

THE WORK OF CONTEMPLATION THEN AND NOW:  
*THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING* AND PRESENT-DAY  
CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL PRACTICE

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by  
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ABSTRACT

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is an anonymous fourteenth-century Middle English mystical text that discusses what its author calls the “work” of contemplation. In the late twentieth century, the *Cloud* became an important resource for two Christian contemplative movements that go by the names of “Centering Prayer” and “Christian Meditation.” This dissertation addresses a number of issues related to the appropriation of the medieval *Cloud* by persons who wish to engage in a present-day form of Christian mystical practice.

These issues are (1) the medieval context and audience of the *Cloud*; (2) the reading of the *Cloud* and the conceptualization of contemplation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; (3) the description of contemplative practice in the *Cloud* and in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation; (4) the effects of contemplation for the practitioner’s understanding and sense of self as this is discussed in the *Cloud* and in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation; and (5) the implications which this consideration of the *Cloud* and

these present-day movements has for the interpretation of mysticism. These issues are addressed through a comparative reading of the *Cloud*, related early Christian and medieval mystical texts, and the literature of the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements.

This dissertation aims to contribute to knowledge of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Christian mysticism more generally, by relating this text to a present-day conception of contemplation. The Christian contemplative movements discussed here read the *Cloud* as a text which offers instruction in a mystical practice that can be performed by persons in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This emphasis upon practice in the appropriation of the *Cloud* can serve as an interpretive lens with which to consider the meaning of the category of mysticism in the discipline of Religious Studies.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “The Work of Contemplation Then and Now: *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Present-Day Christian Mystical Practice,” presented by Glenn Young, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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remember about her is an afternoon we spent reading the *Cloud* together as she held my then infant daughter on her lap.

I have been very fortunate to teach at Rockhurst University during some of my time as a doctoral student, and I would like to thank my colleagues there. In particular, Dr. Daniel Stramara spent many hours talking with me about Christian mysticism. Dr. Bill Stancil and I first met when I worked at Starbucks Coffee, and he invited me into the academy by asking me to teach at Rockhurst. The students I've had during the years there have been a source of joy, learning, and a reminder of why I wanted to write a dissertation in the first place—so that I could be a teacher.

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Finally, there are two women (well, one is a young woman) who have helped give me a reason to finish this dissertation. They are my daughter Sofia and my partner Beringia Zen. My words will fail here, but as the *Cloud* author suggests, there are moments of love which transcend anything that thought can comprehend. The presence of these two women in my life has most surely been an experience of this.



INTRODUCTION: A MEDIEVAL TEXT AND PRESENT-DAY  
MYSTICAL PRACTICE

During a Lenten Mass in 2005 at Visitation Parish, a Roman Catholic church in Kansas City, Missouri, Father Norman Rotert began his weekly homily with a discussion of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Describing this fourteenth-century Middle English mystical text and the influence it has had, Father Rotert said that “spiritual directors have used that little book for seven hundred years now and one of the author’s spiritual suggestions is that the holiest deed we can do is the prayer of contemplation.”<sup>1</sup> At the end of his homily, Father Rotert encouraged those present to try to put the teaching of the *Cloud* into practice: “We have five more weeks of Lent. Lots of time to enter the cloud. Give it a try.”<sup>2</sup>

These statements serve as a fitting introduction to the subject that will be discussed in this dissertation—the appropriation of the *Cloud* in present-day Christian mystical practice. Looking at the words of this homily, two themes are apparent. The first is that this medieval text has a value which extends over the years to Christians in the twenty-first century. The second is that the *Cloud* offers guidance for these persons as to how they might engage in the

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Rotert, *Weaving the Vision: Stories of Faith for the Sons and Daughters of God* (Privately printed, [2005?]), 203.

<sup>2</sup>Rotert, 206.

activity of contemplative prayer. The teaching of this medieval mystical text is described in very practical terms for a contemporary audience.

The *Cloud* gives instruction in what it calls the “work” of contemplation, a mystical practice which prepares its practitioner for an experience of union with God. In the introduction to her critical edition of the *Cloud*, Phyllis Hodgson suggests that this text has “an importance to-day for the man of prayer and the psychologist no less than for the student of medieval thought.”<sup>3</sup> This observation is borne out by the fact that, since the mid-1970s, the *Cloud* has acted as an important resource for two Christian contemplative movements that go by the names of “Centering Prayer” and “Christian Meditation.” These movements are composed of persons, both professionally religious and lay, who wish to engage in a practice of Christian contemplative prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Previous scholarship done on the *Cloud* includes studies which address the religious thought of this text. An example of this is John Clark’s *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to addressing topics such as the author and recipient of the *Cloud*

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<sup>3</sup>Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, Early English Text Society o.s. 218 (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), li. Citations of the *Cloud* and *Privy Counseling* in this dissertation are from this edition. Translations from the Middle English are my own.

<sup>4</sup>The story of the Centering Prayer movement begins with the Trappist monk William Meninger, who found “a dusty copy” of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in 1974 and used it to devise a method of Christian contemplation. This story is recounted by Jerry Adler, “In Search of the Spiritual,” *Newsweek*, August 29/September 5, 2005, 48. While the origins of the Christian Meditation movement are less explicitly connected with the *Cloud*, the text is referred to repeatedly in the movement’s literature.

<sup>5</sup>John P.H. Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, 3 vols., Analecta Cartusiana 119:4-6 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1995-1996).

and the relationship of the *Cloud* to other figures in the history of Christian mysticism, Clark provides a line-by-line reading and analysis of the teaching of the *Cloud*. Studies such as this do not strive so much to come to some conclusion or assert something about a particular aspect of the *Cloud*, so much as they are about explicating its thought in general.

Other studies of the *Cloud* discuss the historical and cultural antecedents which shape the text's view and provide its context. For example, John Clark's "Sources and Theology in *The Cloud of Unknowing*" illustrates the theological connections that the *Cloud* has with the sixth-century pseudo-Dionysius, particularly as the latter's work was mediated in the late middle ages by Thomas Gallus and Johannes Sarracenus. Clark also addresses how the *Cloud* was influenced by the twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux, and he suggests that the text makes references to Walter Hilton, another fourteenth-century Middle English mystic.<sup>6</sup> Another example of this type of scholarship, but one that is more specific in its intent, is James Walsh's introduction to his modern English rendition of the *Cloud*. Here Walsh makes the claim that the origins of this text are found in Carthusian monasticism, with the author being an elder monk who was providing spiritual direction to a novice in his care.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these somewhat general studies of the *Cloud*, there are those that focus on particular aspects of the text, and which make more specific claims in terms of interpreting its meaning. Of particular interest for this dissertation are those that deal with the subject of audience of the *Cloud*; that is, those that ask whom the author of the text intended as his

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<sup>6</sup>John P.H. Clark, "Sources and Theology in *The Cloud of Unknowing*," *The Downside Review* 98 (1980): 83-109.

<sup>7</sup>James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 1-97.

reader. The answers to this question found in studies of this topic are diverse. Scholars such as Phyllis Hodgson and Wolfgang Riehle suggest that the *Cloud* author intended that his work be read by an audience not necessarily limited to those in the professed religious, and more specifically contemplative, life. According to them, statements in the text which seem to indicate a limited audience can be interpreted to include the possibility of other intended readers of the text.<sup>8</sup>

Other scholars such as Denise Baker, S.S. Hussey, and John Clark claim that the *Cloud* author is rather clear in his insistence that his text has a readership limited to those in professed religious life, and that evidence for this position is found by reading the text itself.<sup>9</sup> Between these two positions on the intended audience for the *Cloud*, an important point is made by Cheryl Taylor, who suggests that the *Cloud* author was interested in showing that the boundary between contemplative life and active life is permeable. This implies that there may not be a definitive answer as to who was thought to be capable of practicing the form of contemplative prayer taught in this text.<sup>10</sup>

Another way the *Cloud* has received attention is in studies which compare the text's method of contemplative prayer to the meditative practices of Asian religions. These studies

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<sup>8</sup>Hodgson, *Cloud*, 183n14/13; and Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, trans. Bernard Standring (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 17.

<sup>9</sup>Denise N. Baker, "The Active and Contemplative Lives in Rolle, the *Cloud*-Author and Hilton," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, Ireland, and Wales: Exeter Symposium VI; Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 1999*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 94; S.S. Hussey, "The Audience for the Middle English Mystics," in *De Cella in Seculum*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 114; and Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, 1:20-21.

<sup>10</sup>Cheryl Taylor, "The *Cloud* Texts and Some Aspects of Modern Theory," *Mystics Quarterly* 27 (2001): 144.

are relevant to this dissertation because they show an interest not only in the ideas found in the *Cloud* and other religious traditions, but also in comparing their mystical practices. For example, William Johnston, Robert Aitken, and Robert Llewelyn have compared the tradition of Zen Buddhist meditation with the practice of contemplative prayer in the *Cloud*.<sup>11</sup> The significance of this attention to practice is underscored by a study in which Maika Fowler suggests that the *Cloud* and Zen meditation are fundamentally different. What is noteworthy about this study is that it discusses the metaphysical underpinnings of these two traditions rather than the mystical practices they teach.<sup>12</sup> These comparative studies are important because they emphasize that attention to practices, rather than only ideas or descriptions of mystical experiences, is important in discussion of mysticism. Studies that give attention to practice are rather brief, and this dissertation will deal with this aspect of the *Cloud* at greater length.

A study of the *Cloud* which does pay attention to mystical practice as an aspect of this text is Rene Tixier's essay "'Good Gamesumli Pley,' Games of Love in *The Cloud of Unknowing*," in which Tixier describes the *Cloud* as "a text designed more to be practised than read."<sup>13</sup> While Tixier does give attention to things that the *Cloud* author instructs the

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<sup>11</sup>William Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, new ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Robert Aitken, "The *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Mumonkan*: Christian and Buddhist Meditation Methods," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981): 87-91; and Robert Llewelyn, "The Treatment of Distractions in Zen and *The Cloud of Unknowing*," *Fourteenth-Century English Mystics Newsletter* 7 (1981): 61-76.

<sup>12</sup>Maika Will Fowler, "Zen Buddhist Meditation and the *Cloud* Author's Prayer of Love," *The Downside Review* 113 (1995): 289-308.

<sup>13</sup>Rene Tixier, "'Good Gamesumli Pley,' Games of Love in *The Cloud of Unknowing*," *The Downside Review* 108 (1990): 239.

aspiring contemplative to do, he does not discuss the *Cloud* author's central method of mystical practice. This method is focused on the recitation of a single short word which the aspiring contemplative uses to embody his intention to unite with God, and as a means of overcoming thoughts which are understood to be an obstacle to this union. A number of studies of the *Cloud* have noted this aspect of the text's mystical teaching, though their treatment of this topic tends to be rather brief.<sup>14</sup> Because this method of contemplative prayer is such a central component of the present-day Christian practices that make use of the *Cloud*, this dissertation will address this subject in some detail.

A similar tendency can be noted in scholarship on the *Cloud* which discusses the effects of contemplation as this is related to self-reflection and/or self-transcendence on the part of the practitioner. Some studies have noted what Jennifer Bryan calls "the contemplative ideal of self-annihilation."<sup>15</sup> But again, this ideal is not discussed in detail in these studies. As with the method of mystical practice, this issue of the effects of

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<sup>14</sup>Douglas E. Cowan, *A Naked Intent vnto God: A Source/Commentary on The Cloud of Unknowing* (Wakefield, NH: Longwood Academic, 1991), 39; J.A. Burrow, "Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*," *Essays in Criticism* 27 (1977): 293; Vincent Gillespie, "Postcards from the Edge: Interpreting the Ineffable in the Middle English Mystics," in *Interpretation: Medieval and Modern*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 153; Kent Emery, "*The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Mystica Theologia*," in *The Spirituality of Western Christendom II: The Roots of the Modern Tradition*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, *Cistercian Studies* 55 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 60-61; Rene Tixier, "'Pis louely blinde werk': Contemplation in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Treatises," in *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, ed. William F. Pollard and Robert Boenig (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 121; and Rick McDonald, "The Perils of Language in the Mysticism of Late Medieval England," *Mystics Quarterly* 34 (2008): 55.

<sup>15</sup>Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 9. Also see Tixier, "'Good Gamesumli Pley,'" 237-238.

contemplation on the self-perception of the practitioner calls for some comparison with present-day Christian contemplative movements.

Turning to scholarship on the present-day Christian contemplative movements of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, the first thing that can be noted is the dearth of work on this topic. Leigh Schmidt discusses meditative practices in general in his history of American religion.<sup>16</sup> Amanda Porterfield briefly mentions the Centering Prayer movement in her study of American religion.<sup>17</sup> In scholarship on new religious movements there are some brief references to Centering Prayer, but these tend to discuss it in relation to the interest in meditative practices originating from Asian religious traditions.<sup>18</sup> One scholarly work that has dealt at some length with Centering Prayer is a doctoral dissertation by Joseph Conti. In this dissertation, Conti also briefly discusses the *Cloud* and states that the text's practicality is an important aspect of its use as a resource for present-day Christian contemplative practice.<sup>19</sup> Even here, however, there is not an in-depth discussion of the interaction between this present-day movement and the medieval mysticism of the *Cloud*.

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<sup>16</sup>Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 146-147, 170-179.

<sup>17</sup>Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late-Twentieth-Century Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 194.

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Gene R. Thursby, "Hindu Movements Since Mid-Century: Yogis in the States," in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 209-210n9; and John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 173.

<sup>19</sup>Joseph Gerard Conti, "The 'Inner-Worldly Mysticism' of Thomas Keating: A Paradigm of Renewal of Catholic Contemplativism" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1994), 72.

With the possible exception of scholarship on the *Cloud* which compares its mysticism with that of other religious traditions, studies of this text tend to situate it in its original setting and discuss what the author attempted to teach his audience. While this dissertation will make use of such studies, it will differ from them by discussing the *Cloud* not only in terms of its original context but also in relation to present-day mystical practice.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the scholarship which exists on present-day Christian contemplative movements does not discuss the appropriation of the *Cloud* by these movements. Generally speaking, the relationship between the medieval and the present has received little attention in past academic studies of contemplation as a Christian mystical practice. This dissertation aims to redress this gap in scholarship.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation will consider the *Cloud* and the present-day practice of Christian contemplation from a different perspective. These perspectives each have something to contribute to an understanding of both the *Cloud* itself and the way this text is used in the present-day. The first and second chapters address the socio-historical and religious contexts in which the *Cloud* was produced and in which it has been appropriated in the present-day. The first chapter discusses the medieval context of the *Cloud*. Because of the anonymity of this text, there are some inherent limitations upon what can be ascertained regarding its author and intended recipients. Nevertheless, by examining statements made within the text itself, looking at the work of Walter Hilton, a medieval English mystical writer whose work is contemporaneous with the *Cloud*, and considering the perspectives of the companion works which accompany the *Cloud* in some of its manuscripts, some

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. Cowan, xvi-xxvii.



knowledge of the setting and reception of this text can be reconstructed. An important question in this discussion is whether the *Cloud* was intended as a source of spiritual direction for an exclusively monastic audience, or was understood as being appropriate for a larger lay audience and those living a mixed life of contemplation and worldly activity.

The discussion of the medieval context of the *Cloud* leads in the second chapter to a corresponding examination of the situation in which present-day Christian contemplative practice is done. In particular, this will be considered from the perspective of the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements. Just as the issue of audience is important in discussing the medieval context of the *Cloud*, in the present day the issue of who is thought capable of engaging in contemplative practice is significant. This chapter will also ask how the *Cloud* is read and which aspects of the text are privileged in present-day Christian contemplative literature. This discussion makes use of the hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur and Stanley Fish,<sup>21</sup> which describe the way that a text's meaning can shift over time based upon the interests of the audience who is reading that text.

As part of this discussion of present-day Christian contemplative practice, three issues which play a particularly important role in the appropriation of the medieval mysticism of the *Cloud* will be considered. These are the changes brought about in the Roman Catholic church by the Second Vatican Council's (1962-1965) emphasis upon a spirituality of the laity, the presentation of meditative techniques as an antidote for the stresses of modern life, and the

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<sup>21</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); and Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

exposure of the West to the meditative practices of non-Christian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

The third chapter addresses the method of contemplation which is taught in the *Cloud*. In particular, it examines the text's instruction that one should recite what I will call a "verbal formula" during contemplative practice. In the interest of offering a more comprehensive analysis of this topic, this chapter will also consider how the use of verbal formulas in contemplative practice is addressed in the work of Richard Rolle, another medieval English mystical writer, and John Cassian, an earlier author from the Christian desert monastic tradition. Following this, it will examine how present-day Christian contemplative literature addresses the issue of employing a verbal formula in contemplative practice. In approaching this topic, this chapter draws upon the perspectives of performance and practice theories. These theories, which come from the field of ritual studies,<sup>22</sup> will assist with a discussion of how the *Cloud* describes contemplative practice in relationship to mystical experience, and of how the perspective of this text compares with that found in present-day Christian contemplative literature.

The fourth chapter addresses the role which awareness of the self plays in the practice of contemplation, from the perspective of the *Cloud* and the present-day Christian contemplative movements which have appropriated it. This discussion draws upon Michel

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<sup>22</sup>Discussion of the use of performance and practice theories for interpreting mystical texts can be found in Mary A. Suydam, "Background: An Introduction to Performance Studies," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 1-25; and John C. Maraldo, "The Hermeneutics of Practice in Dogen and Francis of Assisi," in *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, ed. Paul O. Ingram and Frederick J. Streng (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 53-74.

Foucault's concept of practices of the self, which is used to describe practices in which a person makes himself an object of inquiry in the interest of self-knowledge and transformation.<sup>23</sup> In light of this concept, it will be asked whether the *Cloud* author's teaching is oriented to self-awareness or self-transcendence. The perspective of the *Cloud* on this topic will also be compared with that of present-day teaching on contemplative prayer. Specifically, it will be asked whether present-day Christian contemplative literature follows the *Cloud* author's claim that the self is to be forgotten, or rather suggests that the self is retained at some level as an object of inquiry and recipient of the benefits of contemplation.

Finally, the fifth chapter considers how the appropriation of the *Cloud* for present-day Christian contemplative practice can be cause for a reassessment of the category of mysticism in religious studies. The *Cloud*, particularly when it is viewed through the lens of this appropriation, shows that mysticism can be defined with reference to particular practices as well as types of experience. This discussion employs Bernard McGinn's tripartite description of mysticism as "a part or element of religion," "a process or way of life," and "an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God."<sup>24</sup> While human experience of the divine presence is certainly one aspect of the mysticism of the *Cloud*, the present-day reading of this text emphasizes the formulation of a method of contemplative prayer which can be drawn from its pages. In this, practice as well as experience are

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<sup>23</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990); and "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

<sup>24</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv-xvi.

important components of what can be included in the category of mysticism. This conception of mysticism as practice will be further explored using Agehananda Bharati's definition of mysticism<sup>25</sup> and Robert Wuthnow's description of a "practice-oriented spirituality" in contemporary American religion.<sup>26</sup>

The conception of mysticism as practice will contribute to two further issues that are addressed in this chapter. The first is concerned with whether present-day contemplative practice which is based on the *Cloud* stands in a position of continuity with, or disjunction from, the medieval Christian conception of mysticism. In particular, it will be asked whether some scholarship,<sup>27</sup> which claims that medieval and present-day views of mysticism are fundamentally different from one another, is adequate for understanding the appropriation of the *Cloud* in the present. The second issue involves the comparative study of religion, and the implications of describing mysticism in terms of practice for the cross-cultural and inter-religious analysis of this subject.

This dissertation will approach *The Cloud of Unknowing* not only as an artifact of its medieval world but also as a text which continues to live and inform the practice of present-day persons. This will contribute to existing knowledge of this subject in two ways. First, it connects the study of the *Cloud* with a discussion of present-day mystical practice, and asks

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<sup>25</sup>Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1976).

<sup>26</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>27</sup>Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

how this medieval text is recontextualized for use in the present. While the *Cloud* has been studied as an example of medieval Christian mysticism, very little has been written about the appropriation of this text's instruction for contemplation in the present day. Conversely, the little scholarship that has been done on present-day Christian contemplative movements gives scant attention to the significance of past mystical traditions such as that found in the *Cloud* for these movements. Second, it uses the discussion of the present-day appropriation of the *Cloud* as an interpretive lens with which to consider the category of mysticism itself. By doing this, I hope to contribute to the ongoing analysis and understanding of this subject.

CHAPTER 1  
WHO ENTERED THE CLOUD? THE CONTEXT AND AUDIENCE  
FOR MEDIEVAL CONTEMPLATIVE LITERATURE

This chapter will address the late medieval context in which *The Cloud of Unknowing* was written. This context provides necessary background for understanding its teaching. In reconstructing this context, an important issue is the implied audience for the text. This may be approached from two different perspectives. The first is to ask what the *Cloud* author himself claims regarding who the appropriate persons are to read his text and to take up the practice it describes. A second perspective is to ask what can be known about those who actually read the text, whether or not they were members of the audience the author originally intended. In this inquiry, then, there is an inherent tension between the audience the author claims and those who eventually received his teachings. This tension will be the subject of this chapter.

This analysis uses three sets of textual materials. First, it discusses what the *Cloud* author says regarding the appropriate audience for his text. Second, it examines the question of audience in light of a second text which was contemporaneous with the *Cloud*, Walter Hilton's *Mixed Life*. Third, it asks what can be known about those who may have actually been the audience for the *Cloud*, using evidence from selected manuscripts in which it is

found. These materials suggest there is good reason to think the medieval audience for this text was larger and more diverse than that anticipated by the *Cloud* author.

### **Background: Late Medieval English Spirituality**

The anonymous author of the *Cloud* is traditionally grouped with a number of mystical authors who wrote in Middle English in the fourteenth century. In addition to the *Cloud* author, this group includes Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich. The fifteenth-century English mystical author Margery Kempe is also sometimes included as a later member of this group. While the *Cloud* author is anonymous, some things can be known about him. He wrote in the East Midlands dialect and composed the *Cloud* sometime in the late fourteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The *Cloud* author's work shows that he was influenced by the sixth-century pseudo-Dionysius, the twelfth-century Richard of St. Victor, the twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux, and the twelfth-century Carthusian Guigo II.<sup>2</sup>

The *Cloud* author has been associated with a group of seven Middle English texts. These are (1) the *Cloud* itself; (2) *Denis' Hidden Theology*, a translation of the pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, based upon the Latin versions of Thomas Gallus and Johannes Sarracenus; (3) *A Treatise of the Study of Wisdom that Men Call Benjamin*, a summary and translation of Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Minor*, a reading of the scriptural story of Jacob, his wives, and children as an allegory of the spiritual life; (4) *An*

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<sup>1</sup>Hodgson, *Cloud*, lxxxiv. Hodgson's dating of the *Cloud* is based on elements in the text which are a response to the writings of Richard Rolle, who died in 1349, and the suggestion that the *Cloud* was itself responded to by Walter Hilton, who died in 1395. Hodgson concludes that the *Cloud* was composed in the period between these dates.

<sup>2</sup>Valerie M. Lagorio and Michael G. Sargent, "English Mystical Writings," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, ed. A.E. Hartung (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1993), 9:3069.

*Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings*, a letter of spiritual direction discussing how to discern if one's spiritual impulses are genuinely inspired by God; (5) *A Treatise of Discretion of Spirits*, in part a translation of two of Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons, this text concerns how one may deal with temptations in the spiritual life; (6) *The Book of Privy Counseling*, a text which functions as a "sequel" to the *Cloud*, and which includes further discussion of contemplation and the higher stages of the union of the human with God; (7) *An Epistle of Prayer*, a letter of spiritual direction addressed to a beginner in the spiritual life, which discusses how to pray, and emphasizes the fear of God and hope in God's mercy.<sup>3</sup>

There are nineteen extant manuscripts of the *Cloud*<sup>4</sup>:

Cambridge

Pembroke College Library

MS 221 (late fifteenth century; Latin translation)

University Library

MS Ff.vi.41 (seventeenth century)

MS. Ii.vi.39 (15th century)

MS Kk.vi.26 (second half of fifteenth century)

Dublin

Trinity College Library

MS 122 (fifteenth century)

Hamburg

University Library

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<sup>3</sup>Lagorio and Sargent, 9:3070-3073.

<sup>4</sup>This list does not include manuscripts of the "Baker" version of the *Cloud*, which is a late recension of the text so-called because this was the version of the *Cloud* known by the Benedictine monk Augustine Baker (Hodgson, *Cloud*, xix). Manuscripts of this version are Ampleforth Abey, MSS 42 and 42a, Downside Abbey, MSS 10 and 11, and Stanbrook Abbey, MS 4.



Liverpool

St. Hugh's Charterhouse, Sussex  
Parkminster MS D.176 (early sixteenth century)

Stonyhurst College, Lancashire  
MS A.vi.60 (ca. 1450)

London

British Library  
Harley MS 674 (early fifteenth century)  
Harley MS 2373 (late fifteenth century)  
Harley MS 959 (mid-fifteenth century)  
Royal MS 17.C.xxvi (mid-fifteenth century)  
Royal MS 17.C.xxvii (late sixteenth century)  
Royal MS 17.D.v (late fifteenth century)

Westminster Cathedral, Diocesan Archives  
MS H.38 (ca. 1400)

Oxford

Bodleian Library  
Bodley MS 576 (early sixteenth century)  
Bodley MS 856 (mid-fifteenth century; Latin translation)  
Douce MS 262 (ca. 1500)

University College  
MS 14 (mid-fifteenth century)

Before discussing the issue of the audience for the *Cloud*, it will be helpful to briefly consider the background of late medieval English spirituality. The religious landscape of fourteenth-century England included a number of traditions and developments which are relevant to this discussion of the *Cloud*. First among these was an emphasis upon religious instruction for the laity and the clergy who served them. The origin of this was the Lateran Council of 1215, which mandated annual confession of sins to a priest and annual communion for all Christians. To facilitate this practice, the laity and parish priests had to

have access to basic instruction in the fundamentals of Christian faith.<sup>5</sup> In England, Archbishop Pecham issued *De informatione simplicium* in 1281, which gave “a programme of religious instruction: the fourteen articles of faith, the ten commandments of the Law and the two commandments of the Gospel, the seven works of mercy, the seven virtues, the seven vices, and the seven sacraments,” which was to be offered to persons in the vernacular four times a year.<sup>6</sup>

To further this provision of religious education for the laity, manuals were developed which provided access to written catechetical instruction of the sort required by Pecham’s order. Two examples of these manuals were Archbishop Thoresby’s *Lay-Folks’ Catechism* and Robert Mannyng’s *Handling Sin*. Both of these texts were written in verse to aid memorization by their readers.<sup>7</sup> The *Lay-Folks’ Catechism* is composed of contents based upon Archbishop Pecham’s syllabus of instruction, and included an indulgence for those who memorized it.<sup>8</sup> *Handling Sin* is a text for preparation for confessing sins, and includes *exempla* to illustrate its moral instruction.<sup>9</sup> The effects of this emphasis upon religious instruction went well beyond written texts whose use was limited to the literate. W.A. Pantin

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<sup>5</sup>W.A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962), 191-192.

<sup>6</sup>Pantin, 193-194.

<sup>7</sup>Joan M. Nuth, *God’s Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics, Traditions of Christian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 29.

<sup>8</sup>Pantin, 212.

<sup>9</sup>Pantin, 224-225.

points out that religious instruction also took the form of preached sermons and visual art,<sup>10</sup> and Clarissa Atkinson states that “by the fourteenth century the sermon had become the central dramatic participatory event in corporate Christian life.”<sup>11</sup> At first glance, the type of religious instruction found in these instructional manuals and the sermons and art which derived from them may seem to have little to do with the mysticism found in a text like the *Cloud*. Nevertheless, Pantin makes an important point in suggesting that mystical literature, while surely going beyond these instructional manuals, “presuppose an audience thoroughly and severely drilled in the rudiments of faith and morals.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, literature of this type forms an important part of the context of the *Cloud*.

A second aspect of religious life of late medieval England was an affective spirituality associated with devotion to the humanity of Jesus and meditation upon the events of his life.<sup>13</sup> This tradition was “consciously designed to use the emotions to move the believer toward God.”<sup>14</sup> An important example of this type of religious practice is the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*,<sup>15</sup> which was attributed to Bonaventure, and which involved an imaginative and emotionally-charged meditation in which one was asked to envision

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<sup>10</sup>Pantin, 235.

<sup>11</sup>Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 115.

<sup>12</sup>Pantin, 250.

<sup>13</sup>Nuth, 17.

<sup>14</sup>Atkinson, 131.

<sup>15</sup>For an English translation of this text, see Francis X. Taney, Anne Miller, and C. Mary Stallins-Taney, trans., *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2000).

himself as being present in a scene from Christ's life and to use this as a means of spiritual reflection. As with the catechetical instruction, this type of religious practice was not limited to written texts. The tradition of imagining scenes from the life of Christ was also expressed in painting, sculpture, and Corpus Christi plays which dramatized these scenes for the public.<sup>16</sup> This non-textual representation is important, because it suggests that this spirituality was potentially accessible to all persons, rather than only the literate. This wide accessibility is also suggested by *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a Middle English translation of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* which was completed in 1410 by the Carthusian monk Nicholas Love. This translation is important because Love explicitly states that he intends his text to be used by laypersons as well as professed religious.<sup>17</sup> The *Cloud* author makes reference to meditating on the life of Christ, and claims that it is essential to a developing spirituality. Nevertheless, he ultimately sees contemplative prayer as transcending this practice.<sup>18</sup>

A third element of the religious context of the *Cloud* is the tradition of monastic, and most specifically Carthusian, spirituality. The Carthusian order was founded in the eleventh century in France. By the early fifteenth century nine Carthusian charterhouses had been established in England.<sup>19</sup> While the *Cloud* was written anonymously, it has been suggested

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<sup>16</sup>Atkinson, 147. On the Corpus Christi plays, see V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

<sup>17</sup>Atkinson, 152.

<sup>18</sup>*Cloud*, 27/15-28/2.

<sup>19</sup>David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 1:130.

that a Carthusian author is likely.<sup>20</sup> Two factors are worth noting which, while not necessarily arguing for Carthusian authorship of the *Cloud*, do suggest that there are certain resonances between the spirituality of this text and that of the Carthusian order. The first is the manuscript tradition of the *Cloud*. Of the extant nineteen manuscripts, five have some connection with the Carthusians.<sup>21</sup> While this does not in itself prove Carthusian authorship, it does suggest that the order understood the *Cloud* author's teaching to have some value for its own spirituality. A second factor that suggests a possible connection between the *Cloud* and the Carthusians is that the *Cloud* author states in the first chapter of his text that he is writing for someone who has committed himself to the solitary life.<sup>22</sup> Solitude and solitary spiritual practice are a fundamental aspect of Carthusian spirituality. The physical setting and daily exercise of Carthusian monasticism suggest this. The monks live and spend a great deal of time in individual cells, while also praying communally at regular intervals.<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup>Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2-9.

<sup>21</sup>These are St. Hugh's Charterhouse, Parkminster MS D.176 and Bodleian Library, Douce MS 262, both of which were connected with the Carthusian London charterhouse; British Library, Harley MS 2373 and Pembroke College Library, MS 221, both of which were connected with the Carthusian Mount Grace charterhouse; and Westminster Cathedral, Diocesan Archives MS H.38, which is a Carthusian commonplace book. Cf. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, 1:120n3, 1:137n1. On the role of the Carthusians in transmitting the *Cloud* and other medieval spiritual texts, see Michael G. Sargent, "The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976): 225-240.

<sup>22</sup>*Cloud*, 14/13-14.

<sup>23</sup>For descriptions of daily life in a Carthusian monastery, see E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 30-41; and Peter-Damian Belisle, *The Language of Silence: The Changing Face of Monastic Solitude*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 97-98.

similarity between the way the *Cloud* author describes his addressee and Carthusian life has led to speculation that the *Cloud* author wrote his text for a novice Carthusian monk.<sup>24</sup>

An important manifestation of Carthusian spirituality is *The Ladder of Monks*, written by Guigo II in the twelfth century. This text discusses the traditional monastic practice of *lectio divina*, which is a part of the context of late medieval English spirituality. A Middle English translation of this text, entitled *A Ladder of Four Rungs by which Men May Well Climb to Heaven*, also circulated in England in three fifteenth-century manuscripts.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, *lectio divina* is specifically discussed by the *Cloud* author in his description of contemplative prayer.

In *The Ladder of Monks*, Guigo describes *lectio divina* as a four-stage spiritual practice in which one reads a scriptural text, meditates reflectively upon what has been read, is moved to address God in prayer, and finally comes to rest in a state of contemplation which is beyond thought.<sup>26</sup> He writes that these four stages of *lectio divina* “make a ladder for monks by which they are lifted from earth to heaven.”<sup>27</sup> There are two things that are important to note about this practice. First, it is directed to and culminates in a contemplative

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<sup>24</sup>Knowles, 1:121n2.

<sup>25</sup>Nuth, 16. For the text of *A Ladder of Four Rungs by which Men May Well Climb to Heaven*, see Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, Early English Text Society o.s. 231 (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 100-117. For a general treatment of *lectio divina* as part of monastic culture, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 15-17, 72-73.

<sup>26</sup>Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Cistercian Studies 48 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 68.

<sup>27</sup>Guigo II, 68.

experience. The term “contemplation” had been traditionally used in the monastic tradition “to point to those moments in prayer when some form of more direct contact with God was attained.”<sup>28</sup> It was thus a way of referring to what in more contemporary language is called mystical experience. Second, this mystical experience comes about through a systematic spiritual practice. Bernard McGinn states that *The Ladder of Monks* “underlines that mystical consciousness . . . must not be cultivated or investigated in itself, but can only be understood as the culminating element in an entire program.”<sup>29</sup> In a sense, the traditions and developments in late medieval English spirituality form the background and the “program” for the mystical experience which is discussed in the *Cloud*.

### **The Audience Claimed by the *Cloud* Author**

An initial reading of the *Cloud* gives the impression that the author envisioned a narrow and restricted audience. He claims that the teaching and practice of his text is only appropriate for professed contemplatives. He expresses this in a number of statements throughout the *Cloud*. While the passages in which he refers to his audience are generally well-known among scholars of this text, they bear some recounting here, because they set the context for considering the tension between those the author claimed as his audience and those who actually received his text.

In the prologue of the *Cloud*, the author says the text should not be shown to anyone except “such a one who has (by your supposing) in a true will and by a whole intent,

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<sup>28</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century*, vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 139.

<sup>29</sup>McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 358.

intended himself to be a perfect follower of Christ, not only in active living, but in the most sovereign point of contemplative life which is possible by grace to come to in this present life of a perfect soul yet abiding in a mortal body.”<sup>30</sup> The author thus claims what S.S. Hussey describes as a “limited readership” for whom this text is appropriate as a means of spiritual instruction.<sup>31</sup>

The author suggests that the work of his text is only for those whose entire lives are given to contemplation: “If you ask me who should work thus, I answer you: all that have forsaken the world in a true will, and thereto that give themselves not to active life, but to that life that is called contemplative life.”<sup>32</sup> The author’s reference to those who have “forsaken the world” implies that the contemplative identification involves not simply an interior disposition or inclination, but a state of life in which one is removed from active living in order to pursue contemplation. This suggests the necessity of a professed religious life for the practice of contemplation.

This emphasis upon professed contemplative life is also found in the author’s description of the “four degrees and forms of Christian men’s living, and these are: Common,

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<sup>30</sup>*Cloud*, 1/14-2/5: “soche one þat haþ (bi þi supposing) in a trewe wille and by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste, not only in actyue leuyng, bot in þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuyng þe whiche is possible by grace for to be comen to in þis present liif of a parfite soule 3it abiding in þis deedly body.”

<sup>31</sup>Hussey, “The Audience for the Middle English Mystics,” 114.

<sup>32</sup>*Cloud*, 63/3-6: “3if þou aske me who schuld worche þus, I answere þee: alle þat han forsaken þe worlde in a trewe wille, and þer-to þat 3euen hem not to actyue liif, bot to þat liif þat is clepid contemplatyue liif.”



Special, Singular, and Perfect.”<sup>33</sup> Addressing the particular person for whom the *Cloud* was written, the author asks, “See you not how eagerly and how graciously he has pulled you to the third degree and manner of living, which is called Singular? In this solitary form and manner of living you may learn to lift up the foot of your love, and step towards that state and degree of living that is perfect, and the last state of all”<sup>34</sup> Referring to this passage, Sarah Coakley writes that in the *Cloud*, “the ‘contemplative’ becomes a professional solitary who recedes, introverts, ‘abstracts,’ from normal practical reasoning for his own particular purposes in relation to God.”<sup>35</sup> The author defines not only the particular individual for whom this text was written, but also the type of person in general for whom contemplative work is possible.

The *Cloud* author thus envisions a specific audience for the work that his text teaches, those living the contemplative life. Furthermore, he defines this audience through what

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<sup>33</sup>*Cloud*, 13/9-11: “foure degrees and fourmes of Cristen mens leuyng; and ben þeese: Comoun, Special, Singuler, and Parfite.”

<sup>34</sup>*Cloud*, 14/10-15: “Seest þou nouȝt how lystly and how graciously he haþ pulled þee to þe þrid degre and maner of leuyng, þe whiche hiȝt Synguleer? In þe whiche solitari forme and maner of leuyng þou maist lerne to lift up þe fote of þi loue, and step towardses þat state and degre of leuyng þat is parfite, and þe laste state of alle.”

<sup>35</sup>Sarah Coakley, “Visions of the Self in Late Medieval Christianity: Some Cross-Disciplinary Reflections,” in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, ed. Michael McGhee, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 32 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 98. It should be noted, however, that this passage from the *Cloud* has been interpreted differently by other scholars. Wolfgang Riehle suggests that the *Cloud* author’s references to solitary life “could be used in a merely figurative sense to mean that the soul had freed itself from the world,” and that “it does not even follow that the person addressed need have been a recluse in the strict sense” (17). Phyllis Hodgson also suggests this possibility; nevertheless, she writes that the *Cloud* author’s reference to “solitary form and manner of living” implies “a visible way of life” (*Cloud*, 183n14/13).

Denise Baker calls an “oppositional paradigm”<sup>36</sup> that distinguishes between contemplatives and those in active life. He thereby excludes the latter from his teaching. Finally, he uses the scriptural story of Martha and Mary to appeal to a touchstone of the tradition and to give authority to his claim concerning the appropriate audience to carry out the work his text teaches.

In this narrative from the Gospel of Luke,<sup>37</sup> Jesus visits the home of the sisters Martha and Mary. While Martha busies herself with the duties involved with the care of their guest, Mary sits still and quiet at the feet of Jesus, directing all her attention to him. When Martha complains about her sister’s lack of help in caring for their guest, Jesus responds that Mary has “chosen the better part.” Using Martha and Mary as archetypes for those living active and contemplative lives, the *Cloud* author writes that “these two sisters, are set in example of all actives and contemplatives that have been since in Holy Church, and shall be to the Day of Judgment. For by Mary is understood all contemplatives, for they should conform their living after her; and by Martha, actives, in the same manner, and for the same skill in likeness.”<sup>38</sup>

The author’s reference to the Martha and Mary story as an allegory for active and contemplative life is important in discussing the audience for contemplative instruction. He uses this story to suggest that active and contemplative lives are clearly separate from one

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<sup>36</sup>Baker, “The Active and Contemplative Lives,” 87.

<sup>37</sup>Luke 10:38-42.

<sup>38</sup>*Cloud*, 48/11-16: “þeese two sistres, ben set in ensauple of alle actyues and alle contemplatyues þat han ben siþen in Holy Chirche, and schal be to þe Day of Dome. For by Mary is undertonden alle contemplatyues, for thei schuld conforme here leuying after hirs; and by Martha, actyues, on þe same maner, and for þe same skil in licnes.”

another, yet also connected. The author claims that the active and contemplative lives, while two distinct types, also mutually inform one another. He delineates three stages of spiritual life—lower active, a middle stage which is simultaneously higher active and lower contemplative, and higher contemplative.<sup>39</sup> In his identification of the middle stage, the author admits that a clear-cut distinction between active and contemplative lives does not exhaust the possibilities for spiritual practice and experience.<sup>40</sup> If, as the author has stated, Martha is emblematic of the active life and Mary of contemplative life, the separation of these two lives is mitigated to some extent by the fact that Martha and Mary are not only two distinct persons, but also sisters. This suggests that the lives they represent are closely connected. Their sisterhood is the symbol of the middle stage of spiritual life—the higher active/lower contemplative stage—in which the otherwise very different active and contemplative lives connect. As the author says, “In this part is contemplative life and active life coupled together in spiritual relationship and made sisters, as in the example of Martha and Mary.”<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the author does not fail to emphasize that active and contemplative lives are distinct and that each asks an individual to perform different spiritual practices. Therefore, they offer the possibility of distinct sets of experiences. While Martha and Mary are sisters, they still represent distinct differences in religious life and practice. If the intermediate higher active/lower contemplative stage is a bridge between action and

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<sup>39</sup>*Cloud*, 31/4-8.

<sup>40</sup>*Cloud*, 31/8-14.

<sup>41</sup>*Cloud*, 53/19-21: “In þis partye is contemplatyue liif and actyue liif couplid togeders in goostly sibreden and maad sistres, at þe ensanple of Martha and Marye.”

contemplation, it is at the same time a clear boundary which marks their distinction from each other. The author writes of this intermediate stage, “Thus high may an active come to contemplation, and no higher; unless it be very seldom and by a special grace. Thus low may a contemplative come towards active life, and no lower; unless it be very seldom and in great need.”<sup>42</sup> Martha and Mary function as symbols of both the distinction and connection between the active and contemplative lives. These lives represent the possibilities for those who read this text and practice some type of religious exercise. What that exercise is, and how it relates to the practice taught in the *Cloud*, depends on where a person understands himself to be along this continuum between action and contemplation.

As if to emphasize this distinction between action and contemplation a final time, in the seventy-fourth and penultimate chapter of the text, the author reminds his reader for whom his spiritual instruction is intended. Reciting a list of the types of persons for whom reading this text is not appropriate, the author concludes, “I would not that they heard it, neither they nor none of these curious lettered nor uneducated men, ye! although they be very good men in active living; for it accords not to them.”<sup>43</sup> The author, both in his direct statements to the reader and in his use of the Gospel story of Martha and Mary, makes a clear distinction between the active and contemplative lives. He claims for his own audience—and

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<sup>42</sup>*Cloud*, 53/21-54/2: “Þus hiȝe may an actyue come to contemplacion, & no hiȝer; bot ȝif it be ful seeldom & by a specyall grace. Þus lowe may a contemplatiif com towardes actyue liif, and no lower; bot ȝif it be ful seeldom and in grete nede.”

<sup>43</sup>*Cloud*, 130/20-23: “I wolde not þat þei herde it, neiþer þei ne none of þees corious lettrid ne lewid men, ȝe! al-þof þei be ful good men in actyue leuyng; for it acordeþ not to hem.”

therefore for the mystical practice which the *Cloud* teaches—only those persons who have been called to contemplative life.

### **Action, Contemplation, and the Mixed Life in Walter Hilton and the *Cloud***

The contrast between active and contemplative lives, and the suggestion by the *Cloud* author that persons in active life are excluded from contemplation, raises the question as to why this was an issue upon which the author felt it necessary to comment at length. Roughly contemporaneous with the composition of the *Cloud*, the phenomenon of persons living what came to be known as the “mixed life” became an issue of significance for Christian spiritual life. One of the foundational texts of instruction in the spirituality of the mixed life was Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life*. A discussion of Hilton’s text, and its relationship to the practice taught in the *Cloud*, has implications for understanding how the *Cloud* would have been received and what persons may have been imagined as a potential audience for this text, apart from those whom the author explicitly claims to address.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England, a conception of religious life and practice that included an expansion and variation on the distinctions between active and contemplative lives emerged. As its name implies, the idea of the mixed life is that those who have obligations that associate them with the workings of the everyday world might also include in their religious lives some of the practices and experiences which had traditionally been associated with persons living a professed religious life. The mixed life was, then, a mixing of the practices of action and contemplation. In fourteenth-century England, according to Hilary Carey, “for the first time, devout lay people were instructed in the art of

contemplation, referred to by the modern world as ‘meditation,’ and urged to pursue the ‘mixed life’ which combined activity in the world with a personal, meditative prayer life.”<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note that distinctions between active, contemplative, and mixed lives refer to the character of a person’s spiritual practice rather than to a division between clergy and laity. Those in active life were associated with responsibilities pertaining to the secular world, while persons in contemplative life were removed from this arena of activity. The laity were generally identified with the active, or at best mixed, life. Clerics could be associated with the active, contemplative, or mixed life. Referring specifically to the area of York in England, but appropriate more generally to a discussion of the mixed life, Jonathan Hughes comments that spiritual teachers “provided specific practical teaching for clergy and laymen living a secular life to enable them to reconcile their spiritual and social lives in a ‘mixed life.’”<sup>45</sup>

The use of the word “reconcile” here is significant, for in outlining the contours of a mixed life, those who promoted this ideal of religious practice were attempting to integrate two spheres of religious practice and experience which had been seen as largely irreconcilable. This combining of the worlds of action and contemplation also implies that the experience of contemplation was not limited to professed religious life. Hughes writes that “those who defined the mixed life in this period assumed that it was possible to attain

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<sup>44</sup>Hilary M. Carey, “Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England,” *Journal of Religious History* 14 (1986-1987): 361. On the continent, the Beguines provide an earlier example of a type of religious life which blurred the boundary between action in the world and contemplative mysticism.

<sup>45</sup>Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1988), 251.

religious experiences without ascetic exercise, the external discipline of a monastic rule or renunciation of the world.”<sup>46</sup> The ideal of the mixed life raises the possibility that contemplation is an experience which was not wholly identifiable with the life one assumed by becoming a member of a professed religious order devoted to the contemplative life. It suggests, in short, that contemplation is a practice and experience, rather than a state of life marked by an official vow or profession.

Walter Hilton’s *Mixed Life*, which was written between the mid-1380s and the mid-1390s,<sup>47</sup> is addressed to a person who has worldly responsibilities in the form of family and the care of property and goods, but who nonetheless desires to devote himself more intensely to religious practice. Hilton prescribes a mixed life, in which his reader “shall combine the works of active life with spiritual works of contemplative life.”<sup>48</sup> Hilton specifies those parts of active and contemplative life which are necessary to retain in the construction of the mixed life he proposes.

In a fashion both similar to and distinct from the *Cloud* author, Hilton makes use of the Martha and Mary narrative to illustrate and give scriptural authority to his conception of the active and contemplative lives. Referring to active life, the domain of Martha, Hilton writes, “For you shall one time with Martha be busy to rule and govern your household, your

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<sup>46</sup>Hughes, 258-259.

<sup>47</sup>This is the period suggested by S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson in the introduction to *Walter Hilton’s Mixed Life Edited from Lambeth Palace MS 472*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson, Salzburg Studies in English Literature 92:15 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1986), ix. Citations of *Mixed Life* are from this edition. Translations from the Middle English are my own.

<sup>48</sup>Walter Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 10/101-102: “schalt meedele þe werkes of actif liyf wip goostli werkes of lif contemplatif.”

children, your servants, your neighbors, your tenants: if they do well, comfort them therein and help them; if they do evil, teach them and amend them and chastise them.”<sup>49</sup> Hilton then gives attention to that aspect of the mixed life concerned with religious practice and experience, making reference to the figure of Mary, who serves as the representative of the contemplative life: “Another time you shall with Mary leave the busyness of the world, and sit down at the feet of our lord by meekness in prayers and in holy thoughts and in contemplation of him, as he gives you grace.”<sup>50</sup>

Whereas the *Cloud* author draws upon the Martha and Mary story to emphasize the separation of action from contemplation, Hilton makes use of this same narrative to illustrate the possibility of there being some mixture of action and contemplation within the life of a person living outside the realm of professed religious life, so that one may “go from the one to the other profitably, and fulfill them both.”<sup>51</sup>

Turning to the specific religious practices of the mixed life, Hilton sets up a dichotomy between action in the world and explicit religious practices which remove one, for a time at least, from the world. While Hilton makes it clear that good deeds done in the world

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<sup>49</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 10/103-11/107: “For þou schalt oo tyme wiþ Martha be bisi for to rule and gouerne þi houshoold, þi children, þi seruauntes, þi neizbores, þi tenauntes: zif þei doo weel, comfort hem þerinne and helpe hem; zef þei doon yuele, for to teche hem and amende hem and chastice hem.”

<sup>50</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 11/111-114: “Anopir tyme þou schal wiþ Maria leue businesse of þe world, and sitten down at þe feet of oure lord bi mekenesse in praiers and in hooli þouztis and in contemplacioun of him, as he zeueþ þee grace.”

<sup>51</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 11/115-116: “goon from þe toon to þe toþir medfulli, and fulfille hem boþe.”



for the welfare of others form part of the mixed life, he also says that those actions in which one is removed from others are a higher and more developed religious practice:

Though it be so that all your good deeds, bodily and spiritual, are a showing of your desire to God, yet there is a diversity between spiritual and bodily deeds, for deeds of contemplative life are properly and naturally the working of this desire, but outward deeds are not so, and therefore, when you pray or think on God, your desire to God is more whole, more fervent, and more spiritual than when you do other deeds unto your fellow-Christian.<sup>52</sup>

Having distinguished between action in the world and interior practices, Hilton describes a number of spiritual exercises which he sees as appropriate expressions of the desire for God in the mixed life. The first of these is reflection upon one's own and others' sins:

You may, if you will, sometimes think on your sins done before, and of your frailties that you fall in each day, and ask mercy and forgiveness for them. Also, after this, you may think of the frailties, the sins and the wretchedness of your fellow-Christian, bodily and spiritual, with pity and compassion of them, and cry mercy and forgiveness for them as tenderly as for yourself as if they were your own.<sup>53</sup>

A second exercise Hilton mentions is affective meditation upon the life of Jesus:

“You may have mind of the manhood of our lord in his birth and in his passion, or in any of

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<sup>52</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 49/579-586: “þou3 it be soo þat alle þi good deedes, bodili and goostli, aren a schewynge of þi desire to God, 3it is þere a diuersite bitwene goostli and bodili dedis, for dedis of contemplatif lif aren propirli and kyndeli þe wirchinge of þis desire, but outeward deedes aren not so, and forþi, whan þou praiest and þenkest on God, þi desire to God is more hool, more feruent and more goostli þan whanne þou dost ɔpere dedis vnto þin euen-Cristen.”

<sup>53</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 51/606-612: “Þou mai, 3if þou wil, sumtyme þenke on þy synnes bifore doon, and of þi freeltees þat þou fallest inne eche dai, and aske merci and for3yuenesse for hem. Also, aftir þis, þou mai þenke of þe freeltes, þe synnes and þe wrechidnessis of þyn euen-Cristene, bodili and goostli, wiþ pite and compassioun of hem, and crie merci and for3euenesse for hem as tendirli as for þi silf and as þei were þyn owen.”

his works, and feed your thought with spiritual imaginations of it to stir your affections more to the love of him.”<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Hilton recommends a number of topics for meditation which are manifestations of divine goodness and which, therefore, provide examples for one’s moral development. He writes that one should “think on saints of our lord, as on apostles, martyrs, confessors and holy virgins; behold inwardly the holy living, the grace and the virtues that our lord gave them in their living, and with this thought stir your own heart to take example of them unto better living.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Hilton suggests reflecting upon the natural world as a way to know a God who is otherwise unknowable. He suggests one should think upon “the might, the wisdom and the goodness of our lord in all his creatures, for in as much as we may not see God fully in himself here living, therefore we should behold him, love him, dread him, and wonder at his might and his wisdom and his goodness in his works and in his creatures.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 52/623-626: “þou mai haue mynde of þe manhede of oure lord in his birþe and in his passioun, or in ony of his werkes, and feede þi þouȝt wiþ goostli ymaginacions of it for to stire þyne affeccions more to þe loue of him.”

<sup>55</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 54/651-55/655: “þenke on seyntis of oure lord, as on apostelis, martires, confessours and hooli uirginis; bihold inwardli þe hooli lyuyng, þe grace and þe vertues þat oure lord ȝaaf hem heere lyuyng, and bi þis mynde stire þyn owen herte to take ensample of hem vnto betere lyuyng.” In particular, Hilton singles out Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the ultimate human exemplar upon which one should reflect (55/656-666).

<sup>56</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 56/680-57/684: “þe myȝt, þe wisdom and þe goodnesse of oure lord in alle his creatures, for in as moche as we mai not see God fulli in him silf heere lyuyng, forþi we schulden biholde him, louen him, drede him, and wondre his myȝt and his wisdom and his goodnesse in his werkes and in his creatures.” In addition to these topics, Hilton recommends reflection on the joys of heaven (58/699-59/710) and the mercy of Christ (57/685-58/698).

The spiritual practices Hilton suggests for the mixed life can be compared with the exercises discussed in the *Cloud*. As has been mentioned, the *Cloud* author envisions a tripartite division of spiritual life into lower active, higher active/lower contemplative, and higher contemplative stages. Additionally, the author explains what spiritual exercises and experiences are appropriate in each of these stages:

The lower part of active life stands in good and honest bodily works of mercy and charity. The higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life lie in good spiritual meditations, and a busy beholding—unto a man's own wretchedness with sorrow and contrition, unto the passion of Christ and his servants with pity and compassion, and unto the wonderful gifts, kindness, and works of God in all his creatures, bodily and spiritual, with thanking and praising. But the higher part of contemplative life (as it may be had here) hangs wholly in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing, with a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God himself only.<sup>57</sup>

The first two of the *Cloud* author's list of spiritual stages and their attendant practices correspond closely to what is found in Hilton's *Mixed Life*. In the lower active life, spiritual practice is action in the world benefiting others. Similarly, Hilton suggests the importance in the mixed life of action which fulfills one's worldly obligations. The *Cloud* author goes on to suggest that the higher active/lower contemplative life is marked by the practice of discursive meditation, and he specifies three subjects for this meditation: one's own sinfulness, the Passion of Christ and other holy figures, and the goodness of God, especially as this is

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<sup>57</sup>*Cloud*, 31/21-32/8: "þe lower party of actiue liif stondeþ in good and honeste bodily werkes of mercy & of charite. þe hier party of actiue liif & þe lower party of contemplatiue liif liþ in goodly goostly meditacions, and besy beholding—vnto a mans owne wrechidnes wiþ sorow and contricion, vnto þe Passion of Crist and of his seruauntes wiþ pite and compassion, and vnto þe wonderful ziftes, kyndnes, and werkes of God in alle his creatures, bodili and goostly, wiþ þankyng and preising. Bot þe hizer partye of contemplacion (as it may be had here) hongep al holy in þis derknes and in þis cloude of vnknowyng, wiþ a louyng steryng and a blinde beholdyng vnto þe nakid beyng of God him-self only."

manifested through what God has created. These topics are virtually identical to those Hilton recommends for persons living the mixed life. With regard, then, to the role which action and discursive meditation play as spiritual practices, Hilton's *Mixed Life* and the *Cloud* share a great deal in common. Yet they differ in that Hilton's instruction in spiritual practices for the mixed life is focused upon what the *Cloud* author calls the lower active and higher active/lower contemplative stages. The *Cloud* author, however, claims that there is yet one more stage of spiritual ascent—the higher contemplative—in which this type of action and discursive meditation ceases.

An emphasis upon either discursive meditation characterized by thoughts, feelings, and imagination, or apophatic mystical experience characterized by an absence of these things is what most distinguishes the position of Hilton in *Mixed Life* from that of the *Cloud* author. Hilton and the *Cloud* author urge their respective audiences on to very different experiences. This difference in the type of experiences sought in each of these texts can be attributed to the audience for whom each author understood himself to be writing. When this difference in intended audience is taken into consideration, these two authors and their texts are consistent with one another.

While the two texts are divergent with regard to their experiential goals and practices, they are similar in terms of the type of person for whom these practices and experiences are deemed appropriate. In addressing the inter-related issues of audience and type of experience, the texts use similar imagery to describe the experiences to which a practitioner should aspire. Addressing the desire to move from discursive to apophatic experience, Hilton advises his reader,

high things that are above your wit and your reason, seek not, and great things that are above your might, investigate not. By these words the wise man forbids not utterly to seek and investigate spiritual and heavenly things, but he forbids us, that as long as we are fleshly and boisterous, not cleansed from vain love of the world, that we not take upon us by our own travail nor by our own wit to investigate or feel spiritual things.<sup>58</sup>

For a person in the mixed life, it is inappropriate to desire an experience of God beyond that of the meditations and reflections in which one's thoughts, feelings, and imagination play a central role.

Using similar imagery, the *Cloud* author suggests that the higher active/lower contemplative life—the mixed life Hilton describes—is natural for the religious practitioner. The higher contemplative life, though, is that to which one should aspire. The author writes that

in the lower part of active life a man is without himself and beneath himself. In the higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life, a man is within himself and even with himself. But in the higher part of contemplative life, a man is above himself and under his God. Above himself he is, because he intends to come thither by grace, whither he may not come by nature; that is to say, to be knit to God in spirit, and in oneness of love and accordance of will.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 68/824-830: “hiȝ þinges þat aren aboue þi wit and þi resoun, seke not, and grete þynges þat aren abouen þi myȝt, ransake not. Bi þise wordes þe wise man forbedeþ not vttili for to seke and ransake goostli and heueneli þinges, but he forbedeþ vs, þat as longe as we aren fleschli and boistous, not clensid from veyn loue of þe world, þat we take not upon us bi oure owen traueile ne bi oure owen wit for to ransake or feele goosteli þinges.”

<sup>59</sup>*Cloud*, 32/9-16: “In þe lower partye of actiue liif a man is wiþ-outen him-self and bineeþ him-self. In þe hiȝer party of actyue liif & þe lower party of contemplatiue liif, a man is wiþ-inne him-self & euen wiþ him-self. Bot in þe hiȝer partie of contemplatiue liif, a man is abouen him-self and vnder his God. Abouen him-self he is, for whi he purposeþ him to wynne þeder bi grace, wheþer he may not come bi kynde; þat is to sey, to be knit to God in spirite, and in oneheed of loue and acordaunce of wile.”

In their texts, both Hilton and the *Cloud* author use the image of ascent to speak of the degree of spiritual activity to which one should aspire. There is no fundamental disagreement between these authors as to what constitutes what is natural for a human being and what is above his natural condition. Both authors suggest that discursive meditative experience is the natural condition of spiritual activity for a person, and both agree that apophatic experience is above this natural state for human beings. Where they differ is in the way they approach this conceptualization with regard to the audience for which each author writes.

For Hilton, writing as he is for someone living the mixed life, the practice and experience of discursive meditation is appropriate. The *Cloud* author, while not disagreeing fundamentally with anything in Hilton's understanding, urges his reader to transcend these discursive meditations and move into apophatic experience. This is because he is writing for an audience composed of persons committed to and professed in the contemplative life.

For all the difference in intended audience between these two texts, though, both agree on a point which is quite explicit in the *Cloud*, and somewhat less emphasized in Hilton's *Mixed Life*. This concerns the relative priority of the contemplative over the active life. The *Cloud* author is unapologetic in his emphasis upon the higher contemplative life. In fact, he spends little time on practices or experiences that are preliminary to those of the higher contemplative life. This is not to say that he denigrates or thinks the lower stages unimportant, yet he has in mind a specific subject he wishes to address and, therefore, a very particular audience to whom his teaching is directed.

Hilton's *Mixed Life*, on the other hand, is concerned with a lower stage of spiritual practice according to the *Cloud* author's framework. Hilton claims that, for those persons

who have duties and obligations that tie them to the world and other persons, the mixed life is the appropriate state of spiritual progress and practice.<sup>60</sup> However, Hilton is also careful to say that, for those without such obligations, a higher state devoted solely to contemplative life is preferable:

But to others who are free, not bound to temporal nor to spiritual ministrations, I believe that contemplative life alone, if they might come thereto truthfully, is best, most helpful, most rewarding, most fair, and most worthy to them to use and to hold, and not to leave it willfully for no outward working of active life, unless it were in great need and great relieving and comforting of other men, either of their body or of their soul.<sup>61</sup>

Although Hilton directs his text to those with worldly duties who must live the mixed life, he states that in the absence of these obligations the contemplative life is to be considered higher.

In a fashion similar to the *Cloud* author, Hilton describes the more advanced stages of spiritual life in terms of an increasing renunciation of the world:

The life of each good Christian man is a continual desire to God, and that is of great virtue, for it is a great crying in the ears of God. The more you desire, the higher you cry, the better you pray, the wiser you think. And what is this desire? Surely nothing but a loathing of all this world's bliss, and of all fleshly desire in your heart, and a wonderful longing with a trusting yearning of endless bliss and heavenly joy.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 21/223-227.

<sup>61</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 21/227-22/234: "But to oþere þat aren free, not bounden to temporal ministracioun ne to spiritual, I hope þat lif contemplatif aloone, 3if þei my3ten come þerto soþfasteli, were best, moste spedefulle, most medfulle, most fair, and most worþi to hem for to vse and for to hoolde, and not for to leue it wilfulli for noon outward wirchyng of actif lif, but 3if it were in gret nede and grete releuyng and comforyng of oþir men, eiþir of here bodi or of heere soule."

<sup>62</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 41/472-479: "þe liyf of eche good Cristen man is a continuel desire to God, and þat is of grete vertu, for it is a greet cryng in þe eeris of God. Þe more

While Hilton talks about the human desire for God as an issue that is relevant to all Christians, he claims that spiritual progression is marked by the withdrawal of one's attention from the world. In this, there is the suggestion that professed contemplative life, which provides a means of removing oneself from the world, is the highest form of spiritual life, higher than the mixed life.

Thus, Hilton in *Mixed Life* and the *Cloud* author show a considerable amount of consistency in their judgment of professed religious life as the highest state. Despite the great emphasis that Hilton gives to appreciating and providing instruction in the mixed life, he holds up a solely contemplative life as the highest state possible for human beings. Denise Baker writes that “as much as Hilton approves of this ‘medled lyf’ [‘mixed life’] under the constraining circumstances of secular duties, he nonetheless continues to maintain that the condition of withdrawal from the world in a religious profession is necessary to progress to the highest stage of contemplation.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, S.S. Hussey rightly suggests that Hilton, despite his concessions to the necessities of combining action and contemplation, should not be understood as “some kind of religious egalitarian.”<sup>64</sup>

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þou desirest, þe hiȝer þou criest, þe betere þou praiest, þe wiseliere þou þenkest. And what is þis desire? Soþeli, no þinge but a lopynge of al þis wordlis blisse, of al fleschli likynge in þyn herte, and a wondirful longynge wiþ a trustfull ȝernynge of endeles blisse and heueneli ioie.”

<sup>63</sup>Baker, “The Active and Contemplative Lives,” 99-100.

<sup>64</sup>S.S. Hussey, “Walter Hilton: Traditionalist?,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at the Exeter Symposium, July 1980*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1980), 15.



Both the *Cloud* author and Hilton concede that there are occasions when one living an active or mixed life may experience contemplation, but they suggest that these occasions are the exception rather than the rule. In his prologue to the *Cloud*, the author says that there may be some readers who, “although they stand in activity by outward form of living, nevertheless yet by inward stirring after the secret spirit of God, whose judgments are hidden, are very graciously disposed, not continuously, as it is proper to true contemplatives, but now and then to be partakers in the highest point of this contemplative act.”<sup>65</sup> Wolfgang Riehle interprets this passage to mean that the *Cloud* “was aimed not only at the specific addressee but also at a wider group of readers who were leading active life as lay people and could not devote all their time to contemplation.”<sup>66</sup>

While it is true that the *Cloud* author allows that some in active life may be able to engage in contemplative practice, he also maintains a distinction in that these persons will experience contemplation only momentarily or periodically, as opposed to the “true” contemplatives who are in this state more or less continuously.<sup>67</sup> The *Cloud* author acknowledges that some blurring of the boundary separating active from contemplative life is possible, but he maintains his distinction between them with regard to the particular quality of experience one may have in these lives.

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<sup>65</sup>*Cloud*, 3/2-6: “þou3 al þei stonde in actyute bi outward forme of leuyng, neuerþeles 3it bi inward stering after þe priue sperit of God, whos domes ben hid, þei ben ful graciously disposid, not contynowely as it is propre to verrey contemplatyues, bot þan and þan to be parceners in þe hiezst pointe of þis contemplatiue acte.”

<sup>66</sup>Riehle, 15-16.

<sup>67</sup>Baker, “The Active and Contemplative Lives,” 95.

Similarly, Hilton writes to his reader, who is living the mixed life, that “it is enough for you and for me to have a desire and a longing for our lord. And if he will of his free grace over this desire send us of his spiritual light, and open our spiritual eye to see and know more of him than we have before by common travail, thank we him for this.”<sup>68</sup> In this, Hilton is in agreement with the *Cloud* author, in that both see this movement into contemplation as a possibility for one not solely professed to contemplative life, although it is not likely to be a frequent occurrence nor an ongoing experience due to one’s continuing involvement with the world. Summarizing the position of both authors on this issue, Denise Baker writes that “even though the *Cloud*-author and Hilton admit that those in the active state can, on rare occasions, engage in the contemplative act, they both distinguish this sporadic achievement from the true contemplation of those committed to a religious or eremitic vocation.”<sup>69</sup>

One issue which remains with regard to the inter-relationship between the active and contemplative lives is whether by “mixed life” Hilton and the *Cloud* author understand something fundamentally distinct from either active or contemplative lives. In numerical terms, are there two lives (active and contemplative) or three lives (active, contemplative, and mixed)? Hilton’s position on this issue in *Mixed Life* is clearly revealed by the title of his

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<sup>68</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 66/802-67/807: “It is ynow3 to þee and to me for to haue a desire and a longynge to oure lord. And 3if he wole of his free grace ouer þis desire sende us of his goostli li3t, and openen oure goostli i3en for to se and knowe more of him þan we haue had tofore bi comone trauaile, þanke we him þerof.”

<sup>69</sup>Baker, “The Active and Contemplative Lives,” 102.

treatise, and by his words: “You shall understand that there are three manners of living. One is active. Another is contemplative. The third is made of both, and that is mixed.”<sup>70</sup>

With regard to the position of the *Cloud* author on this question, more discussion is needed. It appears that the *Cloud* author disregards the possibility of the mixed life. As he writes, “Three lives they are not, for Holy Church makes no mind but of two—active life and contemplative life.”<sup>71</sup> The author’s statement here is seemingly clear and has been taken by scholars as evidence that the *Cloud* does not admit of the possibility of a mixed life. Hilary Carey, citing this passage, writes that the *Cloud* author “goes so far as to deny explicitly the existence of a third life.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Hugh Kempster suggests that the *Cloud* author’s position on this issue “could be read as a counter argument to the third way of Christian living posited in the contemporaneous *Mixed Life*.”<sup>73</sup>

This interpretation, while correct in terms of what the *Cloud* explicitly says, misses an important nuance of the inter-relationship between active and contemplative lives. While the

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<sup>70</sup>Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 11/119-121: “Þou schalt vndirstonde þat þeer is þree maner of lyuyng. Oon is actif. Anoper is contemplatifyf. Þe þredde is maad of boþe, and þat is medeled.”

<sup>71</sup>*Cloud*, 53/4-5: “Þre lyues þey not, for Holi Chirche makip no mynde bot of two—actyue liif and contemplatyue liif.”

<sup>72</sup>Carey, 374. Further on, Carey acknowledges that the *Cloud* author admits that some actives may have contemplative experience, but this does not address whether the author envisioned a way of life that combined action and contemplation.

<sup>73</sup>Hugh Kempster, “A Question of Audience: The Westminster Text and Fifteenth-Century Reception of Julian of Norwich,” in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire, Garland Medieval Casebooks (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 261.

author literally says that there are only two lives, he describes their inter-relationship in a very specific way:

There are two manner of lives in Holy Church. The one is active life, and the other is contemplative life. Active is the lower, and contemplative is the higher. Active life has two degrees, a higher and a lower; and also contemplative life has two degrees, a lower and a higher. Also these two lives are so coupled together, that although they are diverse in some part, yet neither of them may be had fully without some part of the other; because that part that is the higher part of active life, that same part is the lower part of contemplative life. So that a man may not be fully active, unless he be in part contemplative; nor yet fully contemplative (as it may be here), unless he be in part active.<sup>74</sup>

The *Cloud* author emphatically claims that the active and contemplative lives overlap each other. While he may not use the term “mixed life,” he certainly appears to argue for it as an experiential reality in spiritual practice and experience. Cheryl Taylor’s explanation is much closer to capturing the full implications of the *Cloud* on this point: “The author expounds the upper degree of active life and the lower degree of contemplative life as a third term, negotiating the space *between* the lives, and an indispensable aspect of both.”<sup>75</sup> This interpretation of the *Cloud* author’s position on the issue of who is suited for contemplative practice suggests the possibility that contemplation may be practiced and experienced by persons in the world.

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<sup>74</sup>*Cloud*, 31/4-14: “þer ben two maner of liues in Holy Chirche. Þe tone is actiue liif, and þe toþer is contemplatiue liif. Actyue is þe lower, and contemplatiue is þe hier. Actiue liif haþ two degrees, a hier and a lower; and also contemplatiue liif haþ two degrees, a lower and a hizer. Also þeese two liues ben so couplid to-geders, þat þof al þei ben diuers in som party, 3it neiþer of hem may be had fully wiþ-uten som party of þe oþer; for whi þat party þat is þe heiþer party of actyue liif, þat same party is þe lower party of contemplatiue liif. So þat a man may not be fully actiue, bot 3if he be in party contemplatiue; ne 3it fully contemplatiue (as it may be here), bot 3if he be in partie actyue.”

<sup>75</sup>Taylor, 145.

### **An Analysis of the Audience for the *Cloud* from Some of its Manuscripts**

Having considered what the *Cloud* author says regarding the audience for his text, and how this is related to the understanding of the mixed life, it can now be asked what can be known about those who read the *Cloud* and received its instruction in contemplative practice. Specifically, does evidence exist that the *Cloud* was understood by its readers to have some applicability to those outside the professed contemplative state, regardless of what the author himself had to say on this subject? This issue can be addressed by examining the relationships which exist between the *Cloud* and a number of other texts with which it circulated in some manuscripts. Such an analysis reveals something about the audience who received and attempted to use this text.

Hilary Carey suggests that in late medieval England the written word played a crucial role in providing those who desired to pursue the mixed life with instructional materials for spiritual practice.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Vincent Gillespie notes that this production of textual resources for those attempting to live the mixed life involved an “assimilation by the laity of techniques and materials of spiritual advancement, which had historically been the preserve of the clerical and monastic orders.”<sup>77</sup> The written word—the manuscripts of the *Cloud* and other texts—should be examined as examples of these descriptions.

Hilton’s *Mixed Life*—the clearest and most explicit treatise directed to a layperson who desired to incorporate contemplative practice into his religious life—does not have any

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<sup>76</sup>Carey, 361.

<sup>77</sup>Vincent Gillespie, “Vernacular Books of Religion,” in *Book Production and Printing in Britain 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, Cambridge Studies in Publishing and Printing History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 317.

known connection to the manuscript history of the *Cloud*. In fact, there is little hard evidence to suggest that the manuscripts of the *Cloud* were used widely by laypersons for instruction in contemplation. M. Deanesly's study, which examines the vernacular books most often bequeathed in wills in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, shows that the most popular bequeathed devotional books during this time included works by Richard Rolle (*Mending of Life, Meditations on the Passion, and English Psalter*) and Walter Hilton (*Scale of Perfection, Mixed Life, and Stimulus Amoris*), as well as Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. This list does not include the *Cloud*.<sup>78</sup>

The texts which were popularly bequeathed, however, are worth noting for two reasons. First, there is a noticeable trend toward imaginative and discursive meditative practice in a number of these works. Second, there is an emphasis upon the mixed life as a possibility in some of these works. In Love's text, these two tendencies meet and hint at how some persons may have envisioned the spirituality of the layperson. *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is based upon the spiritual practice of an imaginative and discursive meditation upon the life of Christ. It is an English translation of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, traditionally attributed to Saint Bonaventure.<sup>79</sup> Love's text also admits of the possibility of the mixed life, and recommends Walter Hilton's work to those who desire

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<sup>78</sup>M. Deanesly, "Vernacular Books in England in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Modern Language Review* 15 (1920): 349-358. Deanesly's findings in this article are summarized by Carey, 370.

<sup>79</sup>In its spiritual method it is thus connected with another of the popularly bequeathed books, Richard Rolle's *Meditations on the Passion*. The relationship of this type of spiritual practice to that of the *Cloud*, particularly as relates to awareness of the self, will be considered below in chapter 4.

to follow this spiritual path.<sup>80</sup> The importance of this endorsement is noted by Hilary Carey, who writes that

Love is recommending the approval of his order [the Carthusians] and, through Archbishop Arundel's license, the approval of the whole church to the admission of laypeople to the practice of contemplation and the reading of books which describe the process. The popularity of these texts in wills . . . is evidence of the advantage laypeople took of this opportunity in the fifteenth century.<sup>81</sup>

There is thus evidence of a number of works in circulation among laypersons which contained particular spiritual practices and acknowledged the mixed life as an option for laypersons.

In contrast to this trend, Vincent Gillespie claims that the manuscript history of the *Cloud* suggests that it was treated in such a way as to avoid its distribution among lay readers.<sup>82</sup> Gillespie notes the *Cloud* author's warnings in his text that the proper audience for his work is professed contemplatives, and states that, with only one exception, "there seems to be no evidence of borrowing of material into anthologies or derivative works. The signs are that the author's warnings were respected, and that these warnings conditioned the appearance of copies and the preservation of the integrity of each work."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Kempster, 261-262. While Love does not specifically name *Mixed Life* as the recommended treatise by Walter Hilton, it seems very likely that this is the text he had in mind, given his mention of Hilton in the context of a readership which was pursuing the mixed life.

<sup>81</sup>Carey, 373.

<sup>82</sup>Gillespie, "Vernacular Books of Religion," 322.

<sup>83</sup>Gillespie, "Vernacular Books of Religion," 322. The one exception to which Gillespie refers are four secondary treatises also attributed to the *Cloud* author, which appeared in a printed anthology alongside other texts.

It is true that a large number of the *Cloud* manuscripts contain only works by this author. This suggests that the text was understood to be of a distinctive quality, so that it was better not to accompany it with texts perceived as being of a different quality or directed to another audience. It is tempting, and understandable, to draw the conclusion that the exclusion of this text from anthologies was in keeping with the author's claim to an exclusive audience for instruction in contemplative spirituality. Yet, this analysis is called into question because some manuscripts do exist in which the *Cloud* is accompanied by other vernacular texts.

To date, no analysis has been done which attempts to understand the *Cloud* in the context of these other vernacular texts. Such an analysis raises questions about who might have been understood as the audience of these texts. While the *Cloud* explicitly states that it is intended for professional religious, the accompanying texts do not make such claims. Furthermore, these texts suggest a concern with issues which either are not unique to contemplative life, or which are pertinent to active or mixed lives. Using five manuscripts in which the *Cloud* is accompanied by other vernacular devotional texts (of the nineteen extant manuscripts of the *Cloud*), it can be argued that the *Cloud* appealed to a broader audience which included persons who were not necessarily professed contemplatives. If this was the case, then the *Cloud* may have been one of the texts that played a role in the new spirituality of the mixed life in late medieval England.

A sustained point of reference for this discussion will be the *Cloud* author's tripartite description of the stages of spiritual life and their accompanying spiritual practices.<sup>84</sup> This

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<sup>84</sup>*Cloud*, 31/21-32/8.



passage from the *Cloud* has already been dealt with at some length. It is sufficient to recall here that the *Cloud* author envisions spiritual life to consist of a hierarchy of these stages. The lower active life involves works of mercy in the world, while the higher active and lower contemplative lives are concerned with meditations upon such subjects as one's sins, the Passion of Christ, and the expression of the divine will in created things. Finally, the higher contemplative life consists of contemplation proper, as understood by the *Cloud* author. It is characterized by a silent awareness of the divine presence apart from thought and sense impression.<sup>85</sup> This model of the stages of spiritual life and practice is important because the *Cloud* author is concerned with providing direction in the higher contemplative life. The lower stages, while of value as preparation for this life, are not the author's concern. Yet the vernacular texts which accompany the *Cloud* in these five manuscripts are texts of spiritual instruction which are not limited to what the *Cloud* author calls the higher contemplative life. In fact, some of these texts are directed to the type of spiritual practices described by the *Cloud* author as being appropriate to the mid-point of spiritual progression, the higher active and lower contemplative lives.

The first such manuscript is British Library, Royal MS 17.D.v. It contains, in addition to the *Cloud*, an extract from the *Life* of Catherine of Siena. Both texts are in the same scribal hand.<sup>86</sup> The extract from the *Life*, which in the manuscript is given the title "Diverse

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<sup>85</sup>As has been discussed, this hierarchy of stages as described by the *Cloud* author does have some ambiguity built into it with regard to the separation of these stages, as the *Cloud* author says that the higher active and lower contemplative lives are the same, and that action and contemplation are therefore connected with each other in human life and spiritual practice.

<sup>86</sup>Hodgson, *Cloud*, xii.

Doctrines Devout and Fruitful, Taken Out of the Life of that Glorious Virgin and Spouse of Our Lord, Saint Catherine of Siena,” includes a discussion (presented in the form of Christ addressing Catherine) of the role of thinking upon the Passion of Christ to overcome spiritual temptations: “If you will overcome your spiritual enemies, take the Cross as I did; this Cross shall be to you a great refreshing in all your temptations, if you have mind of the pains and temptations that I suffered thereon. And certainly the pains of the Cross may well be called refreshing of temptations, for the more pain you suffer for My love, the more like you be to Me.”<sup>87</sup>

While the *Cloud* author would not disagree with the value of this practice, he does relegate it to the middle stage of his model of spiritual progress. The *Cloud* author goes so far as to say that meditation upon topics such as the Passion of Christ must be transcended if one is to enter into the fullness of contemplation. He writes that “it behooves a man or woman, who has for a long time been used to these meditations, always leave them, and put them and hold them far down under the cloud of forgetting, if ever he shall pierce the cloud of

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<sup>87</sup>Catherine of Siena, “Divers Doctrines Devout and Fruitful, Taken Out of the Life of that Glorious Virgin and Spouse of Our Lord, Saint Katherin of Seenes,” 39-40: “if ye will overcome your ghostly enemies, for to take the Cross as I did; the which Cross shall be to you a great refreshing in all your temptations, if ye have mind of the pains and temptations that I suffered thereon. And certainly the pains of the Cross may well be called refreshing of temptations, for the more pain ye suffer for My love, the more like ye be to Me.” Citations of this text are from *The Cell of Self-Knowledge: Seven Early English Mystical Treatises Printed by Henry Pepwell in 1521*, ed. Edmund G. Gardner (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966). This text is presented in modernized English in this edition. I have modernized the language further, and have taken into account the manuscript variants as these are noted in this edition of the text.

unknowing between him and his God.”<sup>88</sup> The *Cloud* author describes as preparatory a spiritual practice which the Catherine of Siena text emphasizes.

Similarly, there is a distinction between the way these two texts address other spiritual practices. The Catherine text makes brief mention of other practices, all in the context of using them to overcome temptation when one experiences a deprivation of spiritual consolations: “Some unwise folks, considering that they are destitute from the spiritual comfort which they were accustomed to have, leave therefore the spiritual exercise that they were accustomed to use of prayer, of meditations, of reading, of holy communications, and of doing penance; whereby they are made more ready to be overcome by the fiend.”<sup>89</sup> While the text refers to a number of practices here, what is particularly important is the mention of prayer, meditation, and reading. These are the names traditionally associated with the practice of *lectio divina*.

The reference to these practices related to *lectio divina* is relevant to this discussion because the *Cloud* author makes a similar mention of these exercises,<sup>90</sup> but he draws a different conclusion regarding their place in the contemplative life. He claims that these three

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<sup>88</sup>*Cloud*, 27/20-28/2: “it behouep a man or a womman, þat haþ longe tyme ben usid in þeese meditacions, algates leue hem, & put hem & holde hem fer down vnder þe cloude of forþetyng, 3if euer schal he peerse þe cloude of vnknowyng bitwix him and his God.”

<sup>89</sup>Catherine of Siena, “Divers Doctrines,” 42-43: “some unwitty folks, considering that they be destitute from the ghostly comfort the which they were wont to have, leave therefore the ghostly exercise that they were wont to use of prayer, of meditations, of reading, of holy communications, and of penance doing; whereby they be made more ready to be overcome of the fiend.”

<sup>90</sup>*Cloud*, 71/11-14. A more detailed discussion of the *Cloud* author’s view of *lectio divina* can be found below in chapter 3.

movements of *lectio divina* are linked with one another as a single spiritual practice for those in the early and middle stages of spiritual progress. For these persons, meditation may not be done without reading having been done first, and prayer likewise may not be done without meditation having been done first.<sup>91</sup> In discussing the practice of *lectio divina* among experienced contemplatives, however, the *Cloud* author suggests that meditation is less dependent upon reading, and that prayer is in turn less dependent upon meditation.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the *Cloud* author makes reference to reading, prayer, and meditation—the three movements of *lectio divina*—but in a way which distinguishes these practices in those who are relatively new to contemplative life and practice as opposed to those who are seasoned contemplatives. While he never rejects these exercises as trivial or unnecessary, he relegates their more elaborate practice to those who are inexperienced in contemplation. He suggests that those with experience practice only a simplified form of these exercises. In relating the treatment of this topic in the *Cloud* to that of the Catherine of Siena text, it may be noted that the Catherine of Siena text draws no such distinctions. It simply recommends reading, meditation, and prayer as essential spiritual practices to all persons. The Catherine text, then, seems unconcerned with distinctions between those who are more or less experienced in contemplation, a distinction which the *Cloud* author finds particularly important.

A final point of comparison between these two texts involves the way each describes one's response to persons who have sinned, and the implications of this for envisioning the

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<sup>91</sup>*Cloud*, 71/17-20, 71/22-72/2.

<sup>92</sup>*Cloud*, 72/23-73/4, 73/24-74/1, 74/5-7.

solitary or communal context of the person reading these texts. The author of the Catherine text writes,

to get and purchase purity of soul, it is very necessary that a man be kept himself from all manner of judgments of his neighbor's deeds; for in every creature we should behold only the will of God. And therefore [Catherine] said that in no way should men judge creatures; that is, neither despise them by their judgment nor condemn them, albeit that they see them do open sin before them.<sup>93</sup>

Such a comment suggests a reader who is in a state of regular contact with other persons, and in a position to be aware of and judge their actions.

This section of the Catherine text invites a comparison with the *Cloud* on this issue of the presumed social context of the reader and his relative seclusion from or contact with other persons. The *Cloud* author states that he is writing specifically for a person who is living a solitary rather than communal life.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere in his text the *Cloud* author addresses the implications of the contemplative's contact with others in a more developed manner. In a discussion of how the contemplative is to regard other persons, the author implies that, while contact with other persons does occur for one in contemplative life, this contact takes place outside the time of contemplative practice itself.<sup>95</sup> There is an assumption, then, that the contemplative spends significant time removed from the presence of other persons, and that he must on occasion leave this state and come into contact with others. This is significantly

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<sup>93</sup>Catherine of Siena, "Divers Doctrines," 46: "to get and purchase purity of soul, it were right necessary that a man kept himself from all manner of judgments of his neighbour's deeds; for in every creature we should behold only the will of God. And therefore she said that in no wise men should deem creatures; that is, neither despise them by their doom nor condemn them, all be it that they see them do open sin before them."

<sup>94</sup>*Cloud*, 14/10-15.

<sup>95</sup>*Cloud*, 59/15-60/5.

different from the Catherine text, which draws no such distinctions. Instead, it simply assumes that its reader lives in a state in which she is in contact with other persons and is aware of their actions. These two texts, then, make different assumptions regarding the relative solitude or communal nature of their readers' lives. The *Cloud* assumes a contemplative reader who exists in relative solitude from others, while the Catherine text makes no such assumptions. In fact, it suggests that its readers live in a much more communal context.

The second text to be considered is Walter Hilton's *Of Angels' Song*, which is found alongside the *Cloud* in Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 576, both texts having been written by the same scribal hand.<sup>96</sup> The intertextual relationship between Hilton's text found in this manuscript and the *Cloud* is similar to that between the Catherine of Siena text and the *Cloud*. In both cases, there are allusions to spiritual practices and experiences which, while not completely disregarded by the *Cloud* author, are viewed by him as preparatory to contemplative life or appropriate to those whose lives are not truly contemplative.

Walter Hilton's *Of Angels' Song* presents a clear instance of this distinction between a text written for a strictly contemplative audience, such as the *Cloud*, and one written for the needs of a broader readership which includes persons living a variety of forms of life spanning the continuum between the active and contemplative. In describing *Of Angels' Song*, Jonathan Hughes writes that Hilton "addressed himself in this work to those who did

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<sup>96</sup>Hodgson, *Cloud*, xvi.

not have the time or the expertise to master the contemplative techniques expounded by . . . the author of the *Cloud*.”<sup>97</sup>

One of the issues of concern to Hilton in *Of Angels' Song* is the way in which persons deceive themselves, or allow themselves to become vulnerable to deception by demonic forces. Hilton writes,

Some man when he has long worked bodily and spiritually in destroying sins and getting virtues, and perhaps has gotten by grace a little rest, and a clarity of conscience, immediately he leaves prayers, readings of holy scriptures, and meditations of the passion of Christ, and the mindfulness of his own wretchedness; and, before he is called by God, he gathers his own wits by violence to seek and to behold heavenly things, before his eye is made spiritual by grace, and overworks by imagination his wits, and by indiscrete working turns the brains in his head, and breaks the powers and wits both of the soul and of the body.<sup>98</sup>

In this passage, Hilton recommends the traditional spiritual practices, such as reading scripture and meditating upon Christ's Passion and one's own sinfulness, as means to protect against deception.

As has been seen, for the *Cloud* author, the very exercises recommended by Hilton are but preliminary for contemplatives. Reading and meditation are appropriate for those at

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<sup>97</sup>Hughes, 228.

<sup>98</sup>Walter Hilton, *Of Angels' Song*, 13/114-123: “Sum man when he has longe traueled bodili and gastli in destroyng of syns and getyng of uertus, and padventure has getyn be grace a sumdele rest, and a clerte in conscience, anon he leues prayers, redyngs of haly scriptures, and meditacions of þe passion of Crist, and þe mynde of his owne wretchednesse; and, or he be called of God, he gadres his owne wyttes be violence to sekyn and to byhalde heuenly thyngs, or his egh be mad gastly by grace, and ouertrauels be ymagynaciouns his wittis, and be undiscrete trauelyng turnes þe braynes in his heued, and forbrekis þe myghtes and the wyttes bothe of þe saule and of þe body.” Citations of this text are from “Walter Hilton's *Of Angels' Song* Edited from the British Museum MS Additional 27592,” ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya, in *Two Minor Works of Walter Hilton* (Tokyo: Privately printed, 1980). I have taken into account the manuscript variants found in Bodley MS 576 as they are noted in this edition of the text. Translations from the Middle English are my own.

the mid-point in the hierarchy of spiritual practice and experience. The *Cloud* author recommends that one called to contemplation eventually leave behind the spiritual practices Hilton recommends in his text.

A second issue Hilton addresses in *Of Angels' Song* is the question of spiritual consolation, or pleasant experiences which result from the human soul drawing close to the divine presence through spiritual practice. Hilton's text is very concerned with this issue. As the title of the treatise suggests, it deals with such experiences as heavenly music which one may encounter in devotional practice. At one point in his text, Hilton describes the experience of the soul receiving these consolations:

Much comfort it receives from our lord, not only inwardly in its own private substance, by virtue of the oneness with our lord that lies in knowing and loving God, in light and spiritual burning from him, in transforming of the soul in the godhead, but also many other comforts, savours, sweetnesses, and wonderful feelings in diverse and sundry manners, after as it pleases our lord to visit his creatures here on earth, and after that the soul profits and grows in charity.<sup>99</sup>

Here Hilton suggests that the soul encounters pleasant phenomena which are separate and distinct from the inner experience of union with God. Moreover, these consist of what seem to be sensible experiences.

In the *Cloud*, the author also addresses the question of consolations which the contemplative may encounter. On the whole, the *Cloud* author seems to attribute less significance to these types of consolations. Although he does not deny nor disregard their

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<sup>99</sup>Hilton, *Of Angels' Song*, 11/41-48: "Mykil comforth it resayues of our lord, nocht anly inwardly in hys awne pryue substance, be uertu of þe anhedde of our lord þat lys in knawyng and lufyng of God, in lyght and gastly brennyng of hym, in transfourmyng of þe saule into þe godhede, bot also many other comforthes, sauours, swetnesses, and wonderful felyngs on dyvers and sondrie maners, eftir as it please our lord to uisit his creaturs her in erth, and after þat þe saule profites and waxes in charite."



existence, he views them as of less consequence than the simple desire for, and awareness of, God which are the central elements in contemplative spirituality. The *Cloud* author writes of a “humble stirring of love” within the contemplative, and goes on to say that this stirring is “the substance of all perfection. All sweetness and comforts, bodily or spiritual, are to this but as it were accidents, be they never so holy; and they do but hang on this good will. Accidents I call them, for they may be had or lacked without breaking it up.”<sup>100</sup> The interest in consolations in Hilton’s text is downplayed in the *Cloud*, where the emphasis is placed upon the experience of God.

It is difficult to extrapolate conclusions regarding the intended audience for these texts from this discussion of the relative importance of consolations in the spiritual life. The *Cloud* author himself is reluctant to state definitively what level of spiritual progress is revealed by the presence or absence of these experiences.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, the author always maintains that the constitutive element of the spirituality he teaches is the simple desire for God, making the issue of spiritual consolations a matter of some indifference. He writes that “we should direct all our beholding unto this meek stirring of love in our will. And in all other sweetness and comforts, bodily or spiritual, be they never so pleasant nor so holy (if it

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<sup>100</sup>*Cloud*, 92/14, 92/21-93/3: “meek steryng of loue . . . þe substaunce of alle perfeccion. Alle swetnes & counfortes, bodily or goostly, ben to þis bot as it were accyidentes, be þei neuer so holy; and þei don bot hangen on þis good wil. Accyidentes I clepe hem, for þei mowe be had and lackyd wiþ-outyn parbrakyng of it.”

<sup>101</sup>*Cloud*, 94/1-4, 17-18.

is courteous and seemly to say) we should have a manner of recklessness.”<sup>102</sup> The issue of consolations, which Hilton takes up in *Of Angels’ Song*, receives a treatment in the *Cloud* which calls into questions its importance for the person living a contemplative life. The position of the *Cloud* author, with regard to both the types of spiritual practices undertaken by the contemplative and the place of consolations in this life, has been rightly summarized by James Walsh. He writes that, for the *Cloud* author, “meditative reflections, and the consolations of devotion attaching to them, are inappropriate in ‘the higher part of the contemplative life.’”<sup>103</sup>

A final point of comparison between Hilton’s *Of Angels’ Song* and the *Cloud* is the awareness and perception of physical and spiritual phenomena as a part of spiritual life and practice. Hilton’s text and the *Cloud* take rather different positions, suggesting different conceptions of who the audience for each of these texts would be. Hilton describes the human soul that has undergone a spiritual purification as finding joy in the manifestations of the physical world: “Some soul, by virtue of charity that God gives it, is so cleansed that all creatures, and all that he hears, or sees, or feels by any of his senses, turns him to comfort and gladness, and the sensual nature receives new savour and sweetness in all creatures.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>*Cloud*, 93/11-15: “we schulde directe alle oure beholdyng vnto þis meek steryng of loue in oure wille. And in alle oþer swetnes & counfortes, bodily or goostly, be þei neuer so likyng ne so holy (3if it be cortesie and semely to sey) we schuld haue a maner of rechelesnes.”

<sup>103</sup>Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 62.

<sup>104</sup>Hilton, *Of Angels’ Song*, 11/49-52: “Sum saule, be uertue of charite þat God gyues it, is so clensted þat al creaturs, and al þat he heres, or sese, or felis be any of his wittis, turnes hym to comforth and gladnes, and þe sensualite resayues newe sauour and swetnes in al

This reference to finding joy in the physical world runs counter to the emphasis found in the *Cloud* upon forgetting created things in the practice of contemplation.

For the *Cloud* author, thoughts of all creatures are nothing so much as a hindrance to contemplative practice. Therefore, they should be placed beneath a “cloud of forgetting” during the time of contemplation. As the author writes,

you are much farther from [God] when you have no cloud of forgetting between you and all the creatures that have ever been made. As often as I say ‘all the creatures that have ever been made,’ as often I mean not only the creatures themselves, but also all the works and the conditions of the same creatures. I leave out not one creature, whether it is bodily or spiritual, nor yet any condition or work of any creature, whether it is good or evil; but shortly to say, all should be hid under the cloud of forgetting in this case. For although it is very profitable sometimes to think of certain conditions and deeds of some certain special creatures, nevertheless in this work it profits little or nothing.<sup>105</sup>

What is noteworthy in this passage is the forcefulness with which the author offers his instruction, and with which he insists that thoughts of any created things are not appropriate to contemplative practice. This is different indeed from Hilton’s picture of a practitioner who not only thinks of, but revels in, the joy of the created world.

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creatures.” Hilton does go on to specify that this love for creatures is “spiritual and clean” (“gastly and clene”) (11/54-55), but there is obviously an emphasis here upon awareness of the physical world.

<sup>105</sup>*Cloud*, 24/7-17: “þou arte wel ferþer fro hym when þou hast no cloude of forþetyng bitwix þee and alle þe creatures þat euer ben maad. As ofte as I sey ‘alle þe creatures þat euer ben maad,’ as ofte I mene, not only þe self creatures, bot also alle þe werkes and þe condicions of þe same creatures. I oute-take not o creature, wheþer þei ben bodily creatures or goostly, ne 3it any condicion or werk of any creature, wheþer þei be good or iuel; bot schortly to sey, alle schulde be hid vnder þe cloude of forþetyng in þis caas. For þof al it be ful profitable sumtyme to þink of certeyne condicions and dedes of sum certein special creatures, neuerþeles 3it in þis werke it profiteþ lityl or nou3t.”

A corresponding contrast can be drawn between *Of Angels' Song* and the *Cloud* with regard to the perception of spiritual things as a part of one's spiritual life and practice. Hilton explains that the purified soul, in addition to its joyful awareness of creatures, is able to perceive spiritual entities as well. As he writes, "When a soul is purified by the love of God, illumined by wisdom, made stable by the might of God, then is the eye of the soul opened to behold spiritual things, such as virtues, and angels, and in holy souls, and in heavenly things. Then is the soul able, because of cleanness, to feel the touching and the speaking of good angels."<sup>106</sup>

For the *Cloud* author, however, awareness of even spiritual creatures during contemplation is of little consequence as compared with awareness of God. He writes that

it is more profitable to the health of your soul, more worthy in itself . . . such a blind stirring of love unto God for himself, and such a private love put upon this cloud of unknowing; and better for you to have it and to feel it in your affection spiritually, than it is to have the eye of your soul opened in contemplation of beholding of all the angels or saints in heaven, or in hearing of all the mirth and the melody that is among them in bliss.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Hilton, *Of Angels' Song*, 11/71-12/76: "When a saule es purified be þe luf of God, illumynd be wysdom, stabild be þe myght of God, þan es þe eyes of þe saule opynd to behalde gastly þings, as uertus, and angels, and in holly saules, and in hevynly thynges. Þan es þe saule abil, because of clenness, to fele þe towchinge and þe spekyng of goode aungels." As with the last passage quoted from this text, Hilton does go on to specify that this perception is spiritual rather than physical (12/76-77), but his emphasis upon this awareness of spiritual realities is nevertheless pronounced. To give an accurate portrayal of Hilton's thought here, it should be noted that he does state that the perception of these spiritual things is of less significance than one's love for God (12/86-89). Despite this, it is clear that in this text Hilton regards the awareness of both physical and spiritual creatures as playing significant roles in spiritual experience.

<sup>107</sup>*Cloud*, 34/5-6, 8-14: "it is more profitable to þe helpe of þi soule, more worþi in it-self . . . soche a blynde steryng of loue vnto God for him-self, and soche a priue loue put vpon þis cloude of vnknowyng; and beter þee were for to haue it and for to fele it in þin

In taking this position, the *Cloud* author differs from Hilton as regards experiences one might desire and expect in contemplative life.

These comparisons between Walter Hilton's *Of Angels' Song* and the *Cloud* show two different conceptions regarding what is of value in contemplative practice. In short, Hilton's text places much greater emphasis upon practices and experiences which appeal to the imagination and senses of the practitioner, as can be seen in his references to discursive exercises, spiritual consolations, and the perception of physical and spiritual creatures as a part of spiritual life. The *Cloud*, in contrast, lessens emphasis upon these elements in favor of an understanding of spiritual practice and experience in which the imagination and senses are surpassed in an apophatic approach to God. This basic difference between these two texts has implications for considering the audience for whom each was written. As Jonathan Hughes suggests, Hilton was "attempting to guide people along a path of religious sensibility which took them away from the metaphysical abstractions of the author of *The Cloud* . . . instead [he] directed them towards the normal emotional responses that were appropriate to married couples and their families."<sup>108</sup> Hilton's *Of Angels' Song* and the *Cloud*, while sharing space in the same manuscript, make different assumptions about what constitutes spiritual practice. These assumptions, in turn, have implications for the intended recipients of these texts and practitioners of the spiritualities they teach.

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affeccion goostly, þen it is for to haue þe ize of þi soule openid in contemplacion or beholding of alle þe aungelles or seyntes in heuen, or in hering of alle þe mirþe and þe melody þat is amonges hem in blisse."

<sup>108</sup>Hughes, 228.

The third manuscript is Bodleian Library, Douce MS 262, which contains a short untitled text beginning, “When a soul begins to feel grace . . .” The *Cloud* and this text are written by different scribal hands,<sup>109</sup> though their compilation in this manuscript suggests a recognition that the texts share common concerns. With regard to subject-matter, and the implications of this for audience, this text presents a problem in that it offers a summary of the entire progression made by the contemplative through the spiritual stages as these are described by the *Cloud* author. In a sense, then, this text is consistent with the *Cloud*, in that it describes in summary fashion the experiences of the higher active and lower contemplative life, and the transition from this stage to that of the higher contemplative life. If a contrast between these texts may be drawn, it is this: while the *Cloud* is interested almost exclusively with the higher contemplative life, this text presents a summary of the entire journey to contemplation, and describes the stages which come before the contemplative experience addressed by the *Cloud*.

In describing the stages preliminary to contemplation proper, “When a soul begins to feel grace . . .” makes reference to a number of spiritual practices and experiences. All of these are practices which call upon one to reflect discursively upon himself or upon the narratives and teachings of Christian scripture and tradition. The text begins, “When a soul begins to feel grace working in him, he weeps in sorrow for his sins.”<sup>110</sup> A few lines later, the

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<sup>109</sup>Helen L. Gardner, “Walter Hilton and the Authorship of the *Cloud of Unknowing*,” *The Review of English Studies* 9 (1933): 132.

<sup>110</sup>“When a soul begins to feel grace . . .,” 297. Citations of this text are from James Walsh, ed., *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works, by the Author of The Cloud of Unknowing*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988). Walsh presents this text translated into modern English.

text continues by describing the actions which one takes as a result of this sorrow for sins: “As he continues in this state, he decides to enter Religion, or at least to go to Confession; and there he purifies himself by contrition and doing penance, until he is cleansed from all the rust of sin.”<sup>111</sup> Here, the text describes the practitioner focusing attention upon himself, reflecting upon his previous acts, feeling sorrow for them, and performing penances to be purified of them. As the description of this spiritual journey continues, the text explains that the practitioner’s attention moves to reflection upon other subjects: “Nothing brings him comfort or joy except the remembrance of Christ’s Passion and the joys of heaven.”<sup>112</sup> In the description of all these practices and experiences, there is a correspondence with what the *Cloud* author refers to as the higher active and lower contemplative lives.<sup>113</sup>

Finally, the text describes the movement into what the *Cloud* author would call the higher stage of contemplation. Here one “thinks no more on joy or pain or sin, or of the Passion of Christ or of our Lady, or of anything in heaven, in hell, or on earth, but only on God: not what God is in nature or qualities, but that God is; and this is all his desire . . . Then is his soul still and at rest. He feels God in himself and himself in God.”<sup>114</sup> Because this text addresses the entire progression of spiritual practice, it seems to address persons who are at a variety of stages in this process, rather than simply those who live and practice the stage of higher contemplation.

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<sup>111</sup>“When a soul begins to feel grace . . .,” 297.

<sup>112</sup>“When a soul begins to feel grace . . .,” 297.

<sup>113</sup>Walsh, *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works*, 294.

<sup>114</sup>“When a soul begins to feel grace . . .,” 297-298. Cf. Walsh, *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works*, 294.

The fourth manuscript which contains the *Cloud* and another work of vernacular devotional literature is Oxford, University College, MS 14, which includes a short extract from Catherine of Siena's *The Orcherd of Syon*, a Middle English translation of her *Dialogue*.<sup>115</sup> Both texts are in the same scribal hand.<sup>116</sup> Phyllis Hodgson suggests that a basic difference exists between the spiritualities of Catherine of Siena and the *Cloud* author, in that the *Cloud* "is esoteric in its concentration on a special exercise of unitive prayer."<sup>117</sup> Hodgson's reference to esotericism here seems to be concerned primarily with the question of whether such prayer is understood as accessible to all persons or as the special experience of a small religious elite. Hodgson claims that Catherine "regarded the attainment of contemplation as the goal for all, and progress towards this as a continuous and gradual development of the life of grace begun at baptism."<sup>118</sup> According to Hodgson, then, these two texts diverge with regard to whom the audience for contemplative literature is.

In the extract of the *Orcherd* that is found in this manuscript, Catherine addresses the discernment of visions which may visit the soul. As the text explains (through God's voice speaking to Catherine), it is concerned with "by what tokens you should know when a soul receives my visitations, whether they were visions or other spiritual comforts, where I

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<sup>115</sup>The extract corresponds with Part 5, Chapter 2 of *The Orcherd of Syon*.

<sup>116</sup>Hodgson, *Cloud*, xvii.

<sup>117</sup>Phyllis Hodgson, *The Orcherd of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*, Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lectures (London: Oxford University Press, [1964?]), 243n1.

<sup>118</sup>Hodgson, *The Orcherd of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*, 243. While Hodgson contrasts the *Cloud* and Catherine of Siena on this point, she also claims that Catherine and Walter Hilton fundamentally agreed that contemplation is open to all persons.



showed you tokens of how you should know whether these were from me or not.”<sup>119</sup> As with Hilton’s *Of Angels’ Song*, the concern of this particular extract from the *Orcherd* is with consolations which are a part of spiritual experience. As such, what was said above regarding the comparison of Hilton’s text with the *Cloud* on the issue of spiritual consolations is applicable to the relationship of the *Orcherd* to the *Cloud* as well. That is, the *Orcherd* addresses spiritual consolations, which the *Cloud* author views as belonging to less-developed stage of spiritual progress.

An important feature of the *Orcherd* extract is its multiple references to “perfect” and “imperfect” spiritual practitioners. At two places in this extract, Catherine makes reference to the deceptions which can occur in those who receive spiritual consolations while they are in an imperfect state. According to Catherine, the danger for these persons is that they will value the joy of these consolations more than the presence of God who is their source. For example, in the text God says, “Of such namely who are yet in the state of imperfection, they would rather behold the gift of comforts that I give them than the affection of my own charity, which I give them more specially. In this they may receive deceits.”<sup>120</sup> At the end of the extract, the text suggests that the instructions for discernment it has given will benefit all

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<sup>119</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Orcherd of Syon*, 237/18-22: “by what tokene þou schuldest knowe whanne a soule resceyueþ my visitacioun, wheþir it were of visiones or of opire goostly cumfortis, where I schewide þee tookenes how þou schuldest knowe wheþir it were of me or not.” Citations of this text are from *The Orcherd of Syon*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, Early English Text Society o.s. 258 (London: Oxford University Press, 1966). Translations from the Middle English are my own.

<sup>120</sup>Catherine of Siena, *Orcherd of Syon*, 238/8-11: “Of siche namely þat ben zit in þe staat of inperfeccioun, þe whiche rapir beholden to þe gift of cumfortis þat I zeue hem þan to affeccioun of my charyte, which I zeue hem moore specially. In þis þei mown resceyue disceytis.”

spiritual practitioners, both perfect and imperfect: “Lo, daughter, my endless goodness has thus provided for perfect and imperfect, in whatever state that they stand, to know deceits of the fiend in the time of visions and visitations, so that they are not deceived.”<sup>121</sup> The extract from Catherine’s text in this manuscript makes particular reference to those characterized as imperfect, and states that its instruction has bearing upon their spiritual practice.

This reference to the perfect and imperfect suggests a point of contrast with the *Cloud*, particularly with regard to whom the *Cloud* author states is the appropriate audience for his text. As has been discussed, the *Cloud* author also makes reference to a state of perfection, naming it as the final of the four stages of Christian life: the common, special, singular, and perfect.<sup>122</sup> The author then addresses the particular person for whom he says he has written this text, and claims that he is in the third of these states, and preparing for entry into the fourth.<sup>123</sup> Thus, the *Cloud* author specifically states that his text is written for one who, while not yet in the state of perfection, is certainly proximate to that state. The *Cloud* author is not concerned with providing instruction to those who are not close to this state of perfection. In this sense, the *Cloud* and the extract from Catherine of Siena’s *The Orchard of Syon* suggest that the instruction given in their texts may be applicable to different audiences.

The final manuscript to be considered is Westminster Cathedral, Diocesan Archives, MS H.38. This manuscript contains an extract of the *Cloud* (it is the only manuscript

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<sup>121</sup>Catherine of Siena, *Orchard of Syon*, 239/23-26: “Lo, douȝtir, myn eendelees goodnes haȝ prouydid þus for parfȝt and vnparfȝt, in what staat þat þei stonde, for to knowe disceytis of þe feend in tyme of visyouns and visitaciouns, þat þei be not disceyued.”

<sup>122</sup>*Cloud*, 13/9-11.

<sup>123</sup>*Cloud*, 14/10-15.

discussed here which does not contain the entire text) as well as a number of other short devotional texts. Sarah Horrall says this manuscript “resembles a commonplace book and was apparently used by a Carthusian to preserve short Latin and English passages from texts which interested him.”<sup>124</sup> The texts in this part of the manuscript are written by the same scribal hand.<sup>125</sup> Two of the Middle English devotional texts can be contrasted with the *Cloud*.

The first of these texts is unidentified, and describes four ways by which a person may know if he is living in a state of God’s grace. In describing this text, Sarah Horrall says that it “is similar in content to the text called ‘Four Tokens of Salvation,’ usually found in very simple guides to Christian life, where it generally accompanies vernacular treatments of the Pater Noster, Ave, Creed or Ten Commandments, or short tracts on the Seven Deadly Sins, Seven Virtues, etc.”<sup>126</sup> Horrall’s description suggests an important point of contrast between this text and the *Cloud*, in that this text appears to be oriented to providing the most elementary instruction in Christian faith, whereas the *Cloud* is directed towards persons who are pursuing a very particular spiritual practice, in which it would be assumed that the practitioner would already be familiar with the kind of information included in this untitled text. These two texts are aimed at very different types of audiences.

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<sup>124</sup>Sarah M. Horrall, “Middle English Texts in a Carthusian Commonplace Book: Westminster Cathedral, Diocesan Archives, MS H.38,” *Medium Aevum* 59 (1990): 214. Citations of texts in this manuscript are from Horrall’s article. Translations from the Middle English are my own. Only the vernacular texts which are found in this manuscript will be addressed here.

<sup>125</sup>N.R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 1:419.

<sup>126</sup>Horrall, 216.

This impression is borne out by the specific content found in this untitled text. It reads, in part,

there are four things by which a man may have true supposing, if he has them, that he stands in grace. The first is if he has sweetness or devotion of prayer in his soul. The second if he has heat of love in his soul to God and to all men. The third if he has bitter sorrow in his soul for sins that he has wrought. The fourth is if he has the passion of Christ steadfastly in mind.<sup>127</sup>

As has been seen with the other texts discussed, this text addresses spiritual practices or experiences which, according to the model of spiritual progression offered by the *Cloud* author, belong to the level of higher active and lower contemplative life. In fact, two of the indicators of grace which are mentioned here—sorrow for sins and meditation on the Passion of Christ—are specifically described by the *Cloud* author as being practices which belong to the middle of the hierarchy of spiritual stages, below that of the higher contemplative life to which the *Cloud* is directed.

Also included in the Westminster Cathedral manuscript are two chapters from the anonymous *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* (also known as the *Fervor Amoris*).<sup>128</sup> Speaking about this text as a whole, Robert Boenig has noted that it is directed to an audience different from that claimed by the *Cloud* author: “A manual that instructs the reader on the successive degrees of love, *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* is

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<sup>127</sup>Horrall, 223: “þer ben foure þinges bi which a man mai haue verrey supposynge, 3if he haþ hem, þat he stondeþ in grace. The first is 3if he haþ swetnes or deuocioun of preyere in his soule. The secunde 3if he haue hete of luf in his soule to God & to alle men. The þrid 3if he haue bittere sorwe in his sowe for synnes þat he haþ wrou3t. The ferþe is 3if he haue þe passioun of Christ stedfastly in mynde.”

<sup>128</sup>The chapters from *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* included in this manuscript are c and m.

intended for a general audience—women and men, religious, secular, or lay. In this it is different from many Middle English devotional treatises . . . *The Cloud of Unknowing* [is addressed] to a novice monk.”<sup>129</sup>

The suggestion that *Contemplations* is directed to a more diverse audience than the *Cloud* is demonstrated by the particular extracts of *Contemplations* which are included in this manuscript. For example, the first chapter included in the manuscript describes the dread of God. In it, the author writes that “from the dread of God grows a healthy and great devotion and a manner of sorrow with complete contrition for your sins. Through that devotion and contrition you forsake your sin and perhaps something of worldly goods.”<sup>130</sup> With regard to the question of audience, a passage such as this seems directed less to one living a professed contemplative life than to a person in the early stages of spiritual progress. The forsaking of worldly goods would be assumed by one living a monastic or solitary life. Similarly, the *Cloud* author states clearly that confession of one’s sins is a prerequisite to beginning the work of contemplation.<sup>131</sup> Thus, the experiences described in *Contemplations* seem applicable to one who has not yet entered into contemplative life envisioned by the *Cloud* author.

Finally, the Westminster Cathedral manuscript also includes a single chapter (the sixty-fifth) from the *Cloud*. The content of the particular chapter of the *Cloud* included in the

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<sup>129</sup>Robert Boenig, introduction to *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God (1506): A Facsimile Reproduction* (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1990), 4.

<sup>130</sup>Horrall, 225: “Of þe drede of God wexiþ a helpful & gret deuocioun & a maner sorw wiþ ful contricioun for þi sinnis. Þurȝ þat deuocioun & contricioun þou forsakist þi sinne & perauenture sumwhat of wordly godes.”

<sup>131</sup>*Cloud*, 63/8-11.

Westminster Cathedral manuscript is noteworthy because it contains instructions which appear applicable to a person who is in the early stages of spiritual development. In the sixty-fifth chapter, the *Cloud* author discusses the subject of human imagination, and gives particular attention to the effects of original sin upon imagination. The author explains that these effects are felt most keenly in those who are new to spiritual practice:

For unless it is restrained by the light of grace in the reason it will never cease, sleeping nor waking, to portray diverse inordinate things of bodily creatures or else some fantasy which is nothing else but a bodily conceit of a spiritual thing or else a spiritual conceit of a bodily thing and this is evermore fictitious and false and next to error. This disobedience of imagination may be clearly conceived in those who are newly turned from the world to devotion in the time of their prayer.<sup>132</sup>

While the *Cloud* in general addresses an audience which is assumed to have some experience in the practice of prayer, in this manuscript, it is presented to give particular attention to those who are novices in their spiritual practice.

Similarly, the chapter of the *Cloud* included in this manuscript suggests that the restraint of imagination is accomplished through the use of discursive meditative exercises.

The *Cloud* author writes,

For before the time that imagination be in great part restrained by the light of grace to the reason as it is in the continual meditation of spiritual things, as in a man's own wretchedness, the passion and the nature of our lord Jesus with many other such things, they may in no way put away the wonderful and diverse thoughts, fantasies,

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<sup>132</sup>Horrall, 224: "for bot if it be refreyned bi þe liȝt of grace in þe resoun it wil neuer cese, slepyng ne wakyng, to portrey diuerse inordinate þinges of bodily creatures or ellis sum fantasie which is not ellis but a bodily conceit of gostly þinge or ellis a gostly conceit of bodily þinge and þis is euermore foyned & fals & next to errour. Þis inobedience of ymaginacion may be clerly conceyued in hem þat be newly turned fro þe word to deuocioun in tyme of her preier." Citations of the chapter of the *Cloud* included in the Westminster Cathedral manuscript are from Horrall's article. Cf. *Cloud*, 117/12-20.

and images that are ministered and impressed in their minds by the curiosity of imagination.<sup>133</sup>

The spiritual practices which the author mentions here in the context of controlling the imagination are those which he elsewhere in the *Cloud* states are appropriate to higher active and lower contemplative life. In the chapter of the *Cloud* which is included in this manuscript, the subject-matter concerns those who are at best at the mid-point of the progression through the spiritual stages as these have been described by the author. In any case, this chapter does not appear to address those who are in the higher contemplative life. In the Westminster Cathedral manuscript, then, there are allusions to those who are not necessarily experienced contemplatives, expressed both in the texts which accompany the *Cloud*, as well as in the particular extract from the *Cloud* itself in this manuscript.

### Conclusion

Having discussed these five manuscripts in which the *Cloud* is accompanied by other vernacular texts of devotion and spiritual instruction, it can be asked what this might mean for understanding the possible audience for the contemplative spirituality of the *Cloud*. Briefly stated, in each of the five manuscripts considered here, the *Cloud* is found in the context of another treatise which addresses an aspect of spiritual practice not specifically applicable to professed contemplative life. In some cases, these texts address subjects which the *Cloud* author specifically relegates to the higher active and lower contemplative life, as

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<sup>133</sup>Horrall, 224: “For bifore þe tyme þat ymaginacioun be in gret party refreynd bi þe lizt of grace to þe resoun as it is in þe continuel meditacioun of gostly þinges, as is a mannes owne wrechednes, þe passioun & þe kyndnesse of owre lord Ihesu wiþ manye oþer siche, þei may in no wise put away þe wondirful & diuerse þouȝtes, fantasies & ymages þat be minstred & prented in her mynde bi þe curiosite of ymaginacioun.” Cf. *Cloud*, 117/20-118/6.

opposed to the higher contemplative life which is his primary area of concern. The subjects addressed in these accompanying texts include the spiritual practices of imaginative and discursive meditation, the experience of spiritual consolations and the related perceptions of physical and spiritual realities, and the attempt to discuss issues relevant to the entirety of the active and contemplative lives, rather than focus narrowly upon only the higher contemplative practice and experience.

In her study of Catherine of Siena's *The Orchard of Syon*, Phyllis Hodgson writes, "after reading the *Orchard* those studying the English mystical tradition will return to the great fourteenth-century writers with fuller understanding."<sup>134</sup> Hodgson's claim is applicable more broadly to all of the texts considered here in relation to the *Cloud*. In the five manuscripts discussed in this chapter, the stage is set for an intertextual dialogue between the *Cloud* and the texts which accompany it in these manuscripts, a dialogue which has implications for understanding the audience for the contemplative mysticism of the *Cloud*. The analysis of manuscripts in this chapter suggests that the compiling of these collections of texts was an attempt to complement the contemplative mysticism of the *Cloud* with other texts of spiritual instruction appropriate to an audience not necessarily composed only of professed contemplatives. The contemplative mysticism of the *Cloud* must have been viewed as being accessible to a larger and more diverse audience than that explicitly claimed by the author of this text.

In concluding this chapter, it is worth noting that the Westminster Cathedral manuscript includes, among its Middle English devotional texts, a set of "four recipes for

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<sup>134</sup>Hodgson, *The Orchard of Syon and the English Mystical Tradition*, 249.



making ink.”<sup>135</sup> This serves as a reminder of the written word’s power for those who read a text or hear it read. This power of the written word is complex when diverse texts are read in relation to one another. In the case of the *Cloud*, these intertextual relationships are cause for a reconsideration of the audience for the mystical instruction of this text.

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<sup>135</sup>Horrall, 216.

CHAPTER 2  
THE CONTEXTS OF CONTEMPLATION: PRESENT-DAY  
APPROPRIATION OF *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING*

The previous chapter discussed what might be ascertained about the medieval audience of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This subject was addressed from the perspective of the *Cloud* itself, Walter Hilton's *Mixed Life*, and some of the manuscripts of the *Cloud*. While the *Cloud* author states that he is writing for an audience composed of persons living the contemplative rather than active life, a consideration of both intra- and intertextual perspectives related to the *Cloud* suggests the possibility that the medieval audience for the contemplative spirituality of this text was larger and more diverse than that intended or explicitly claimed by its author.

This chapter continues this discussion of audience, and brings it into the contemporary period. Here it will be asked how the Christian contemplative tradition, of which the *Cloud* is an important part, has been received and appropriated by persons in the present day. This will be addressed by considering four topics. First, two theories of textual interpretation from the fields of hermeneutics and literary criticism will be briefly reviewed. These provide a theoretical background with which to consider the present-day reading of the *Cloud*. Second, this chapter will discuss the way the issue of audience is addressed in present-day Christian contemplative literature. Third, it will discuss particular tendencies

found in the interpretation of the *Cloud* by present-day Christian contemplative authors. In this, special attention will be given to which aspects of the *Cloud* text these authors choose to emphasize. Finally, it will be suggested that the present-day reading of the *Cloud*, and the Christian contemplative tradition more generally, can be interpreted through the lens of three contexts in which the audience for this tradition is situated.

Through a consideration of these topics, this chapter addresses what contemporary Christian contemplative literature claims is especially important in the tradition of Christian spirituality it receives. Furthermore, it considers a number of contextual factors which influence how an audience in the present day appropriates this tradition and develops a contemplative spirituality which it can put into practice.

### **Theories of Textual Interpretation and Appropriation**

Contemporary practitioners of Christian contemplation bring certain interpretive strategies to their reading of the *Cloud*. In his work on the interpretation of spiritual texts, Philip Sheldrake suggests that there is a need to reflect upon “the question as to what is going on when a text, created within different historical horizons, encounters a twentieth-century person.”<sup>1</sup> Sheldrake claims that there are two fundamentally different perspectives which may be taken when interpreting spiritual texts. He refers to these as the “classical” and “creative” approaches.<sup>2</sup> The first of these approaches understands the past as an artifact from which one is removed, while the second sees it as a resource which has implications for the present: “In the classical account, what is essential in a tradition is only the original intention

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 163.

<sup>2</sup>Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 168.

. . . In contrast, the creative or historical approach suggests that we may be transformed in the present by an imaginative use of tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Christian practitioners’ readings of the *Cloud* are an example of this “creative” approach.

Two resources for describing how the creative approach to textual interpretation takes place are the hermeneutic theory of Paul Ricoeur and the literary criticism of Stanley Fish. Ricoeur’s theory focuses upon the possibilities which are opened up for interpretation and appropriation once a cultural tradition takes form in a written text. Once discourse is set forth in writing its meaning is liberated from the intention of its author. Ricoeur refers to this as the “semantic autonomy” of a text, and he writes that “the text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.”<sup>4</sup> The meaning assigned to a written text by its author may be changed, supplemented, or even contradicted by those who interpret the text at some later time.

Related to the semantic autonomy of the text is the universalization of the text’s audience which comes about through the process of writing. Just as the meaning of the text is disconnected to some degree from the author’s intention, so also is the audience broadened beyond those for whom the author may have originally intended his work. Ricoeur says that “a written text is addressed to an unknown reader and potentially to whoever knows how to read. This universalization of the audience is one of the more striking effects of writing.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 168.

<sup>4</sup>Ricoeur, 29-30.

<sup>5</sup>Ricoeur, 31. Ricoeur does acknowledge that a text’s audience is not completely unlimited in the sense that it depends upon persons possessing the ability to read.

Furthermore, a potentially unlimited audience brings a corresponding diversity of interpretations to a text, resulting in the multitude of meanings which a single text may have. As Ricoeur writes, “It is part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of readers and, therefore, of interpretations. The opportunity for multiple readings is the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text.”<sup>6</sup> Taking up Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory, Douglas Burton-Christie explains that a text “has the capacity to continually mean more, to overflow in an excess or surplus of meaning. A text never simply ‘means’ one thing but continues to unfold new possibilities of meaning.”<sup>7</sup> A written text can be read by an audience which is more diverse than that intended by the author. In this process, a variety of interpretations of the text can be suggested. The text’s meaning breaks free of the limitations set upon it by the intentions of its author.

Ricoeur also discusses the relationship a text may have with its readers. This involves the act of appropriation. Describing this act, Ricoeur writes, “to appropriate is to make ‘one’s own’ what was ‘alien.’”<sup>8</sup> The semantic autonomy of the text that results from its having been written down allows for an expansion of audience and a multiplicity of interpretations. This likewise means that members of this expanded audience will have to appropriate—that is,

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Furthermore, the availability of a text to a given reader is contingent upon a host of social factors.

<sup>6</sup>Ricoeur, 31-32.

<sup>7</sup>Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>8</sup>Ricoeur, 43.

interpret, adapt, and attempt to use—the meaning of a text which is historically and culturally removed from them.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory emphasizes the surplus of meaning which allows a text to come alive for the reader who stands at some distance from it. This perspective can be complemented by drawing upon the “reader-response” school of literary criticism. In particular, the work of Stanley Fish provides a theoretical background with which to consider the present-day interpretation of a medieval text such as the *Cloud*.<sup>9</sup> Fish begins with the assumption that the reader’s activities are as fundamental to the process of interpretation as anything which can be found within the text itself.<sup>10</sup>

This giving priority to the experience of the reader has implications for discussion of the reception of the *Cloud* by Christians in the present day. First, Fish claims that the particular interpretive strategies which one brings to a text determine how that text will be understood. The meaning of the text is dependent upon the reader and his situation. As Fish writes, “what is noticed [in a text] is what has been *made* noticeable, not by a clear and undistorting glass, but by an interpretive strategy.”<sup>11</sup> Fish’s words suggest that it would be futile to attempt to ascertain some pristine meaning of a text apart from the responses of the

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<sup>9</sup>Previous studies which have used Fish’s reader-response theory to discuss religious objects and topics include Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), which applies this theory to Indian religious art; and Dominic LaRochelle, “Reception Theory, Martial Arts, and Daoism in the West: An Interpretive Model in Cultural and Religious Transfers Studies” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, PA, November 20, 2005), which uses Fish’s work to discuss Western reception of Daoism.

<sup>10</sup>Fish, 152.

<sup>11</sup>Fish, 166.

text's readers. In fact, he claims that it is these responses which confer meaning upon the text. Applying Fish's reader-response theory to the visual arts, Richard Davis writes that "viewers also bring their own frames of assumptions, understandings, needs, expectations, and hopes to what they see."<sup>12</sup>

A second aspect of reader-response theory which bears upon this discussion is Fish's concept of interpretive communities. According to Fish, the reading (and therefore the meaning) that one brings to a text is not idiosyncratic to an individual reader. Rather, a reader's interpretation of a text comes about because he belongs to a particular community which shares certain assumptions which give a text its particular meaning. This meaning is thus shared between an individual reader and other members of the interpretive community to which he belongs. Fish writes that "interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions."<sup>13</sup> This concept of interpretive communities implies that a given text's meaning will shift depending upon the particular community which receives that text, and the questions and assumptions with which it approaches the text and seeks out its meaning. As Fish states, "there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only 'ways of reading' that are extensions of community perspectives."<sup>14</sup> According to this idea, it is important to ask what the expectations of a given reading community are, and how these work to determine the meaning of a given text.

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<sup>12</sup>Davis, 9.

<sup>13</sup>Fish, 171. Cf. Davis, 8.

<sup>14</sup>Fish, 16.

Taken together, the theories of Paul Ricoeur and Stanley Fish suggest that textual meaning is not stable and that it can shift depending upon the circumstances in which the text is received. Ricoeur points out that certain features within the written text itself allow for this pluriformity of interpretation, while Fish emphasizes that meaning comes not from the text but from the community that reads it. These theories are useful in discussing the reception of spiritual texts which are historically and culturally removed from those who read them.

Referring to Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory, Joan Nuth writes that, "while it is important to know something of the author's circumstances and purpose in creating the work, our appropriation of it is not limited to those. The meaning of the text comes alive for us in the present, changed somewhat by the perceptions and circumstances of its readers."<sup>15</sup> This suggests a dialectical relationship with the past in the interpretation of spiritual texts. Knowledge and understanding of the original context of the text are crucial to an informed appreciation of the text. Yet this knowledge is but one pole in the process of textual interpretation. Equally important are the perspectives, concerns, and questions which present-day readers bring to the text. By giving attention to their own situation, readers potentially give the text a new meaning and render it "usable" in the present.

### **The Audience for Christian Contemplative Literature**

The Christian contemplative literature that will be discussed in this chapter, and throughout the remainder of this dissertation, comes primarily from two movements. The first of these, the Centering Prayer movement, began in the United States in the mid-1970s. The method of Centering Prayer as a contemporary form of Christian contemplation was

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<sup>15</sup>Nuth, 147.



originally taught by three Trappist monks: William Meninger, Thomas Keating, and Basil Pennington. Carl Arico, a diocesan priest from New Jersey, also became involved as a teacher of the Centering Prayer method. In the early 1980s, the organization Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. was founded to promote and offer persons instruction in the Centering Prayer method.<sup>16</sup>

A second Christian contemplative movement that will be discussed is the Christian Meditation movement. This was begun by John Main, an English Benedictine monk, who founded a center for the practice of Christian Meditation in London in 1975. Main moved to Montreal in 1977 and continued to write about and teach Christian Meditation. After Main died in 1982, his work was continued by Laurence Freeman, another English Benedictine monk. Freeman established The World Community for Christian Meditation as an organization to promote the teaching of this form of Christian contemplative practice.<sup>17</sup> Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are now both international movements.

A comparative reading of the *Cloud* and the literature of these present-day contemplative movements suggests two important issues. The first is the claim this literature makes regarding the appropriate audience for instruction in contemplative practice. The second is the aspects of the *Cloud* text which are given particular emphasis in this present-day contemplative literature. In considering these issues, we are employing Ricoeur's theory

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<sup>16</sup>A history of the origins of the Centering Prayer movement is given by Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 11-21.

<sup>17</sup>A brief history of the Christian Meditation movement is given on The World Community for Christian Meditation's website, <http://www.wccm.org> (accessed September 9, 2010).

of textual interpretation, asking how readers make their own a text from which they are separated by historical and cultural distance.

Throughout the works of a number of authors in this present-day literature, there are statements which make the claim that contemplative practice and experience are potentially open to all persons and are not limited to certain states of life or religious profession. Typical of this type of statement is that made by Carl Arico, a teacher in the Centering Prayer movement, who writes, “Contemplation is not a rare reward for excellence or virtue. This has nothing to do with our achievement or status. It’s a gift. It can come to anyone. Contemplation is not a singular mark of God’s special love or approval so that we can enter into the contemplative dimension. It is an ordinary development in the life of a faithful, praying person.”<sup>18</sup>

James Finley, a layperson who lived as a Trappist monk for five years during the 1960s, writes in similar language about the call to contemplation in Christian life:

We are each a contemplative in the sense that our humanity (our means to personal fulfillment) is innately open to contemplation. Contemplation is natural to us . . . In response, then, to the question, Am I called to contemplative prayer?, it can be answered, yes. I am a person, a human being, a Christian and thus I share God’s call for all of his children to participate in Christ the Word’s eternal contemplation of the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Carl J. Arico, *A Taste of Silence: Centering Prayer and the Contemplative Journey* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 146-147.

<sup>19</sup>James Finley, *The Awakening Call: Fostering Intimacy with God* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1984), 28. Unlike most of the other present-day authors discussed here, Finley is not associated with an organized Christian contemplative movement; however, his work does express ideals and concerns that are consistent with those found in these movements.

What is particularly noteworthy in these statements is the language these authors use to describe the call to contemplation. It is “ordinary” and “natural” and can thus be claimed as a possibility by all persons.

Following from this is the related claim that, since contemplation is an ordinary and natural part of Christian life, this experience cannot be restricted to persons living in particular states of religious life. Finley writes of the call to contemplative prayer, “there seems to be a renewed awareness that this call is first and foremost not a call to live in a certain kind of social, religious institution. Rather, it is essentially a call to live one’s daily life as claimed by God for a transforming intimacy with himself in a lifetime of fidelity to contemplative prayer.”<sup>20</sup> Finley’s description of contemplation focuses upon the quality of one’s life rather than profession into a particular state of religious life. Because contemplation is defined qualitatively, Finley is able to conclude that contemplation is a possibility for all persons: “This call comes to college students, housewives, insurance salesmen and prisoners. It comes to religious, diocesan priests, Protestant clergy and rabbis. It comes to whom it comes.”<sup>21</sup>

Having noted the general perspective on the possibility of contemplation found in this present-day literature, it may now be considered more specifically how these texts make use of the *Cloud* in their discussion of the audience for whom contemplative literature is appropriate. In some of the claims made in this literature, clear references to the *Cloud* occur. An example of this is found in the work of Laurence Freeman, a teacher in the Christian

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<sup>20</sup>Finley, *The Awakening Call*, 29.

<sup>21</sup>Finley, *The Awakening Call*, 29.

Meditation movement. Freeman reflects upon the *Cloud* author's assumptions about the audience for his text, and notes the way these assumptions have changed:

The [*Cloud*] author would have been surprised, perhaps shocked, to think of popular paperbacks of his book in mass circulation. His concept of contemplation was still highly restrictive. Written as a letter to a young monk encouraging him to enter and persevere in the form of cloistered religious life called 'contemplative,' the book sees this form of life as a higher stage than the ordinary, active life of most people.<sup>22</sup>

Freeman acknowledges that present-day assumptions about the accessibility of the contemplative life for all persons subverts to some extent the intentions of the *Cloud* author on this issue.

Nevertheless, Freeman also finds in the text of the *Cloud* itself some validation of this shift in audience for contemplative literature. Imagining the *Cloud* author's response to this development, Freeman writes, "But I do not think he would have objected; in fact, the active and contemplative dimensions of life, in his view, subtly shade into each other."<sup>23</sup> While he does not cite a specific passage of the *Cloud* here, it is clear that Freeman is referring to the *Cloud* author's teaching on the three stages of spiritual life, in which there are lower active, higher active/lower contemplative, and higher contemplative stages.<sup>24</sup> The mid-point of this progression entails simultaneous involvement in both active and contemplative lives, and Freeman uses this teaching from the *Cloud* to explain the appropriation of this contemplative text by laypersons in active life.

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<sup>22</sup>Laurence Freeman, *Common Ground: Letters to a World Community of Meditators* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 31.

<sup>23</sup>Freeman, *Common Ground*, 31.

<sup>24</sup>*Cloud*, 31/3-14. The significance of this passage for discussing the audience for the *Cloud* was discussed in chapter 1.

A second example from present-day Christian contemplative literature where the *Cloud* is used to discuss the possibility of contemplation by laypersons is found in the work of Basil Pennington, a Trappist monk who was one of the founders of the Centering Prayer movement. In his discussion of who is able to practice contemplative prayer, Pennington makes specific reference to the final chapter of the *Cloud*, in which the author provides his reader some criteria with which to discern if he has been called to contemplation. Quoting one of the *Cloud* author's statements, Pennington claims, "If one has a simple desire to be deeply united to God, to experience his love and respond to it, 'he need have no fear of error in believing that God is calling him to contemplation, regardless of what sort of person he is now or has been in the past.'"<sup>25</sup> For Pennington, the defining characteristic of one who is called to contemplative prayer is that he has the desire for this type of prayer. Such a desire supercedes the importance of any particular type of religious life as being prerequisite to contemplation. Pennington concludes this discussion, "When properly understood, the author of *The Cloud* does not attach the call to contemplation to any specially lofty or advanced stage of holiness. One needs but to have actually turned from deliberate sin and to be desirous of a simple union with God in prayer."<sup>26</sup>

There are also cases in this Christian contemplative literature where reference is made to the texts of the *Cloud* author in order to support the claim that contemplative practice and experience are potentially available to all persons, but where the references to the *Cloud*

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<sup>25</sup>M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 212. Cf. *Cloud*, 132/16-18.

<sup>26</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 212. Pennington also refers in this discussion to the *Cloud* author's teaching that sacramental confession of sin is a prerequisite to contemplative practice. Cf. *Cloud*, 63/8-11.

author's texts are rather oblique. An example of this is found in a statement made by Thomas Keating, another Trappist monk who is a teacher in the Centering Prayer movement.

Discussing the *Cloud* author's text *The Book of Privy Counseling*, Keating writes, "In *The [Book] of Privy Counseling*, written toward the end of his life, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* acknowledges that the call to contemplative prayer is more common than he had originally thought."<sup>27</sup> While Keating does not cite a specific passage in *Privy Counseling* for this statement, there are at least two statements made by the author in this text which are generally consistent with Keating's characterization. Early in *Privy Counseling*, the author writes that the contemplative experience of God begins with the most simple awareness of one's own existence. Furthermore, the author suggests that this awareness is so simple that it is accessible to persons in any and all states of life. He writes of this awareness, "This is easy to think, even if it were bidden to the lowdest man or woman who lives in the most common knowledge of nature in this life,"<sup>28</sup> and he describes contemplation arising from this awareness as "this light work, through which the least educated man or woman's soul in this life is truly in lovely humility united to God in perfect charity."<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere in *Privy Counseling*, the author writes that the call to contemplation can potentially come to any person:

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<sup>27</sup>Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (1986; repr., Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 29.

<sup>28</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 137/4-6: "Þis is litil maistrie for to þink, gif it were bodyn to þe lewdist man or womman þat leuiþ in þe comounist wit of kynde in þis liif."

<sup>29</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 137/17-19: "þis liȝt werk, þorow þe whiche þe boistourest mans soule or wommans in þis liif is verely in louely meeknes onyd to God in parfite charite."

In the first beginning of Holy Church in the time of the persecution, many diverse souls were so marvelously touched in suddenness of grace that suddenly, without the means of other works coming before, men of crafts cast their instruments from their hands, children their tables in school, and ran without ransacking of reason to martyrdom with the saints: why should men not believe now, in time of peace, that God may, can and will, and does—ye! touch diverse souls as suddenly with the grace of contemplation?<sup>30</sup>

In these passages, the *Cloud* author suggests that the ability to undergo contemplative experience is not contingent upon one's education but is rather dependent upon God's initiative. Thus, the contemplative experience is potentially open to all. Such statements would seem to be what Keating is referring to when he claims that the *Cloud* author taught that contemplative prayer is possible for a large and diverse group of persons.

Similarly, Basil Pennington describes the *Cloud* as being an adaptation of earlier monastic methods of contemplative prayer for a larger and more diverse audience. He writes,

The author of *The Cloud*, receiving a way of prayer that had developed in the monastic tradition, with great wisdom, prudence, and discretion passes it on in such a way that it can be readily employed by one who does not find himself in a context of life wherein he can be wholly free to seek constant actual prayer. Thus it is that the method of prayer taught by the author of *The Cloud* and represented in *Centering Prayer*, while certainly not useless to monks, coming as it does from the fullness of their tradition, is yet suited to the life of lay persons as well as to priests and religious who are taken up with the many cares of the active apostolate.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 151/1-9: “in þe first biginnyng of Holy Chirche in þe tyme of persecucion, dyuerse soules & many weren so merueylously touchid in sodeynthe of grace þat sodenly, wiþ-outyn menes of oper werkes comyng before, þei kasten here instrumentes, men of craftes, of here hondes, children here tables in þe scole, and ronnen wiþ-outyn ransakyng of reson to þe martirdom wiþ seintes: whi schul men not trowe now, in þe tyme of pees, þat God may, kan & wile & doþ—ze! touche diuerse soules as sodenly with þe grace of contemplacion?”

<sup>31</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 36-37.

Pennington bases this assessment of the *Cloud* on his suggestion that, whereas the earlier monastic tradition had been concerned primarily with the practice of *lectio divina* leading to the experience of contemplation, the *Cloud* author emphasizes contemplation itself apart from the preliminary movements of *lectio divina*.<sup>32</sup> Pennington concludes that the *Cloud* provides an example of instruction in a contemplative practice for persons not living in the monastic setting.

The discussion to this point has considered how present-day authors make use of the *Cloud* author and his text to support their claims that contemplative practice is a possibility for all persons. A final example of this use of the *Cloud* is found in the writing of James Finley. Finley interprets (or perhaps re-interprets) the *Cloud* in such a way as to suggest that the author claims that all persons are potentially capable of engaging in contemplative practice. Finley discusses a passage from the *Cloud* in which the author distinguishes between the active and contemplative life. In his prologue, the *Cloud* author writes that this text should only be shared with a person who has, “in a true will and by a whole intent, committed himself to be a perfect follower of Christ, not only in active living, but in the most sovereign point of contemplative living which is possible by grace to come to in this present life of a perfect soul yet abiding in this mortal body.”<sup>33</sup> This instruction suggests that the author sees a rather definitive distinction that may be drawn between active and

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<sup>32</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 35-36.

<sup>33</sup>*Cloud*, 2/1-5: “in a trewe wille and by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste, not only in actyue leuyng, bot in þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuyng þe whiche is possible by grace for to be comen to in þis present liif of a parfite soule zit abiding in þis deedly body.”



contemplative life, and that his work of spiritual instruction is only to be shared with persons who are in the latter rather than the former.

Further on in the prologue, the author makes a small concession to a less rigid distinction between active and contemplative lives. He writes that his text is not appropriate for persons in active life, with one qualification: “Unless it be to those men who, although they stand in activity by outward form of living, nevertheless by inward stirring after the secret spirit of God, whose judgments are hid, they are very graciously disposed, not continuously as is proper to true contemplatives, but now and then to be partakers in the highest point of this contemplative act.”<sup>34</sup> The author concedes that one may be in active life with regard to his outward actions, while his interior states incline toward contemplative life, yet he still describes these two lives as being fundamentally different from one another. The *Cloud* author distinguishes between active persons who may experience occasional contemplative experiences and “true” contemplatives who are continuously in this state.

When James Finley comments on this passage from the *Cloud*, it takes on a different meaning in two ways. First, Finley distinguishes between action and contemplation as referring to whether one focuses his attention upon his own activity or the presence of God. He writes,

When the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* uses the term *active life*, he is referring to a way of life in which our identity and sense of security tend to be bound up with all that we have attained and are capable of attaining through our own efforts. The

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<sup>34</sup>*Cloud*, 3/1-6: “bot 3if it be to þoo men þe whiche, þou3 al þei stonde in actyete bi outward forme of leuyng, neuerþeles 3it bi inward stering after þe priue sperit of God, whos domes ben hid, þei ben ful graciously disposid, not contynowely as it is propre to verrey contemplatyues, bot þan and þan to be parceners in þe hie3st pointe of þis contemplatiue acte.”

author invites us to see ourselves going along, minding our own business, living the active life, when suddenly a blind stirring of love in the very core of our being blesses us with an awareness of God's loving presence that utterly transcends what our own efforts could ever account for or attain.<sup>35</sup>

A second distinction Finley draws between action and contemplation has to do with the frequency with which one attains to contemplative consciousness. Whereas the *Cloud* author implies that active and contemplative lives are fundamentally distinct, allowing only for the possibility that an active person may periodically experience contemplation, Finley describes the distinction in different terms, as having to do with whether one is a new or experienced contemplative. He writes, "At the initial stage of our journey we experience this blind stirring of love only 'now and again.' But the author suggests that there are 'experienced contemplatives' who experience this stirring continuously. And this fills us with a sense of hope that one day we, too, might, with God's grace, habitually experience this blind stirring."<sup>36</sup> In Finley's interpretation of this passage from the *Cloud*, the distinction between action and contemplation is not between two different types of lives so much as between the amount of experience one has in contemplation, and therefore the frequency with which one is in this state of consciousness. This implies that the contemplative experience is not distinct from active life, but rather is something to which those in active life

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<sup>35</sup>James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 135.

<sup>36</sup>Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 135-136. In his comments on this passage from the *Cloud*, Finley relies upon William Johnston's edition of the text, which renders "true contemplatives" (*Cloud*, 3/5: "verrey contemplatyues") as "experienced contemplatives." Cf. William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 44. This translation suggests something of a different relationship between action and contemplation than what is found in the original Middle English of the *Cloud*.

are called and a capacity for awareness which they can develop. Such an understanding of the relationship between action and contemplation suggests that contemplative practice and experience may indeed be available to persons whose lives are active.

This claim for an interconnection between action and contemplation is not without precedent. In his study of American spirituality, Leigh Schmidt explains that one of the characteristics of “the practical spirituality of religious liberalism,” whose history he traces from the nineteenth century to the present, is a concern with overcoming the opposition between the active and contemplative lives.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in his study of the influence of Esalen, a community for “alternative” spiritualities which began in the 1960s in California, Jeffrey Kripal suggests that American democratic ideals have an influence upon religion.<sup>38</sup> This claim suggests one reason why a contemplative practice traditionally associated with a monastic elite has, in literature on Christian contemplation published for a largely North American audience, emphasized that contemplative practice is in fact open to all persons.

This discussion of how present-day Christian contemplative literature addresses the subject of who is capable of undertaking contemplative practice can be concluded with a comment made by Basil Pennington. In response to the question of whether or not the method of Centering Prayer should be shared with all people, Pennington replies that in a general sense all persons are called to contemplative awareness of God: “Every Christian, by his very nature as a baptized child of God, is meant to have a deep, loving relationship with

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<sup>37</sup>Schmidt, 177.

<sup>38</sup>Jeffrey J. Kripal, introduction to *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal and Glenn W. Shuck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 5.

God that will go beyond words and concepts, thoughts and feelings.”<sup>39</sup> Pennington then says, “I do not think we should hesitate to share Centering Prayer with anyone who seeks to learn about it or whose life indicates that he or she is trying to pray to get in closer touch with God.”<sup>40</sup> These statements represent the vision of this Christian contemplative literature on the question of who can practice contemplative prayer. All persons (or at least all Christians) are potential contemplatives, and any person who is interested in a particular contemplative practice should be able to receive instruction in and undertake that practice.

### **How the *Cloud* is Read in Present-Day Christian Contemplative Literature**

A discussion of how the *Cloud* is read in present-day Christian contemplative literature involves two related issues. The first is how this literature understands and describes the *Cloud* as a Christian contemplative text and as a resource for aspiring present-day contemplatives. The second is how the *Cloud* is used in this literature to discuss the development of a method of Christian contemplative practice and to describe the experience of contemplation.

The authors who write instructional literature for the Centering Prayer movement explicitly claim the *Cloud* as one of the texts which provide resources for Christian contemplative practice.<sup>41</sup> Thomas Keating describes Centering Prayer as “an attempt to present the teaching of earlier times (e.g., *The Cloud of Unknowing*) in an updated form and

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<sup>39</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 207-208.

<sup>40</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 208.

<sup>41</sup>Two other authors who are frequently mentioned in this literature are the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross and the early desert monastic father John Cassian, particularly the tenth of his *Conferences*, which deals with the subject of prayer.

to put a certain order and regularity into it.”<sup>42</sup> This rather short and simple statement reveals a great deal about how the *Cloud* is handled in this literature. It is a text which is understood to function as a traditional resource from which a practice for the present can be developed.

Basil Pennington also refers to the *Cloud* in discussing the origins of the Centering Prayer movement. He explains that “the name ‘Centering Prayer’ . . . has become the common and popular name for this particular method of entering into contemplative prayer or deep meditation, drawn from our Western Christian tradition and taught by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.”<sup>43</sup> In such statements, there is an attempt to connect a present-day practice to a medieval Christian text. As will be seen, an important component of this practice is the formulation of a particular method for engaging in contemplative prayer.

These present-day authors claim that the *Cloud* can be difficult for today’s readers to use as an instructional text for contemplative prayer. One obvious reason for this difficulty is the gulf of time and culture which lies between the *Cloud* and these present-day readers. William Meninger, a Trappist monk who is a teacher of Christian contemplative prayer, writes, “I have often been very disappointed upon learning that when [persons] read *The Cloud* on their own, they find it very difficult, at times impossible, to understand. The reason is, of course, that *The Cloud* was written from and for a fourteenth-century culture. Some of the ideas and many of the methods for communicating them are unfamiliar to the modern

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<sup>42</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.

<sup>43</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 62-63.

reader.”<sup>44</sup> Teachers of Christian contemplation in the present feel the need to augment and adapt the teaching found in the *Cloud* so it can be used for contemplative practice.

A second reason the *Cloud* is difficult for today’s readers is that the instruction found in this text is not presented in a systematic or explicit manner. Basil Pennington writes, “if one reads *The Cloud* on his own, as perhaps many of my readers have, he is not likely to draw from the text the simple technique the author offers.”<sup>45</sup> It is important to note in this comment the assumption that the *Cloud* can potentially offer its readers a “technique” of contemplative prayer. Pennington explains that the difficulty in using the *Cloud* results from its being a work of spiritual direction: “*The Cloud of Unknowing* is the word of a spiritual father addressed to a particular disciple . . . [it] presupposes the oral instruction the father has given. It is undoubtedly for this reason that we do not find precise instructions by the father in the way of prayer.”<sup>46</sup> Faced with the two challenges of the remote cultural situation in which the *Cloud* was originally produced and the personal relationship of spiritual direction which is assumed as the context of this work, the teachers of Centering Prayer set out to use this text in a very particular way. They wish to adapt its teaching in order to formulate a specific set of instructions which persons can use to engage in contemplative prayer.

These challenges of using the text having been noted, the teachers of Centering Prayer claim that the *Cloud* does function to provide a basis for a method of contemplative

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<sup>44</sup>William A. Meninger, *The Loving Search for God: Contemplative Prayer and The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Continuum, 1994), xvii.

<sup>45</sup>M. Basil Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” in *Finding Grace at the Center* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1978), 10.

<sup>46</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 34.

prayer. This claim is made with particular clarity in Basil Pennington's writings. Asking if there are Christian resources for persons who wish to undertake contemplative practice, he writes,

we do have in our Christian tradition simple methods, 'techniques,' for entering into contemplative prayer, a prayer of quiet. And without more ado I would like to share one such method with you. The one I have chosen is drawn from a little volume called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is indeed a popular book in our time.<sup>47</sup>

Elsewhere, Pennington explains his method for utilizing the teaching found in the *Cloud*:

“Repeatedly in the text there is allusion to such precise instruction and repetition of fragments of it. By drawing these scattered texts together we can, in a rather complete way, reconstruct the precise method of prayer that the father taught his disciple.”<sup>48</sup>

As has been seen, Thomas Keating describes Centering Prayer as a development of traditional Christian teaching about contemplation. What distinguishes Centering Prayer is that it presents contemplation in a way that is easy for present-day persons to put into practice. As such, it is a conjoining of traditional Christian practice and the format of a practical method: “Centering prayer as a preparation for contemplative prayer is not something that someone invented in our day. Rather it is a means of regaining the traditional teaching on contemplative prayer and of making this teaching better known and more available. The only thing that is new is trying to communicate it in a methodical way.”<sup>49</sup> Even Keating's definition of the term “Centering Prayer” alludes to this functional role played by method in the attainment of contemplative experience. Centering Prayer is “a

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<sup>47</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 8.

<sup>48</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 34.

<sup>49</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 31.

method of reducing the obstacles to the gift of contemplative prayer and of facilitating the development of habits conducive to responding to the inspirations of the Spirit.”<sup>50</sup> These statements underscore the important place which a concrete and specific method of contemplative practice plays in this tradition.

While Keating emphasizes the role of method in contemplative practice, he does not reduce Centering Prayer to being only a method, as if it functioned mechanistically to bring the practitioner to consciousness of the divine presence. He explains that there are two senses in which one can speak about this practice: “To emphasize a most important point: *Centering Prayer is both a relationship and a method to foster that relationship at the same time.*”<sup>51</sup> For Keating, the practice of Centering Prayer can never be seen as only a method which one performs. Rather, what one performs is one’s “relationship” with God. Centering Prayer does, however, provide a specific means with which the performance may be enacted. While he does not give complete and ultimate importance to method, Keating does understand it to have an important role to play in contemplative experience.

A similar emphasis upon the role of method in contemplation is seen in the work of William Meninger, whose book *The Loving Search for God* is an extended reflection on contemplative prayer based upon the text of the *Cloud*. In one of the chapters of this book, Meninger offers his reader a method for the practice of contemplative prayer. After explaining the steps of this method, Meninger concludes, “I hope you will realize, dear friend in God, that this chapter is very important. In many ways, most of the rest of this book

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<sup>50</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 145.

<sup>51</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 122.



depends upon it, and will serve to explain and facilitate it.”<sup>52</sup> From such statements, it is apparent that those who teach a present-day form of Christian contemplation place a great deal of emphasis on the importance of presenting a specific method with which contemplative prayer can be practiced.

These authors also make use of the *Cloud* in their attempts to provide some description of the Christian contemplative experience. In doing this, they often refer to a particular passage in the third chapter of the *Cloud*:

Lift up your heart unto God with a humble stirring of love; and mean himself, and not any of his goods. And moreover, see that you are loath to think on anything but himself, so that nothing works in your mind nor in your will but only himself. And do what is in you to forget all the creatures that God ever made and the works of them, so that your thought and your desire are not directed nor stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in particular. But let them be, and take no heed of them.<sup>53</sup>

A look at the references to this passage from the *Cloud* in present-day Christian contemplative literature shows an emphasis upon contemplation as a focusing of one’s awareness on God. In Basil Pennington’s formulation, the first “rule” of the Centering Prayer method is that “*at the beginning of the prayer we take a minute or two to quiet down and*

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<sup>52</sup>Meninger, 18.

<sup>53</sup>*Cloud*, 16/3-9: “Lift up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue; and mene him-self, and none of his goodes. And þerto loke þee loþe to þenk on ouzt bot on hym-self, so þat nouzt worche in þi witte ne in þi wille bot only him-self. & do þat in þee is to forzete alle þe creatures þat euer God maad & þe werkes of hem, so þat þi þouzt ne þi desire be not directe ne streche to any of hem, neiþer in general ne in special. Bot lat hem be, and take no kepe to hem.” This passage has been quoted at somewhat greater length than what is usually found in works discussing Christian contemplative prayer. This has been done to give a more complete sense of the passage which present-day authors cite.

*then move in faith and love to God dwelling in our depths.*”<sup>54</sup> In commenting on this rule, Pennington quotes this passage from the *Cloud* and writes, “we move in faith to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, dwelling in creative love in the depths of our being. This is the whole essence of the prayer . . . All the rest of the method is simply a means to enable us to abide quietly in this center, and to allow our whole being to share in this refreshing contact with its Source.”<sup>55</sup>

This description of contemplative experience as directing one’s attention to God also implies that one is entering into a state which is qualitatively different from ordinary awareness. James Finley writes that this passage from the *Cloud* is an example of many “classical texts of the contemplative traditions of the world’s great religions which encourage the cultivation of a contemplative awareness that transcends our customary reliance on thought and feeling.”<sup>56</sup> More specifically, Finley uses this passage from the *Cloud* to describe contemplation as an experience of love which transcends ordinary thought: “The anonymous author then goes on to say, in the above passage, that you are to sustain the stance of loving openness to God by refraining from dwelling on any thoughts about God that might come into your mind.”<sup>57</sup> These present-day authors use this passage from the *Cloud* to describe contemplation as an experience in which one transcends ordinary awareness by directing one’s attention wholly to God.

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<sup>54</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 12.

<sup>55</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 12.

<sup>56</sup>James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2000), 93.

<sup>57</sup>Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 146.

## The Contexts of Present-Day Christian Contemplation

Three contexts are relevant to interpreting the adoption of contemplative practices by laypersons in twentieth-century Christian spirituality. These are (1) the understanding of a spirituality of the laity which emerged out of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic church, (2) the formulation and use of meditative techniques as exercises for health and stress reduction, and (3) the exposure of Westerners to the meditative practices of “Eastern” religions. Each of these contexts has influenced the understanding of contemplation and as such has played a role in the adoption of contemplative prayer as a practice in present-day Christian spirituality.

Returning to the theories of textual interpretation which were discussed at the beginning of this chapter, these contexts can be understood in light of Stanley Fish’s reader-response theory of literary criticism. That is, these contexts set up interpretive communities, which influence how persons read the text of the *Cloud* and understand the Christian contemplative tradition. This process in turn assigns meaning to this tradition for the present-day.<sup>58</sup> As will be seen, however, these contexts for interpretation also present something of a problem when discussing Christian contemplative prayer. This is because the conception of contemplation found in present-day Christian contemplative texts exists in a condition of some tension with what is suggested by these interpretive contexts. As such, the contexts provide a set of situations within which the present-day Christian contemplative tradition defines and develops its understanding of itself and the contemplative practice it teaches.

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<sup>58</sup>This is the approach taken by Dominic LaRochelle in his paper on the reception of Daoism in the West.

*The Second Vatican Council and Lay Christian Spirituality*

While the Christian contemplative movements of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are not exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church, these movements did begin there. Because of this, some discussion of events preceding this movement within the church will help to explain why the appropriation of a medieval contemplative text such as the *Cloud* was thought to be a useful undertaking. One of the important factors in this history is the change in the understanding of the laity which came about as a result of the Second Vatican Council. This change “had profound implications for lay spirituality among Roman Catholics and other Christians.”<sup>59</sup> While the statements made by the Council on the laity are themselves important, what is also significant is the way they are interpreted by subsequent writers, particularly as this concerns the practice of contemplative prayer by laypersons. As will be seen, the implications of the Council’s statements on the laity can be interpreted in various, and to some extent even contradictory, ways.

Of fundamental importance to the understanding of the laity in the post-Vatican II church is the Council’s declaration of “the universal call to holiness.” The Council document the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* declares that “all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness,”<sup>60</sup> and that “all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and

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<sup>59</sup>Edward C. Sellner, “Lay Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 591.

<sup>60</sup>Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 5.39. Citations to the documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). Citations to these documents are by their chapter numbers.

the perfection of charity.”<sup>61</sup> Such statements express the Council’s position that the laity as well as the professionally religious are called to and have the capacity for holy lives.

The declaration of the universal call to holiness is more than a descriptive statement. It is rather an exhortation to Christians to manifest the holiness to which they have been called. It is a statement of “the vocation and duty of all Christians to seek holiness.”<sup>62</sup> An implication of this universal call is the response of the person to this capacity for holiness. The Council declares that “the followers of Christ . . . have been made sons and daughters of God by the Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God.”<sup>63</sup> This suggests not only that all persons are called to holiness, but that they must act, must do something, to fulfill that holiness. Thus, one consequence of this universal call to holiness as declared by the Second Vatican Council is the need for persons to have some means with which this life of holiness may be performed. This raises the issue of religious practices which Christians in the present might undertake.

One interpretation of the universal call to holiness suggests that it opens the possibility of contemplation and mystical experience to all Christians, whereas these had traditionally been associated with persons who were professionally religious. This perspective is expressed by Lawrence Cunningham and Keith Egan, who explain that one of

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<sup>61</sup>Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 5.40.

<sup>62</sup>Friedrich Wulf, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Chapter V: The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness,” trans. Richard Strachan, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 1:261.

<sup>63</sup>Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 5.40.

the effects of Vatican II is a recognition that contemplative practices are a possibility for all persons:

Meditation clearly is not only for clergy and religious but is a practice for every disciple of Jesus. Holiness, as Vatican II has said, is a universal call; the means to holiness are, therefore, needed by all. Meditation is the birthright of every Christian, and every human person has the capacity for contemplation which is our destiny, if not in this life, then in the next.<sup>64</sup>

This statement is important for two reasons. First, it claims that contemplative prayer is a possibility for all persons, including laypersons. Second, it suggests the necessity of having some method or practice with which the life of holiness may be performed. These authors also connect the universal call to holiness with an interest in recovering Christian spiritual traditions of the past: “That recognition of the universal call to holiness has led to an interest in the variety of ways that Christians have meditated and experienced contemplation through the centuries.”<sup>65</sup>

Yet this reference to the appropriation of past spiritual traditions raises the question as to what it is most useful and appropriate for laypersons to use as they formulate their own spirituality. Is there something distinctive about the call to holiness for the laity which would distinguish its spiritual practices from those of persons living in a professed religious state? This question is important when discussing the role of the *Cloud* in lay Christian spirituality, as the practice of contemplative prayer as it is described in this text is traditionally associated with a monastic rather than lay context.

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<sup>64</sup>Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>65</sup>Cunningham and Egan, 85-86.

Even as it proclaims a universal call to holiness, the Council reserves a place of distinction for those who live in a professed religious state. This concerns persons who have professed a commitment to the “evangelical counsels” of poverty, chastity, and obedience. According to the Council document *Lumen Gentium*, “this holiness of the church . . . appears in a way especially suited to it in the practice of those counsels which are usually called evangelical,” and these counsels provide “a striking witness and example of that holiness.”<sup>66</sup> The professed religious life serves an exemplary function for lay Christians: “The ecclesiastical state which public profession of the counsels entails has a special function, among all the states of life and ministries in the People of God, as witnessing to the holiness of the Church by its mere existence and by the example of those who live in that state.”<sup>67</sup> All persons may be called to holiness, but those who live in a professed religious state are held out as a particularly vivid manifestation of that holiness. A commentary on the documents of Vatican II explains that “the import of an evangelical counsel” is that “it is meant to keep freeing the Christian from selfish attachment to the things of the world, freeing him for the nobler, supernatural love which transcends the world; and positively, it is simply the love which draws a man beyond the absolute minimum of duty, beyond the transitory form of this world.”<sup>68</sup> Those who are professionally religious are held up as a model of Christian holiness,

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<sup>66</sup>Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 5.39.

<sup>67</sup>Wulf, 265.

<sup>68</sup>Wulf, 271-272. This commentary is not limiting the significance of the counsels to the professed religious state but is discussing them in the context of their being practiced by any Christian person. Nevertheless, this description of the counsels emphasizes a concern that moves beyond the world.

and what is signified in particular by such persons is that the spiritual life is ideally concerned with transcendence of “the world.”

The statements of the Second Vatican Council suggest that what is distinct about the spirituality of laypersons is that it enacted and expressed precisely through involvement with the world. While *Lumen Gentium* affirms that all persons are called to holiness, it also describes the particular way this holiness is expressed for laypersons:

It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. They live in the world, in each and every one of the world’s occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. They are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties.<sup>69</sup>

Another Council document, the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, also emphasizes activity in the world as the locus for the religious life of the laity:

While doing what is expected of them in the world in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life, but actually grow closer to him by doing their work according to God’s will. This is the path along which lay people must advance, fervently, joyfully, overcoming difficulties with prudent, patient effort. Family cares should not be foreign to their spirituality, nor any other temporal interest.<sup>70</sup>

A commentary on this document describes the Council’s vision of lay spirituality: “What is peculiar to the laity is the relation of their union with Christ to their concrete life in the world and their growth in this union and this holiness, which is achieved by means of their activity

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<sup>69</sup>Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 4.31.

<sup>70</sup>Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 1.4.



in the world.”<sup>71</sup> The spiritual life of laypersons does not require withdrawal from the world; rather, it manifests itself by engaging with the world.

While the Second Vatican Council affirms that the holiness to which laypersons are called is good and worthwhile, it also suggests that this holiness is significantly different from that of persons in the clerical or religious state. As James Bacik explains, there is “a growing awareness that discipleship must be practiced in the particular concrete circumstances of life. Thus we face the great challenge of embodying the universal call to holiness in distinctive spiritualities that fit the needs and lifestyles of laypersons, clergy, and members of religious orders.”<sup>72</sup> The Second Vatican Council envisions a distinctively lay spirituality formed around activity in the world, rather than the simple appropriation of the spiritual traditions of professed religious life, which are to some degree based upon an assumption of separation from the world.

This concern with identifying the characteristics of a specifically lay spirituality can also be seen in the work of some authors who seek to respond to and develop the vision of the laity set forth by the Second Vatican Council. For example, Elizabeth Dreyer argues for the necessity of formulating a spirituality which is specific to the life of a layperson.<sup>73</sup> For Dreyer, a spirituality for laypersons must take into account the circumstances of lay life in

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<sup>71</sup>Ferdinand Klostermann, “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity,” trans. John M. Jakubiak, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 3:319.

<sup>72</sup>James J. Bacik, “Contemporary Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 229.

<sup>73</sup>Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 27.

the world, and must therefore be more than an adaptation of earlier spiritualities such as those from a monastic environment, which did not account for this worldly context. She writes of the need for “a new ownership by all the baptized of their daily experience as well as a critical appropriation of the past. The laity cannot accept without thought what has been handed down from past generations. Rather, they must pay reverent attention to daily existence as the locus and seedbed for the ongoing revelation of God.”<sup>74</sup> This perspective is consistent with the view of the laity offered by Vatican II, and suggests the need for a correlation between past spiritual traditions and the distinct circumstances of present-day lay life in the world.

Ann Astell explains that the notion of a distinctively lay spirituality is a recent development in Christian tradition: “Whereas laymen and laywomen of the Middle Ages could aspire to sanctity by approximating the ascetical, world-renouncing lifestyle of the monks, present-day laity must excel in the this-worldly apostolate that is judged proper to them as laypersons.”<sup>75</sup> For Dreyer and Astell, both of whom are writing in response to the statements of the Second Vatican Council on the laity, a spirituality for laypersons rests upon a foundation which is fundamentally different from that of professed religious life. This difference is ultimately concerned with whether one understands the spiritual life to be situated in a condition of separation from, or connection with, the world.

This discussion of lay spirituality has implications for those persons who want to read spiritual texts from earlier historical periods and adapt their teachings for present-day life.

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<sup>74</sup>Dreyer, 21-22.

<sup>75</sup>Ann W. Astell, introduction to *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models*, ed. Ann W. Astell (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 2.

Barbara Jean argues that lay Christians need to understand that their own spirituality is different from that of monastic or clerical spirituality.<sup>76</sup> Jean is skeptical that laypersons can fruitfully use mystical texts which come out of a monastic context so different from their own. At the very least, she suggests that these texts must be approached with caution:

As regards the laity, the steady diet of monastic authors leaves them with an unrealistic set of expectations as they seek their own paths of union with God. Both laity and clergy need to find mystics whose lives and experiences can be adapted to their own particular circumstances. This is why there needs to be careful and calculated guidance, particularly for the laity, in reading mystical works.<sup>77</sup>

This perspective questions whether it would be useful or even possible for a Christian layperson to adapt a mystical practice which is traditionally associated with the monastic context.

The practice and experience of contemplation is a part of this discussion of lay spirituality. Yet what is meant by the term “contemplation” must itself be considered. Elizabeth Dreyer writes that the Second Vatican Council’s declaration of the universal call to holiness suggests that the experience of contemplation is possible for all Christians.<sup>78</sup> Yet for Dreyer, it is a fundamental problem for lay Christian spirituality that contemplation is commonly described as a cessation of activity and a withdrawal from the world which is the place of activity. She claims that what is needed is a conception in which contemplation is more closely integrated with action: “The challenge of a spirituality of everyday life is to maintain the crucial importance of moments of solitary silence and being alone with God,

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<sup>76</sup>Barbara Jean, “The Influence of the Medieval Mystics on Twentieth-Century Spirituality,” *Mystics Quarterly* 19 (1993): 138.

<sup>77</sup>Jean, 139.

<sup>78</sup>Dreyer, 156.

without giving up on the possibility that we can also be contemplatives *in the midst* of the noise, the hubbub and the intense activity of our days.”<sup>79</sup> In Dreyer’s view, the meaning of contemplation needs to be reconsidered from the perspective of a person living an active life in the world. It can be asked how this understanding of contemplation compares with that which is presented in the literature of present-day Christian contemplative teachers, particularly those whose work is informed to some degree by the spirituality of the *Cloud*.

For his definition of contemplation, James Finley draws upon the Christian practice of *lectio divina*, a traditionally monastic exercise in which one reads scripture, reflectively meditates upon the text, is moved to offer a prayer in response to this reading and reflection, and finally moves into contemplation, understood as a consciousness of the presence of God. Finley writes that “contemplative prayer has been seen as the culmination of a graced evolution of consciousness in which one moves from *spiritual reading* to *meditation* to *contemplation*.”<sup>80</sup> Finley defines contemplation by contrasting it with the experience of meditation:

In meditation the discursive intellect and imagination are active in a personal awareness of specific aspects of the mystery of our union with God in Christ. In contemplation, however, both the discursive intellect and the imagination are silenced and transcended in an utterly simple moment of loving communion with God as he is in himself. Contemplation is marked by naked faith, presence and radical intimacy. It is marked, too, by ineffability—by an all-embracing totality that defies the limitations of a description.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Dreyer, 154.

<sup>80</sup>Finley, *The Awakening Call*, 21.

<sup>81</sup>Finley, *The Awakening Call*, 22.

What is most noteworthy for this discussion is Finley's emphasis upon contemplation as a transcendence of thought and imagination. In this understanding, contemplation is a silencing and stilling of those faculties which one ordinarily uses to engage the world around him.

A definition of contemplation similar to Finley's is found in Thomas Keating's writing on the method of Centering Prayer. What is most pronounced in Keating's description of contemplation is his emphasis upon it being an experience of the divine presence which transcends the ordinary processes of human thought and language. Keating defines contemplative prayer as "the opening of mind and heart, body and emotions—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts and emotions—beyond, in other words, the psychological content of the present moment."<sup>82</sup> As has been seen, Keating suggests that there are certain practices which one may perform to help bring about this contemplative experience of God. He defines the "method of contemplative prayer" as "any prayer practice that spontaneously evolves or is deliberately designed to free the mind of excessive dependence on thinking to go to God."<sup>83</sup>

Keating also situates his understanding of contemplation within the more comprehensive practice of *lectio divina*. In describing the ways contemplation has been understood in Christian tradition, Keating notes that contemplation is one part of *lectio divina*, and that it has a character which is distinct from the other components of this practice. Keating describes the performance of *lectio divina* as involving the practitioner's mind and will as he reflects upon and prays in response to the sacred text he has read. But these

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<sup>82</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 14.

<sup>83</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 147.

movements of *lectio divina* culminate in the contemplative experience: “As these reflections and acts of the will are simplified, one moves on to a state of resting in the presence of God, and that is what was meant by *contemplatio*, ‘contemplation.’”<sup>84</sup> The verb Keating chooses here to describe contemplation is important. Contemplation is a “resting” in the divine presence. Such a description connotes a lack of activity and even implies a sense in which one has withdrawn from the world, at least for the time in which one undertakes this practice and has this experience.

This description of contemplation as a withdrawal from the ordinary activities of the mind and senses also has implications for how contemplation and activity in the world are understood in relation to one another. Authors who teach the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer attempt to overcome the opposition between contemplation and action. But they do this in a particular way. The teachers of Centering Prayer emphasize both the importance of formal periods of practice during which one withdraws from activity, while at the same time explaining that these periods have an effect upon the rest of the practitioner’s life. In this way, discrete periods of contemplative practice and engagement with the world are understood to be connected.

This connection between action and contemplation can be seen in Thomas Keating’s instructions for Centering Prayer. On the one hand, these instructions emphasize periods of discrete and formal practice apart from any other activity. Keating writes, “The minimum time for this prayer is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first

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<sup>84</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 20.

thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or early evening.”<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, Keating also claims that these periods of practice are not the arena in which the effects of the prayer are manifested. This occurs rather in the course of the practitioner’s other activities: “The principal effects of centering prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of centering prayer itself.”<sup>86</sup> In these two statements, there is an attempt to understand formal periods of practice and activity in the world as being connected with rather than opposed to one another.

One of the reasons Keating emphasizes this connection of practice and daily life is because he is teaching this contemplative method to an audience composed largely of laypersons rather than the professionally religious. He writes, “the ordinary events of life become our practice. I can’t emphasize that too much. A monastic structure is not the path to holiness for lay folks. The routine of daily life is. Contemplative prayer is aimed at transforming daily life with its never-ending round of ordinary activities.”<sup>87</sup> Keating claims that a proper understanding of contemplative prayer takes one well beyond the practice of the prayer itself and into a consideration of one’s entire life and the effect upon this of one’s formal contemplative practice. He explains that the decision to embark upon contemplative practice not as a decision to devote a certain period of time each day to formal practice. Rather, it is more fundamentally a willingness to have one’s life transformed by this practice: “One of the reasons why contemplatives have always been in the minority in this world is

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<sup>85</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 141.

<sup>86</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 141.

<sup>87</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 125.

because contemplation involves a surrender of one's whole self, not just a period of time set aside each day for some form of prayer or meditation."<sup>88</sup> In his description of contemplation, Keating suggests that formal periods of practice which are characterized by silence and temporary withdrawal are themselves connected with how one acts in the world and the rest of life.

### *Meditation as an Exercise for Health*

A second context within which the contemporary understanding of contemplative practice developed is the promotion of meditation as a therapeutic device for physical and mental well-being.<sup>89</sup> A particularly important figure in this discussion is Herbert Benson, a medical doctor who recommends the use of a meditative technique as a means of stress reduction. Benson is especially relevant here because he links this technique with contemplative traditions found in various world religions. Most relevant to this discussion, Benson uses the *Cloud* as one of the religious sources with which he describes and formulates his own meditative method.

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<sup>88</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 114.

<sup>89</sup>While the discussion in this section will focus on the practical use of meditation as an exercise for health, there is a related body of literature which attempts to analyze meditation through scientific inquiry. An older example of this type of literature is Claudio Naranjo and Robert E. Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), which approaches meditation in terms of the psychological processes of restriction of sensory input through concentrative practice and the expansion of awareness that results from this. A more recent example is Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), which analyzes meditation practice and mystical experience in terms of neurophysiology. A useful overview of this scientific approach to the study of meditation can be found in B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity*, The Columbia Series in Science and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 27-36.



Benson's book *The Relaxation Response*, published in 1975, contains the essential components of his understanding of contemplative practice. According to Benson, the modern person lives in a world where he is besieged by the physical effects of stress. This situation arises out of a normal biological response to stressful stimuli, but is problematic for persons when it is elicited frequently or even continuously in the face of the stresses of modern life, and it can result in health problems.<sup>90</sup>

Benson claims that humans possess the ability to counter the effects of stress. This is what he calls the "relaxation response."<sup>91</sup> He enumerates the various physiological effects which the use of a meditative technique as a means of eliciting the relaxation response can have upon practitioners. Referring to a study of persons who practiced Transcendental Meditation, Benson explains that the physical effects of this practice included reduced oxygen consumption, increased alpha brain waves, decreased blood lactate, and decreased heart rate. He also notes that the blood pressure of practitioners was consistently low before, during, and after periods of meditation.<sup>92</sup> More abstractly, Benson writes that "you will be able to better cope with difficult situations by regularly allowing your body to achieve a more balanced state through the physiologic effects of the Relaxation Response."<sup>93</sup> In Benson's

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<sup>90</sup>Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 17-18. A more recent work which is similar to Benson's in its relating meditation practice to physical and mental well-being is Jon Kabat-Zin, *Full Catastrophe Living* (New York: Delacorte, 1990).

<sup>91</sup>Benson, 18.

<sup>92</sup>Benson, 62-68.

<sup>93</sup>Benson, 122.

work, the use of a meditative method to bring about relaxation is described as having benefits related to the physical health and functioning of the person.

Benson's description of the technique for eliciting the relaxation response likewise consists of a set of practical instructions for how one is to perform a meditative method:

You will learn that evoking the Relaxation Response is extremely simple if you follow a very short set of instructions which incorporate four essential elements: (1) a quiet environment; (2) a mental device such as a word or phrase which should be repeated in a specific fashion over and over again; (3) the adoption of a passive attitude, which is perhaps the most important of the elements; and (4) a comfortable position. Your appropriate practice of these four elements for ten to twenty minutes once or twice daily should markedly enhance your well-being.<sup>94</sup>

With these instructions, Benson presents a meditative technique which he says will elicit the relaxation response and thereby counter the effects of stress upon one's body and mind.

Thus far, this discussion of Benson's ideas has emphasized the physiological basis and effects of stress and its antidote produced through meditative practice. Benson does not limit his description of this technique to the medical however. Rather, he seeks to show that a connection exists between the method he is teaching and contemplative traditions found in the world's religions.<sup>95</sup> Specifically, Benson claims that a consideration of mystical and

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<sup>94</sup>Benson, 19. Elsewhere in his book, Benson gives a more extensive description of the passive attitude which he considers most important to the relaxation response. He writes that this attitude is "an emptying of all thoughts and distractions from one's mind" (78), and he teaches that "*distracting thoughts will occur. Do not worry about them. When these thoughts do present themselves and you become aware of them, simply return to the repetition of the mental device*" (113).

<sup>95</sup>Herbert Benson, John F. Beary, and Mark P. Carol, "The Relaxation Response," *Psychiatry* 37 (1974): 38.

meditative literatures from various religious cultures reveals common elements which can be related to the relaxation response as he describes it.<sup>96</sup>

Benson emphasizes the meditative methods which are found in these traditions, and he suggests that these methods can be used to bring about the experience of the relaxation response. Benson is not concerned with intellectual systems or doctrinal formulations so much as with *practices* which have existed in various religious traditions. In this regard, it is useful to consider specifically what aspects of the *Cloud* text Benson gives attention to as part of his discussion of the relationship of the relaxation response to the world's religions. Doing so will highlight the emphasis he places upon methods of practice in mystical traditions.

In his discussion of the *Cloud*, Benson states that the author of this text was concerned with imparting “practical advice” for contemplative prayer to his reader.<sup>97</sup> The first component in the text's instruction for contemplation is the transcendence of all thought and distraction in the consciousness of the contemplative. According to Benson, the *Cloud* author writes of “eliminating all distractions and physical activity, all worldly things, including all thoughts.”<sup>98</sup> Benson also states that the *Cloud* author “depicts a passive attitude as the way ‘to cover,’ or forget, all distractions”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Benson, 76.

<sup>97</sup>Benson, 80.

<sup>98</sup>Benson, Beary, and Carol, 38-39.

<sup>99</sup>Benson, 80-81. The edition of the *Cloud* which Benson is quoting is Ira Progoff, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Dell, 1957). Cf. *Cloud*, 66/5-8.

The second element Benson highlights in the *Cloud* author's description of contemplative prayer is the use of a mental device which is repeated as a means of transcending distracting thoughts. Benson writes that the *Cloud* author "advises that his readers can develop 'special ways, tricks, private techniques, and spiritual devices' in order to achieve contemplation. One means is the use of a single syllable such as 'God' or 'love.'"<sup>100</sup> It is apparent that Benson's concern with the *Cloud* has to do with identifying a method of practicing contemplative prayer which can be extracted from this text. Moreover, Benson relates the *Cloud* author's teaching on contemplation to two of the important elements in a meditative practice designed to elicit the relaxation response. These are the practitioner having a passive attitude and using the repetition of a mental device for the transcendence of thought.

In relating meditative methods from the world's religions to the relaxation response, Benson is asserting that the practice of contemplation can be used for the physical and mental well-being of practitioners by providing them with a means for overcoming the effects of stress in their lives. In doing this, Benson acknowledges that he is giving attention to an aspect of these traditions which the traditions themselves have not necessarily emphasized.<sup>101</sup> Yet it is these physical effects of contemplative practices which constitute at least part of their significance for the contemporary person. Benson writes that "religious prayers and related mental techniques have measurable, definable physiologic effects on the body."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Benson, 81. Cf. *Cloud*, 28/14-20, 66/9-10.

<sup>101</sup>Benson, 97-98.

<sup>102</sup>Benson, 19.

Nevertheless, Benson does not completely reduce religiously motivated behavior to physical technique. He acknowledges that the beneficial medical effects of meditative practices are not the only functions these practices serve. He writes that his understanding of religious traditions in light of the relaxation response “*is not to be interpreted as viewing religion or philosophy in a mechanistic fashion. The ultimate purpose of any exercise to attain transcendent experience corresponds to the philosophy or religion in which it is used.*”<sup>103</sup> This interpretation of contemplation includes both the physical effects of its practice as well as an understanding that a particular contemplative tradition may be oriented to a state or experience—such as union with God, in the case of the *Cloud*—which transcends the physical.

Finally, Benson relates the relaxation response, and the meditative methods that elicit it, to altered states of consciousness. He writes that the relaxation response “is an *altered* state simply because we do not commonly experience it, and because it usually does not occur spontaneously; it must be consciously and purposefully evoked.”<sup>104</sup> This understanding of the relaxation response has implications for the interpretation of meditative practices

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<sup>103</sup>Benson, 76.

<sup>104</sup>Benson, 74-75. Benson’s description of altered states of consciousness is consistent with the definition offered by Arnold M. Ludwig: “Any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a significant deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness,” “Altered States of Consciousness,” in *Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Charles T. Tart (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 11. The two central components of this definition, which are reflected in Benson’s description, are that an altered state of consciousness differs substantially from ordinary consciousness, and that the altered state is elicited intentionally through some prescribed means.

found in various religious traditions. According to Benson, these practices are means by which an altered state of consciousness may be brought about.<sup>105</sup> This understanding of the relaxation response informs Benson's characterization of the contemplative spirituality found in the *Cloud*. He writes, "in the West a fourteenth-century Christian treatise entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* discusses how to attain an altered state of consciousness which is required to attain alleged union with God."<sup>106</sup> As will be seen, this description of contemplative spirituality in general, and the *Cloud* in particular, conflicts to some degree with the way contemplation is characterized in present-day Christian contemplative literature.

To this point, the discussion has focused on the conception that contemplative methods operate as a means to reduce stress and bring about physical and mental well-being through the physiologic effects of these methods. While Christian contemplative literature shows an awareness of this view, its own description of contemplative prayer is ambiguous on this point. These differing views on the purpose of contemplative practice contribute to the present-day understanding of what contemplation is and what it means.

In his description of the method of Centering Prayer, Thomas Keating explicitly denies that this practice is a relaxation technique. Keating begins the first chapter of his book *Open Mind, Open Heart* with this statement: "The first thing contemplation is not is a relaxation exercise. It may bring relaxation, but that is strictly a side effect. It is primarily

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<sup>105</sup>Benson, 75.

<sup>106</sup>Benson, Beary, and Carol, 38.

relationship, hence, intentionality. It is not a technique, it is prayer.”<sup>107</sup> This understanding of contemplative practice is obviously quite different from Herbert Benson’s discussion of the relaxation response. Keating’s definition cited above does express his view of what contemplation is, apart from its not being a relaxation technique. First, contemplation is a relationship. Second, and again offering a negative definition, Keating claims that contemplation is not a technique. Considering each of these characteristics will show how Keating’s understanding of contemplation contrasts with the view that it is an exercise for relaxation and health.

Keating teaches that, rather than being a relaxation technique, Centering Prayer is first and foremost the practitioner’s participation in a relationship with God, and it provides a means with which to participate in this relationship. The endpoint of this process is mystical experience envisioned as union of the human soul and God: “The method itself is a discipline to enable the developing relationship with Jesus to reach its term in union with God.”<sup>108</sup>

Related to this is Keating’s position that Centering Prayer should not be understood as a technique. This negative definition is related to Keating’s distinguishing between contemplative prayer and techniques oriented to relaxation. In his description of the relaxation response, Herbert Benson suggests that when a person practices a technique that contains certain essential characteristics, he can expect that it will result in the elicitation of the relaxation response. In contrast, Keating explains that the practitioner of Centering Prayer

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<sup>107</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 5.

<sup>108</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 122.

should not expect certain outcomes. He writes that Centering Prayer is not a technique, explaining that

in a technique, as I understand it, you do a certain practice or discipline, physical or mental, and it issues in a result that you can more or less predict. Centering Prayer is a method, but a kind of ‘methodless method.’ It’s the kind of method that you develop when you’re trying to form a relationship with someone; hence, it has a great deal of openness or flexibility to what happens.<sup>109</sup>

In describing contemplation with the terminology of relationship, Keating claims that it is more than a technique one can perform which will reliably result in a decrease in the effects of stress on one’s mind and body. He says of Centering Prayer, “It’s not designed to fix your mind or your blood pressure or to help you to grow hair or other things. It’s a relationship first and foremost and the method is totally in the service of that relationship.”<sup>110</sup> This understanding of contemplation is substantially different from that of Herbert Benson, who describes contemplative methods primarily in relation to their medically therapeutic function. While Keating does acknowledge that Centering Prayer may result in relaxation (this will be discussed in more detail below), he claims that relaxation is only a pleasant secondary consequence of a practice ultimately oriented to fostering the human-divine relationship.

A final way in which Keating’s description of Centering Prayer differs from the understanding of contemplation as a relaxation technique has to do with the issue of altered states of consciousness. As was discussed, Herbert Benson states that a person who elicits the

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<sup>109</sup>Thomas Keating, *Centering Prayer: Six Follow Up Sessions Following an Introductory Workshop on Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription (Snowmass, CO: St. Benedict’s Monastery, 2003), 15.

<sup>110</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 31.



relaxation response through a meditative technique is experiencing an altered state of consciousness. Keating denies that the experience of Centering Prayer can be defined in this way: “In the Christian tradition, contemplative prayer has never been a privatized spiritual experience in the service of ‘altered states of consciousness’ or self-actualization.”<sup>111</sup> From these statements, it is apparent that Keating understands the practice of contemplative prayer to be something quite other than a relaxation exercise.

In spite of what has been said thus far concerning his denial that Centering Prayer is a relaxation technique, Keating does acknowledge that relaxation may be concomitant with this contemplative practice. As was seen, Keating states that relaxation may be a “side effect” of this practice. He describes Centering Prayer as an experience in which the ordinary awareness of one’s thoughts and concerns is put on hold for a time, resulting in an experience of relaxation. He writes, “It’s nice to be alone, that’s relaxing. It’s nice not to be thinking our ordinary thoughts. For a human being the greatest vacation is not to have any thoughts for a while . . . That’s refreshing! It puts a whole new dimension on our activities and it frees us from the tumult of noise, worries and concerns and self-centered projects for happiness.”<sup>112</sup>

This implied relationship between Centering Prayer and the experience of relaxation which is found in Keating’s statements is also present in the work of other teachers of this practice. Basil Pennington explicitly claims that Centering Prayer should provide an experience of relaxation. While he does not limit the practice to bodily relaxation, he does include the effects of this prayer upon the body in his discussion of this practice: “Prayer

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<sup>111</sup>Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 2.

<sup>112</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 16.

should be spiritually refreshing . . . It should, moreover, be physically renewing and strengthening. When we pray, we are touching the Source of our being, of all our life and vitality, and new creative energies are set loose to flow through us.”<sup>113</sup> While Pennington acknowledges the place of relaxation in the practice of Centering Prayer, he does not reduce contemplation to a relaxation exercise. For the Centering Prayer movement, contemplation is ultimately concerned with the relationship of the human practitioner and God.

Is meditative practice a therapeutic physical activity, a spiritual discipline, or some combination of these? This discussion has suggested that these various ways of describing contemplation are not always easily delineated from each other. As Daniel Rogers writes, “for all the differences in purpose and motivations, medical authorities recognize a similarity between the state of someone practising prayer in accord with the *Cloud*-author’s direction and the state of one experiencing the relaxation response when using one or another clinical technique.”<sup>114</sup>

In an article describing his experience facilitating a group which practiced a form of contemplative prayer, Daniel Musholt proposes that the stress-relieving physical and mental effects of meditative practice and the goals more traditionally associated with contemplation can converge.<sup>115</sup> Whereas talk of the relaxation response largely emphasizes its physiologic

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<sup>113</sup>Pennington, *Centering Prayer*, 199.

<sup>114</sup>Daniel J. Rogers, “Psychotechnological Approaches to the Teaching of the *Cloud*-Author and to the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1982*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1982), 146.

<sup>115</sup>Daniel Martin Musholt, “Stress Management and Contemplative Spirituality,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 43 (1989): 121.

benefits, Musholt claims that contemplative methods offers a further possibility for practitioners: “For group members in a faith context, success at stress management signals the beginnings of contemplative awareness. After one has achieved a level of calm and relaxation that implies a sense of detachment from the stress and pressure of created reality, a person is more receptive to the beginning stages of the invitation to contemplation.”<sup>116</sup>

Similarly, Rogers attempts to see the practices of the medieval English mystics and modern medicine in light of one another: “Today we are more aware than ever that spiritual growth is dependent upon one’s physical and mental well-being . . . The converse has also been evidenced throughout time, namely, that in a variety of ways one’s spiritual development influences all the other dimensions of one’s experience.”<sup>117</sup> Such statements suggest that the physical effects of stress reduction and consciousness of God can be understood to meet in the practice of contemplative prayer.

#### *The Influence of Eastern Meditative Traditions*

A third context within which the contemporary understanding of Christian contemplative practice developed is the influence of “Eastern” (particularly Hindu and Buddhist) religious traditions. The discussion of this context will address the influence of these traditions on the way the *Cloud* as a Christian mystical text has been received, and on the origin and self-presentation of present-day Christian contemplative practices. Before addressing these two areas, it will be useful to briefly consider the role played by the Second

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<sup>116</sup>Musholt, 126.

<sup>117</sup>Rogers, 143.

Vatican Council in the interpretation of Christian mystical texts and practices in light of Eastern religious traditions.

Just as the Second Vatican Council's statements on the spirituality of the Christian laity provide a context for understanding contemporary notions of contemplation, the statements of the Council on non-Christian religions also provide some background for discussing the influence of Eastern traditions on attempts to formulate a contemporary Christian contemplative practice. Most important in this regard is the Council document the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*. In an oft-quoted passage from this document, the council states that religious traditions other than Christianity contain elements of truth and value, and that these should be appreciated by Christians: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women."<sup>118</sup>

One example of what the Second Vatican Council means when it refers to that which is true and holy in other religions can be seen in the discussion of Hinduism in *Nostra Aetate*. Among the elements of Hinduism which the Council states are particularly important are attempts by persons to "seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation, and recourse to God in confidence and love."<sup>119</sup> Particularly important

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<sup>118</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 2.

<sup>119</sup>Vatican Council II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 2.

in this statement for this discussion is the Council's recognition of the value of ascetic and meditative practices which are found in an Eastern religious tradition. Pointing to the interest in Eastern meditative traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Yoga in the years following Vatican II, William Johnston writes that this has "been partly stimulated by the general post-conciliar humility of a Catholic Church eager to learn from all good religions."<sup>120</sup>

A good place to begin this discussion of the influence of Eastern meditative traditions on the interpretation of the *Cloud* and the development of present-day Christian contemplative practice is with William Johnston, a Jesuit priest who has written on Christian mysticism, and the *Cloud* in particular, as well as the tradition of Zen Buddhism. In a preface to his book *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, Johnston suggests a number of reasons why the *Cloud* continues to be relevant as a mystical text. The first of these reasons is that "the English author [of the *Cloud*] is primarily a teacher of prayer, giving practical instruction to his 'ghostly friend in God.' And he teaches the kind of prayer that people today are searching for."<sup>121</sup> A second reason for the continuing importance of the *Cloud* is that this text can be used to open avenues of dialogue between the spiritual traditions of Christianity and the East.<sup>122</sup> Johnston's comments on the significance of the *Cloud* suggest much of what will be discussed here. In present-day conceptions of contemplation there is a confluence of three factors: the teaching of the *Cloud* text itself, an emphasis upon practical instruction in

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<sup>120</sup>William Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections on Zen and Christian Mysticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), 179.

<sup>121</sup>Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, vii-viii.

<sup>122</sup>Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, viii-ix.

methods of prayer, and the influence of Eastern meditative traditions on the definition of contemplation.

In literature which discusses the significance of Eastern religions for Christian spirituality, the *Cloud* is often used as a bridge to connect the practices and experiences of Christian mysticism with these other traditions. Much of this literature which discusses the *Cloud* in light of Eastern meditation was published in the 1960s and '70s,<sup>123</sup> and thus immediately precedes the Centering Prayer movement. One of the topics addressed in this literature is the apparent lack of resources in Christianity for persons who desire a contemplative experience in which dependence upon thoughts and words is surpassed. For example, in his book *Zen Meditation for Christians*, H.M. Enomiya Lassalle writes of a distinction in Christian spirituality between discursive meditation which utilizes words and concepts and contemplation, or what Lassalle calls “object-less meditation,” in which these are transcended. Lassalle explains that most instruction in Christian spiritual practices involves discursive meditation and that there is little assistance to be found for those who wish to make the transition to contemplative prayer. According to Lassalle, the only guidance for this process is found in medieval mystical literature (and the *Cloud* is one of the texts he names). Yet Lassalle states that this literature is largely inaccessible to those who might benefit from it.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>While the literature discussed here was published in the 1960s and '70s, an interest in Eastern meditative traditions can be seen well before this time. In his study of the history of American spirituality, Leigh Schmidt traces interest in meditation to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (146).

<sup>124</sup>H.M. Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians*, trans. John C. Maraldo (LaSalle: Open Court, 1974), 31-32. The date of publication of this book is important. While

Similar concerns are voiced by William Johnston. He states that the appeal of Eastern traditions comes from a perception that Christianity does not provide persons the necessary resources to undertake contemplative prayer:

If young people look to Hinduism and Buddhism for the contemplative education that they instinctively long for, may this not be because modern Christianity has projected the image of a churchgoing religion rather than a mystical one? May it not have too much bingo and too little mysticism? Too much theological chatter and not enough subliminal silence? Words, words, words! Perhaps this is why we need the blood transfusion from the East.<sup>125</sup>

For authors such as Lassalle and Johnston, Eastern meditative traditions (and for these authors, Zen Buddhism holds particular interest) provide a resource for contemplative experience to a Christian tradition which has not in recent times offered this to practitioners.

Lassalle claims that Zen meditation can provide a means for the Christian to move from discursive to object-less meditation (or contemplation, to use the more traditional Christian term). He first describes this transition in the context of Christian practice: “The preparation necessary for meditation in the proper sense [that is, object-less meditation] can be made in different ways. One common way for the Christian who has practiced the discursive type is to let the rational activity gradually recede until a transition to object-less meditation is made.”<sup>126</sup> Lassalle goes on to explain that the practice of Zen meditation can help one to experience object-less meditation: “When you really practice *zazen* naturally as a

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the Christian mystical texts of which Lassalle speaks were less available when he wrote this, much has been done to redress this in the years since. Particularly notable in this regard is The Classics of Western Spirituality series published by Paulist Press.

<sup>125</sup>William Johnston, *Christian Zen: A Way of Meditation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 19-20.

<sup>126</sup>Lassalle, 29.

part of yourself, it by itself becomes object-less meditation . . . *Zazen*, at least traditionally, does not proceed along the way of discursive meditation to attain its goal; rather it excludes discursive thinking and imagination from the outset. Likewise, it has no object, qua object, in mind.”<sup>127</sup>

William Johnston also claims that the practice of Zen meditation can become a means for the Christian to enter a contemplative state characterized by an apophatic experience of the divine. He writes, “the Oriental technique can deepen the prayer life of those who are already contemplative. Much of the Zen technique will help them practice the counsel of the mystics to abandon thoughts and images in order that the tiny flame of contemplative love may arise in the heart.”<sup>128</sup> For Lassalle and Johnston, the practice of Zen meditation can function as a path to Christian mystical experience.

While Lassalle and Johnston assert the value of the meditative techniques of the East for Christians, they also use the *Cloud* as a meeting-point between Zen meditation and Christian spiritual practice. These authors emphasize that in Zen meditation discursive thought is surpassed in favor of a more simple and immediate awareness of reality. The apophatic orientation of the *Cloud* thus becomes one way for Zen to be related to Christian mysticism. In his discussion of apophatic experience, Lassalle draws a comparison between Zen and the *Cloud*. He cites the fifth chapter of the *Cloud*, in which the author urges his reader to abandon thought on subjects such as the saints and the qualities of God. Lassalle writes that “this method, like Zen, completely rejects ordinary discursive meditation from the

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<sup>127</sup>Lassalle, 29-30.

<sup>128</sup>Johnston, *The Still Point*, 188.



very outset, despite its laudable content . . . its intent is to lead us to the essence of God, which we can never touch with discursive thinking but only with befogged intuition.”<sup>129</sup>

Continuing with his commentary on the *Cloud*, Lassalle explains that this text teaches a method by which the apophatic experience may be attained. In this, Lassalle sees another point of convergence between the *Cloud* and Zen. He refers to the seventh chapter of the *Cloud*, in which the author instructs his reader to use a one-syllable word as a focal point during prayer to rid the mind of all other thoughts. Commenting on this method, Lassalle writes,

it matters only that the person have this word in his mind day and night, never letting go of it. In *zazen*, the *koan* takes the place of such a word; it too is to be kept in mind day and night . . . All thoughts other than the *koan* itself are to be excluded. Just as everything must be expelled from the cloud of unknowing, so too in *zazen* everything in all states of consciousness must be eliminated. Hence Zen also teaches that we must penetrate the cloud of unknowing on this way to enlightenment.<sup>130</sup>

Lassalle’s interpretation of the *Cloud* and comparison of it with Zen emphasizes both apophatic experience and meditative method which is used to attain this experience.

These works which compare Christian mysticism and Eastern traditions also address the question of who is thought to be capable of undertaking mystical practice. Statements in this literature assert that understanding Christian mysticism in light of Eastern traditions suggests that mystical consciousness is accessible to a large number of people rather than an elite few. In his book *Zen Catholicism*, Aelred Graham writes that one of the things Zen offers to Christianity is a connection of mysticism with daily life: “What interested Catholics should explore, I suggest, is whether contemplation has not a much more generalized and

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<sup>129</sup>Lassalle, 136.

<sup>130</sup>Lassalle, 137.

nonprofessional character than is often supposed.”<sup>131</sup> For Graham, contemplation is understood to be continuous with action in the world. He asks, referring to the Biblical archetypes of contemplation and action that were also used by the *Cloud* author, “Could Zen’s chief role in the West be that of peacemaker—the reuniting once and for all of those quarrelsome sisters, Martha and Mary?”<sup>132</sup>

Similarly, William Johnston claims that the insights of Eastern traditions can widen the conception of who can participate in mystical practice. For Johnston, what the East offers is instruction in practical techniques of mystical consciousness. He writes of Zen, “The instructions are concerned with your spine and your eyes and your abdomen; in a very practical way you are led to *samadhi* without too much theory.”<sup>133</sup> The result of this practicality is that mystical practice is made accessible to all persons rather than being the exclusive possession of a religious elite: “By using a language that people understand and employing a technique they can practice, it should be possible to introduce a great number of people to Christian *samadhi* . . . The wretched wall that divided popular Christianity from monastic Christianity can be broken down so that all may have vision, all may reach *samadhi*.”<sup>134</sup> For Johnston, the opening of contemplative prayer to a wide audience is related to the provision of practical techniques of contemplation. This can take place in Christianity through following the example that is found in Eastern meditative practices.

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<sup>131</sup>Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 146-147.

<sup>132</sup>Graham, 157.

<sup>133</sup>Johnston, *Christian Zen*, 45.

<sup>134</sup>Johnston, *Christian Zen*, 46.

This emphasis upon the importance of method in Christian contemplative spirituality is also reflected in H.M. Enomiya Lassalle's discussion of the *Cloud* and Zen meditation. Lassalle claims that the *Cloud* provides something that other medieval Christian mystical texts do not; specifically, the *Cloud* contains "a systematic introduction to mystical prayer, a complete and consistent method leading to mystical experience—provided that it is always applied with God's grace—similar to the method of Zen which leads to enlightenment."<sup>135</sup> The *Cloud* offers instruction in a method of mystical practice. For Lassalle, this is what makes this text distinctive, and what makes it comparable to the Eastern meditative tradition of Zen.

Despite this, Lassalle also claims that the *Cloud* is not able to effectively function as a guide for mystical prayer in the present day. This is because its medieval context is so different from that of today.<sup>136</sup> He suggests that the role occupied by the *Cloud* in medieval Christianity can now be better served by Christians adopting the practice of Zen meditation: "What we need now is a *Cloud of Unknowing* for the present age . . . The question, therefore, is this: how do we turn *zazen* into a *Christian* meditation without forfeiting its essence? To do so would be to provide the twentieth century with its own *Cloud of Unknowing*."<sup>137</sup> This statement is important to understanding the development of Christian contemplative practice. According to Lassalle, the *Cloud* is noteworthy for its instruction in a specific contemplative

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<sup>135</sup>Lassalle, 133-134.

<sup>136</sup>Lassalle, 149. Another reason Lassalle claims that the *Cloud* is not entirely effective for giving instruction to today's audience is because "we are in greater need of the various body postures and breathing techniques known to us today than were the medievals, who probably lived a more meditative life than we in any case" (149).

<sup>137</sup>Lassalle, 149-150.

technique, but it has ceased to be effective in this role due to the cultural differences between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries. Consequently, he believes that Zen can fill a role which the *Cloud* no longer can.

As will be seen, the founders of the Christian contemplative practice of Centering Prayer come to a different conclusion. Teachers in the Centering Prayer movement, while appreciating and being influenced by Eastern meditative traditions, have sought to ground this practice in its Christian context. In looking at the writings of the founders of the Centering Prayer movement, it is clear that exposure to and appreciation for Eastern meditative methods had a significant influence on the development of this Christian contemplative tradition. For example, Thomas Keating writes that a growing awareness of Eastern traditions is one of the reasons for renewed interest in Christian contemplation. Among the particular Eastern traditions with which Keating had contact and which he recounts as having been influences for the origins of Centering Prayer are Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation (TM).<sup>138</sup>

In recounting the origins of the Centering Prayer movement, Keating describes the 1970s as a period in which people were attracted to Eastern traditions and had committed themselves to practicing the meditative methods of these traditions.<sup>139</sup> This situation caused him to ask why such persons were not seeking out the contemplative tradition of Christianity which was culturally much closer to them than the Eastern traditions they were practicing:

Why were thousands of young people going to India every summer to find some form of spirituality when contemplative monasteries of men and women were plentiful

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<sup>138</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 11-12.

<sup>139</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 13.

right here in this country? . . . Why don't they come to visit us? Some did, but very few. What often impressed me in my conversations with those who did come was that they had never heard that there was such a thing as Christian spirituality . . . Consequently, it did not occur to them to look for a Christian form of contemplative prayer or to visit Catholic monasteries. When they heard that these existed, they were surprised, impressed, and somewhat curious.<sup>140</sup>

In the midst of this situation, the Centering Prayer movement began.

Reflecting on American religion in the contemporary period, Jeffrey Kripal writes that “the growing global awareness of religious and cultural pluralism calls into question the obvious normativity of any single system of thought, unless, of course, a tradition chooses to isolate itself at the risk of obsolescence.”<sup>141</sup> This observation is applicable to what the founders of Centering Prayer say about the origins of this movement, though their concern was less with doctrine than with practices being offered by Eastern religious traditions. Their formulation of a contemporary method of Christian contemplation was at least in part a reaction to the situation of religious pluralism which Kripal describes. In particular, it was a response to the growing popularity of Eastern meditative practices in American religion in the 1960s and ‘70s.

In their discussions of the influence of Eastern meditation on the Centering Prayer movement, Keating and other teachers of this method tend to give particular emphasis to two things. First, Eastern meditative disciplines provide instruction in specific methods of practice which are relatively easily undertaken by aspiring practitioners. Second, the experience of meditation in these traditions is characterized by a transcendence of thought and word in favor of a silent, supra-conceptual consciousness. The Christian teachers write

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<sup>140</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 14.

<sup>141</sup>Kripal, introduction to *On the Edge of the Future*, 5.

that these elements of Eastern meditation are important in the formulation of a Christian contemplative practice, and their appreciation of these elements is reflected in the Centering Prayer method they teach, which emphasizes both method and an apophatic approach to the experience of God.

Keating explains that one of the characteristics which has made Eastern traditions so appealing is that they provide persons with a concrete method that can be used for contemplative practice. This emphasis upon method was lacking in the Christian tradition of which Keating was a part. He writes, “Without some how-to method of contemplatively oriented prayer, people were being attracted in great numbers to the well-thought-out and well-presented methods of Eastern masters who were arriving in increasing numbers in this country.”<sup>142</sup> The adjectives Keating uses here are significant. He describes Eastern meditative methods as “well-thought-out” and “well-presented”; they are “how-to” methods that can be easily performed.

Basil Pennington also acknowledges the appeal of Eastern meditative methods, but he suggests that these can present a problem for Christians who attempt to appropriate them for their own religious practice:

If a person desiring to seek the experience of God in deep meditation does go to one of the many swamis found in the West today, he or she will be quickly taught a simple method to pursue this goal . . . In carrying through this exercise, devoting mind and heart to this pursuit, the seeker is actually engaging in a very pure form of prayer. The sad part of it is that his pursuit and his experience of God’s very real presence in him in his creative love is not clearly integrated with his faith.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 113.

<sup>143</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 4.

For Keating and Pennington, what was valuable in Eastern methods of meditation also presented them with the challenge of developing a similar contemplative practice within the context of Christian belief and tradition.

In responding to this situation, Keating and Pennington drew upon the Christian contemplative tradition to develop a method for prayer which, like the Eastern meditative methods, could be easily taught and put into practice. Pennington writes, “The current appeal of the swamis makes us ask ourselves, are there not in our own Christian tradition some simple methods, some meditation techniques, which we can use to open the way to quiet, contemplative union with God?”<sup>144</sup> Keating writes of having posed a similar question:

Sometime in the mid-1970s, I raised the following question in a conference to our monastic community: ‘Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people in the active ministry today and to young people who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?’ Having devoted my life to the pursuit of the Christian contemplative tradition and having developed a profound appreciation of its immense value, I grieved to see it completely ignored by people who were going to the East for what could be found right at home, if only it were properly presented.<sup>145</sup>

Clearly, for these founders of the Centering Prayer movement, the issue of method in contemplative practice took on a fundamental importance, and this issue came to the fore at least in part because of their exposure to Eastern traditions of meditation.

One of the Eastern traditions Keating refers to in recounting the origins of the Centering Prayer movement is Transcendental Meditation (TM). In her survey of religious pluralism in America, Diana Eck explains that TM is presented as a technique for meditation

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<sup>144</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 5.

<sup>145</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 15.

which is not affiliated with any religious tradition: “The movement insists this is not Hinduism, indeed not religion at all, but a technique of concentration . . . Anyone can learn TM, no matter what one’s religion or culture, age, or educational background.”<sup>146</sup> This self-presentation of the TM movement goes beyond what Keating and Pennington would claim for Centering Prayer. Throughout their works, Keating and Pennington claim that there is an essential relationship between Centering Prayer and Christian tradition. Nevertheless, the TM movement’s emphasis upon the presentation of a technique which can be easily taught and practiced is something Keating and Pennington also emphasize in their writings on Centering Prayer. Furthermore, the simplicity of this method suggests that it can be practiced by all persons, rather than only by religious professionals. According to Gene Thursby, the approach to meditation taken by the TM movement was an inspiration for providing a contemporary Christian contemplative practice to all interested persons: “TM stimulated Catholic leaders to adapt their own traditions of spiritual formation, previously restricted mainly to religious orders, and make them available to the laity. The success of the Centering Prayer movement, for example, probably owes much to the ways in which TM made the public receptive.”<sup>147</sup>

In their work on new religious movements, Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe describe a dynamic in which aspects of one religion are renewed through contact with other religious traditions: “Not infrequently, indigenous and non-Western spiritual practices were the spark that rekindled the embers of tradition or threw new light on old interpretations of ancient

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<sup>146</sup>Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 109.

<sup>147</sup>Thursby, 209-210n9. Cf. Porterfield, 86.



religious texts.”<sup>148</sup> This is at least in part what has happened in the way that Christian contemplative teachers draw upon and react to Eastern meditative practices. These Eastern traditions offer a motivation for Christian contemplative practice to be renewed so that comparable methods can be made available to Christians. Furthermore, the Eastern traditions’ emphasis upon meditative method influences these Christian contemplative practices. It is important to state clearly that the Centering Prayer movement does not present itself as a mere appropriation of Hinduism or Zen Buddhism by Christians. The teachers of this method insist that they are drawing upon a tradition of Christian contemplative spirituality and presenting it in a modern and easily-used form. Nevertheless, it is clear from these teachers’ own statements that Eastern religious traditions have also played a significant role in the development of a contemporary Christian contemplative practice.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has used some of the insights of hermeneutic and literary critical theory to discuss how present-day persons receive and make use of the tradition of Christian contemplative spirituality in general and *The Cloud of Unknowing* in particular. Paul Ricoeur’s theory of textual interpretation provides a basis for discussing how a medieval text remains very much alive in the present, and how interpreters of the *Cloud* produce their own meaning by giving special emphasis to certain aspects of this text. Of particular importance to present-day interpreters is a reading of the *Cloud* as a text that teaches a contemplative spirituality which is potentially available to all persons rather than restricted to an elite group. Also important to this reading is an interpretation of the *Cloud* which emphasizes its role as a

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<sup>148</sup>Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Culture: Making the Human Sacred* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 44.

manual that offers instruction in a method of contemplative practice which present-day persons can perform.

Similarly, the reader-response theory of Stanley Fish provides a way to think about the contexts, or interpretive communities, that help to determine how the *Cloud* and Christian contemplation are understood in the present day. Of particular importance in this regard are the contexts of a lay spirituality arising from the Second Vatican Council, the conception of meditative practices as techniques for stress reduction and enhanced health, and the influence of traditions of meditation from the Eastern religions of Hinduism and Zen Buddhism.

It is important to recognize, however, that the conception of Christian contemplation and the interpretation of the *Cloud* within these three contexts is to some extent problematic. This is because there is tension within each of these contexts concerning how the practice of contemplation is to be understood. In the case of the first context of a post-Vatican II lay spirituality, attempts to define this spirituality result in differing conclusions as to whether contemplative prayer is understood as a discrete and formal practice characterized to some extent by withdrawal or as an activity more closely connected with life in the world. In the second context of the view of meditation as a means of physical health, there is tension between seeing contemplation as either a technique for stress reduction or as an expression of the relationship between practitioners and God. Finally, in the third context of the influence of Eastern meditative traditions, there is a recognition of the value of these traditions for Christians, but there is also a desire to formulate an explicitly Christian contemplative practice based upon traditional sources such as the *Cloud*. In each of these contexts, an effort

is being made to come to some conception of what it means for present-day persons to practice a contemplative Christian spirituality.

Throughout this discussion of the present-day reading of the *Cloud* and the contexts for understanding contemplation, two points have been consistently emphasized by those who have attempted to formulate a Christian contemplative practice. First, there is an emphasis upon the apophatic orientation of the *Cloud*. Mystical experience as understood in this movement is a silent and non-conceptual experience which transcends the thoughts and images present in ordinary consciousness. Second, there is great attention given to extracting from the *Cloud* and other sources a concrete method for Christian contemplative practice. The presentation of this practice in present-day Christian contemplative literature, and the way that the *Cloud* is used in this presentation, will be taken up in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICE OF CONTEMPLATION: VERBAL FORMULAS AND THE METHOD OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

The preceding chapter addressed the conception of contemplation which is expressed in present-day Christian contemplative movements. One part of that discussion emphasized the role which a method for practice plays in descriptions of contemplative prayer. This chapter will further consider this by examining a topic which is given considerable attention in both the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative literature. This is the employment of a word or phrase (which I will refer to as a “verbal formula”) as part of the method of contemplative prayer. The discussion of verbal formulas in contemplation will help to explain more precisely how a mystical practice functions, and how it is related to mystical experience. To address this topic, this chapter will consider the transformations which have occurred in the movement from the *Cloud* to present-day Christian contemplative practice.

#### **Theoretical Perspectives on Mystical Language and Activity**

Before undertaking this discussion of verbal formulas in contemplation in the *Cloud*, related early Christian and medieval mystical texts, and present-day Christian contemplative literature, it will be helpful to briefly review a number of theoretical perspectives which will inform my consideration of this topic. The first of these addresses the role language plays in the practices and experiences of mystical traditions. Steven Katz draws an important

distinction between two functions language serves in mystical discourse. The first of these is the descriptive function, in which language is understood to refer to and describe certain realities and situations.<sup>1</sup> But Katz writes that this understanding of language in mysticism is not by itself complete: “Such denotative and referential meaning is not the only sense that mystical (and other) language can have. Much classical mystical language and many mystical linguistic forms have other purposes, an essential one being the transformation of consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

In explaining how language can exercise a transformative function in mystical traditions, Katz writes, “what language as employed here seeks to accomplish is to effect a transformation of awareness, thus enabling us to understand/experience that which presently transcends our understanding/experience. In this sense, such special employment of language moves us from consciousness A (ordinary awareness) to consciousness B (mystical awareness).”<sup>3</sup> What this chapter will show is that the contemplative prayer practices which are discussed in early Christian, medieval, and present-day texts employ language in the fashion Katz describes, as a means of bringing about mystical awareness through effecting a transformation in the practitioner’s consciousness.

That being said, it is important to keep in mind that this discussion will not concern mysticism as an abstract phenomenon; rather, it will specifically address Christian contemplative practices. Katz suggests that there is an inherent problem for Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Steven T. Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup>Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” 6.

<sup>3</sup>Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” 8.

mystical traditions when it comes to the use of language: “Christian mysticism has a much less well-developed tradition of such linguistically induced techniques. This is due largely to the very different status of scripture and the strong apophatic influence drawn from Neoplatonism in Christian spirituality.”<sup>4</sup> This tension to which Katz points is important because the texts discussed in this chapter teach contemplative practices in which verbal formulas are fundamentally important; at the same time, these texts are oriented to an apophatic mystical experience in which language is transcended. In these practices, there is a dynamic in which language is used as a tool with which to overcome language. By doing this, language functions to bring about mystical consciousness in the practitioner.

A second theoretical perspective which has some bearing on the interpretation of these mystical practices that employ verbal formulas is the concept of performance, which comes from the field of ritual studies. Discussing Christian mysticism from the perspective of performance theory, Joanna Ziegler writes, “We seek to lead our readers into perceiving the mystics as performers, actors, dancers: in other words, as artists. Mystics *performed* their mysticism.”<sup>5</sup> This description initially seems problematic when applied to the *Cloud*. There is little indication either intra- or extra-textually that the contemplative practice the *Cloud* author teaches was enacted as a public performance. The author’s claim that his text is intended for persons dedicated to contemplative life, which he associates with a life of solitude, suggests that the contemplative practice he describes is anything but a public

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<sup>4</sup>Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” 15. Katz does mention the “Jesus Prayer” as one Christian mystical practice in which language plays an important role.

<sup>5</sup>Joanna E. Ziegler, introduction to *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), xviii-xix.

performance. Nevertheless, some aspects of performance theory are still useful in interpreting the mystical practices of the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative movements. These practices can be understood as performances, albeit more private and interior ones in which the practitioner is performing for an audience consisting of himself and God.

An aspect of performance theory that is relevant to this discussion is the recognition that repetitive action is an important component of ritual which affects the consciousness of the ritual performer. Drawing on the work of Ronald Grimes in ritual studies, Mary Suydam writes that the “dynamic flow” of religious ritual “may be called forth through stylization and practice. Indeed, such repetition may be necessary to allow the performer to reach the point where one’s whole body ‘surpasses fatigue, chatter, and self-indulgence.’”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Suydam says that understanding religious practice as a performance of repetitive action has implications for interpreting the mystical experiences which occur in relation to these practices: “The element of rehearsal conflicts with the desire for spontaneity . . . Yet, to bring about the ‘dynamic flow and process,’ both ritual and theater require preparation, repetition, and practice. This has obvious implications for scholars of mysticism, who have tended to regard religious ecstasies as spontaneous outpourings.”<sup>7</sup> This recognition of the role of repetition in performance is important because, as will be seen, the practices being considered here emphasize repetitive activity with a verbal formula in their methods of contemplative prayer.

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<sup>6</sup>Suydam, 8. Cf. Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, rev. ed., Studies in Comparative Religion (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 172.

<sup>7</sup>Suydam, 9.

A third theoretical perspective, which is related to performance theory, is the understanding of religious activity as “practice.” Catherine Bell uses the concept of practice to describe human activity as being “inherently strategic, manipulative, and expedient” and “a ceaseless play of situationally effective schemes, tactics, and strategies.”<sup>8</sup> This description emphasizes that religious activity can be understood as action which is aimed at accomplishing something. In the case of contemplative practice, it is action aimed at the practitioner’s realization of union with God.

Another dimension of practice is addressed by John Maraldo, who uses this concept to interpret certain Buddhist and Christian spiritual exercises. In formulating his theory of practice, Maraldo contests a perspective which “opposes practice to theory,” in which “theory and theoretical knowledge is an end in itself; practice is a means to an end outside itself.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, he explains that practice refers to an activity which “requires repeated effort and concentrated performance. Such activities are daily disciplines exercised for no other goal than their performance.”<sup>10</sup>

Two important points are suggested by Maraldo’s description of practice. First, practice involves the repetitive performance of an action, and this performance entails a certain degree of concentration on the part of the practitioner. Second, practice is not activity

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<sup>8</sup>Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford univeristy Press, 1992), 82.

<sup>9</sup>Maraldo, 55. In this essay, Maraldo discusses the implications of his theory for interpreting the mysticism of the Zen Buddhist philosopher Dogen and the medieval Christian Francis of Assisi. My interest is in Maraldo’s theoretical perspective on practice, which can be applied to the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative traditions.

<sup>10</sup>Maraldo, 55.



which is a means to some other end; rather, a practice's meaning derives from its own performance. Relating this general concept to religious activity, Maraldo defines "religious practice" as "the constant performance of a particular activity which does not aim at, but embodies unconditioned truth."<sup>11</sup>

As will be seen, these theoretical perspectives on the role of language in mystical traditions and on the understanding of religious activity as performance and practice have value for interpreting the way verbal formulas are used in contemplation as this is described in the *Cloud*, related early Christian and medieval texts, and present-day Christian contemplative literature.

### **Verbal Formulas in the *Cloud* and Other Early Christian and Medieval Texts**

This discussion of verbal formulas and contemplation will begin by considering the *Cloud* author's statements on this topic. The textual references to verbal formulas in the *Cloud* are brief relative to the entire text. Furthermore, it is not completely clear how they were intended and would have been received. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the *Cloud* author considers the use of a verbal formula to be an important aspect of his method of contemplative prayer. The discussion of this topic in the *Cloud* can be contextualized by also looking at other Christian contemplative texts which pre-date or were contemporaneous with the *Cloud*.

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<sup>11</sup>Maraldo, 68.

The *locus classicus* in the *Cloud* on the use of a verbal formula in contemplation is found in the seventh chapter of this text.<sup>12</sup> Before discussing this passage itself, it is helpful to situate it within the text. In the preceding chapter, the *Cloud* author makes what is for him a fundamental distinction between approaching God through thought and through love:

[God] may well be loved, but not thought. By love may he be gotten and held; but by thought neither. And therefore, although it is good sometimes to think of the kindness and worthiness of God in particular, and although it is a light and a part of contemplation: nevertheless in this work it should be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you shall step above it stalwartly, but eagerly, with a devout and pleasing stirring of love, endeavor to pierce that darkness above you. And smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and go not thence for anything that befalls you.<sup>13</sup>

To approach God in love necessitates movement beyond thought, even thoughts which are devout and reflect upon the being of God. No thought, according to the author, is comparable with loving God. The contemplative method the author teaches arises from this attempt to move beyond thought out of love for God.

Continuing with the distinction between love and thought, the author describes what this means for approaching God in contemplation:

Therefore, during the time that you devote yourself to this work, and feel by grace that you are called by God, lift then up your heart unto God with a humble stirring of love. And mean God that made you, and bought you, and who graciously has called

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<sup>12</sup>As will be seen further on in this chapter, this passage is given considerable attention in instructional literature for present-day Christian contemplative methods.

<sup>13</sup>*Cloud*, 26/3-12: “he may wel be loued, bot not þouȝt. By loue may he be getyn and holden; bot bi þouȝt neiþer. And þerfore, þof al it be good sumtyme to þink of þe kyndnes & þe worþines of God in special, and þof al it be a lizt and a party of contemplacion: neuerþeles in þis werk it schal be casten down and keuerid wiþ a cloude of forȝetyng. And þou schalt step abouen it stalworþly, bot listely, wiþ a deuoute and a plesing stering of loue, and fonde for to peerse þat derknes abouen þee. And smyte apon þat picke cloude of vnknowyng wiþ a scharp darte of longing loue, and go not þens for þing þat befaller.”

you to this work: and receive no other thought of God. And yet not even all these, except as it pleases you; for it suffices enough to have a naked intent directed unto God, without any other cause than himself.<sup>14</sup>

Thus far, the author has distinguished between knowing and loving God, and he has claimed that love for God is what is essential for contemplation.

This brings us to the point in the text where the *Cloud* author explicitly discusses the use of a verbal formula as part of contemplative practice. This is, in effect, a practical application of the author's instruction that the aspiring contemplative must have a "naked intent directed unto God." The author's instruction for contemplative practice reads:

And if it pleases you have this intent wrapped and enfolded in one word, and so that you should have better hold thereupon, take but a little word of one syllable; for so it is better than of two, for ever the shorter it is, the better it accords with the work of the spirit. And such a word is this word GOD or this word LOVE. Choose whichever you will, or another as it pleases you: whichever that you like best of one syllable. And fasten this word to your heart, so that it never goes thence for anything that befalls you.<sup>15</sup>

This single short word is a verbal expression of the "intent" that is central to contemplation.

A perspective from performance theory that can be used to interpret this is J.L. Austin's concept of the performative utterance. According to Austin, in certain circumstances persons

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<sup>14</sup>*Cloud*, 28/3-9: "Perfore, what tyme þat þou purposest þee to þis werk, and felest bi grace þat þou arte clepid of God, lift þan up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue. And mene God þat maad þee, and bouzt þee, and þat graciousli haþ clepid þee to þis werk: and resseiu none oþer þouzt of God. And zit not alle þeese, bot þee list; for it suffiseþ inouȝ a naked entent directe vnto God, wiþ-outen any oþer cause þen him-self."

<sup>15</sup>*Cloud*, 28/10-16: "And zif þee list haue þis entent lappid and foulden in o worde, for þou schuldest haue betir holde þer-apon, take þee bot a litil worde of o silable; for so it is betir þen of two, for euer þe schorter it is, þe betir it acordeþ wiþ þe werk of þe spirite. And soche a worde is þis worde GOD or þis worde LOUE. Cheese þee wheþer þou wilt, or anoþer as þe list: whiche þat þee likeþ best of o silable. And fasten þis worde to þin herte, so þat it neuer go þens for þing þat bifalleþ."

make statements which do not describe things; rather, their statements are involved in doing something.<sup>16</sup> Austin calls such statements “performatives,” and says that, with these statements, “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.”<sup>17</sup> The use of the verbal formula in contemplative prayer can be understood as a performative utterance. According to Douglas Cowan, in the *Cloud* the verbal formula functions for the aspiring contemplative as an “anchor-word,” a “discursive cognate upon which to hang his contemplation.”<sup>18</sup> By reciting this word, the contemplative is performing an act. He uses the word as a sign that expresses his intent; the word in turn directs that intent to God.

The use of this verbal formula is part of a method for contemplative practice taught in the *Cloud* which corresponds to the author’s more theoretical description of contemplation. The correspondence between theory and practical application can be seen in the parallels between this passage discussing the single short word and the earlier passage in which the author distinguishes between love and thought as ways to encounter God. In the earlier passage, the author urges his reader to approach the cloud of unknowing in love rather than thought and to “go not thence for anything that befalls you.” In the passage on the use of a single short word in contemplation, the author likewise instructs his reader to employ this word so that it “never goes thence for anything that befalls you.” The author’s instruction on the verbal formula implies that it is a practical means which embodies the love for and intent toward God which the author states are constitutive of contemplative prayer.

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<sup>16</sup>J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5. Cf. Suydam, 10.

<sup>17</sup>Austin, 6.

<sup>18</sup>Cowan, 39.

The *Cloud* author continues his instruction by describing specifically how the verbal formula is to be employed:

This word shall be your shield and your spear, whether you ride in peace or in war. With this word you shall beat on this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you shall smite down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting; in so much that if any thought presses upon you to ask you what you would have, answer him with no more words but with this one word.<sup>19</sup>

Recitation of the word is a way for the person practicing contemplative prayer to respond to and therefore overcome distracting thoughts which arise during the time of this practice. It is the tool one uses to put thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting; at the same time, it directs one's loving intention into the cloud of unknowing.

This use of the verbal formula to surpass thought is an example of what performance theorist Richard Schechner calls "restored behavior," which refers to "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first time; that are prepared or rehearsed."<sup>20</sup> Schechner describes restored behavior as actions which are "marked, framed, or heightened," and which "can be worked on, stored and recalled, played with, made into something else, transmitted, and transformed."<sup>21</sup> He further explains that in performance certain familiar behaviors "are

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<sup>19</sup>*Cloud*, 28/17-29/1: "Þis worde schal be þi scheeld and þi spere, wheþer þou ridest on pees or on werre. Wiþ þis worde þou schalt bete on þis cloude and þis derknes abouen þee. Wiþ þis worde þou schalt smite doun al maner þouzt vnder þe cloude of forþeting; in so mochel þat 3if any þouzt prees apon þee to aske þee what þou woldest haue, answere him wiþ no mo wordes bot wiþ þis o worde."

<sup>20</sup>Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29.

<sup>21</sup>Schechner, 35.

freed from their original functions,” and are “exaggerated and simplified.”<sup>22</sup> This is precisely what happens in the contemplative method taught in the *Cloud*. A single, short word (the *Cloud* author’s examples are “God” and “love”), familiar in the religious context in which it ordinarily occurs, is set off and given a particular function. This word has significance because it expresses the intention of the practitioner. Furthermore, this word is framed within the context of contemplative practice, and is employed in a particular fashion. Recitation of the verbal formula is a rehearsed behavior which is used to bring the practitioner into a condition of cognitive silence, which is the way to mystical experience of God.

Finally, in this passage the *Cloud* author also explains why the verbal formula used in contemplative prayer should take the form of a single one-syllable word. The word’s brevity helps to avoid the multiplication of distracting thoughts which would arise from reflection upon the significance of the word itself. In his description of how the word should be employed to respond to thoughts, the *Cloud* author writes, “And if [the thought] offers you of its great learning to expound upon that word and to tell you the conditions of that word, tell him that you will have it completely whole, and not broken nor undone. And if you will hold yourself fast in this purpose, be certain that he will not abide for long.”<sup>23</sup> Because the verbal formula is a single short word, it can be used to answer distracting thoughts without its becoming a distraction itself.

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<sup>22</sup>Schechner, 65. Schechner is speaking more generally about ritual action here, but says that ritual is similar to restored behavior.

<sup>23</sup>*Cloud*, 29/1-5: “And 3if he profre þee of his grete clergie to expoune þee þat worde and to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde, sey him þat þou wilt haue it al hole, and not broken ne vndon. And 3if þow wilt holde þee fast on þis purpos, sekir be þou he wil no while abide.”

In his discussion of this passage from the *Cloud*, Vincent Gillespie explains that the ordinary and profane function of language ceases in the verbal formula; instead, language becomes a non-discursive means with which a person approaches the sacred: “Contemplative prayer struggles to break free of earthly syntax and aspires to the condition of heavenly song. *The Cloud of Unknowing* recommends short words, ideally of one syllable only. The single, uninflected, syntactically uninhibited word aspires to escape from referentiality and from the chains of signification of earthly discourse.”<sup>24</sup> The *Cloud* author describes a contemplative practice in which language paradoxically functions as a tool to transcend language. It enables the aspiring contemplative to express a loving intent which is beyond the confines of thought. In this passage from the *Cloud*, the author describes a method in which the employment of a verbal formula is central to the practice of contemplative prayer.

In the passage from the *Cloud* just discussed, the author relates the use of the verbal formula to his claim for the priority of love over thought in approaching God. This is the first of two places in the text where the author addresses the topic of verbal formulas in contemplation. When he returns to this subject, the author situates his teaching on the verbal formula within the broader context of a discussion of the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*. A consideration of how the *Cloud* author relates the use of the verbal formula to the stages of *lectio divina* will assist in interpreting how this contemplative practice would have been understood within the context surrounding this text.

The author introduces his discussion of *lectio divina* by saying that “there are means in which a contemplative apprentice should be occupied, which are these . . . Reading,

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<sup>24</sup>Gillespie, “Postcards from the Edge,” 153.

Thinking and Praying.”<sup>25</sup> He continues by contrasting how these stages of *lectio divina* are experienced by novice versus experienced contemplatives. For the “apprentice,” and even for those who are “proficient” contemplatives, reading, meditation, and prayer are so closely linked with one another that these stages are only experienced collectively: “These three are so coupled together, that unto them who are beginners and proficient—but not unto them who are perfect, yes, as it may be here—thinking may not well be gotten without reading or hearing coming before . . . Nor prayer may not be gotten in beginners and proficient without thinking coming before.”<sup>26</sup>

For those who are “perfect,” meaning that they have committed themselves completely to contemplative prayer, the stages of *lectio divina* are experienced differently. For them, meditation can occur without being immediately preceded by the prerequisite stage of reading: “But it is not so with them who continually work in the work of this book. For their meditations are as they were sudden conceits and blind feelings of their own wretchedness, or of the goodness of God, without any means of reading or hearing coming

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<sup>25</sup>*Cloud*, 71/11-12, 14: “menes þer ben in whiche a contemplatiif prentys schuld be occupyed, þe whiche ben þeese . . . Redyng, þinkyng and Preiing.” In introducing his discussion of *lectio divina*, the *Cloud* author states that another person has also written about this subject (71/15-16). James Walsh suggests that the *Cloud* author is referring here to the Carthusian Guigo II’s *The Ladder of Monks* (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, 187n245).

<sup>26</sup>*Cloud*, 71/17-20, 71/22-72/2: “þeese þre ben so couplid to-gedir, þat vnto hem þat ben bigynners & profifers—bot not to hem þat be parfite, 3e, as it may be here—þinkyng may not goodly be getyn wiþ-outyn reding or heryng comyng before . . . Ne preier may not goodly be getyn in bigynners & profifers wiþ-outyn þinkyng comyng bifore.” The author makes it a point in this passage to equate reading and hearing, as he assumes that some contemplatives will be literate and therefore able to read, while others who are not literate will hear a text being read to them.



before, and without any particular beholding of any thing under God.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the author writes that the stage of prayer may be experienced by the perfect without its being preceded by meditation: “And just as the meditations of them who continuously work in this grace and in this work rise suddenly without any means, just so do their prayers . . . their particular prayers rise evermore suddenly unto God, without any means or any pre-meditation in particular coming before, or going therewith.”<sup>28</sup>

In these statements, the author suggests that, as a person gains experience in the practice of contemplation, his prayers come to stand on their own, and are not necessarily proximately related to reading of and meditation upon scripture. This is significant because, according to the *Cloud* author, the stage of prayer is the time when the verbal formula is used in contemplative practice.

When the author discusses the third stage of *lectio divina*—prayer—he repeats almost *verbatim* his earlier teaching that the contemplative should embody his intent toward God in a single short word.<sup>29</sup> The height of contemplative practice is, according to the *Cloud* author, the use of this short single-word verbal formula. Furthermore, the author claims that as one gains experience in contemplative discipline, this word comes to occupy a place in which it

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<sup>27</sup>*Cloud*, 72/23-73/4: “But it is not so wiþ hem þat contynuely worchen in þe werk of þis book. For þeire meditacions ben as þei were sodein conseites and blynde felynges of þeire owne wrechidnes, or of þe goodnes of God, wiþ-outyn any menes of redyng or heryng comyng before, and with-outyn any specyal beholdyng of any þing vnder God.”

<sup>28</sup>*Cloud*, 73/24-74/1, 74/5-7: “riȝt as þe meditacions of hem þat contynuely worchen in þis grace & in þis werk risen sodenly wiþ-outyn any menes, riȝt so don þeire preiers . . . þeire specyal preiers risen euermore sodenly vnto God, wiþ-outyn any meenes or any premeditacion in special comyng before, or going þer-wiþ.”

<sup>29</sup>*Cloud*, 74/8-13.

to some extent stands alone, and is in less direct and immediate relationship to the preceding stages of *lectio divina* which involve reading and meditating upon the words of scripture. The verbal formula becomes the singular focus of the contemplative's consciousness.

The particular words the author suggests for use in prayer are significant in relation to his description of what prayer involves. He defines prayer as "nothing else but a devout intent directed unto God, for getting of goods and removing of evils."<sup>30</sup> It has already been seen that the author relates the use of a verbal formula to one's intent toward God; here, the author also relates the verbal formula specifically to the contemplative's attempt to move away from sin and toward goodness.<sup>31</sup> The *Cloud* author's understanding of prayer leads him to suggest "SIN" and "GOD" as the two most appropriate words to use in prayer:

Since it is so that all evils are comprehended in sin, either by cause or by being, let us therefore, when we will wholeheartedly pray for removing of evils, either say or think or mean nothing else, no more words, but this little word SIN. And if we will wholeheartedly pray for getting of goods, let us cry, either with word or with thought or with desire, nothing else, no more words, but this word GOD. Because in God are all goods, both by cause and by being.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*Cloud*, 77/4-5: "not elles bot a deuoute entent directe vnto God, for getyng of goodes & remowyng of yuelles."

<sup>31</sup>Cowan, 153.

<sup>32</sup>*Cloud*, 77/6-13: "siþen it is so þat alle yuelles ben comprehendid in synne, ouþer by cause or by beyng, lat us þerfore, whan we wyl ententifly preie for remowyng of yuelles, ouþer sey or þink or mene nouȝt elles, ne no mo wordes, bot þis lityl worde SYNNE. And ȝif we wil ententifly preie for getyng of goodes, lat us crie, ouþer wiþ worde or wiþ þouȝt or wiþ desire, nouȝt elles, ne no mo wordes, bot þis worde GOD. For whi in God ben alle goodes, boþe by cause and by beyng." Whereas in the earlier discussion of verbal formulas the *Cloud* author suggested the words "God" and "love" as symbols of one's intention, here he suggests words more specifically related to the movement away from sin and toward goodness.

In addition to their being an expression of the contemplative's intention in prayer, these verbal formulas take the form of single short words, which the *Cloud* author claims are most appropriate for contemplative practice. Commenting on this section of the *Cloud*, James Walsh relates the use of short prayer words to an attempt by the contemplative to move from intellectual knowing to willful loving: "The very brevity of the words will help the apprentice to rivet his loving attention on that which the intellect cannot comprehend."<sup>33</sup> The particular form the verbal formula takes is related to what the contemplative seeks to accomplish with its use. It is a tool to be used in contemplation for the transcendence of distracting thought and the expression of intention to which the contemplative gives his full and focused attention.

In this second discussion of verbal formulas, the *Cloud* author relates contemplative prayer to the larger context of *lectio divina*. He also describes an ever-increasing simplification of the way this prayer is practiced. Whereas the novice contemplative closely connects the activities of reading, meditation, and prayer, the experienced contemplative is able to approach God in prayer without the intermediaries of reading and meditation being directly involved or immediately preceding contemplation.<sup>34</sup> As the contemplative approaches the highest point of contemplation, he does so with the use of a single short word. This points to the important role the verbal formula plays in the *Cloud* author's instruction for contemplative practice.

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<sup>33</sup>Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 81.

<sup>34</sup>It seems reasonable to assume that reading and meditation are still involved in the sense that they provide the context in which prayer takes place and they have occurred as preliminary practices. Nevertheless, the author does reduce their role for the experienced contemplative.

Yet even this simplified experience of prayer with a single short word is not the ultimate end of contemplative practice. As Douglas Cowan explains, in the section of the *Cloud* in which the author discusses the stages of *lectio divina*, he is providing instruction in practices which are themselves preliminary to the contemplative experience proper: “The author will outline a number of these preparatory exercises in which the aspirant may (read: must) engage in order to ready his or her soul for the final, comm/unitive stage of the contemplative life.”<sup>35</sup> The *Cloud* author is directing his student toward a mystical experience in which all thoughts and words, even those words used in prayer, are surpassed in consciousness of the divine presence.

It is helpful to contextualize the *Cloud* author’s comments on verbal formulas in contemplative prayer by considering the treatment of this topic in other medieval mystical texts. Some of Richard Rolle’s works are particularly helpful in this regard. Rolle’s texts are roughly contemporaneous with the *Cloud*. Moreover, because the *Cloud* author is rather brief in his treatment of the use of a verbal formula, a consideration of Rolle’s texts will give a more complete view of this type of practice. In particular, Rolle’s three vernacular letters of spiritual direction—*Ego Dormio*, *The Commandment*, and *The Form of Living*—discuss the use of a verbal formula.

Practice employing a verbal formula takes a quite specific form in Rolle’s works. Rolle writes about devotion to and meditation upon the name “Jesus” as a mystical practice. While Rolle’s specificity in this regard differentiates him somewhat from what the *Cloud* author says about the use of a single short word, there are parallels that may be drawn

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<sup>35</sup>Cowan, 136.

between these two authors. Furthermore, the devotion to the name of Jesus which Rolle teaches bears characteristics of a contemplative practice which makes use of a verbal formula.

While it is clear that Rolle and the *Cloud* author are not discussing identical practices in their respective texts, there is a similarity in that each recommends a contemplative method in which the use of a verbal formula is of fundamental importance. M.F. Wakelin points to the similarity and difference between Rolle and the *Cloud* on this topic. While Rolle teaches a meditative practice specifically focused on the name of Jesus, “the *Cloud* is too philosophical and other-worldly to fasten onto this sort of thing. It does, however, have something of great interest to say in connection with this when it recommends ejaculatory prayer—prayer ‘of one syllable’ which penetrates heaven.”<sup>36</sup>

Rolle’s teaching about meditation on the name of Jesus is related in these vernacular texts to his understanding of three stages of spiritual progress, which he calls “three degrees of love.”<sup>37</sup> In his letter *Ego Dormio*, Rolle introduces his model of these three stages. In the

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<sup>36</sup>M.F. Wakelin, “Richard Rolle and the Language of Mystical Experience in the Fourteenth Century,” *The Downside Review* 97 (1979): 203.

<sup>37</sup>Richard Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 63/82-83: “three degrees of love.” Citations of Rolle’s three vernacular letters are from *English Writings of Richard Rolle Hermit of Hampole*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (1931; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). Translations from the Middle English are my own. Rolle also includes a discussion of three stages of spiritual life in his other two vernacular letters. It is not entirely clear whether the three stages Rolle describes in *Ego Dormio* are identical with those he describes in *The Commandment* and *The Form of Living*. Margaret Jennings claims that they are different, “Richard Rolle and the Three Degrees of Love,” *The Downside Review* 93 (1975): 199. But it has also been suggested that the stages Rolle describes in *Ego Dormio* are the same as those he names in the other two letters, Rosamund S. Allen, ed., *Richard Rolle: The English Writings*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 143. Whether or not these

first stage, “a man keeps the ten commandments, and keeps himself from the seven deadly sins, and is steadfast in the truth of holy church.”<sup>38</sup> In the second degree of love, one must

forsake all the world, your father and your mother, and all your kin, and follow Christ in poverty. In this degree you shall study how clean you are in heart, and how chaste in body; and give yourself to humility, suffering, and obedience; and look how fair you may make your soul in virtues and hate all vices, so that your life be spiritual and not fleshly.<sup>39</sup>

In the third stage,

your spiritual eye is taken up into the bliss of heaven, and is there enlightened with grace and kindled with the fire of Christ’s love, so that you shall truly feel the burning of love in your heart ever more and more, lifting your thought to God . . . and then because of the highness of your heart your prayers turn into joyful song, and your thoughts to melody. Then is Jesus all your desire, all your delight, all your joy, all your solace, all your comfort.<sup>40</sup>

Before discussing how a practice using verbal formulas fits into Rolle’s model, an observation should be made about these successive stages of spiritual growth. As the aspiring

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stages are identical across the three texts is not central to this discussion of Rolle’s teaching on meditation on the name of Jesus.

<sup>38</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 63/86-88: “a man haldes þe ten commandementes, and kepes hym fra þe seven dedely synnes, and es stabyl in þe trowth of hali kyrke.”

<sup>39</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 64/119-65/125: “forsake al þe worlde, þi fader and þi moder, and al þi kyn, and folow Criste in poverte. In þis degre þou sal stody how clene þou be in hert, and how chaste in body; and gife þe til mekenes, suffryng, and buxumnes; and loke how fayre þou may make þi saule in vertues and hate al vices, so þat þi lyf be gastly and noght fleschly.”

<sup>40</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 69/276-281, 69/283-70/287: “þi gastly egh es taken up intil þe blysse of heven, and þar lyghtned with grace and kyndelde with fyre of Cristes luf, sa þat þou sal verraly fele þe bernyng of lufe in þi hert ever mare and mare, liftand þi thoght to God . . . and þan fore heghnesse of þi hert þi prayers turnes intil joyful sange, and þi thoghtes to melody. Þan es Jhesu al þi desyre, al þi delyte, al þi joy, al þi solace, al þi comforth.” Rolle also refers to this stage as “contemplative life” (“contemplatife lyfe”) (*Ego Dormio*, 69/274).

contemplative progresses through these stages, there is a marked movement away from preoccupation with the concerns of the world and toward a condition in which awareness of the divine presence is the primary if not sole object within one's consciousness. The basic trajectory of spiritual growth which Rolle describes consists of this transition. As M.F. Wakelin writes, "Rolle's whole mystical philosophy is built around three stages or degrees of love by which the ascent is made to full communion with God."<sup>41</sup> Rolle integrates his teaching on the use of a verbal formula with the progression through these three stages.

In *Ego Dormio*, Rolle prefaces his teaching on the name of Jesus with more general instruction on the recitation of prayers. This discussion is important because it gives some idea of how Rolle understands prayer to function; in doing this, it contextualizes the specific practice of devotion to Jesus' name. Rolle instructs his reader,

when you are by yourself alone, give yourself much to say the psalms of the psalter and Pater noster and Ave Maria; and have no care that you say many, but that you say them well, with all the devotion that you may, lifting up your thought to heaven. It is better to say seven psalms with desire for Christ's love, having your heart on your praying, than seven hundred thousand suffering your thought to pass in vanities of bodily things. What good, hopes you, may come thereof, if you let your tongue blabber on the book and your heart run about in various places in the world? Therefore set your thought in Christ, and he shall guide it to himself. And keep yourself from the venom of worldly busyness.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Wakelin, 193.

<sup>42</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 66/163-175: "when þou ert by þe alane, gyf þe mykel to say þe psalmes of þe psauter and Pater noster and Ave Maria; and take na tent þat þou say many, bot þat þou say þam wele, with al þe devocion þat þow may, liftand up þi thoght til heven. Better it es to say seven psalmes wyth desyre of Crystes lufe, havand þi hert on þi praying, þan seven hundreth thowsand suffrand þi thoght passe in vanitees of bodyli thynges. What gude, hopes þou, may come þarof, if þou lat þi tonge blaber on þe boke and þi hert ren abowte in sere stedes in þe worlde? Forþi sett þi thoght in Criste, and he sal rewle it til hym. And halde þe fra þe venome of þe worldly bisynesse."

Rolle gives much attention in this statement to how one should avoid thinking about the concerns of the world during prayer. Yet it is also important to recognize that his comments imply that the verbalization of prayers provide a way to focus attention on Jesus and overcome the distractions which thoughts about the world present. Rolle suggests that prayer, and in particular the verbalization and repetition of prayer, can serve as a means with which one brings about a state of consciousness characterized by focused attention on the divine presence.

Rolle begins the specific discussion of devotion to the name of Jesus in *Ego Dormio* by emphasizing to his reader the importance of this devotion as part of spiritual practice: “And I pray you, as you desire to be God’s lover, that you love this name Jesus, and think it in your heart, so that you never forget it, wheresoever you are.”<sup>43</sup> While he does not give specific instruction about how one is to employ the name of Jesus, Rolle suggests sustained and attentive concentration upon this name as a spiritual practice. This provides a focal point for devotion. The practitioner’s desire is not left in an abstract form; rather, it is embodied in a specific verbal formula, this being the name of Jesus. Rolle continues by describing the effects of devotion to the name of Jesus: “If you love it rightly and persistently, and never stop, for nothing that men may do or say, you shall be received into a higher life than you can

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<sup>43</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 66/176-178: “And I pray þe, als þou covaytes to be Goddes lufer, þat þou luf þis name Jhesu, and thynk it in þi hert, sa þat þou forget it never, whareso þou be.”



desire.”<sup>44</sup> In these introductory remarks, Rolle suggests that meditation upon the name of Jesus is a spiritual practice which can bring one into a particular state of being.

Elsewhere in his vernacular letters of spiritual direction, Rolle describes with some specificity what form this elevation into a higher spiritual life takes. In *Ego Dormio*, Rolle states that one who progresses spiritually “shall overcome your enemies, the world, the devil, and your flesh.”<sup>45</sup> He connects the renunciation of worldly concerns with the practice of meditation upon the name of Jesus: “The world you shall overcome through desire of Christ’s love and thinking on his sweet name Jesus, and desire for heaven. For as soon as you feel savour in Jesus, you will think the world nothing but vanity and annoyance for men’s souls.”<sup>46</sup> Rolle situates his recommendation that one use the name of Jesus in spiritual practice within a vision of spiritual progress as withdrawal from the world and ever-increasing attention to the divine presence. Meditation upon Jesus’ name by the aspiring contemplative helps to effect this transformation of consciousness.

Similarly, in *The Commandment*, Rolle discusses devotion to the name of Jesus. Here, in addition to describing the effects of this practice, Rolle’s statements also imply something about how he understands that meditation upon Jesus’ name should be performed. He

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<sup>44</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 66/183-186: “If þou lufe it ryght and lastandely, and never let, for na thyng þat men may do or say, þou sal be receyved intil a heghar lyf þan þou can covete.”

<sup>45</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 66/190-191: “sal overcome þi enmyse, þe worlde, þe devel, and þi flesche.”

<sup>46</sup>Rolle, *Ego Dormio*, 67/200-204: “þe worlde þou sal overcom thorow covaytyng of Cristes lufe and thynkyng on þis swete name Jhesus, and desyre til heven. For als sone als þou feles savoure in Jhesu, þe wil thynk al þe worlde nocht bot vanyte and noy for men sawles.”

instructs his reader, “One thing I advise you, that you forget not this name Jesus, but think it in your heart, night and day, as your special and dear treasure. Love it more than your life. Root it in your mind.”<sup>47</sup> While Rolle does not offer specific direction for a method of practice, he does say that the name of Jesus should be meditated upon continually, “night and day,” and that it should be foremost in one’s consciousness, “rooted” in one’s mind.

This statement suggests something about how meditation upon the name of Jesus is performed as a spiritual practice. Rolle emphasizes ongoing and continual attention to the name. Kallistos Ware writes that, for Rolle, “Devotion to the Holy Name is in this way envisaged as a way of maintaining the continual remembrance of God.”<sup>48</sup> This continuity, however, involves more than simple duration, as if what is most important is the amount of time spent in the remembrance of Jesus’ name. Rather, there is also a qualitative dimension to this practice. The description of meditation as continual implies a condition of consciousness in which one’s awareness is focused upon the presence of God to the exclusion of all other thoughts. As Ware explains, “The memory of Jesus is a way of making the mind or heart single-pointed, of concentrating the attention upon God alone; through long-continued practice such remembrance is to become self-acting and spontaneous.”<sup>49</sup> Rolle’s description of meditation upon the name of Jesus suggests that the aspiring

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<sup>47</sup>Richard Rolle, *The Commandment*, 81/278-281: “A thyng I rede þe, þat þou forgete noht þis name Jhesu, bot thynk it in þi hert, nyght and day, as þi speciall and þi dere tresowre. Luf it mare þan þi lyfe. Rute it in þi mynde.”

<sup>48</sup>Kallistos Ware, “The Holy Name of Jesus in East and West: The Hesychasts and Richard Rolle,” *Sobornost* n.s. 4 (1982): 176.

<sup>49</sup>Ware, 176.

contemplative is continually engaged in this practice. This focuses his attention to such a degree that the presence of God becomes the sole object within his consciousness.

The significance of this characteristic of focused attention is further explained by contrasting meditation upon the name of Jesus with two other devotional trends in late medieval England which are related to, but also different from, this practice. The first of these is the ritual formalization of devotion to the name of Jesus as this took shape in an eight-day liturgical office (octave) in the church. R.W. Pfaff explains how this liturgical celebration uses the name of Jesus in a way that is substantially different from Rolle's conception of meditation upon the name of Jesus: "The lessons for the octave comprise a thorough anatomy of the name of Jesus. In a typically Western schematization (totally contrary to the Eastern use of the Holy Name in the 'Jesus Prayer' with its aim of emptying the mind) each day on which the octave is observed is devoted to a different aspect of the Name."<sup>50</sup> While Pfaff's comparison here is between the office of the Holy Name in England and the Orthodox Christian practice of the Jesus Prayer, it is also useful in interpreting Rolle's description of meditation upon the name of Jesus. Like the Jesus Prayer tradition in the Eastern church, the practice that Rolle teaches is directed to clearing the mind of all thoughts other than the name upon which one is meditating.

Pfaff hints at the contrast between Rolle's practice and the liturgical formulation of devotion to the Holy Name when he describes Rolle as "the fourteenth-century Yorkshire mystic who was ardently devoted to the Holy Name, but whose interests were not at all along

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<sup>50</sup>R.W. Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 70.

the lines of liturgical composition.”<sup>51</sup> The liturgical formalization of the office of the Holy Name is oriented to encouraging reflective thought about this name. In Rolle’s description of meditation on the name of Jesus, however, use of the name is directed to a reduction and simplification of thoughts, so that only the name of Jesus itself is present in the practitioner’s mind.

Rolle’s teaching about meditation upon the name of Jesus can also be interpreted in light of a second devotional practice prominent in late medieval England—meditation upon the Passion of Christ. Rolle himself emphasizes this practice in his writings. Yet, it is significantly different from devotion to the name of Jesus. The tradition of meditation upon the Passion of Christ, as this is described in a number of medieval devotional texts, involves a multiplication of the objects of consciousness as one reflects imaginatively upon detailed reconstructed scenes of biblical events.<sup>52</sup> This can be contrasted with a singularity of consciousness in the practice of meditation upon the name of Jesus, in which the employment of a simple verbal formula reduces the cognitive activity of the practitioner to a bare minimum.

Mary Madigan relates the differing tones of these two practices about which Rolle writes to the varying levels of experience of those who undertake them. She writes that meditation upon the Passion of Christ is suited to beginners in the spiritual way, whereas other practices are more appropriate once one has progressed in spiritual practice. Describing the practice of meditation upon the Passion of Christ, Madigan writes that the

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<sup>51</sup>Pfaff, 68.

<sup>52</sup>This practice will be discussed in more detail below in chapter 4.

more extensive and diffuse detail serves to focus and satisfy the active imagination of the beginner who soon tires of a single concentrated regard. This mode of explicit development is in contrast to the apparently repetitious, fervent responses expressed in [Rolle's] other works which delineate a more simplified form of prayer for proficients, whose imaginations have become more disciplined and docile, and therefore no longer demand variety to satisfy them.<sup>53</sup>

Aside from the question of the practitioner's level of experience, a consideration of the different types of spiritual practice Rolle recommends is important to understanding how the verbal formula of the name of Jesus functions. In Madigan's description, meditation upon Jesus' name is correlated with the disciplined consciousness of one who is able to utilize a simple prayer form in a repetitive manner. This is in contrast to the multiplicity of detail and use of imagination which characterize the very different practice of meditation upon the Passion of Christ.

While Rolle writes that devotion to the name of Jesus removes concern for the world from the mind, he also associates this practice with the mystical experience of God's presence. This is most clearly expressed in *The Form of Living*, where Rolle writes,

If you will be well with God, and have his grace rule your life, and come to the joy of love, this name Jesus, fasten it so fast in your heart, so that it never comes out of your thought. And when you speak to him, and say 'Jesus,' through custom, it shall be in your ear joy, in your mouth honey, and in your heart melody. For you shall think it a

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<sup>53</sup>Mary Felicitas Madigan, *The Passio Domini Theme in the Works of Richard Rolle: His Personal Contribution in Its Religious, Cultural, and Literary Context*, Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies 79 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1978), 99. While Madigan does not explicitly name meditation upon the name of Jesus as one of these advanced practices, it certainly seems to fit her description of a practice in which repetition and simplification are pronounced, as contrasted with the practice of meditation on the Passion of Christ. Similarly, Nicholas Watson writes that Rolle "associates devotion to the Holy Name with more advanced spiritual states," *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 13 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55. In contrast, Rosamund Allen claims that "in most of Rolle's writing there is one aid to devotion which all can follow, no matter how little their degree of proficiency, and that is his devotion to the 'name' of Jesus" (40).

joy to hear that name be named, sweetness to speak it, mirth and song to think it. If you think Jesus continually, and hold it steadfastly, it purges your sin, and kindles your heart; it clarifies your soul, it removes anger, and does away with sloth; it wounds in love, and fulfills charity; it chases the devil, and puts out dread; it opens heaven, and makes a contemplative man.<sup>54</sup>

Rolle emphasizes here that Jesus' name purifies the soul of the one who is devoted to it. But Rolle also suggests that the effects of this practice go beyond the purgative. Meditation on the name of Jesus results in what for Rolle are the determining characteristics of mystical experience. In his autobiographical accounts, Rolle associates mystical experience with the sensations of heat, song, and sweetness. Here each of these sensations are invoked to describe the effects of meditation upon Jesus' name.<sup>55</sup> Rolle relates this practice to song in the ear and heart, sweetness in the mouth, and fire in the heart. For Rolle, devotion to Jesus' name is the means to mystical experience.

This passage from *The Form of Living* which discusses meditation upon the name of Jesus suggests two points of comparison between Rolle and the *Cloud* author concerning the practice and experiences associated with verbal formulas. The first of these has to do with the way these two authors describe the particular character of mystical experience. As has been

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<sup>54</sup>Richard Rolle, *The Form of Living*, 108/1-13: "If þou wil be wele with God, and have grace to rewle þi lyf, and com til þe joy of luf, þis name Jhesu, fest it swa fast in þi hert, þat it com never owt of þi thocht. And when þou spekes til hym, and says 'Jhesu,' thurgh custom, it sal be in þi ere joy, in þi mouth hony, and in þi hert melody. For þe sall thynk joy to here þat name be nevened, swetnes to speke it, myrth and sang to thynk it. If þou thynk Jhesu contynuly, and halde it stabely, it purges þi syn, and kyndels þi hert; it clarifies þi sawle, it removes anger, and dose away slawnes; it woundes in lufe, and fulfilles of charite; it chaces þe devel, and puttes oute drede; it opens heven, and makes a contemplatif man."

<sup>55</sup>Cf. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 88-90. The relationship of meditation upon the name of Jesus and the experiences characterizing mystical experience in Rolle's works is also noted by Ware, 180.

seen, for Rolle mystical experience involves the sensations of heat, song, and sweetness. The *Cloud* author emphasizes an apophatic mystical experience which transcends sensations such as these, along with all other thoughts and feelings. Kallistos Ware suggests that the verbal formulas found in Rolle and the *Cloud* author's teaching are directed to different types of experience. He says that Rolle "nowhere treats the invocation of the Name as a way of passing beyond images and thoughts,"<sup>56</sup> whereas for the *Cloud* author, "The aim of this monologic prayer is precisely to attain non-discursive contemplation."<sup>57</sup>

While it is true that Rolle's description of mystical experience is significantly different from that of the *Cloud* author, his discussion of meditation upon the name of Jesus suggests that in this practice there is a simplification and focusing of the practitioner's consciousness. This can also be seen in Rolle's description of spiritual development as a progression away from concern with the world and toward a sole preoccupation with God. In this way, Rolle's understanding of mystical experience does bear some similarity with that of the *Cloud* author.

A second point of comparison between Rolle and the *Cloud* author concerns the degree to which these authors provide detailed instruction to their readers as to how these practices utilizing verbal formulas are to be carried out. In this regard, Rolle and the *Cloud* author show substantial similarity. Rolle writes a great deal about the importance of meditation upon Jesus' name, but he does not offer any specific instruction which is apparent to later readers of his texts concerning how this practice should be performed. Kallistos Ware

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<sup>56</sup>Ware, 183.

<sup>57</sup>Ware, 184.

compares Rolle's teaching to the Eastern Orthodox hesychast tradition and concludes that Rolle "is far less concerned with exact formulae, with outward techniques and particular methods of praying."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the *Cloud* author emphasizes the use of a single short word in contemplative prayer, but does not offer any definite instruction for this practice. While both of these authors recommend the employment of a verbal formula as a method of mystical practice, neither provides detailed directions in their texts concerning how persons are to carry out these practices.

The *Cloud* author and Richard Rolle's discussion of contemplative practices which utilize verbal formulas are both found in fourteenth-century Middle English mystical texts. But evidence of related practices can be seen in much earlier periods. An important example of this is the work of John Cassian, a fourth-century author who wrote about the early Christian monastic communities he observed in Egypt. Because Cassian is so far removed in time from the *Cloud*, it is important to explain why he factors into this discussion. Cassian's *Conferences* includes a section on prayer which is relevant to this discussion of verbal formulas in two ways. First, it provides some historical context for the contemplative method found in the *Cloud*. Previous studies of Cassian have noted this. Owen Chadwick states that Cassian is the first figure in the history of Christian spirituality to discuss the practice of using a verbal formula in a comprehensive way.<sup>59</sup> More specific to this discussion, Columba

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<sup>58</sup>Ware, 177.

<sup>59</sup>Owen Chadwick, introduction to *John Cassian: Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 13. Citations of Cassian's text are from this edition.



Stewart suggests that Cassian's method of prayer influenced the author of the *Cloud*.<sup>60</sup> James Walsh notes that Cassian and the *Cloud* author use the same image of the verbal formula as a shield and spear, with which the contemplative repels distracting thoughts and directs his intent toward God.<sup>61</sup> A second reason Cassian is relevant to this discussion is that his teaching, like that of the *Cloud* author, is explicitly drawn upon in present-day Christian contemplative practice.

In his *Conference* 10, Cassian discusses a practice of contemplative prayer taught by the desert monks. He introduces this subject by describing the fundamental principles which underlie this practice: "First would be to know the method of finding and holding God in our thoughts. Second would be to hold unshakably to this method, whatever that may be, for in this perseverance, we feel, lies the ultimate perfection."<sup>62</sup> This short passage says a great deal about Cassian's view of the contemplative practice he teaches in his text. It describes the end toward which this practice is oriented as having an ongoing consciousness of the divine presence. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of having some method with which to attain this end. It also implies that the benefit of such a method is that it gives the practitioner something to do, a foundation upon which to hold as he strives for awareness of God. In summarizing what he has said thus far, Cassian explains both the necessity of the method he teaches and its goal. He writes of "our anxiety to find a formula which will enable us to think of God and to hold incessantly to that thought so that, as we keep it in view, we may have

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<sup>60</sup>Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 113. A connection between Cassian and the *Cloud* is also noted by Cowan, 108-109.

<sup>61</sup>Walsh, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 134n83.

<sup>62</sup>John Cassian, *Conferences*, 131.

something to return to immediately whenever we find that we have somehow slipped away from it.”<sup>63</sup>

Cassian continues by offering instruction in the particular method of contemplative practice he recommends:

And what follows now is the model to teach you, the prayer formula for which you are searching. Every monk who wants to think continuously about God should get accustomed to meditating endlessly on it and to banishing all other thoughts for its sake. But he will not hold on to it unless he breaks completely free from all bodily concerns and cares. This is something which has been handed on to us by some of the oldest of the Fathers and it is something which we hand on to only a very small number of the souls eager to know it: To keep the thought of God always in your mind you must cling totally to this formula for piety: “Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue.”<sup>64</sup>

Cassian teaches that this verbal formula based on a biblical text should be employed in a particular way. He stresses that it should be meditated upon continuously and that it is used to remove all thoughts other than those of God from one’s mind. Two important issues in interpreting this text are Cassian’s instructions for how the verbal formula is employed, and the content of the formula itself which he recommends for this contemplative practice.

In Cassian’s instructions there is a great emphasis that the verbal formula is repeated continually within one’s consciousness. This raises a question as to whether Cassian envisions a specified place and time in which the monk does nothing but practice meditation according to these instructions, or if instead he teaches that the verbal formula is kept in one’s consciousness as the “background” which accompanies all other activities. Cassian’s statements in this text suggest the latter. He writes, “The thought of this verse should be

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<sup>63</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 131.

<sup>64</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 132. The scriptural reference for the prayer formula is Psalm 70:1 (Vulgate Psalm 69:2).

turning unceasingly in your heart. Never cease to recite it in whatever task or service or journey you find yourself. Think upon it as you sleep, as you eat, as you submit to the most basic demands of nature.”<sup>65</sup>

William Graham describes the manner in which scripture was recited by monks in communities structured around the rule of Pachomius, a founder of the desert monastic tradition. This provides important context for Cassian’s statements. Graham writes that “the clear intention of Pachomius and his successors” is

to integrate scriptural meditation in all of the monk’s daily occupations. The Psalms and other scriptural passages that the monks were required to learn by heart were chanted, sung, or murmured aloud not only in formal devotions and communal worship . . . but during work and leisure, while walking within the monastic compound or traveling abroad, and on special occasions.<sup>66</sup>

While the repetition of scriptural passages accompanied even the monks’ mundane activities, for Cassian it is also associated specifically with other devotional practices. He writes that this repetition “should accompany you in all your works and deeds. It should be at your side at all times . . . It will be a continuous prayer, an endless refrain when you bow down in prostration and when you rise up to do all the necessary things of life.”<sup>67</sup> Cassian describes an ongoing recitation of the verbal formula rather than a practice which is confined to a particular time and place. In fact, he suggests that the verbal formula accompanies both formal prayer (“bow down in prostration”) and more mundane activities (“rising up to do all

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<sup>65</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 135.

<sup>66</sup>William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 135. Graham also notes that Cassian acted as one of the mediators of the Pachomian monastic tradition to Western Christianity (128).

<sup>67</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 136.

the necessary things of life”). Throughout all of these times, the monk continues to recite the verbal formula. According to Columba Stewart, Cassian’s practice “consists of continually repeating a brief verse from the Psalms, which becomes a leitmotif running through everything a monk does, including other prayer-related practices such as psalmody and *meditatio*.”<sup>68</sup> This contemplative practice of repeating a verbal formula takes place simultaneously with the other activities of the monk, including other devotional activities, rather than being performed at a discrete time set apart from these other activities.

If the employment of the verbal formula as a contemplative practice is not associated with specific periods of practice but is instead described as an ongoing action, how can it be distinguished from the other devotional activities of the monk with which it simultaneously occurs? Killian McDonnell explains that Cassian gives preference to private prayer over prayer held in common by the community: “Cassian, it should be remembered, was by vocation and inclination a hermit and his doctrine on prayer is not surprisingly the unceasing private prayer of the solitary rather than the common prayer of the cenobite.”<sup>69</sup>

This suggests that the relationship of personal repetition of the verbal formula to periods of formal and communal devotional activity is complex. Cassian clearly teaches that the monk’s use of the verbal formula should continuously accompany all activities. At the same time, Cassian does not wholly associate the repetition of the verbal formula with these other activities. While they occur simultaneously, Cassian gives priority to a private contemplative practice which takes place within the monk and forms a background in the

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<sup>68</sup>Stewart, 110.

<sup>69</sup>Killian McDonnell, “Prayer in Ancient Western Tradition,” *Worship* 55 (1981): 41-42.

consciousness even during times when one is engaged in other prayer with other monks. Somewhat paradoxically, Cassian's contemplative method is both connected with and set apart from the other practical and devotional activities of the monk.

Related to the issue of when one is to repeat the verbal formula is a question concerning how this repetition should be performed. Specifically, in the practice Cassian teaches, is the verbal formula repeated audibly with one's mouth or silently in one's mind? One way of addressing this is by considering how the practice of meditation was understood in the desert monastic context which Cassian describes. Graham points out that meditation in early monasticism was an oral and aural, rather than strictly mental, activity which involved the audible recitation of scriptural texts.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, Graham explains that the contemporary conception of meditation as "a wholly internal, abstract, and soundless process of mental reflection or focusing of consciousness on a particular theme or idea" is far removed from what meditation meant in early Christian monasticism. The contemporary understanding does not include "the close connection of 'meditation' specifically to a scriptural text nor the physical dimension of audible recitation and repetition"<sup>71</sup> which meditation involved in the early monastic context.

An understanding of early monastic meditation is important in interpreting Cassian's teaching on contemplative prayer using a verbal formula. This is especially the case because Cassian does not say in *Conference* 10 whether one should recite the verbal formula audibly or silently. While there is an absence of explicit textual instruction regarding this aspect of

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<sup>70</sup>Graham points out that "recitation" is the primary meaning of the Latin word *meditare* and the Greek word *melete*, which are translated into English as "meditation" (133).

<sup>71</sup>Graham, 133.

the practice, it is important to note that Cassian does use the word “meditation” at a number of points in his discussion of repetition of the verbal formula.<sup>72</sup> Given the meaning this term had in the monastic context in which Cassian wrote, and given that he does not specify that the verbal formula should be recited silently, against what would have been the accepted practice, it seems likely that Cassian is envisioning an audible repetition of the verbal formula in this contemplative practice.

Finally, in his discussion of the deployment of the verbal formula, Cassian also says that it is used to “banish all other thoughts” from one’s consciousness, so that the verbal formula itself is all that remains in one’s awareness. Cassian does not elaborate upon this instruction, other than to affirm what he has said. He writes that repetition of the verbal formula is a means with which to overcome all other thoughts: “The soul must grab fiercely onto this formula so that after saying it over and over again, after meditating upon it without pause, it has the strength to reject and to refuse all the abundant riches of thought.”<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere in the text, Cassian’s companions say, “certainly we ought to know how we are to keep a firm hold of that little verse which you have given us as a formula so that all our ideas

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<sup>72</sup>In the Latin text of *Conference 10*, Cassian can be seen to use various forms of the noun “meditation” (*meditatio*) and the verb “to meditate” (*meditari*). Cf. John Cassian, *Conferences*, ed. E. Pichery, Sources Chretiennes 54 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1958), e.g., 85, 90.

<sup>73</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 136.

should cease to appear and disappear in their own inconstant way but should remain under our control.”<sup>74</sup>

Such statements suggest two things about the relationship of the verbal formula to thought and awareness. First, Cassian sets up a dichotomy in which the repetition of the verbal formula is opposed to all other thoughts. Second, the practice of this contemplative method is described as the monk attempting to “control” his thoughts. Columba Stewart writes that “Cassian addressed the struggle against distraction repeatedly in his writings,” and that “the method of unceasing prayer suggested in *Conference* 10 is, at least in part, a focusing technique.”<sup>75</sup>

This concern with distraction and desire to overcome it in contemplation is also the reason that the verbal formula Cassian recommends takes the form of a short phrase which can be easily repeated. Noting this emphasis upon brief verbal formulas in early Christian prayer, McDonnell writes that “brevity was necessary in order that prayer might be pure and intense. One of the reasons for this brevity is the fragility of nature and the tendency of the mind to wander.”<sup>76</sup> In this, Cassian’s method is similar to that of the *Cloud* author, who recommends the use of single short words for contemplative prayer. These short phrases and words do not engage the intellectual faculties of the practitioner; rather, they provide him with a means to quiet cognitive activity. For both Cassian and the *Cloud* author, the length of

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<sup>74</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 139. The thoughts to which this passage refers are devout thoughts brought on by reading scripture; nevertheless, even these are depicted as being distracting so that one’s attention is not focused upon God.

<sup>75</sup>Stewart, 105.

<sup>76</sup>McDonnell, 56.

the particular verbal formulas they recommend is closely related to the purpose of contemplative prayer. In negative terms, the verbal formula is used to overcome distracting thought. Speaking positively, it keeps one's consciousness focused on the divine presence.

Having discussed Cassian's teaching on how the verbal formula is deployed, an examination of the formula itself is also important. A consideration of Cassian's verbal formula shows that it bears some similarity to those recommended by the *Cloud* author and Richard Rolle. Cassian teaches that the biblical phrase "Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue" should be recited in contemplative prayer. Immediately following this, Cassian explains the significance of these words. He says that this phrase simultaneously "carries within it a cry of help to God in the face of every danger. It expresses the humility of a pious confession. It conveys the watchfulness born of unending worry and fear. It conveys a sense of our frailty, the assurance of being heard, the confidence in help that is always and everywhere present."<sup>77</sup> Continuing, Cassian says, "this verse keeps us from despairing of our salvation since it reveals to us the One to whom we call, the One who sees our struggles and who is never far from those who pray to Him."<sup>78</sup> These explanations of the significance of the particular verbal formula Cassian recommends are consistent with what the *Cloud* author and Rolle say about their own verbal formulas.

Rolle's teaching on this subject is relatively simple in that he recommends only one word for contemplative practice—the name "Jesus." In his letter of spiritual direction *The Commandment*, Rolle expresses the significance of Jesus' name by identifying it with

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<sup>77</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 133.

<sup>78</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 133.



“salvation.”<sup>79</sup> Rolle claims that this verbal formula has a particular meaning in terms of its content. Similarly, the phrase Cassian recommends signifies a trust in the salvation that God offers to persons.

Rather than focus solely on the assurance of salvation, however, Cassian also teaches that this verbal formula is a reminder that weakness and sinfulness are the reason one must request divine assistance. In this, Cassian bears great similarity to the *Cloud* author, who suggests that the contemplative’s prayers be reduced to short single-syllable words, of which he recommends two in particular—“God” and “sin.”<sup>80</sup> The author’s rationale is that these words signify the two essentials of contemplative practice: knowledge of one’s own sinfulness and awareness of God’s goodness and offer of salvation. The two words the *Cloud* author recommends carry a significance very similar to the phrase which Cassian specifies for contemplative prayer.

Cassian also explains that the power of the particular phrase he recommends comes from its acting as a summary, in very few words, of all the aspirations of the contemplative: “What could be more perfect and more sublime than to be able to latch onto God in a brief meditation, to leave all the boundaries of the visible world by means of reflection upon one little verse, and to pull together in a few words the sentiments engendered by all the forms of prayer?”<sup>81</sup> In this, Cassian’s teaching also resembles the *Cloud* author’s, who says that the single short word used for contemplative prayer acts as a summary of the contemplative’s

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<sup>79</sup>Rolle, *The Commandment*, 81/283-284.

<sup>80</sup>*Cloud*, 77/6-13.

<sup>81</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 138.

intent toward God, an intent which is “wrapped and enfolded in one word.”<sup>82</sup> For both Cassian and the *Cloud* author, the phrase or word signifies not only something about God, but also something about the contemplative himself. It functions as a summary statement of the contemplative’s desire for God; furthermore, it acts as a verbal means of focusing the contemplative’s attention upon this desire.

Another way Cassian’s teaching on contemplation is similar to that of the fourteenth-century English mystical tradition involves the trajectory of these practices which utilize verbal formulas. In this regard, Cassian’s teaching is similar to Rolle’s. As has been discussed, Rolle’s description of the three stages of spiritual development depicts a movement away from preoccupation with worldly concerns and toward sole focus of one’s attention upon God. Cassian’s description of this process does not describe a series of stages as does Rolle’s, but the overall trajectory is the same.

Cassian writes of the effort required to “keep a wandering mind in place,” and states that “such stability cannot be obtained except by a continuous effort made not for the sake of ambitiousness but because of the requirements of the present way of life. This is the way to break out of the worries and the cares of the present life and to make possible for us the realization of the apostolic injunction ‘Pray without cease.’”<sup>83</sup> For Cassian and Rolle, a connection is drawn between a contemplative practice which uses a verbal formula, and a progression the practitioner experiences in which attention is withdrawn from the world and

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<sup>82</sup>*Cloud*, 28/10: “lappid and foulden in o worde.”

<sup>83</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 139. The scriptural reference is to 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

focused upon the divine presence. The verbal formula functions to bring diverse and distracted thoughts to a single point in which one's awareness rests upon only God.

A final point of comparison between Cassian and medieval English mysticism (and the *Cloud* author in particular) concerns the end toward which these practices which use verbal formulas are directed. As has been seen, the *Cloud* is oriented to an apophatic experience of God beyond word, thought, or image. Similarly, Cassian's contemplative method which uses words is directed to an experience beyond words. Owen Chadwick writes that the repetition of the verbal formula "represents Cassian's last step to the highest stage, where the mind is engaged in continuous prayer (which is contemplation, or 'the vision of God') and has rejected all images and distractions and thoughts, except the one thought of God."<sup>84</sup>

Cassian refers to moments in which the practitioner surpasses thoughts and words in an apophatic experience of God which is the ultimate end of this prayer: "This prayer centers on no contemplation of some image or other. It is masked by no attendant sounds or words. It is a fiery outbreak, an indescribable exaltation, an insatiable thrust of the soul. Free of what is sensed and seen, ineffable in its groans and sighs, the soul pours itself out to God."<sup>85</sup>

Columba Stewart describes Cassian's approach to prayer as being based on the words of a biblical text, while also progressively moving toward transcendence of those words in the experience of God: "[Cassian's] map of progress in prayer leads from multiple forms and words to simpler forms and fewer words and finally to wordless ecstatic prayer. At each

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<sup>84</sup>Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 106.

<sup>85</sup>Cassian, *Conferences*, 138.

stage, however, the basis of the prayer is biblical. He prescribes particular words for prayer even as he urges his readers toward wordless prayer.”<sup>86</sup>

This inter-relationship between a mystical practice which uses words and a wordless mystical experience in Cassian’s *Conferences* and the *Cloud* is an important aspect of these texts. Cassian understands that utter silence does not lend itself to ordinary modes of human perception. Consequently, he teaches a practice in which oral and aural human capacities are engaged. As Columba Stewart explains, “Cassian accepted that however formless and wordless perfect prayer should be, the human mind and heart normally subsist on thoughts and words. While pointing beyond normal experience to an ideal of wordless prayer, he makes provision for ordinary experience.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, the *Cloud* author recommends an intent toward God which is stripped of all thoughts and words; nevertheless, he allows that the contemplative practitioner of may need to embody that intent in a verbal formula consisting of a single short word. While both these authors desire to lead their students toward a mystical experience beyond words, they also realize that the way to this is through a mystical practice which uses the very words they wish to surpass.

The *Cloud*, Richard Rolle’s vernacular letters of spiritual direction, and John Cassian’s *Conferences* are all part of a tradition of Christian mysticism which recommends the repetition of a verbal formula as a contemplative practice. A number of points of commonality can be identified in these texts. First, there is an emphasis on the importance of providing a method with which mystical practice may be performed. These texts are to a

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<sup>86</sup>Stewart, 105-106.

<sup>87</sup>Stewart, 110.

significant degree practical in that they offer instruction in what one is to do to engage in the mystical practices and experiences they discuss. In saying this, however, it is important to note that these texts do not offer what a contemporary audience would consider to be detailed and systematic instruction in these methods. Their practicality is more implicit than explicit. This suggests that these authors assumed that some type of personal and “face-to-face” direction in these methods would take place outside the pages of the text.

A second common feature of these texts is that the contemplative methods they recommend are based upon on the recitation of a verbal formula, which is employed in a repetitive manner to overcome distracting thoughts and to direct attention completely to the divine presence. Third, in these texts it is not only the method with which the verbal formula is employed which is of importance. The content of the formula itself is of great significance and represents a dual awareness of one’s sinfulness and the salvation which is offered by God. Fourth, these texts chart a course of spiritual development in which the practices they teach are connected with a movement away from the world and toward an ever-growing and intimate closeness to God.

Finally, these texts emphasize that mystical practice culminates in a mystical experience in which all words, thoughts, and images are transcended. The recitation of the verbal formula is not an end unto itself in these practices; rather, it directs the practitioner’s attention beyond itself and toward God. Speaking with reference to Cassian (though his comments are applicable to the *Cloud* and Rolle as well), Columba Stewart writes that “the simplification of prayer to a handful of words and then beyond words to a fiery silence are

themes more remarkable and even provocative in our day than they were in his.”<sup>88</sup> This statement hints at the topic that will be taken up next in this chapter. Having discussed how the early Christian and medieval texts of the *Cloud* author, Richard Rolle, and John Cassian offer instruction in the use of a verbal formulas for contemplative practice, it can now be asked how this instruction is interpreted and appropriated in present-day Christian contemplative literature.

### **Verbal Formulas in Present-Day Christian Contemplative Practices**

The discussion that follows will consider how present-day Christian contemplative literature addresses the subject of a mystical practice which employs a verbal formula. In particular, it will examine the writings of a number of authors who provide instruction in the contemplative movements of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, giving particular attention to the way these authors discuss the use of verbal formulas as part of the contemplative methods they teach.<sup>89</sup> To highlight the relationship between this present-day literature and the early Christian and medieval texts that have been considered in this chapter, the five points identified above in summarizing the texts of the *Cloud* author, Richard Rolle, and John Cassian will be used as an interpretive framework.

The first point noted is that these texts teach a contemplative practice in which the recitation of a verbal formula is central. It was also noted, however, that these texts do not discuss these methods in a fashion which provides detailed and systematic instruction to the

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<sup>88</sup>Stewart, 130.

<sup>89</sup>Because there is a lack of secondary literature which addresses these present-day Christian contemplative movements, my discussion of them will rely predominately upon literature of the movements themselves, interpreted in light of the medieval texts which have been discussed and the theoretical perspectives considered at the beginning of this chapter.

reader. The author who provides the most concrete instruction is John Cassian, who states explicitly that he is teaching a method of contemplative prayer and then goes on to give some direction for how this practice is performed. In contrast, both the *Cloud* author and Richard Rolle clearly discuss contemplative practices which use verbal formulas in their texts, but do so in such a way that it is difficult to ascertain exactly how they envisioned this practice being carried out by those whom they instructed. The *Cloud* author and Rolle recommend methods of practice, yet technical instruction in these methods is not easily extracted from their texts.

By contrast, present-day Christian contemplative literature contains not only a recommendation for contemplative practice which uses a verbal formula, but also very explicit instructions which explain how this practice is to be performed. The texts which provide instruction in the methods of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer include short but detailed sections offering direction in how one is to perform these practices. For example, John Main summarizes the method of Christian Meditation with these instructions:

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase “maranatha.” Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word. Meditate each morning and evening for between twenty and thirty minutes.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Thomas Keating summarizes the Centering Prayer method in a set of numbered steps:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and

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<sup>90</sup>John Main, *Word into Silence* (1981; repr., New York: Continuum, 2003), [v].

silently introduce 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 with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.<sup>91</sup>

In these texts, the practitioner is instructed in how to perform the method of contemplative prayer and is given explicit direction concerning how to employ the verbal formulas which are central to these practices.

It is also clear that both Main and Keating relate the respective methods of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer to some of the older texts which have been discussed in this chapter. Main most clearly draws upon John Cassian's *Conferences* for the formulation of his contemplative practice: "Cassian recommended anyone who wanted to learn to pray, and to pray continually, to take a single short verse and just repeat this verse over and over again. In his Tenth Conference, he urges this method of simple and constant repetition as the best way of casting out all distractions and monkey chatter from our mind, in order that it might rest in God."<sup>92</sup>

Main also relates the method of Christian Meditation to the *Cloud*, and sees this text as following in the same tradition of contemplative prayer: "A thousand years after Cassian, the English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* recommends the repetition of a little word: 'We must pray in the height, depth, length, and breadth of our spirit, [he says] not in many words but in a little word.'"<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139. Keating refers to the verbal formula used in Centering Prayer as the "sacred word."

<sup>92</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 9.

<sup>93</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 10. Cf. *Cloud*, 76/19-21.



The instructions for Centering Prayer are also connected quite clearly to a medieval text. As has been seen, Keating states that the method of Centering Prayer is based on the *Cloud*.<sup>94</sup> More specifically, when Keating addresses the role of the verbal formula in Centering Prayer, he quotes the passage from the *Cloud* discussed earlier in this chapter, in which the author discusses the use of a single short word in contemplative prayer. Keating writes, “Choose a sacred word of one or two syllables that you feel comfortable with . . . It will be the sign of your intention to open yourself interiorly to the mystery of God’s enveloping presence. Keep thinking this sacred word . . . When you become aware that you are off on some other thought, gently return to this word.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, the methods of both Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer are based upon and connected to earlier texts—most specifically John Cassian’s *Conferences* and the *Cloud*—which deal with the subject of contemplative prayer. Nevertheless, a distinction can be drawn between the earlier and present-day texts. While present-day Christian contemplative literature offers detailed and systematic directions for a method of practice, this instruction must to a great extent be inferred from the older mystical texts.

In their teaching on the use of a verbal formula, Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer texts provide clear directions for practice in two areas which were addressed much less explicitly in earlier texts. In the discussion of the *Conferences* in this chapter, there was an attempt to determine whether Cassian was teaching that the recitation of the verbal

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<sup>94</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.

<sup>95</sup>Thomas Keating, “Cultivating the Centering Prayer,” in *Finding Grace at the Center* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1978), 25. Cf. *Cloud*, 28/10-16. For other examples in Centering Prayer literature which refer to this passage from the *Cloud*, see Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 16-19; and Arico, 140-141.

formula was to be performed within a discrete period of time or was done continuously and in conjunction with all of the monk's other activities. Similarly, it was asked whether Cassian's instructions called for a silent or audible recitation of the verbal formula. Some conclusions regarding these questions are made possible by considering the desert monastic context in which Cassian wrote. These questions, however, are much more difficult to answer with regard to the *Cloud* and Richard Rolle's texts because neither gives clear instruction about how the verbal formula should be employed.

In the Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer texts, these issues are handled in a significantly different manner. The instructions for these methods recommend that the verbal formula be used during a discrete period of practice, in which the practitioner is not engaged in any other activity. This is clearly reflected in Main's directions for Christian Meditation, where he teaches that the person should practice for a set period of time two times per day.

Elsewhere, Main elaborates on this point:

In order to experience [meditation's] benefits, it is necessary to meditate twice a day and every day, without fail. Twenty minutes is the minimum time for meditation . . . It is also helpful to meditate regularly in the same place and also at the same time every day because this helps a creative rhythm in our life to grow, with meditation as a kind of pulse-beat sounding the rhythm.<sup>96</sup>

Main clearly envisions discrete periods of contemplative practice in which one employs the verbal formula. The separation of periods of contemplative prayer from all other activities also has implications for how the verbal formula is recited. Cassian's text implies that this recitation is continuous and accompanies the monk in all his activities. Main also emphasizes continuous recitation of the verbal formula, but limits this to specified periods of

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<sup>96</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 12.

formal practice, rather than as an accompaniment to all other activities. While both the older and present-day texts emphasize continuous repetition of a verbal formula, there are clearly differences in how these texts describe this practice.

In providing his instruction for a contemplative practice, Main also draws upon the *Cloud* as a resource. He writes, “the most important thing to bear in mind about meditation is to remain faithfully repeating the mantra throughout the time put aside for it, throughout the time of what the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* called ‘the time of the work.’”<sup>97</sup> This statement deserves particular attention because Main interprets the *Cloud* so that it supports the method of contemplative prayer he is teaching. The practice of Christian Meditation is performed in a time “set aside” from other activities. For Main, this setting aside is what the *Cloud* author means when he talks about the “work” of contemplation.

The *Cloud* author does make statements which suggest that he is discussing discrete periods of contemplative prayer. Examples of such statements are “for although it is very profitable sometimes to think of certain conditions and deeds of some certain special creatures, nevertheless yet in this work it profits little or nothing,”<sup>98</sup> and “what time that you give yourself to this work, and feel by grace that you are called by God, lift then up your

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<sup>97</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 12. Main cites the *Cloud*, chapters 4-7, 36-40. Main refers to the verbal formula used in Christian Meditation as a “mantra.”

<sup>98</sup>*Cloud*, 24/15-17: “For þof al it be ful profitable sumtyme to þink of certeyne condicions and dedes of sum certein special creatures, neuerþeles 3it in þis werke it profiteþ lityl or nougt.”

heart to God with a humble stirring of love.”<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, Main’s teaching differs from that of the *Cloud* author in that Main is explicitly recommending discrete periods of time in which this practice is performed. Such a recommendation is at best only implied by the *Cloud* author. In fact, it may well be that the *Cloud* author intended these statements to describe a certain quality of contemplation, rather than to refer to a discrete period of time in which contemplative prayer was practiced. What is ambiguous in the *Cloud* is interpreted as a clear direction for practice in the Christian Meditation literature.

In his guidelines for the practice of Centering Prayer, Keating also clearly states that practitioners of this method are to set apart periods of time for practice which are distinct from other daily activities. He writes that “the minimum time for this prayer is twenty minutes. Two periods are recommended each day, one first thing in the morning, and one in the afternoon or evening.”<sup>100</sup> Basil Pennington offers a reason for this recommendation of two periods of Centering Prayer each day, and in doing so suggests that the times of contemplation are qualitatively different from other times and activities:

We strongly recommend two periods of contemplative prayer in the course of a day. The first, in the morning, introduces into our day a good rhythm: a period of deep rest and refreshment in the Lord flowing out into eight or ten hours of fruitful activity. The second is a period of renewal to carry us through, what is for almost everyone today, a long evening of activity.<sup>101</sup>

It is also clear from the instructions for Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer that the verbal formula used in these contemplative practices is to be repeated silently rather

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<sup>99</sup>*Cloud*, 28/3-5: “what tyme þat þou purposest þee to þis werk, and felest bi grace þat þou arte clepid of God, lift þan up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue.”

<sup>100</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 141.

<sup>101</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 14-15.

than audibly. John Main instructs his reader to “simply, gently repeat that word in silence in your heart, in the depths of your being, and continue repeating it. Listen to it as a sound. Say it; articulate it in silence, clearly, but listen to it as a sound.”<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Thomas Keating writes that one should “introduce [the sacred word] on the level of your imagination. Do not form it with your lips or vocal chords.”<sup>103</sup> With regard to the questions of when and how the verbal formula is employed, texts teaching Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer provide explicit instructions for how these practices are performed. In contrast, in the early Christian and medieval texts, answers to these questions concerning the method of repeating the verbal formula either have to be inferred from the context of the text, as with Cassian, or are not addressed in any definitive way in the text, as is the case with the *Cloud* and Rolle.

A second aspect of these mystical practices is the use of the verbal formula to overcome distracting thoughts. The present-day practices are quite consistent with the older texts in addressing this issue. In his description of Christian Meditation, Main describes three stages through which one progresses as he becomes adept at meditation. As the practitioner passes through these stages, the repetition of the verbal formula acts more and more effectively as a focal point which reduces distracting thoughts during the time of contemplative practice:

As you persevere in saying the mantra, the distractions do become less and less of a reality . . . the first three aims that you have when you begin to meditate are these: first of all, just to say the mantra for the full period of your meditation . . . The second goal is to say your mantra and be perfectly calm in the face of all distractions that

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<sup>102</sup>John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons through Meditation* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 1.

<sup>103</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 36.

come. And the third preliminary aim is to say the mantra for the full time of your meditation with no distractions.<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, in Centering Prayer the verbal formula is repeated as a way to respond to one's thoughts during the time of practice. Explaining how to employ the verbal formula, Keating instructs his reader to "gently place it in your awareness each time you recognize you are thinking about some other thought."<sup>105</sup> In these contemplative methods, the verbal formula is juxtaposed with other thoughts in the practitioner's consciousness; furthermore, repetition of the verbal formula provides a means to transcend the distraction these thoughts present for contemplative practice.

The third element has to do with the importance attached to the content of the particular word or phrase which is repeated in contemplative practice. In the older texts, the recommended verbal formulas have an obvious significance given the Christian context in which they are used. The *Cloud* author suggests the words "God" and "love" (or elsewhere in his text, "God" and "sin"), Rolle recommends the name "Jesus," and Cassian teaches that one should repeat the scriptural verse "Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue." Furthermore, each of these authors provides some explanation as to why these particular verbal formulas are meaningful and appropriate for contemplative prayer.

In the methods of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer, certain verbal formulas are recommended for use in contemplation, and a rationale is likewise given for these recommendations. John Main suggests the word *maranatha* (an Aramaic phrase meaning

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<sup>104</sup>John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks* (1977; repr., n.p.: Medio Media, 1999), 45.

<sup>105</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 36.

“Come Lord”) as the verbal formula for Christian Meditation. He explains that this word is found in the Christian scriptures and early liturgical texts.<sup>106</sup> In explaining his recommendation of this word as a verbal formula, Main emphasizes both the place of this word within Christian tradition, and its utility as a meditative tool which brings about a change in the consciousness of the practitioner: “The essence of the mantra, as I have suggested to you, is that it brings you to silence. It is not a magic word. It is not a word that has any esoteric properties to it or anything like that. It is simply a word that is sacred in our tradition . . . It is a word that brings us to great peacefulness, to rest and calm.”<sup>107</sup>

Because Main teaches that the function of the verbal formula is to move one from thought to silence, he also instructs practitioners not to reflect upon the meaning of the word: “Do not bother thinking about what it means, and it is not necessary to start looking around for other or ‘better’ words. In addition, do not think about God. In fact do not think about anything. Say your word, recite it and listen to it.”<sup>108</sup> This emphasis on not thinking is also reflected in the particular linguistic form of the verbal formula Main recommends. He suggests that the word *maranatha* is effective as a verbal formula because its meaning remains veiled to practitioners of Christian Meditation: “I prefer the Aramaic form because it has no associations for most of us and it helps us into a meditation that will be quite free of all images.”<sup>109</sup> Thus, the verbal formula both has and does not have meaning. It has meaning

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<sup>106</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 11.

<sup>107</sup>Main, *The Way of Unknowing*, 107.

<sup>108</sup>Main, *The Way of Unknowing*, 29.

<sup>109</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 11.

in that it is a word rooted in Christian tradition. At the same time, the language of the verbal formula is important precisely because it keeps the word's meaning from being foregrounded. As such, the use of this particular verbal formula prevents reflective thought because it is a phrase which has no obvious discursive meaning for the practitioner.

A similar discussion of the verbal formula's meaning or lack thereof is found in the instruction for Centering Prayer. Carl Arico states that what makes the word used in Centering Prayer "sacred" is what it represents to the practitioner: "Let's not get hung up with the term 'sacred word'—we call it sacred because of its intent. When we pray the word it is a symbol of our intention to consent to God's presence and action within. That is what makes it sacred. It celebrates our consent."<sup>110</sup>

Because the verbal formula functions as an expression of the practitioner's intent, Keating explicitly rejects the idea that it should have some intellectual or emotional significance for the meditator. Such qualities would become distractions with which the practitioner would have to contend during contemplative prayer:

The meaning of the sacred word or its resonances should not be pursued. It is better to choose a word that does not stir up other associations in your mind or cause you to consider its particular emotional qualities. The sacred word is only a gesture, an expression of your intent; it has no meaning other than your intent. You should choose your word as a simple expression of that intent, not as a source of meaning or emotional attachment. The less the word means to you, the better off you are.<sup>111</sup>

In the continuum that runs between meaning and lack thereof, the verbal formula used in Centering Prayer seems to fall rather definitively to the side of an absence of meaning, as reflection upon the content of the sacred word has no place in this practice.

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<sup>110</sup>Arico, 130.

<sup>111</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 49.



Yet the particular word one uses for Centering Prayer does have some significance attached to it. This is especially revealed in the examples of verbal formulas Keating provides, which include the words “God, Jesus, Spirit, Abba, amen, peace, silence, open, glory, love, presence, trust, etc.”<sup>112</sup> From the perspective of Christian tradition, it isn’t difficult to understand why such words would hold significance for the Centering Prayer practitioner. If the meaning of the verbal formula were entirely unimportant, it could be asked if a phrase such as “pepperoni pizza” would serve equally well. That it would not suggests that the meaning of the verbal formula does have some significance as compared with arbitrarily selected words. Nevertheless, the practitioner is instructed not to reflect upon the meaning of these words, as this has the potential of giving rise to distracting thoughts. In Centering Prayer, the verbal formula’s purpose is to assist the practitioner in giving less attention to thoughts and feelings during the time of this practice.

What remains to be considered in this discussion of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer is the particular type of experience to which these practices are directed. This can be related to the fourth and fifth points that were addressed in considering the early Christian and medieval texts’ discussions of verbal formulas in contemplative practice. In these texts, use of the verbal formula is associated with a trajectory away from concern with the world and toward a focusing of consciousness upon the divine presence. Furthermore, the use of the verbal formula culminates in an experience in which the words of the formula disappear, so that one encounters God in complete silence. These characteristics of the verbal

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<sup>112</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 43n1.

formula are also expressed to some degree in the literature which teaches Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer.

In considering the first aspect of the experiential goal of the use of the verbal formula—the movement of attention away from the world and toward awareness of the divine presence—it is helpful to draw a comparison between these Christian contemplative practices and the use of mantras in Indo-Tibetan religious traditions.<sup>113</sup> In his discussion of the purposes for which mantras are employed, Agehananda Bharati explains that in Hindu and Buddhist practice mantras are used to accomplish one of three aims. The first, propitiation, is the use of the mantra to “ward off unpleasant powers” and to “ingratiate the user with the pleasant ones.”<sup>114</sup> The second, acquisition, is the use of the mantra to acquire “things which are thought to be unobtainable or not so easily obtainable through secular or other religious efforts.”<sup>115</sup> The third, identification, or introjection, is the use of the mantra for the purpose of identifying the practitioner who employs it with absolute reality, a use which Bharati claims is “the most sophisticated purpose *mantra* can have.”<sup>116</sup> The various functions mantras may serve, then, are on a spectrum that runs from worldly concerns to a mystical identification of oneself with the divine presence.

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<sup>113</sup>A note of caution must of course be sounded here, as this discussion will not be an attempt to draw a detailed comparison between the use of mantras in Indo-Tibetan religions and these Christian practices; rather, it intends simply to ask how knowledge about mantras lends some insight into how these Christian contemplative methods may be understood.

<sup>114</sup>Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (1965; repr., New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), 111.

<sup>115</sup>Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, 112.

<sup>116</sup>Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, 112-113.

This helps to identify the way verbal formulas are understood to function in Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer. In these practices, attention is for a time removed from concern with the world and focused upon the practitioner realizing a state of union or identity of the self and God. John Main reflects this in his explanation that the objective of Christian Meditation is to achieve a degree of self-transcendence such that one is identified with Christ:

We are summoned to see with the eyes of Christ and to love with the heart of Christ, and to respond to this summons we must pass beyond egoism. In practical terms this means learning to be so still and silent that we cease thinking about ourselves . . . The way we set out on this pilgrimage of ‘other-centredness’ is to recite a short phrase, a word that is commonly today called a mantra. The mantra is simply a means of turning our attention beyond ourselves—a way of unhooking us from our own thoughts and concerns.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, Thomas Keating claims that Centering Prayer can result in an awareness of one’s union with God: “The sacred word points us beyond our psychic awareness to our Source, the Trinity dwelling in our inmost being.”<sup>118</sup> According to Bharati’s classification of the purposes of mantras, Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer employ their verbal formulas in the interest of bringing about an awareness of the identity of the practitioner and God.

This discussion of the purpose of the verbal formula is related to the final point discussed above with reference to the early Christian and medieval texts. These texts suggest that, while the practices they teach involve the practitioner using a verbal formula, ultimately they are oriented to an experience of the divine presence which takes place in silence,

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<sup>117</sup>John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (1984; repr., New York: Continuum, 1998), xi.

<sup>118</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 46.

transcending even the words of the verbal formula itself. Here also, the literature of present-day Christian contemplative practices bears strong resemblance to the older texts. While John Main emphasizes that repetition of the verbal formula is the central component of the practice of Christian Meditation, he also claims that this may result in an experience in which the meditator transcends the verbal formula and is left with only silence: “The day will come when the mantra ceases to sound and we are lost in the eternal silence of God . . . The clear rule is that as soon as we consciously realize that we are in this state of profound silence and begin to reflect about it we must gently and quietly return to our mantra.”<sup>119</sup> Main describes an experience in which alternating currents of sound—in the repetition of the verbal formula—and silence—in those moments when the repetition ceases—coexist. Silence is the experiential goal of meditation; nevertheless, the verbal formula continues to be fundamentally important because the practitioner returns to its repetition once the silence ends.

As Main explains it, the movement into silence beyond the verbal formula is an experience of union with God. In describing this experience of ultimate silence, Main draws upon the imagery of the *Cloud*: “There then comes the day when we enter that ‘cloud of unknowing’ in which there is silence, absolute silence, and we can no longer hear the mantra.”<sup>120</sup> This reference to the *Cloud* explains how Main understands the progression of the practice of Christian Meditation. The practitioner moves toward an ever more silent experience until even the verbal formula itself has been surpassed; this is the cloud of

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<sup>119</sup>Main, *Moment of Christ*, xi.

<sup>120</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 55.

unknowing. For the *Cloud* author, the cloud of unknowing refers to that situation in which God is encountered in the most immediate way possible for the human being in the midst of earthly life. Main's use of this image suggests that those moments of silence beyond the verbal formula are instances of encounter with the divine presence.

Similarly, Thomas Keating explains that, as one progresses in the practice of Centering Prayer, the use of the verbal formula may culminate in an experience of silence in which the verbal formula itself ceases for a time to have any place in one's prayer. He writes,

You may reach a point where you no longer think of the sacred word at all. When you sit down for prayer, your whole psyche gathers itself together and melts into God. Interior silence *is* the sacred word at its deepest level . . . So long as you experience the undifferentiated, general, and loving presence of God beyond any thought, don't go back to the sacred word.<sup>121</sup>

Here also, there is an interplay between sound and silence, wherein the use of the verbal formula facilitates an experience of silence which surpasses even its own recitation.

Keating also states that this movement into silence is an experience of union with God: "We are going beyond the sacred word into union with that to which it points—the Ultimate Mystery, the Presence of God beyond any conception that we can form of Him."<sup>122</sup> As with the early Christian and medieval texts, in Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer a contemplative practice which uses a verbal formula is ultimately oriented to an apophatic experience in which silence is emphasized to the point that even the verbal formula itself is for a time transcended. During these moments, the practitioner is aware of the divine presence as the sole object within his consciousness.

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<sup>121</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 49.

<sup>122</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 46.

Having discussed the use of verbal formulas as part of the contemplative methods of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, it can be asked how these practices might be interpreted in light of performance and practice theories. As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the conception of an activity as practice suggests that the activity is fulfilled through its own performance rather than through the attainment of an external goal. This understanding of practice is reflected in the presentation of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. For example, Keating states that Centering Prayer should be understood not as a “technique” but rather as a “method.” In explaining this distinction, Keating writes,

A technique, therefore, is something that produces a result. A method is something you do to cultivate a relationship . . . So the method of Centering Prayer, it’s important to realize, is not going to produce a particular result; or at least it’s not going to produce a result that you can anticipate, and hence be annoyed with, if it doesn’t happen. It simply happens of itself by deepening the relationship until it becomes a presence-to-presence communion, or union, or unity even, as time goes on.<sup>123</sup>

Similarly, Laurence Freeman explains that Christian Meditation should not be understood in terms of its allowing one to attain certain goals. He writes, “we meditate because it is natural, not to achieve a goal or get a higher rating.”<sup>124</sup> Both of these authors emphasize that the contemplative practices they teach are not oriented to attaining a goal outside of their own performance; rather, by engaging in the practice of contemplative prayer, one participates in the relationship and even union between oneself and God.

In addition to their being understood as practices, Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation can also be interpreted as religious performance. The conceptualization of

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<sup>123</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 16.

<sup>124</sup>Laurence Freeman, *Light Within: The Inner Path of Meditation* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 108-109.

religious activity as performance, as was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, emphasizes the qualities of repetition and ongoing practice. These qualities are reflected in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation in two ways. First, both practices emphasize the repetition of a verbal formula (the sacred word or mantra) as a central component of their contemplative methods. Second, these traditions include the quality of repetition in their instruction that their contemplative methods should be performed as formal practices at recurring intervals. Both traditions recommend two daily periods of approximately twenty minutes each during which their practice is performed on an ongoing basis.

Furthermore, to say that an action is a performance implies that it involves expression, in which a certain thought or affective state is embodied. This aspect of performance is most clear in the method of Centering Prayer, in which there is an explicit description of the verbal formula as an expression of the practitioner's intent to enter into relationship with God. Keating writes that "the primary function of the sacred word is not push thoughts away or to thin them out. It is rather to express our intention to love God, to be in God's presence, and to submit to the Spirit's action during the time of prayer."<sup>125</sup> In these ways, the contemplative practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation can be interpreted as mystical activities which involve characteristics of performance.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the use of verbal formulas in the contemplative practices discussed in the *Cloud*, related early Christian and medieval texts of John Cassian and Richard Rolle, and present-day Christian contemplative literature. There are a number of

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<sup>125</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 68.

points in common among these practices. First, in all of these texts, a method of practice is being recommended and taught in which the recitation and repetition of a verbal formula is a key component. Second, this verbal formula is employed as a means to transcend thought so that one's attention is focused upon consciousness of God. Third, in these texts the content of the verbal formula is significant in that it can be related to the particular religious context in which the practice is taking place. Fourth, the use of these verbal formulas is associated with a trajectory in which one's attention is progressively less focused upon the objects and activities of the mundane world and is instead more focused upon the divine presence as the sole object of one's consciousness. Finally, these texts emphasize that the mystical experience of God is so utterly ineffable that at some point in one's practice the verbal formula itself is transcended, such that only a silent awareness of the divine remains.

These commonalities having been noted, there is at least one way in which the early Christian and medieval texts differ significantly from their present-day counterparts. This is in the specificity and clarity of instruction which the present-day texts provide. While it is clear that the older texts discussed in this chapter are recommending and offering instruction in contemplative methods, the texts themselves are often rather silent when it comes to the particularities of these methods. One can well imagine a present-day reader engaged with one of these texts, knowing that it recommends a contemplative practice, and knowing that this practice involves the use of a verbal formula, but nevertheless being unable to formulate a concrete method of practice, because specific instructions are not provided in the text. In present-day Christian contemplative literature, there is a noticeable shift, in that explicit and



detailed instruction as to how one is to perform these practices is offered clearly, sometimes in directions which are numbered so that they may be easily followed.

From the discussion in this chapter on the place of verbal formulas in contemplative prayer, it can be noted that, in attempting to understand the mysticism of the *Cloud*, other early Christian and medieval texts, and their present-day counterparts, it is important to conceptualize mysticism as involving more than just certain types of experience. Rather, a consideration of this tradition of Christian mysticism suggests that practice—in the sense of what a person does—is as important as the experiences a person has, or the doctrines he holds, in interpreting mysticism. This important role which practice plays is made more clear if one considers contemplative Christian mysticism not only through an examination of texts understood as historical artifacts, but also through the present-day practices which follow from these texts. The next chapter will address a related issue by asking about the effects which are understood to follow from mystical experience, particularly as this relates to the way that awareness of the self is understood in relation to contemplation.

CHAPTER 4  
AWARENESS AND TRANSCENDENCE: THE SELF IN CONTEMPLATIVE  
PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE

In his study of William James' philosophy of mysticism, William Barnard writes that "every philosophical, social-scientific, or theological investigation of mystical experience operates with certain assumptions about the nature of the self."<sup>1</sup> Barnard's statement suggests that it is important to reflect upon what is meant when we speak about a "self" who performs the practices and has the experiences which are associated with a particular mystical tradition. This chapter will discuss the way in which the self is conceptualized in the mysticism of the *Cloud* and in the present-day Christian contemplative literature which uses the *Cloud* as a resource for the practice it teaches.

As an introduction to this discussion, it will be helpful to briefly reflect on three questions which have some significance for how the place of the self in mystical practice and experience is understood. The first of these questions is concerned with how the self is identified. Eliot Deutsch contrasts the Western notion of the self, which is based upon "the

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<sup>1</sup>G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 147.

belief that a person has a special place in nature by virtue of his or her having a mind,”<sup>2</sup> with the Indian view of the self, which “is not identified with the mind . . . but with unlimited spiritual being.”<sup>3</sup> This reference to opposing conceptions of what constitutes the self suggests that one question to be asked is whether the self is identified with the human capacity for thought or with some aspect of one’s humanity which transcends this.

A second question involves the relationship that exists between a self which is apparent to ordinary consciousness and one which is not as obvious but is perhaps more real. Thus, some religious traditions conceptualize a “surface self that is to be systematically reduced, impoverished, and transcended in favor of the nonself (or, what amounts to the same thing, a ‘true self’) of far greater metaphysical depth and urgency.”<sup>4</sup> This question alludes to certain religious and cultural practices which a person may employ in order to effect a transformation from the surface to the deep self.

A final question concerns the language which is used to describe the encounter of the self and the divine. Writing about medieval Christian spirituality, Colin Morris notes that the twelfth-century Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux describes the soul’s relationship to God in two ways. The first of these is “deification language,” in which he “was putting his emphasis upon the unity of the Soul and God, and was relatively little concerned to make a

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<sup>2</sup>Eliot Deutsch, “The Comparative Study of the Self,” in *Selves, People, and Persons: What Does it Mean to Be a Self?*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 95.

<sup>3</sup>Deutsch, 96.

<sup>4</sup>David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa, “Introduction: Persons, Passages, and Shifting Cultural Space,” in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, ed. David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

distinction between them.”<sup>5</sup> The second is the language of “spiritual marriage,” in which “the soul retains his identity. It is the fulfillment, not the annihilation of the self.”<sup>6</sup> This question asks whether in mystical experience the self is understood to retain its sense of discrete identity or instead loses itself by becoming wholly identified with God.

These three questions share a common concern. They suggest that in the study of mysticism it is important to ask how the self is defined and how it is understood to function in the practices and experiences of a particular mystical tradition. Is the self identified with one’s thoughts or with something which transcends thought? Is the self that is apparent to the senses who one really is, or is there some identity beyond this? In the encounter with the divine, does a person lose himself in God or does he encounter God as a distinct and separate being? Attempting to answer these questions can reveal a great deal about the way in which a given mystical tradition understands both the self and the relationship of the self and the divine.

This chapter will ask how these issues related to the conceptualization of the self are addressed both in the medieval mysticism of the *Cloud* and in the present-day Christian contemplative practices based on this text. While there are substantial differences between conceptions of the self in these two contexts, there is also a significant (and perhaps even surprising) degree of similarity and consistency between these medieval and present-day mysticisms.

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<sup>5</sup>Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200* (London: SPCK, 1972), 154.

<sup>6</sup>Morris, 157.

As this medieval and present-day contemplative literature is surveyed, a methodological issue of some importance for the study of mysticism also comes into view. As was seen in the previous chapter, it is important to situate the mystical experience of union with God within the larger context of the practices which precede this experience. A similar analysis can be done concerning the issue of self-awareness and self-transcendence in contemplation. The *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative texts differentiate between the place of the self in the mystical experience itself and the role the self plays leading up to and following from this experience. As such, this chapter addresses not only the particular subject of the self in Christian contemplation; like the discussion of mystical practice in the previous chapter, it also has more general implications for what is included within the category of mysticism.

#### **The Medieval Self: The *Cloud* and Related Devotional Texts**

As has been seen in the previous chapters, the author of the *Cloud* characterizes mystical union with God as an “unknowing,” in which one’s awareness moves beyond anything that can be thought, imagined, or reflected upon. This description of mystical experience suggests a question about what role awareness of self plays in this contemplative practice. The anonymous author the *Cloud* provides something of an answer to this question when he tells his reader that “you shall in this work forget both yourself and also your deeds for God.”<sup>7</sup> Such a statement suggests that in contemplation reflection upon oneself must be, like all other thoughts, subjected to an unknowing which is the way to the experience of God.

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<sup>7</sup>*Cloud*, 82/4-5: “þou schalt in þis werk forȝete boþe þi-self and also þi dedes for God.”

Before addressing the role of the self in the mysticism of the *Cloud*, a discussion of how the “self” was understood in the medieval context of this text and related devotional literature will be helpful. While there is a lack of literature which discusses the way the self was conceptualized in fourteenth-century English mysticism specifically or even more generally in fourteenth-century Christianity, this topic can be addressed by looking more broadly at tendencies within medieval Christianity.

In his description of medieval religious life, Giles Constable states that there is a general consistency between the spirituality of the twelfth century and that of the later medieval Christianity of which the *Cloud* is a part.<sup>8</sup> Given this basic continuity, one way to consider how the self was understood in the fourteenth-century setting of the *Cloud* is by examining the earlier conception of the self in twelfth-century Christianity.

Some historians have noted that a particularly pronounced characteristic of twelfth-century Christian spirituality was the concern with self-knowledge. R.W. Southern states that in the twelfth century, particularly in the monastic spirituality of the Cistercian order, there was “an emphasis on personal experience, an appeal to the individual conscience, a delving into the roots of the inner life.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Colin Morris suggests that twelfth-century Cistercian spirituality included the “idea of self-knowledge as the path to God.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Giles Constable, “Twelfth-Century Spirituality and the Late Middle Ages,” in *Religious Life and Thought (11th-12th Centuries)* (1971; repr., London: Variorum Reprints, 1979), 49-50.

<sup>9</sup>R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 228.

<sup>10</sup>Morris, 66.

One of the manifestations of this concern for the self which began in the twelfth century and continued into the next century was the emphasis upon sacramental confession of sins as an expected practice for all Christians. Morris explains that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) made annual confession a requirement, and that “the interesting feature of this development is that it was an attempt to introduce the idea of self-examination throughout society; at this point, at least, the pursuit of an interior religion did not remain the property of a small *elite*, but entered every castle and every hovel in western Europe.”<sup>11</sup> This concern with the self—with knowing and therefore having an awareness of oneself—forms part of the context of later medieval spiritual texts such as the *Cloud*.

In discussing this emphasis upon self-knowledge, however, it is important to distinguish the medieval understanding of the self from what this term connotes in modern usage. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, the idea of the self is fundamentally different in these two contexts: “When we speak of ‘the individual,’ we mean not only an inner core, a self; we also mean a particular self, a self unique and unlike other selves . . . the twelfth century regarded the discovery of *homo interior*, or [self], as the discovery within oneself of human nature made in the image of God—an *imago Dei* that is the same for all human beings.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, John Benton contrasts the goals of medieval and modern exercises of self-inquiry: “In the Middle Ages the journey inward was a journey toward self for the sake of

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<sup>11</sup>Morris, 73.

<sup>12</sup>Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 87.

God; today it is commonly for the sake of self alone.”<sup>13</sup> While Bynum and Benton’s comments refer specifically to twelfth-century Christian spirituality, they are important to keep in mind when attempting to understand the place of self-awareness in the *Cloud*. In the medieval context, subjectification of the self is oriented to an awareness of the essential nature that one shares with others, rather than to a concern with oneself as a uniquely individual person. Furthermore, this subjectification is practiced in pursuit of a consciousness of God rather than oneself.

Anne Clark Bartlett also discusses the role played by the self in medieval mystical texts, and asks how the analytical method employed by Michel Foucault can be brought to bear upon this issue. Bartlett cites Foucault’s history of sexuality, in which he states that he is interested in “the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object.”<sup>14</sup> Foucault’s concern here is with identifying what he calls “practices of the self,”<sup>15</sup> by which he means exercises in which a person makes himself a subject of inquiry. Foucault suggests that these can be investigated by reading “texts written for the purpose of offering rules,

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<sup>13</sup>John F. Benton, “Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality,” in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert L. Benson, Giles Constable, and Carol D. Lanham, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 26 (1982; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 285.

<sup>14</sup>Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 29. Cf. Anne Clark Bartlett, “Foucault’s ‘Medievalism,’” *Mystics Quarterly* 20 (1994): 13.

<sup>15</sup>Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 13.



opinions, and advice on how to behave as one should.”<sup>16</sup> In response to this interest in investigating practices of the self, Bartlett states that, “given the wealth of didactic literature written in the Middle Ages, medievalists are uniquely qualified to undertake this sort of project.”<sup>17</sup> The discussion of the *Cloud* in this chapter will attempt to do what Bartlett has suggested, to ask if and how a medieval Christian mystical text instructs its reader to engage in practices which bring about an awareness of oneself as a subject of inquiry.

This analysis of the *Cloud* will be undertaken by considering three specific practices which are discussed and recommended in this text—cultivation of humility, confession of sins, and meditation upon the Passion of Christ. The discussion of these exercises in the *Cloud* would initially seem to suggest a correlation between the mysticism of this text and Foucault’s concept of practices of the self, in that each of these exercises calls for the practitioner to reflect upon and gain some knowledge of himself. Yet this assessment may be called into question in two ways. First, it may be asked whether the acquisition of self-knowledge adequately explains these practices as they are described by the *Cloud* author. Second, each of these exercises can be understood as being at best only preparatory. While they are essential in the journey toward mystical consciousness, they nevertheless are understood to fall short of that experience itself. If these practices do aim at some degree of self-knowledge, this knowledge is not the final goal of the mysticism of the *Cloud*.

The first of these practices is the cultivation of the virtue of humility. The *Cloud* author describes humility as “nothing else but a true knowing and feeling of a man’s self as

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<sup>16</sup>Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Bartlett, 13.

he is. For certainly whoever might truly see and feel himself as he is, he should truly be humble.”<sup>18</sup> The *Cloud* author goes on to explain that this virtue has two distinct dimensions, which he calls imperfect and perfect humility. Imperfect humility is caused by “the filth, the wretchedness, and the frailty of man, into which he is fallen by sin, and which it always behooves him to feel in some part while he lives in this life, be he ever so holy.”<sup>19</sup> The cultivation of this type of humility arises from an awareness and evaluation of oneself as a sinful being. Such self-awareness, however, pertains only to imperfect humility. Complementing this is perfect humility, which is caused by “the superabundant love and worthiness of God in himself; in beholding of which all nature quakes, all clerks are fools, and all saints and angels are blind.”<sup>20</sup>

This division of humility into perfect and imperfect experiences is important because only imperfect humility arises from reflection upon the nature of the self, a nature which is fundamentally characterized by sin. In contrast, perfect humility results not from awareness of oneself, but rather through attention to the divine nature. The *Cloud* author goes so far as to say that the movement from imperfect to perfect humility is marked by a complete, though temporary, loss of self-knowledge and self-awareness. In the experience of perfect humility,

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<sup>18</sup>*Cloud*, 40/8-10: “not ellis bot a trewe knowyng & felyng of a mans self as he is. For sekirly who-so miȝt verrely see and fele him-self as he is, he schuld verrely be meek.”

<sup>19</sup>*Cloud*, 40/11-14: “þe filþe, þe wrecchidnes, and þe freelte of man, into þe whiche he is fallen by synne, and þe whiche algates him behouep to fele in sum partye þe whiles he leuiþ in þis liif, be he neuer so holy.”

<sup>20</sup>*Cloud*, 40/15-17: “þe oueraboundaunt loue and þe worþines of God in him-self; in beholding of þe whiche alle kynde quakiþ, alle clerkes ben foles, and alle seintes & aungelles ben blynde.”

he says, “a soul in this mortal body . . . shall have suddenly and perfectly lost and forgotten all knowing and feeling of his being, not looking after whether he has been holy or wretched.”<sup>21</sup> In its imperfect form, the virtue of humility does involve awareness of self to the extent that one is conscious of one’s sinfulness. Humility is brought to perfection, however, only when knowledge of self is superceded by awareness of God.

A second practice discussed in the *Cloud* is the sacramental confession of sins. Similar to the cultivation of humility, this practice would seem to involve a consideration of oneself. The *Cloud* author explicitly states that confession of sins is an essential prerequisite for contemplative life. With regard to when one should begin to undertake the practice of contemplative prayer, he writes, “if you ask me when they should do this work, then I answer you, and say not before they have cleansed their conscience of all particular deeds of sin done before, after the common ordinance of Holy Church.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the author makes clear the necessity of an awareness of the particular sins one has committed and the confession of these in the sacrament of penance.

Equally important, however, is the way the *Cloud* author instructs his reader to conceive of himself as sinful. Participation in the confession of sins presupposes a detailed scrutiny of oneself and one’s past actions. While the *Cloud* author acknowledges the importance of this confession, he also suggests that the self should be viewed not only

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<sup>21</sup>*Cloud*, 41/2-3, 4-6: “a soule in þis deedly body . . . schal haue sodenly and parfityly lost and forȝetyn alle wetyng and felyng of his beyng, not lokyng after wheþer he haue ben holy or wrechid.”

<sup>22</sup>*Cloud*, 63/8-11: “if þou aske me when þei schulen wirche in þis werk, þen I answeere þee, and I sey þat not er þei haue clensid þeire concience of alle þeire special dedis of sinne done bifore, after þe comoun ordinaunce of Holi Chirche.”

through an enumeration of one's particular acts, but simply as a being whose basic character is sinful. He writes that, during the time of contemplation, the contemplative is to think of sin

without any special beholding unto any kind of sin, whether it be venial or mortal: pride, wrath or envy, covetousness, sloth, gluttony or lechery. What does it matter in contemplatives what sin it is, or how much a sin it is? For it seems to them all sins—I mean for the time of this work—are alike great in themselves, when the least sin separates them from God, and hinders them from their spiritual peace. And feel sin as a lump, you know not what it is, but no other thing than yourself.<sup>23</sup>

In the text's description of contemplative experience, the emphasis is not upon a recollection of one's particular qualities or specific past actions one has performed, but is rather directed toward a simple awareness of oneself as sinful, and as therefore separated from God.

A third exercise mentioned in the *Cloud* is discursive meditation upon the Passion of Christ. Because the *Cloud* author names but does not describe this practice,<sup>24</sup> it will be addressed by looking at two texts which provide examples of this type of meditation. These texts are part of the body of Middle English devotional literature that was contemporaneous with the *Cloud*. The discussion of this subject will be lengthier than that for the cultivation of humility and confession of sins. This is because these texts show a contrast with the *Cloud* with regard to how the self is understood to function in mystical practice. The two texts both derive in some sense from the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, a fourteenth-century devotional work which “enjoyed an immense popularity and influence in the later middle

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<sup>23</sup>*Cloud*, 78/10-18: “wiþ-outyn any specyal beholdyng vnto any kynde of synne, wheþer it be venial or deedly: pryde, wrapþe or enuye, couetyse, slewþ, glotenie or lecherye. What þar reche in contemplatiues what synne þat it be, or how mochel a synne þat it be? For alle synne hem þinkyþ—I mene for þe tyme of þis werk—iliche greet in hem-self, when þe leest synne departeþ hem fro God, and letteþ hem of here goostly pees. And fele synne a lumpe, þou wost neuer what, bot none oþer þing þan þi-self.”

<sup>24</sup>E.g., *Cloud*, 31/23-32/3.

ages: literally hundreds of manuscripts survive of the original Latin text and the various vernacular translations.”<sup>25</sup> These two texts which are in the tradition of the *Meditations* provides a useful means with which to address the type of practice the *Cloud* author most likely has in mind when he refers to meditation upon the Passion of Christ as a spiritual exercise.

The first text, *The Privity of the Passion* is a Middle English translation of the Passion sequence in the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. The method of meditation recommended in *Privity* consists of an imaginative visualization of the events of the Passion, in which the meditator envisions himself as being present at these events. The author of this text writes that the meditator must “make himself present in his thought as if he saw fully with his bodily eye all the things that befell about the cross and the glorious passions of our lord Jesus.”<sup>26</sup> *Privity* also suggests that meditation of this type has a transformative effect upon those who undertake this practice: “And truly I fully believe that whosoever would busy

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<sup>25</sup>Michael G. Sargent, introduction to *Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*, Garland Medieval Texts 18 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), xix.

<sup>26</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 194-195: “make hym-selfe present in his thoghte as if he sawe fully with his bodyly eghe all the thyngys that be-fell abowte the crosse and the glorious passione of oure lorde Ihesu.” Citations of this text are from Denise N. Baker, ed., *The Privity of the Passion*, in *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). This edition contains the text both in modern English translation and in its original Middle English. Translations from the Middle English are my own with some assistance from the translation provided by Baker.

himself with all his heart and all his mind and think of this glorious Passion and all the circumstances thereof, it should bring him and change him into a new state of living.”<sup>27</sup>

With regard to the specific nature of this transformation, the author writes that the person who performs these meditations “shall find very many things therein stirring him to new compassion, new love, new spiritual comfort and so shall he be brought into a new spiritual sweetness.”<sup>28</sup> The repetitive use of “new” in this passage is noteworthy, as these meditations are understood as a means to become a new person or enter into a new state of being. Equally significant is the use of the word “compassion.” The means of transformation for the meditator is compassion for the suffering Christ who is described in this text. This is more than mere sympathy; it is a becoming one with the figure of Christ in the Passion through a “feeling with” his suffering. Richard Kieckhefer writes that these meditations “transformed a sinner into a saint, or made the saint a more perfect one, precisely through subjective assimilation to Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Discursive meditation on the Passion is a means of identifying oneself with Christ and, through this identification, undergoing self-transformation. In this, there is clearly a concern with the self on the part of the meditator as he is transformed by this practice.

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<sup>27</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 194: “and sothely I trowe fully that who so wolde besy hyme with all his herte and all his mynde and vmbethynke hym of this gloryus Passione and all the circumstance thare-off, It sulde bryng hym and change hyme In to a new state of lyfyng.”

<sup>28</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 194: “sall fynde full many thynges thare-In styrende hym to newe compassion, newe luffe, newe gostely comforthe, and so sall he be broghte in to a newe gostely swetnesse.”

<sup>29</sup>Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 116.

The content of the meditations themselves in *Privity* likewise expresses an occupation with the self. This is reflected clearly when the author stops the narrative flow and directly addresses the reader, instructing him to respond to the scene being described with a specific emotion. For example, when the text describes the dressing of Jesus in a mock royal garment, the author asks the reader to “behold you now busily, and have you pity of, his great pains.”<sup>30</sup> As the text describes Jesus’ crowning with thorns, the author again addresses the reader: “Behold him now with compassion and tenderness of heart how his head was pricked through with sharp thorns to his blessed brain.”<sup>31</sup> Moments such as these show an obvious concern with the self and its reaction to the events of the Passion.

A variation on this direct instruction occurs when the text suggests that the reader reflect upon how the witnesses to the Passion must have responded to what they saw. These witnesses—figures such as Jesus’ mother, John, and Mary Magdalene—are revered holy figures and as such provide a model of response to the meditator. Accordingly, the author asks the reader, “what do you believe that Mary Magdalene did who so meekly loved Jesus? What did saint John do, most beloved by Jesus of all his disciples? And what do you believe that the other two sisters of our lady did? What might they do? They were overwhelmed and filled with bitterness of sorrow and made drunk with sobbing and sighing, for they all wept

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<sup>30</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 197: “Be-holde thow now besyly, & haue thou pete of, his gret paynes.”

<sup>31</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 197: “Be-holde hym nowe with compassion & tendirnes of herte hou his heued was thurghe-prikkede with scharpe thornes thurghe his blesside brayne.”

without measure.”<sup>32</sup> Here the author asks the reader to imagine the response of figures who are exemplars, implying that the reader should measure his own response against this. The reader become a witness to the Passion alongside these other witnesses, and is asked to respond in accord with their responses. In all these instances, *Privity* assists the reader in meditating upon the Passion of Jesus and responding to that event in an idealized way. In doing this, the text asks the reader be aware of and evaluate himself. It further suggests that by doing this the reader may experience self-transformation.

A second text in this genre of discursive meditations on the life of Christ is Richard Rolle’s meditations on the Passion of Christ. Whereas *Privity* is a vernacular translation of the Passion sequence of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Rolle’s work is not a translation but a series of reflections inspired by the same tradition of meditation upon and devotion to the events of the Passion. Because it is a part of this tradition, Rolle’s text also contains this element of self-awareness.<sup>33</sup>

Mary Madigan suggests that Rolle’s treatment of the Passion theme is noteworthy because he gives a highly personal character to this type of devotional literature. She writes that Rolle’s text “illustrates his wedding of this individual sensibility with a highly traditional

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<sup>32</sup>*The Privity of the Passion*, 200: “what trowes thou that Marie Maudeleyne dyde that so mekyll loued Ihesu? what did sayne Iohn, most bylouede of Ihesu of al his disciplys? and what trowes thou that the tother two systyrs of oure lady dyd? What myghte they do? They where slokende and fulfillide with bitternes of sorow and made dronkene with sobbynge and sygheyng, ffor all they wepide with-owttyne mesure.”

<sup>33</sup>Rolle’s text does, however, occupy a unique place in relation to the *Cloud*. This is because Rolle’s description of mystical experience is criticized by the *Cloud* author. While this criticism does not bear directly upon Rolle’s Passion meditations, it does show Rolle to be a figure to whom the *Cloud* author opposed himself.



form of meditation.”<sup>34</sup> Madigan’s observation is important because it implies that Rolle’s meditations are oriented to a religious practice and experience in which personal response is central. There is, in other words, an inherent interest in the role the self plays in the performance of these meditations.

Looking at the text, this concern with the self can be seen, for example, in Rolle’s description of the body of Jesus. In a series of reflections, the suffering body of Christ is compared with physical objects which have some significance for the self. For example, Rolle writes, “lord, sweet Jesus, your body is like a net, for as a net is full of holes, so is your body full of wounds. Here, sweet Jesus, I beseech you, catch me in this net of your scourging, that all my heart and love be for you, and draw me ever to you and with you as a net draws fish.”<sup>35</sup> This passage shows Rolle’s concern with directing the meditator’s attention back to himself in the course of these meditations. The events described become occasions for attention to the self. As Madigan states, Rolle’s meditations “call up responses of contrition, desire of adjustment, and prayers for strength and divine help.”<sup>36</sup> Such

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<sup>34</sup>Madigan, 92.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Rolle, *Meditation B*, 74/210-213: “lord, swet Ihesu, þy body is lyk to þe nette, for as a nette is ful of holys, so is þy body ful of woundes. Here, swet Ihesu, I beseche þe, cache me in to þis net of þy scourgyng, þat al my hert and loue be to þe, and drawe me eyr to þe and with þe as a net draweth fyshe.” Citations of this text are from *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse Edited from MS Longleat 29 and Related Manuscripts*, ed. S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson, Early English Text Society o.s. 293 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Rolle’s works include two Passion meditations, referred to as *Meditation A* and *Meditation B*. The quotations cited in this chapter all come from *Meditation B*. Translations from the Middle English are my own.

<sup>36</sup>Madigan, 125.

responses suggest an awareness of oneself in relation to the Passion events which are being described.

This attention to the self is also expressed in Rolle's desire to have a certain emotional experience during his reflection on the Passion. This implies a concern with the self, in that the self is monitored and the meditator becomes aware of what he feels and asks if this is consistent with the desired effects of this meditation. Rolle expresses this self-reflexive stance when he implores the persons who are the objects of his meditation, Christ and his mother Mary, to let him feel the pain and suffering that Christ experienced in the Passion:

My lord's passion is all my desire. I have an appetite for pain, to beseech my lord a drop of his red blood to make my soul bloody, and a drop of water with which to wash my soul. Ah, mother of mercy and compassion . . . visit my soul, and set in my heart your son with his wounds. Send me a spark of compassion into my heart that is hard as stone, and a drop of that passion to make it supple.<sup>37</sup>

The imagery Rolle uses to express his desire to experience the suffering of the Passion with Christ suggests that a union of the soul and Christ occurs. Through reflection on the Passion, the blood of Christ makes the soul bloody; they share this blood and become one. As in *Privity*, the term "compassion" is employed here, implying this oneness in shared experience.<sup>38</sup> The imagery Rolle uses also suggests that the experience of identity with Christ through meditation on his suffering transforms the meditator. The drop of blood that touches

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<sup>37</sup>Rolle, *Meditation B*, 78/363-367, 368-369: "My lordes passioun is alle my desyre. I haue appetite to peyne, to beseche my lord a drope of his rede blode to make my soule bloody, and a drop watyre to weshe with my soule. A, modyr of mercy and of compassioun . . . visite my soule, and set in my hert þy son with his woundes. Send me a sparcle of compassioun in to my hert þat is hard as stone, and a drope of þat passioun to suple hit with."

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Kieckhefer, 105.

the soul changes it, makes it “bloody.” Similarly, the spark of compassion changes the hardened heart of the meditator. Such images speak not only of identification with Christ in suffering, but also of becoming a new person through this process.

Rolle also describes the particular nature of the transformation he wishes to undergo through his meditations on Christ’s Passion. He addresses Christ:

Oh spark of love, oh regret of your passion kindle in my heart, and quicken me with it that I am burning in your love over all things, and bathe me in your blood so that I forget all worldly good and fleshly desire. Then I may bless the time that I feel myself stirred to you by your grace, so that no other good pleases me but your death.<sup>39</sup>

The self not only feels a certain way but is also changed in a certain way by this experience. This transformation results in one’s choice of devotion to Christ over concern with things of the world. The self is given attention in Rolle’s Passion meditations in the feelings one experiences, in the desire to identify oneself with the suffering Christ, and in the hope that one will undergo a transformation as a result of these meditations.

In her analysis of Rolle’s meditations on the Passion, Elizabeth Salter notes that this text “associates the subject of the meditation with the moral life of the suppliant.”<sup>40</sup> In meditation on the Passion of Christ, awareness of the self is one pole in the consciousness of the meditator. The other is awareness of the person of Christ. More specifically, this tradition

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<sup>39</sup>Rolle, *Meditation B*, 82/525-529: “Oo sparcle of loue, oo reuth of þy passioun kyndel in myn hert, and quyken me þerwith þat I be brennyng in þy loue ouer al þynge, and bathe me in þy blode so þat I foryet alle worldly welle and fleishely lykyng. Þan I may blesse þe tyme þat I fele me stirred to þe of þy grace, so þat noon oper welle lyk me bot þy deth.”

<sup>40</sup>Elizabeth Salter, *Nicholas Love’s Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 10 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1974), 160.

emphasizes reflection on the humanity of Christ, rather than concern with his divinity. It is the human Christ whose suffering and death are recounted in these Passion meditations. The description of Christ as a human being encourages the meditator to direct his attention simultaneously to Christ as the object of his meditation and to himself, because both share a common humanity. In these meditations upon the Passion of Christ, the meditator is asked to be aware of and reflect upon himself.

An emphasis on the humanity of Christ, particularly in meditation on the Passion, and its corollary attention the self, can be contrasted with the *Cloud* author's teaching. While the *Cloud* author never rejects the importance of attention to the humanity of Christ, he does approach this subject in a more complex manner than the other medieval devotional texts that have been discussed. In *The Book of Privy Counseling*, the *Cloud* author directly addresses the role that meditation upon Christ's humanity plays in the life of the contemplative. The author uses the image of a door as the entrance to the spiritual life, and he says that attention to the humanity of Christ is the exclusive way by which one may come into this life:

They enter by the door, who in beholding of the Passion of Christ sorrow of their wickedness, which is cause of that Passion, with bitter reproving of themselves, who deserved and did not suffer, and pity and compassion of that worthy Lord, who so vilely suffered and deserved nothing; and after lift up their hearts to the love and the goodness of his Godhead, in which he condescends to humble himself so low in our mortal manhood.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 159/19-25: "Þei entren by þe dore, þat in beholdyng of þe Passion of Criste sorowen here wickydnys, þe whiche ben cause of þat Passion, wiþ bitter reprouyng of hem-self, þat deseruid & not suffrid, and pite & compassion of þat worthi Lorde, þat so vili suffrid & noþing deseruid; and siþen lifte up here hertes to þe loue & þe goodnes of his Godheed, in þe whiche he voucheþ-saaf to meke hym so lowe in oure deedly manheed."

For the *Cloud* author, attention to the humanity of Christ is important. Furthermore, the author connects this with awareness of the self, in that reflection upon the humanity of Christ, particularly as this is displayed in the Passion, is also cause for reflection upon oneself, and the role one's sinfulness plays in Christ's suffering.

But the *Cloud* author's use of the image of a door has another level of significance. While meditation on the life of the human Jesus is the way into the initial stage of spiritual life, the author is concerned with discussing more advanced stages of contemplative life. He says that some persons will pass through the doorway of attention to the humanity of Christ and proceed on to an experience of his divinity. These persons will "go in, in the beholding of the love and the goodness of his Godhead."<sup>42</sup> Others will limit their reflection on Christ to his humanity. These persons will go "out, in beholding of the pain of his manhood."<sup>43</sup> Commenting on this passage from *Privy Counseling*, Karl Steinmetz distinguishes between attention to Christ's humanity and his divinity:

If a person focuses on Christ as presented in Holy Scripture, he or she will find the visible Christ as the entrance and door through which one can approach God. Such a turn to the visible Christ, though, cannot be regarded as the highest form of communication with God. Since God revealed himself as God in Jesus Christ, the humanity of Christ is only the door to God. In order to really attain God one must walk through the door, cross the threshold and then proceed to the Godhead.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 159/26-27: "gone inne, in þe beholdyng of þe loue & þe goodnes of his Godheed."

<sup>43</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 159/27-160/1: "oute, in beholdyng of þe peyne of his manheed."

<sup>44</sup>Karl Heinz Steinmetz, "'Thiself a cros to thiself': Christ as *Signum Impressum* in the *Cloud*-Texts Against the Background of Expressionistic Christology in Late Medieval Devotional Theology," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII; Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E.A. Jones (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 135.

While the *Cloud* author maintains the importance of attention to the humanity of Christ and reflection upon this in meditation on the Passion, he also claims that contemplative experience takes one beyond this.

Similarly, in the *Cloud*, the author uses the biblical story of the sisters Martha and Mary to describe an experience of the divine which transcends attention to Christ's humanity. Since the figure of Mary serves as the model of contemplative life, the *Cloud* author's description of her experience sitting at the feet of Jesus reveals how he understands the role of attention to Christ in contemplative experience. The author writes that Mary

had often little special attention whether ever she had been a sinner or not. Ye! And very often I hope that she was so deeply affected in the love of his Godhead that she had but little special beholding unto the beauty of his precious and blessed body, in which he sat very lovely, speaking and preaching before her; nor yet to anything else, bodily or spiritual. That this is the truth, it seems by the Gospel.<sup>45</sup>

For the *Cloud* author, contemplative awareness of God must ultimately give attention to the ineffable God behind the humanity of Jesus. This is Mary's experience as the author describes it.

Furthermore, in this experience Mary's awareness transcends any thought of herself or her own sinfulness. The contemplative experience which moves beyond attention to the human Christ likewise surpasses attention to the self. The *Cloud* author's position that this type of contemplative experience is the highest to which one may aspire in this life

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<sup>45</sup>*Cloud*, 46/19-47/2: "had ofte-tymes lityl specyall mynde wheþer þat euer sche had ben a synner or none. 3e! and ful oftymes I hope þat sche was so deeply affecte in þe loue of his Godheed þat sche had bot riȝt lityl specyall beholdyng unto þe beute of his precious and his blessid body, in þe whiche he sate ful louely, spekyng and preching before hir; ne ȝit to anyþing elles, bodyly or goostly. Þat þis be soþ, it semþ by þe Gospelle."

differentiates the spirituality of this text from those which recommend and teach discursive meditation on the Passion of Christ.

The cultivation of humility, confession of sins, and meditation upon the Passion of Christ—practices which involve an awareness of oneself—are all recommended by the *Cloud* author as being beneficial and indeed necessary. Yet the author also claims that such exercises are at best only preparatory to an experience of the divine which supercedes all that can be thought or reflected upon. In this way, the *Cloud* is ultimately oriented to an experience which moves beyond practices of self-scrutiny. This is best understood by considering the text's description of the union of the soul with God. As was discussed in the first chapter, according to the *Cloud*, mystical union comes not in an experience of reflection upon either the self or, for that matter, God. It comes, rather, in a “cloud of unknowing,”<sup>46</sup> an experience devoid of all thought.

This description of mystical experience as a cloud of unknowing is complemented by what the author calls the “cloud of forgetting,” which refers to the contemplative's attempt to effect a cessation of thought, imagination, and reflection within himself. The author writes that “it behooves you, as this cloud of unknowing is above you, between you and your God, just so put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and all the creatures that have ever been made.”<sup>47</sup> Since he is himself one of these creatures that has been made, the contemplative is instructed to forgo self-reflective thoughts during the time of contemplation,

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<sup>46</sup>*Cloud*, 17/1: “cloude of vnknowyng.”

<sup>47</sup>*Cloud*, 24/2-4: “þee byhoueþ, as þis cloude of vnknowyng is abouen þee, bitwix þee and þi God, riȝt so put a cloude of forȝetyng bineþ þee, bitwix þee and alle þe cretures þat euer ben maad.”

and is put in the paradoxical position of placing a cloud of forgetting between himself and awareness of himself.

According to this model of the two clouds, union with God in unknowing is possible only if one forgets any and all thoughts during contemplation, including those which involve subjectification of oneself. The *Cloud* author goes so far as to claim that meditations upon subjects such as one's sinfulness and the Passion of Christ, while essential as preparation for mystical experience, themselves fall short of that experience, and must cease if one is to reach the fulfillment of contemplative life: "It behooves a man or woman, who has for a long time been accustomed to these meditations, to always leave them, and put them and hold them far down under the cloud of forgetting, if ever he shall pierce the cloud of unknowing between him and his God."<sup>48</sup> Those practices in which the self is thought about or reflected upon are precisely what must be transcended if one is to experience mystical union with God.

The author of the *Cloud* discusses the place of self-awareness most extensively in *The Book of Privy Counseling*. Here the author makes a distinction between two types of self-awareness. The first is an awareness of the particular attributes one possesses. The second is an awareness of the substance of one's being apart from these attributes. The author explains that in the work of contemplation only an awareness of one's substance has value. He urges his reader to approach the divine

without any curious or particular beholding to any of all the qualities that belong to the being of yourself or God, whether they be clean or wretched, gracious or natural, godly or manly. It matters not now in you but that your blind beholding of your naked

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<sup>48</sup>*Cloud*, 27/20-28/2: "it behouep a man or a womman, þat haþ longe tyme ben usid in þese meditacions, algates leue hem, & put hem and holde hem fer doun vnder þe cloude of forzetyng, 3if euer schal he peerse þe cloude of vnknowyng bitwix him and his God."



being be gladly born up in longing of love, to be knitted and made one in grace and spirit to the precious being of God in himself only as he is, without more.<sup>49</sup>

During the time of contemplation, only the simple being of both the self and God are present in one's awareness. Reflection on the particular characteristics of either has no place in the contemplative experience.<sup>50</sup>

With regard to self-awareness, the author claims that reflection upon one's particular qualities presents nothing so much as an obstacle to union with God:

Then you go back in feeding of your wits when you allow them to seek in the diverse curious meditations on the qualities of your being; these meditations, although they are very good and profitable, nevertheless, in comparison to this blind feeling and offering up of your being, are very dispersed and scatter you from the perfection of oneness, which is fitting to be between God and your soul.<sup>51</sup>

A multiplicity of thoughts arises from consideration of one's various traits, whereas perception of oneself as simple being apart from these traits leads to a singularity of awareness. The multiplicity of thoughts which results from self-reflection is an engagement of one's intellectual faculties, which must instead be quieted if one is to enter into contemplative prayer.

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<sup>49</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 139/8-14: "wiþ-outyn any corious or special beholdyng to eny of alle þe qualitees þat longyn to þe beyng of þi-self or of God, wheþer þei be clene or wrechid, gracyous or kyndely, godli or manly. It chargeþ not now in þee bot þat þi blynde beholdyng of þi nakid beyng be gladli born up in listines of loue, to be knittid & onid in grace & in spirit to þe precious beyng of God in him-self only as he is, wiþ-outen more."

<sup>50</sup>Clark, "Sources and Theology in *The Cloud of Unknowing*," 92.

<sup>51</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 139/29-140/6: "Þan gost þou bak in fedying of þi wittes whan þou suffrest hem seche in þe diuerse corious meditacions of þe qualitees of þi beyng; þe whiche meditacions, þof al þei be ful good and ful profitable, neuerþeles, in comparison of þis blynde felyng & offring up of þi beyng, þei ben ful diuerse & scateryng from þe perfeccion of onheed, þe whiche falliþ for to be bitwix God & þi soule."

While *Privy Counseling* begins by recommending attention to the substance rather than the particular qualities of oneself, the author finally claims that the fulfillment of contemplative prayer comes about in a loss of both types of self-awareness. He writes, “For know well for certain that, although I bid you forget all things but the blind feeling of your naked being, yet nevertheless my will is, and that was my intent in the beginning, that you should forget the feeling of the being of yourself for the feeling of the being of God.”<sup>52</sup> Even the author’s insistence upon a simple and singular self-awareness eventually gives way to an ideal of transcending thought of oneself completely in the work of contemplation. If and when this occurs, the only object within one’s consciousness is the being of God. This is the height of mystical experience; it is an experience which leaves no room for self-awareness of any sort.

To understand the inter-relationship between the various practices and experiences discussed in the *Cloud*, it is helpful to consider the successive stages of spiritual life as the author describes them. As was discussed in the first chapter, the author envisions the spiritual life as consisting of active and contemplative lives, with each of these having a lower and higher part. The lower part of active life involves doing works of mercy in the world. The higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life consist of engaging in meditations on topics such as one’s sins, the Passion of Christ, and the works of God as these are revealed in the world. Finally, the higher part of contemplative life involves a simple

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<sup>52</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 155/27-156/2: “For wite þou wel for certeyn þat, þof al I bid þee forgete alle þinges bot þe blynde felyng of þi nakid beyng, 3it neuerþeles my wille is, & þat was myn entent in þe biginning, þat þou schuldest for3ete þe felyng of þe beyng of þi-self as for þe felyng of þe beyng of God.”

awareness of the presence of God apart from any action or thought.<sup>53</sup> In this description, there is a movement from action in the world to discursive meditation upon topics with intellectual and emotional content to a non-conceptual awareness of the divine. The midpoint in this structure emphasizes self-scrutiny through reflection upon one's sinfulness and the Passion of Christ. In the highest stage, attention to oneself is lessened to the point of having all awareness of self transcended in the mystical experience of God.

This demarcation between awareness and transcendence of self, however, should not be too definitively drawn. While the author does envision a hierarchy of lower and higher stages of spiritual life and practice, he also points out that these stages are never entirely separate from one another. In this regard, it is significant that he does not simply describe active and contemplative lives; rather, he says that these two lives are conjoined, with the higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life being identified with one another. Thus, a person never completely leaves one set of spiritual exercises for those of a higher stage, because these stages, and their attendant practices, are linked with and inform each other.<sup>54</sup> Inquiry into the self, while not being part of the highest contemplative practice to which the *Cloud* is ultimately directed, nevertheless is preparatory and integral to this experience, and as such does play a role in the mysticism of this text.

It is fitting to conclude this discussion of the self in the *Cloud* where it began, with a statement from Michel Foucault, who writes that “throughout Christianity there is a

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<sup>53</sup>*Cloud*, 31/21-32/8.

<sup>54</sup>*Cloud*, 31/8-14. Cf. Taylor, 144.

correlation between disclosure of the self . . . and the renunciation of self.”<sup>55</sup> The *Cloud* is a mystical text in which the self is disclosed and reflected upon. This is especially apparent in the author’s references to the practices of cultivation of humility, confession of sins, and meditation upon the Passion of Christ. With regard to these elements of the *Cloud*, Foucault’s concept of practices of the self, which emphasizes those exercises that bring about knowledge of and reflection upon oneself, is indeed applicable to understanding this text.

Ultimately, however, the *Cloud* describes a practice and experience in which all thoughts, including and perhaps especially those of the self, are renounced and transcended. Even in those places where he discusses exercises that involve self-scrutiny, particularly the cultivation of humility and confession of sins, the author recommends a simplification rather than an amplification of self-knowledge to his reader. Because of this, Foucault’s concept of practices of the self is not wholly adequate to the interpretation of this text. The mysticism found in the *Cloud* suggests the need for a variation of this concept, what might be called a “practice of transcendence of the self,”<sup>56</sup> in which the function of a spiritual exercise is to forget rather than to know oneself. Such a conceptualization would provide a more complete explanation of the *Cloud*, for the practice of this text is finally oriented not to awareness but to transcendence of the self, so that one may experience mystical union with God.

### **The Self in the Present Day: Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation**

Having discussed the role which awareness of the self plays in the contemplative practice and experience of the *Cloud*, this may now be compared with the way the self is

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<sup>55</sup>Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 48.

<sup>56</sup>I give thanks to Dr. Douglas E. Cowan for his assistance in helping me formulate this concept, and for his suggestion of its name.

understood to function in present-day Christian contemplative practices which have been inspired at least in part by this text. This will be done through an examination of instructional texts of the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements, paying attention to the way the subject of self-knowledge and self-awareness is addressed in relation to these practices.

In the literature of the Centering Prayer movement, there is considerable attention given to acquiring knowledge of oneself as part of spiritual practice. This concern with the self is expressed in a number of ways: in an attempt to define the nature of the self, in the use of therapeutic language to describe contemplation as a process of self-healing, and in a consideration of the ways that contemplative practice can effect a self-transformation of the practitioner. In their discussion of these topics, Centering Prayer texts show an interest in self-awareness on the part of the person who undertakes this practice. As will be seen, however, this concern with the self is not absolute, and it is balanced by the language of self-transcendence which is also present in the literature of this tradition. Nevertheless, reflection upon the self does play a significant role in the practice of Centering Prayer.

One way that concern with the self is expressed in Centering Prayer literature is in an attempt to define the nature of the self. In his book *The Loving Search for God*, which discusses Christian contemplative prayer in the form of an extended reflection upon the *Cloud*, William Meninger makes a number of statements which have some bearing upon how the self is understood. Like the *Cloud* author, Meninger discusses the virtue of humility and the relationship of this to knowledge and awareness of oneself. He defines humility as an

experience, “when you know yourself as you truly are and when you are willing to look this truth in the face and accept it.”<sup>57</sup> Humility is correlated with self-knowledge in this statement.

Meninger continues by explaining what a sense of humility will tell a person about himself. In doing this, Meninger describes what he understands to be the essential qualities of human nature. He states that human beings are defined by two facts of their existence. With regard to the first of these, Meninger writes that, when one is humble, “you will know that as a creature, as a human being, you belong to a fallen race. You are one of a large community of intelligent beings called to be sons and daughters of God, but whose fallen nature tends toward deceit, self-interest, lust, and power. As you are in yourself and without God’s grace, you are less than nothing.”<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to the image of the self as fallen and sinful, Meninger names a second fundamental fact of human existence: “You are a member of a redeemed, holy people. You belong to the body of Christ and have been brought back to the Father by the death and resurrection of his Son and the working of the Holy Spirit. You have the promise of a glorious future, both in this world and the next.”<sup>59</sup> Knowledge of the self is knowledge of the human condition, and the practice of contemplative prayer involves an understanding of both these facts of existence. Meninger writes, “by embracing God in a union of love in the prayer of contemplation, we are gradually led by God to know our true selves. We come to know

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<sup>57</sup>Meninger, 19. While Meninger is less specifically associated today with the Centering Prayer movement than are the other authors discussed in this section, he was one of the persons initially involved in formulating the contemplative practice which eventually became known as Centering Prayer.

<sup>58</sup>Meninger, 19-20.

<sup>59</sup>Meninger, 20.

what we are like with all of our weaknesses and what we would be like without God's grace. We come also to know who we are as God's beloved sons and daughters. This is true humility."<sup>60</sup> While contemplation as described here does involve knowledge of oneself, this is not so much a knowledge of one's individual qualities; rather, it is an understanding of the self in terms of a more general human nature in which one shares.

A second way that concern with the self is expressed in Centering Prayer literature is in the description of contemplation as a process of self-healing. This understanding is particularly pronounced in Thomas Keating's writing on Centering Prayer. Keating refers to contemplative prayer as a "divine therapy," and he explains that its practice can enhance the psychological well-being of the practitioner. The significance of this paradigm is that "therapy suggests a climate of friendship and the trust that a topnotch therapist is able to inspire, while at the same time emphasizing that we come to therapy with a variety of serious emotional or mental problems."<sup>61</sup> This description of contemplative prayer in therapeutic terms implies certain things about the self of the contemplative. The contemplative is described as being sick. Moreover, in the relationship with God in which he participates during contemplation, the contemplative experiences a much-needed healing of his psychic wounds. This use of a therapeutic model to describe Centering Prayer brings awareness of the self to the forefront of contemplative practice.

Keating explains that this self-healing which is a part of contemplative prayer occurs through a process of unloading the effects of past traumas from one's unconscious. This

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<sup>60</sup>Meninger, 20.

<sup>61</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 72.

process results in the healing of the practitioner's psyche: "As a result of the deep rest of body, mind, and spirit, the defense mechanisms relax and the undigested emotional material of early life emerges from the unconscious at times in the form of a bombardment of thoughts or primitive emotions."<sup>62</sup>

It would be inadequate, however, to understand this model of contemplation as being wholly concerned with the psychological well-being of the practitioner. Keating does state that the goal of contemplative prayer is union of the soul with God. But he sees the unloading of unconscious material as a necessary prerequisite to that union:

Whenever a certain amount of emotional pain is evacuated, interior space opens within us. We are closer to the spiritual level of our being, closer to our true self, and closer to the Source of our being, which lies in our inmost center but is buried under the emotional debris of a lifetime. We are closer to God because through the process of unloading we have evacuated some of the material that was hiding the divine presence.<sup>63</sup>

According to this therapeutic model of contemplation, when the self is healed, the experience of union with God can occur.

Keating illustrates his description of the unloading of the unconscious with the visual image of a circular diagram. The Centering Prayer practitioner begins at the outer circumference and, through contemplative practice, journeys toward the center. The center of the circle in this diagram is labeled "True Self" and "Divine Presence."<sup>64</sup> Contemplative practice brings about a transformation from a false self which is identified and entangled with

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<sup>62</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 77. Cf. Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 78-79.

<sup>63</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 81.

<sup>64</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 77.



the emotional contents of the unconscious to a true self which is freed of this. The manifestation of this true self is the goal of contemplation.

Yet it is important to note that the center of the circular diagram is labeled not only “True Self” but also “Divine Presence.” In this, Keating’s description of contemplation moves from the merely psychological to the mystical. In uncovering the true self through the unloading of the unconscious, one also comes to consciousness of God. Keating explains that “this circular movement of rest, unloading in the form of emotionally charged thoughts and primitive emotions, and returning to the sacred word is constantly bringing us closer to our center.”<sup>65</sup> To complete his description of this contemplative process, Keating asks, “What happens when we hit the Center? Since there is no more junk left to hide the divine presence, I presume we are in divine union.”<sup>66</sup> Contemplative prayer as conceptualized by Keating involves both psychological health and the experience of mystical union.

It is apparent that awareness of the self plays a rather prominent role in this model of contemplation. Keating emphasizes self-knowledge in his description of the self as psychologically ill, and self-healing in his description of contemplation as the way to make the self well. Nevertheless, Keating’s description of contemplative prayer as a transformation from false to true self, with the true self being identified on some level with God, also implies an ideal of self-transcendence. This is expressed in a number of statements where Keating claims that contemplative experience, in its highest form, consists of a loss of self-awareness.

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<sup>65</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 81.

<sup>66</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 82.

For example, Keating writes of contemplation, “It is important to realize that the place to which we are going is one in which the knower, the knowing, and that which is known are all one. Awareness alone remains. The one who is aware disappears along with whatever was the object of consciousness. This is what divine union is. There is no reflection of self.”<sup>67</sup> It probably goes without saying that such an experience is difficult to describe, but Keating states that it is characterized by the complete lack of cognitive and emotional content: “So long as you *feel* united with God, it cannot be full union. So long as there is a thought, it is not full union. The moment of full union has no thought. You don’t know about it until you emerge from it.”<sup>68</sup> In describing the contemplative experience, Keating emphasizes that no sense of self in the form of one’s thoughts or feelings remains for the practitioner.

Even more specific to the topic of self-awareness, Keating stresses that this ideal of moving beyond thought applies especially to thoughts pertaining to the self. Mystical union occurs when one crosses a final threshold, transcending even the awareness that one is in this state of non-thought. Keating explains,

If you begin to be aware of the fact that you are not thinking at all and can just not think that thought, you have it made. There is only a short step from that point to divine union . . . The thought of not having a thought is the last preserve of self-reflection. If you can get beyond self-reflection, allow yourself to be self-forgetful, and let go of the compulsion to keep track of where you are, you will move into deeper peace and freedom.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 74.

<sup>68</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 74.

<sup>69</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 91.

A final way that concern with the self is expressed in Centering Prayer literature is in a consideration of how contemplative practice can effect a self-transformation of the practitioner. This can be seen, for example, in Centering Prayer teacher Carl Arico's discussion of the "fruits," or effects, of Centering Prayer. In describing these, Arico suggests that the practice of Centering Prayer has consequences which manifest themselves in the life of the contemplative in certain identifiable ways.<sup>70</sup> This reflects a concern with self-transformation as a part of this practice. The self that participates in Centering Prayer is a self that changes.

According to Arico, in contemplative practice a "new self" is generated. The self is changed by the divine presence which it encounters in contemplation: "We are talking about the restructuring of consciousness which takes place, empowering us to perceive, relate, and respond with increasing sensitivity to the Divine Presence in, through, and beyond everything that exists."<sup>71</sup> As the self is remade through contemplative practice, it manifests the fruits of Centering Prayer. Arico describes these using phrases such as "an ability to let go," "we learn to receive, rather than always give," "we learn to love people on their own terms," "a greater

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<sup>70</sup>Arico makes a distinction between the fruits of Centering Prayer and what he calls "effects" of this practice. He denies that Centering Prayer is the cause of any effects in the life of the practitioner: "The heart and soul of Centering Prayer is 'consent'—consent to the presence and action of God in our lives. There is no particular effect that we are looking for, no particular fruits that are desired as a primary focus" (172). Nevertheless, as will be seen, discussion of the fruits of Centering Prayer does imply that the consent to God which occurs in this practice has effects in the life of the practitioner.

<sup>71</sup>Arico, 174.

sensitivity for ‘the cries of the poor,’” “a greater awareness of the presence of God in everything,” and “a healing of deep hurts.”<sup>72</sup>

For this discussion, what is important about these characteristics is that awareness of them is also awareness of oneself. To offer a list of idealized qualities which can arise from the practice of contemplative prayer is to suggest that the practitioner reflect upon himself and ask whether his own practice has resulted in the cultivation of these characteristics. Discussion of these fruits of Centering Prayer means that the self is retained as an object of awareness and scrutiny in this contemplative practice.

Basil Pennington also includes a discussion of the fruits of contemplation in his writing on Centering Prayer. He states that a connection exists between the practice of Centering Prayer itself and the effects of this in the life of the practitioner:

When we Center we practice leaving our human thoughts and reason behind and attending to the Divine, to the Spirit. Practice moves us to the perfect. If we are faithful to our practice, this openness to the Divine will begin to pervade our lives and we will begin to function out of this divine sense even when we rise from the Prayer and go about our daily activity.<sup>73</sup>

In this statement, Pennington claims that the effects of contemplation are manifested in one’s activities outside the periods of formally practicing contemplative prayer. He says that lovingness, joyfulness, kindness, gentleness, goodness, trustfulness, and chastity are among the manifestations, or fruits, of this practice.<sup>74</sup> In naming these qualities, Pennington implies that there is a self-reflexivity in this practice. Attention is drawn to oneself as the potential

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<sup>72</sup>Arico, 175-181.

<sup>73</sup>M. Basil Pennington, *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer* (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 1999), 32.

<sup>74</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 33-37.

recipient of these fruits of Centering Prayer which come about through one's involvement in this practice.

However, this discussion of the fruits of Centering Prayer, and the implications of it for understanding the place of the self in this practice, is not complete without some further consideration of what Pennington says about this subject. He warns that it would be a mistake to enter into contemplative practice for the purpose of obtaining its effects in one's life: "If we go to Centering Prayer seeking any of these benefits, we will not get them. For we will not really be in the Prayer; we will still in some way be seeking self instead of seeking God. This is the essence of the Prayer: it is seeking God. It is in some way dying to self, leaving self behind to reach out totally to God."<sup>75</sup> In his discussion of the fruits of Centering Prayer, Pennington both emphasizes and de-emphasizes the self. He emphasizes the self in his discussion of the effects of this practice in the life of the practitioner. Nevertheless, this is complemented by a de-emphasis of the self in Pennington's claim that Centering Prayer is ultimately concerned not with one's own qualities but with awareness of God.

This idea that self-transcendence is fundamental to contemplation is also suggested by Pennington in his discussion of the "transformation of consciousness" which the Centering Prayer practitioner undergoes. Pennington describes a process in which one's identification and understanding of oneself shifts through contemplative practice. He describes how persons ordinarily view and describe themselves:

As we grow we tend, largely because of the way others mirror us back to ourselves, to identify ourselves with what we have, what others think of us and what we can do.

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<sup>75</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 40.

We tend to construct a false self made up of these elements: what we have, what we do, what others think of us. This becomes the way we think of ourselves and present ourselves to others.<sup>76</sup>

Pennington contrasts this false self with a new understanding in which the self is viewed in an entirely different fashion: “The shift of consciousness, the transformation of consciousness that we want, is to come to realize and to know by experience that God does dwell within us, with all his creative love, ever bringing us forth in his love and his goodness.”<sup>77</sup> Pennington describes two ways of understanding and defining the self; furthermore, he claims that one way of undergoing this transformation of consciousness is through the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer.<sup>78</sup> While Centering Prayer may effect this transformation from one self-perception to another, it should still be noted that both are still perceptions, albeit different ones, of the self. Awareness of the self plays an important role in this transformation.

This is not, however, all that Pennington has to say about the effect of contemplation on self-perception. Following upon transformation of consciousness is what Pennington describes as an experience of “pure consciousness,” which involves an entirely different set of implications for the contemplative practitioner’s self-awareness. In pure consciousness, one loses any sense of self as existing separate from the divine: “It is a unity of love and experience so intimate and so complete that we as the subject of the experience simply disappear. There is no consciousness *of*. There is no subject left in the consciousness to be

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<sup>76</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 86.

<sup>77</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 89.

<sup>78</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 91.

conscious of. There is just wholly, simply, and purely consciousness. And that consciousness is God.”<sup>79</sup> In this experience, the Centering Prayer practitioner enters a state of self-transcendence and consciousness of only the divine.

Yet this pure consciousness experience in which self-awareness ceases may be understood as the culminating moment of a contemplative practice which stretches out over a long period of time. Pennington writes,

This experience is usually brief in time and, for most of us, all too infrequent. But having experienced it but once, even after many years of seeking it, the whole of our being says: It is worth it. Worth all the hours of sitting in darkness, being purified, cleansed and prepared, our desire ever growing. Even if it never occurs again, our whole life would be worth it.<sup>80</sup>

While these comments convey the ultimate value of a mystical experience of self-transcendence, they also suggest that it is much more commonplace in contemplative practice to experience oneself, albeit in a new and transformed manner.

Similarly, Pennington claims that the pure consciousness experience is indescribable because it entails a complete loss of self-awareness; as a result, it can be known only through the impact it has on one’s life outside of the experience itself:

When we return to ordinary, everyday consciousness, we cannot report to ourselves what has occurred, for there was no reflexive consciousness watching and recording; there was no object of which we were conscious. There was only pure consciousness. We can be conscious of the effects in our lives: integration, peace, tranquility, centeredness, a sense of well-being and worth.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 94-95.

<sup>80</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 97.

<sup>81</sup>Pennington, *Centered Living*, 96.

This description says much about the place of self-awareness in contemplation. While Centering Prayer is ultimately oriented to an experience of self-transcendence in which no awareness, much less knowledge, of oneself remains, this experience is itself but one aspect of this contemplative practice. The practitioner returns to self-awareness and to the effects which this experience manifests in his life. This suggests that a distinction can be drawn between a mystical experience in which awareness of self ceases for a time, and a more comprehensive mystical practice which precedes and follows this experience, in which self-awareness does play a significant role.

The way awareness of the self functions in the Christian contemplative practice of Centering Prayer can be interpreted through an analysis of the characteristics of contemporary American religion as these are described by Wade Clark Roof. Roof's analysis helps to explain how the self is conceptualized in contemporary American religion and the role that the self is understood to play in religious practice. His description of this is consistent with what is found in present-day Christian contemplative literature.

Roof writes that there are a number of contexts which play a part in situating contemporary American religion. One of these contexts, which is particularly applicable to the way the self is addressed in Centering Prayer literature, is what he calls "therapeutic culture and its explicit attention to the self."<sup>82</sup> Specifically, Roof relates this tendency in American religion to "a profound effort within contemporary culture to address

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<sup>82</sup>Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39.



psychological health and personal well-being openly and candidly in a supportive context.”<sup>83</sup>

While this description of therapeutic culture is primarily related to support-group environments, it also has interpretive value for the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer. This is seen most clearly in the description of contemplative practice as a means with which the unloading of the unconscious can occur and the psychological health of the practitioner can therefore be fostered.

Nevertheless, this discussion of a therapeutic model of American religion is not wholly adequate to interpreting the way self-awareness is addressed in the practice of Centering Prayer. While the therapeutic orientation of this practice is at times pronounced, and concern for the self obviously plays a role in this, there is also a great emphasis in Centering Prayer literature that contemplation is an experience in which all concern with and even awareness of the self disappears. Thus, in the Centering Prayer tradition there is both the concern for the health of the self which undertakes this practice, and the ideal of a contemplative experience in which the self is completely forgotten.

Turning to the contemplative practice of Christian Meditation, what is most characteristic of the view of the self in this movement is an emphasis upon the method of contemplative prayer acting as a means by which the practitioner may reduce and even transcend thought, including thought that is self-reflexive. This idea is expressed throughout John Main’s writing. Main’s fundamental teaching is that the method of Christian Meditation, in which the practitioner silently repeats a single-word verbal formula (or “mantra,” as Main refers to it), provides a means with which to overcome thoughts about

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<sup>83</sup>Roof, 40.

oneself. One of the ways Main explains this process is with the concept of renunciation. Through this contemplative practice, Main writes, “we renounce thought, imagination, even the self-consciousness itself; the matrix of language and reflection.”<sup>84</sup>

While Main claims that repetition of the mantra allows the practitioner to overcome all thoughts, he gives particular attention to the importance of overcoming those thoughts in which attention is focused upon oneself. For example, he writes that

meditation will also teach you to turn away from your self, to rise above your own thoughts, to be detached from your own self-consciousness, vanities, fears, and desires. It will lead you to turn naturally beyond that to something much greater than you can ever find in all the analysis or self-obsession our culture rates so highly. You have begun a journey through the undergrowth of the ego and the way through is the way of the mantra . . . and it is the mantra above all that takes your attention off yourself, that cuts through self-consciousness.”<sup>85</sup>

The teaching here is rather straightforward—through employing the mantra in meditation, the practitioner’s ordinary mode of thinking is transcended for a time. The result is that reflection upon the self ceases.

But Main suggests that the significance of this contemplative method is not only that it reduces thoughts about the self. By having his attention taken off himself, the practitioner is being prepared for mystical union with God. Christian Meditation can lead to this experience precisely because in this practice one no longer views himself as a distinct and individual being; rather, he comes to understand himself as being connected with the divine presence. Main writes that “meditation is a sure way of losing your own life, losing your consciousness of yourself as an autonomously separate, separated entity. In losing it you find

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<sup>84</sup>Main, *Christian Meditation*, 33.

<sup>85</sup>Main, *The Way of Unknowing*, 33.

yourself at one with God and at one with all creation because you are now at last one with yourself. Your consciousness is no longer divided, no longer confused. It is simplified. It is one in God.”<sup>86</sup> These statements suggest that the method of Christian Meditation provides a means with which thoughts about the self can be suspended during the time one does this practice. This renunciation of self also leads to a new perception of oneself as being united with the divine. In other words, contemplative practice is the means to experience mystical union through self-transcendence.

The topic of the place of the self in Christian Meditation is also addressed by Laurence Freeman, another leader of this movement. Like Main, Freeman emphasizes that the practice of Christian Meditation is a way to reduce thoughts about the self and take one’s focus of attention away from oneself:

During the time of meditation remember that you are not concerned with any of the details of your life. You are concerned with them in a very real way but you are not consciously concerned with them. You are not dealing with your plans, short or long-term. You are not analysing the past. You are not turning over your problems looking for new angles and new solutions. You are not worrying yourself once more with your anxieties, new ones or old ones. You are concerned with deepening your consciousness, with expanding and purifying your spirit.<sup>87</sup>

This statement reveals a certain complexity in the way this practice is understood to impact the practitioner’s sense of himself. On the one hand, Freeman places a great deal of emphasis upon contemplative practice as a way to overcome thoughts of and reflection upon the self. On the other hand, he states that this surpassing of thoughts about the self is simultaneously a “deepening,” “expanding,” and “purifying” of the self at some level. The use of such

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<sup>86</sup>Main, *The Way of Unknowing*, 34.

<sup>87</sup>Laurence Freeman, *The Selfless Self* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 111-112.

language expresses the importance of transcending conscious thought about the self, while retaining a concern with the self which is understood to be transformed by this practice.

Freeman describes this transformation in terms of a set of idealized qualities:

We know that we are progressing spiritually from deep changes taking place in ourselves: a freeing from fear, the deep fears that we always ran away from or suppressed, a lifting of anxiety that seemed to be endless and causeless, an ending to loneliness, a newfound capacity for solitude, a new zeal for creativity, a sense of joyfulness in the ordinary things of life, and above all a new spirit of love.<sup>88</sup>

Similar to the description of the fruits of Centering Prayer, Freeman suggest that there are certain changes in oneself which proceed from the practice of Christian Meditation.

Nevertheless, Freeman also maintains that Christian Meditation is oriented more to self-transcendence than self-awareness. The practitioner becomes less concerned with himself, even as these characteristics of the transformed self develop:

As we meditate we become less self-conscious and therefore less self-analytical. And so, the paradox of growth in meditation is that we become less immediately or self-consciously aware of our progress *as* we progress. We experience growth more through contact with others than by thinking about ourselves. We come to know more about ourselves from the knowledge that other people have of us than from our own introspection.<sup>89</sup>

In this description of the transformation of the self arising from the practice of Christian Meditation, there is both a concern for the development and transformation of the self, as well as a desire to leave behind thoughts about oneself.

### **Conclusion**

Having considered how the self is conceptualized in the discourse of present-day Christian contemplative literature, it may now be asked how this compares with the

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<sup>88</sup>Freeman, *The Selfless Self*, 142.

<sup>89</sup>Freeman, *The Selfless Self*, 142.

perspective on the self which is expressed in the work of the *Cloud* author. There are both considerable differences and similarities between these medieval and present-day contemplative texts. Present-day Christian contemplative literature, which is based in part upon the *Cloud*, nevertheless differs from that text in the way it gives attention to the self as an object of knowledge, scrutiny, and transformation. This can be seen with particular clarity in the discussion of the effects upon the self which are understood to follow from contemplative practice. In its use of therapeutic language to describe contemplation, present-day Christian contemplative literature gives substantial attention to the self and the way it is healed of its past negative emotional experiences through contemplative practice. Similarly, in the discussion of the fruits of contemplation, attention is given to the self in terms of the way a person is transformed through contemplative practice.

This emphasis upon self-awareness stands in rather stark contrast to the *Cloud*. In the *Cloud*, reflection upon the self does play a role in the preliminary spiritual exercises which precede contemplation. When this self-reflection occurs, however, it is not directed to what makes one a unique individual; rather, it is reflection upon a more generalized human nature in which one shares, and the relationship of this to the goal of union with God. Furthermore, in his description of the experience of contemplation, the *Cloud* author insists that the self, and all the means of reflecting upon and scrutinizing the self, must be hidden under the cloud of forgetting if one is to come to the mystical consciousness of the cloud of unknowing.

Nevertheless, there is also a significant degree of similarity between the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative literature. For all the discussion in this chapter about how the self is conceptualized in these two contexts, it is especially important to remember

that both the *Cloud* and the contemplative texts of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation claim that contemplation is an experience in which the self is, at least for a time, forgotten. Self-awareness is transcended in favor of mystical consciousness of the divine. The practices which precede mystical experience, and the effects which result from it, may involve self-reflection in some form. Yet in the experience of union with God itself, all sense of self is surpassed. In their emphasis upon this, both the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative literature claim that contemplative practice is ultimately a practice of transcendence of the self.

Beyond the particular case of the *Cloud* or the present-day Christian contemplative movements which are based upon it, this discussion of the place of the self in contemplation has a more general methodological implication for the study of mysticism. It suggests that it is important to give attention to two related, though perhaps distinct, aspects of a particular mystical tradition. The first is the mystical experience itself which might be understood as the focal point of the tradition. The second is the more comprehensive mystical process which includes the practices that are performed in preparation for this experience, and the effects in one's life which follow from it.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>This discussion of mysticism under the categories of process and experience is suggested by Bernard McGinn in his attempt to formulate a definition of mysticism (*The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi). The conception of mysticism as a process and as an experience will be further explored below in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5  
THE “WORK” OF CONTEMPLATION: ON THE PLACE OF PRACTICE  
IN INTERPRETING MYSTICISM

At a number of places in the *Cloud*, contemplation is referred to as a “work.”<sup>1</sup> This characterization suggests that the author understands contemplation as something which the aspiring contemplative does, as a practice in which he engages. Now that the appropriation of the *Cloud* in present-day Christian contemplative movements has been discussed, this chapter will attempt to draw some conclusions regarding the implications of this appropriation for how the category of mysticism is understood. In particular, it will consider the significance of understanding practice as a fundamental aspect of mysticism.

In the general introduction to his multivolume history of Western Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn offers a definition of mysticism. He begins his description of mysticism with this statement: “I prefer to give a sense of how I understand the term by discussing it under three headings: mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God.”<sup>2</sup> Taking up each component of his tripartite definition, McGinn gives

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., *Cloud*, 16/10.

<sup>2</sup>McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xv-xvi.

some sense of the various aspects which he understands to be included in the category of mysticism.

With regard to the first of these, McGinn states that mysticism must be seen in relation to the specific religious tradition in which it takes place, rather than being viewed as a general phenomenon abstracted from any definite context. He writes that “mysticism is only one part or element of a concrete religion and any particular religious personality.”<sup>3</sup>

A second component of mysticism are the practices which precede and the effects which follow from the mystical experience itself. In addressing this second aspect, McGinn formulates a comprehensive description of mysticism which includes more than just mystical experience. As he writes,

Although the essential note—or, better, goal—of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit, everything that leads up to and prepares for this encounter, as well as all that flows from or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual in the belief community, is also mystical, even if in a secondary sense.<sup>4</sup>

The third component of McGinn’s definition of mysticism is perhaps the least novel, in that here he identifies mystical experience proper as being part of what is meant by mysticism. He describes this third aspect as “the consciousness of . . . what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”<sup>5</sup> While McGinn includes mystical experience in

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<sup>3</sup>McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi. For this part of his description of mysticism, McGinn draws upon Baron Friedrich von Hugel’s understanding of religion as being comprised of institutional, intellectual, and mystical elements. Cf. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 294.

<sup>4</sup>McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup>McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii. It should be noted that even in this aspect of mysticism, McGinn distinguishes his description of consciousness of the immediate



his description of mysticism, the rationale behind his tripartite definition is an attempt to situate mystical experience within a broader context, in relation first to the particular religious tradition within which the experience occurs, and second to the specific practices and effects which lead to and follow from this experience.

McGinn's description of mysticism is particularly useful to this discussion of the *Cloud* and its present-day appropriation because of this comprehensive perspective. More specifically, consideration of the practices leading to and the effects following from mystical experience is relevant to a discussion of Christian contemplative movements which base their methods in part upon the *Cloud*, because these movements place a great deal of emphasis upon this broader context in which mystical experience occurs.

This concern for a more comprehensive view in interpreting mysticism is also expressed by Peter Moore in his updating of the entry "Mysticism" for the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Moore writes that "the varieties of mystical practice tend to receive less scholarly attention than the varieties of experience or doctrine."<sup>6</sup> By "mystical practice," Moore means "anything pertaining to the training of body and mind, whether as elements of the mystic's general way of life or as part of the more immediate conditions of the mystical experience."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Moore claims that an overemphasis upon mystical

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or direct presence of God from a less developed notion of "mystical experience." Cf. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvii-xx.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 6357. In his study of contemporary American spirituality, Robert Wuthnow also suggests that practices have not received adequate attention in scholarship on spirituality (16).

<sup>7</sup>Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," 6357.

experience in scholarship on this subject leads to a lack of consideration of those practices which precede the experience: “The tendency to neglect mystical techniques in the philosophical analysis of mystical experience is a further consequence of viewing this experience as if it were somehow a self-contained nucleus.”<sup>8</sup> He writes that such a consideration of mystical practices “would have to include the whole programme of ethical, ascetical, and technical practices typically followed by mystics within religious traditions.”<sup>9</sup> As examples of these types of programs, Moore cites Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, Patanjali’s *Yoga-sutras*, John Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, and Teresa of Avila’s *Way of Perfection*.<sup>10</sup> The *Cloud* bears some similarity to the type of text Moore describes, in that it also discusses particular mystical practices which are enacted within the context of Christian life.

In this discussion of the implications of the appropriation of the *Cloud* in present-day Christian contemplative movements, particular attention will be given, following the suggestion of scholars like McGinn and Moore, to the role which practice plays in this process. To do this, this chapter will address: the way genre classification figures into the interpretation of the *Cloud*, descriptions of mysticism which emphasize the role of practice, characteristics of mystical practice, shifts in the understanding of mysticism between the medieval and contemporary periods, and the implications of this discussion for theories of

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<sup>8</sup>Peter Moore, “Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 112.

<sup>9</sup>Moore, “Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique,” 113.

<sup>10</sup>Moore, “Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique,” 128n18.

mysticism and the comparative study of this subject. In addressing these topics, it will be asked how this discussion can further develop an understanding of what is meant by the term “mysticism.”

### **The Importance of Genre in Reading Mystical Literature**

One way to approach the *Cloud* and its present-day appropriation is through discussion of the genre of this text. That reflection upon the genre of a given text is important in its interpretation is not a particularly novel suggestion.<sup>11</sup> But when such a reflection is applied to the *Cloud*, it does say something about how the mysticism of this text may be described, and it provides a lens through which to read the present-day appropriation of this text.

One attempt to categorize the genres of medieval Christian mystical texts can be found in Bernard McGinn’s differentiation between monastic and vernacular theologies.<sup>12</sup> While the *Cloud* does not fall definitively into either of these categories, a consideration of these different types of medieval mystical writing does help in reflecting upon the meaning of this text.

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<sup>11</sup>E.g., Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 166. Having noted the importance of genre, however, it is also important to remember that categories of genre classification are themselves transitory and open to interpretation. See Caroline D. Eckhardt, “Genre,” in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 183.

<sup>12</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200-1350*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 19. In addition to these two categories, McGinn also names a third, scholastic theology, which he describes elsewhere as “the form of intellectual appropriation of faith created in the urban schools of northern Europe, which were mostly under the control of local bishops” (*The Growth of Mysticism*, 367). In what follows, the *Cloud* will be discussed as it relates to monastic and vernacular, rather than scholastic, theologies.

One of the ways McGinn identifies these categories of medieval theology is in terms of the various literary genres through which each is expressed. Monastic theology is characterized by the genres of “biblical commentary, letter-treatise, and written rhetorical sermons.”<sup>13</sup> Vernacular theology includes vernacular writings in the literary genres of hagiography, visionary accounts, personification dialogues, poetry, brief treatises, letters, and sermons.<sup>14</sup> While the *Cloud* was written in the vernacular rather than ecclesiastical Latin, the question of where this text falls in terms of monastic and vernacular theologies is not easily answered. McGinn suggests that there are two difficulties involved in distinguishing between monastic and vernacular theologies when considering particular medieval mystical texts. First, some texts are characteristic of vernacular theology in terms of style and content, though they were written in Latin. Second, some texts originally written in the vernacular were subsequently translated into Latin so that they might be accessible to a larger audience than those who were fluent in the text’s original language.<sup>15</sup>

The *Cloud* is a text which bridges the categories of monastic and vernacular theology in ways similar to those described by McGinn. First, while the *Cloud* was written in the vernacular, in terms of its literary form and content it is also consistent with monastic theology. Second, the *Cloud* is an example of a text which was written in the vernacular but was also translated into Latin. Of the nineteen manuscripts in which the text is found, two are

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<sup>13</sup>McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>14</sup>McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 20-21.

<sup>15</sup>McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 22-23.

Latin translations of the original Middle English.<sup>16</sup> Thus, assigning the *Cloud* to either of these categories is a complex task.

That being said, the *Cloud* shares certain distinctive characteristics with monastic theology. For Jean Leclercq, the defining characteristic of monastic theology, and what differentiates it from scholastic theology, is its mystical orientation: “The great difference between the theology of the schools and that of the monasteries resides in the importance which the latter accord the experience of union with God. This experience in the cloister is both the principle and the aim of the quest.”<sup>17</sup> The form which monastic theology often takes is indicative of this experiential concern. Leclercq says that monastic writings “are generally preceded by a letter of dedication, and the treatises themselves often appear to be expanded letters,”<sup>18</sup> and that they are “directed to the practice of the Christian life.”<sup>19</sup> This description bears great resemblance to the form the *Cloud* takes. What is of primary importance is not the particular classification of the text as monastic or vernacular, so much as the characteristics of the text that are highlighted by its genre. In the *Cloud*, a teacher gives instruction to a student in the spiritual life, and this instruction is oriented to the practice of contemplative prayer and the experience of mystical union. In the words of Robert Forman,

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<sup>16</sup>The two manuscripts containing Latin translations of the *Cloud* are Pembroke College Library, MS 221 and Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 856.

<sup>17</sup>Leclercq, 212.

<sup>18</sup>Leclercq, 153.

<sup>19</sup>Leclercq, 154.

the *Cloud* author plays a “principal role as a spiritual director who was preparing his young reader and others like him for certain mystical experiences.”<sup>20</sup>

Another way of discussing the relationship between genre and ways of understanding and describing mysticism is the formulation of taxonomies of mystical literature. Two such taxonomies are those proposed by Carl Keller and Peter Moore. Both describe various forms of mystical literature in such a way that concern with mystical practice can be distinguished from mystical experience. Carl Keller defines “mystical writings” as “texts which discuss the path toward realization of the ultimate knowledge which each particular religion has to offer, and which contain statements about the nature of such knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> In this description, mystical literature concerns both the content of a particular body of knowledge and the “path” by which this knowledge is attained. In other words, one aspect of mystical literature is its concern with the practices with which mysticism is enacted.

Keller names a variety of genres of mystical literature. These include aphorisms, biographies, reports of visionary experiences, commentaries on earlier literature, dialogues, instructions, prayers, and poetry and fiction.<sup>22</sup> He asserts that in instructional mystical literature the personal experiences of the author are less important than are the ideas which

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<sup>20</sup>Robert K.C. Forman, “Mystical Experience in the *Cloud-Literature*,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium IV; Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 177.

<sup>21</sup>Carl A. Keller, “Mystical Literature,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 77.

<sup>22</sup>Keller, 80-95.

the author is communicating in his text.<sup>23</sup> This distinction Keller draws between experience and doctrine can be applied, with slight modification, to the *Cloud*. The *Cloud* author is not so much concerned with reporting about his own mystical experiences; rather, he is interested in teaching his reader a method of mystical practice.

A similar taxonomy is offered by Peter Moore in his description of what he calls “autobiographical,” “impersonal,” and “indirect” texts.<sup>24</sup> Moore distinguishes between these types of mystical literature in terms of their respective handling of the issue of mystical experience. Autobiographical texts describe the particular mystical experiences of the author. Impersonal texts give more general accounts of mystical experiences.<sup>25</sup> Indirect texts, however, “are not mainly concerned with mystical experience as such, but rather with the truths or realities to which mystical experience gives access, or with the ideals and practices on which it is based; they allude to mystical experience rather than describe it.”<sup>26</sup> In this taxonomy, there is also a distinction drawn between texts that describe mystical experience and those that address issues related to mystical doctrine or practice.

An appreciation of the particular concerns of various genres of mystical literature allows for a shift in emphasis from mystical experience to mystical practice. Because the *Cloud* is a text in which a good deal of attention is given to providing instruction (in terms of

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<sup>23</sup>Keller, 91.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Moore, “Christian Mysticism and Interpretation: Some Philosophical Issues Illustrated in the Study of the Medieval English Mystics,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium IV; Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1987*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 159.

<sup>25</sup>Moore, “Christian Mysticism and Interpretation,” 159-160.

<sup>26</sup>Moore, “Christian Mysticism and Interpretation,” 159-160.

Carl Keller's taxonomy of mystical literature) and to discussing practice rather than narrating accounts of mystical experiences (in terms of Peter Moore's analysis), attention to the genre of this text suggests that a discussion of mystical practice rather than just experience is important in understanding the text itself, those present-day contemplative movements which follow from it, and mysticism more generally as a category of discussion and study.

### **Practice and the Definition of Mysticism**

The discussion of genre suggests that it can reveal something about the understanding of mysticism which underlies a given mystical text. In the case of the *Cloud*, the genre of this text suggests that mysticism involves more than just experience. Mystical practice is also a prominent feature of the *Cloud*. It is a text which addresses what one can do to prepare for consciousness of the presence of God. Similarly, present-day Christian contemplative movements emphasize the role of practice in spiritual life. Interpreted in this way, this medieval text and these present-day movements can contribute to an understanding of the more general category of mysticism.

The place of practice in describing mysticism is strongly emphasized in the work of Agehananda Bharati.<sup>27</sup> It should be acknowledged at the outset that Bharati's understanding of mysticism is in many respects quite different from what is found in the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative literature; nevertheless, he does have something to contribute to a discussion of how this contemplative Christian mysticism may be understood.

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<sup>27</sup>An introduction to Bharati's view of mysticism can be found in Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 207-249.



At a number of places in his book *The Light at the Center*, Bharati defines mysticism. These definitions are cumulative in that he often adds new characteristics to those he has previously named. In an early definition, Bharati describes a mystic as a person who desires a particular type of experience: “[The] material part of my definition is one specific experience out of a vast number of religious experiences: it is the person’s *intuition of numerical oneness with the cosmic absolute, with the universal matrix, or with any essence stipulated by the various theological and speculative systems of the world*. This alone is the mystical effort.”<sup>28</sup> Bharati’s emphasis upon mystical experience here is clear, yet the allusion to “effort” implies that a description of mysticism must also include the means with which one pursues this experience. It must include, in other words, the issue of mystical practice.

What Bharati implies in this early description of mysticism is made more explicit in a later definition. Here Bharati includes the mystical practices in which a person may engage. He describes a mystic as “*a seeker of intuitive union with the cosmic ground who chooses experiments which would lead to such intuition*.”<sup>29</sup> This description expresses recognition of the importance of methods or practices (“experiments”) which lead one to mystical experience. Practice as well as experience constitute this understanding of mysticism.

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<sup>28</sup>Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 25.

<sup>29</sup>Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 28. In describing mysticism, Bharati also offers two qualifications which, while not central to the issue of practice as it is being discussed here, do suggest some divergence between his own understanding of mysticism and that found in Christian contemplative spirituality. First, Bharati claims that the methods mystics use are most properly “ecstatic” and “euphoric” methods (e.g., 28-29). Second, Bharati states that a genuine Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mysticism might not be possible because these traditions view complete oneness with the absolute as an heretical proposition. Consequently, Bharati suggests that the Indian tradition offers a better example of “true” mysticism (28).

Later, Bharati elaborates on this idea that practice is fundamental to what is meant by mysticism. He writes, “mysticism, as I said, before, is also a skill. Skills can and must be learned.”<sup>30</sup> Bharati compares aptitude in mysticism to the development of one’s skills in playing football or the piano, and he writes that “the causal explanation of the mystical event is an analysis of training . . . it is the result of some sort of discipline.”<sup>31</sup> Such statements suggest that discussion of practice is as important as discussion of experience in describing mysticism.

Finally, Bharati’s emphasis upon the importance of mystical practice is reflected in his claim that the Indian yogic tradition is the paradigm for all mysticism. The significance of this tradition is that it gives the practitioner something to do; it provides a person with a specific set of techniques which can be learned and practiced as a means of preparing for mystical experience. Bharati writes that “the Indian yogi has a tremendous advantage over the mystics of the non-yogic traditions. While the latter have to wait for ‘grace,’ or wait in despair, the Indian yogi and his disciples in India and abroad have the conviction that they own the technical know-how, the way to get there.”<sup>32</sup> Here again, the centrality of practice in Bharati’s conception of mysticism is apparent.

This last statement calls for some consideration of how Bharati’s description of mysticism both diverges from and corresponds with that found in present-day Christian contemplative literature. In at least one respect, these two perspectives are very different

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<sup>30</sup>Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 115.

<sup>31</sup>Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 115-116.

<sup>32</sup>Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 169-170.

from one another. In this Christian contemplative literature, contemplative practice is sometimes specifically described as a “waiting” upon God’s presence; more generally, these Christian contemplative traditions understand God’s “grace” as fundamental to the occurrence of mystical experience.<sup>33</sup> The Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements claim that consciousness of God comes about as a result of God’s initiative and not through a mechanism controlled by human technique.

Nevertheless, these present-day Christian contemplative traditions also acknowledge the important role which human activity and practice play in mysticism. This is expressed in the suggestion that contemplative practice prepares the practitioner for mystical experience, even if the experience itself is the result of divine rather than human action. For example, John Main writes that “there is a way for us to prepare ourselves for the emergence, in a natural process which is itself the gift of God, of the light of the Spirit. The mantra stills the mind and summons all our faculties to the resolution of a single point; that point we know as the condition of complete simplicity which demands not less than everything.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Thomas Keating explains that the purpose of Centering Prayer is to prepare for mystical experience: “Centering prayer is a method designed to . . . facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>On contemplative practice as waiting on the divine presence, see Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 65; and Main, *Christian Meditation*, 26. On the priority of God’s grace in contemplation, see Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 132; and Main, *Word into Silence*, 37.

<sup>34</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 44.

<sup>35</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.

There is, then, some convergence of Bharati's emphasis upon mystical practice and what is found in present-day Christian contemplative movements. Just as Bharati underscores the importance of method in the Indian yogic tradition, the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation traditions emphasize that they offer persons something to do—a practice—as a means of readying themselves for the mystical experience of God's presence. As Keating writes, “Spiritual disciplines, both East and West, are based upon the hypothesis that there is something that we can do to enter upon the journey to divine union once we have been touched by the realization that such a state exists.”<sup>36</sup> While these Christian contemplative movements would not claim that spiritual disciplines compel God to grant mystical experience, they do suggest that practice plays an important role in Christian mysticism.

Beyond particular statements that are made in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation literature regarding the relative roles of human activity and divine grace, the genre of this literature is itself an important consideration in this discussion. As with the *Cloud* in its medieval setting, present-day Christian contemplative literature can be characterized as literature of spiritual direction. It is written by a teacher (in many cases a person in professed religious life) for prospective students. This literature includes instruction in methods of spiritual practice and discussion of how these practices can lead to or prepare one for a mystical experience of God. The genre of these texts indicates that they attach considerable significance to the role of practice.

In an essay on the Centering Prayer tradition, Gustave Reininger describes Thomas Keating's work as “not merely theoretical or scholarly but practical—meant both as a *vade*

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<sup>36</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 34.

*mecum*, a ‘how to’ approach to contemplative prayer, and a ‘what happens’ with regular practice, which is the contemplative dimension of the spiritual journey.”<sup>37</sup> This assessment of present-day Christian contemplative spirituality also functions as a lens through which earlier sources of the Christian contemplative tradition are read. Reininger describes medieval English mysticism in terms which are quite similar to those he uses for Keating’s work: “The fourteenth-century English mystics—the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich—emphasized practices leading to divine union.”<sup>38</sup> This description of both medieval and present-day Christian contemplative literature suggests that an emphasis upon practice—a “how to” approach—is central to the way mysticism is conceptualized.

### **The Characteristics of Mystical Practice**

Having suggested that the issue of practice is important for interpreting mysticism, the implications of this for addressing the present-day appropriation of the *Cloud* can now be considered. In his book *After Heaven: Spirituality in American Since the 1950s*, sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow describes what he calls a “practice-oriented spirituality,”<sup>39</sup> by which he means a way of being religious in which engagement in spiritual practices is of

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<sup>37</sup>Gustave Reininger, “The Christian Contemplative Tradition and Centering Prayer,” in *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, ed. Gustave Reininger (New York: Continuum, 1998), 27.

<sup>38</sup>Reininger, 31.

<sup>39</sup>Wuthnow, 16. Wuthnow argues that a spirituality of practice provides an alternative to spiritualities of “dwelling” and “seeking.” Of these, Wuthnow writes that “a spirituality of dwelling emphasizes *habitation*: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell . . . A spirituality of seeking emphasizes *negotiation*: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting” (3-4).

primary importance. The discussion that follows will use Wuthnow's concept to interpret the present-day Christian contemplative tradition.

Wuthnow suggests that one of the things practices do is connect the personal spirituality of the individual person with a larger religious tradition:

Spiritual practices put responsibility squarely on individuals to spend time on a regular basis worshipping, communing with, listening to, and attempting to understand the ultimate source of sacredness in their lives. Spiritual practices can be performed in the company of others, and they are inevitably embedded in religious institutions, but they also must be performed individually if they are to be personally meaningful and enriching.<sup>40</sup>

While the emphasis in this statement is on the individual element in practice, it should not be overlooked that Wuthnow links this to a communal, institutional element.<sup>41</sup> This model of practice-oriented spirituality is well-suited to describing the contemplative movements of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation.

In Centering Prayer literature, this connection between a practice performed by the individual person and Christian thought and tradition is evident. One of the ways this is expressed is through references to Christian theological concepts. Thomas Keating identifies what he considers to be three fundamental theological principles which underlie the practice of Centering Prayer. These are faith in the Holy Trinity that dwells within human beings,<sup>42</sup> human participation in the Paschal mystery of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection,<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Wuthnow, 16.

<sup>41</sup>Wuthnow, 188-189.

<sup>42</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 25.

<sup>43</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 26. Cf. Reininger, 32-33.

and the relationship of Centering Prayer to the formation of community.<sup>44</sup> In referring to these theological principles, Keating situates the practice of Centering Prayer firmly within the context of Christian thought. This is an example of spiritual practice as Wuthnow describes it, an activity performed by a person which relates that person to a religious tradition.

It is not only theological concepts which Keating uses to link the practice of Centering Prayer and Christian tradition. He also situates this practice within the historical tradition of Christian mystical figures and texts. Keating writes that “contemplative prayer enjoys an ancient and venerable history within Christianity,” and he names a long list of figures from various periods of that history, including the Desert Fathers, John Cassian, the pseudo-Dionysius, the Hesychasts of the Orthodox church, the fourteenth-century English mystics (the author of the *Cloud*, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich), John of the Cross, and others. Among these figures, Keating specifies that Centering Prayer is based especially on the *Cloud* and John of the Cross.<sup>45</sup> In this way, Keating connects the practice of Centering Prayer with a long tradition of Christian contemplative teaching. As with the theological principles Keating discusses, this is a means of situating this spiritual practice within Christian religious tradition.

This relating of contemplative practice to figures from Christian tradition is also evident in the literature of the Christian Meditation movement. As has been seen, John Main connects the practice of repeating a verbal formula in meditation most specifically to John

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<sup>44</sup>Keating, *Centering Prayer*, videotape transcription, 27.

<sup>45</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 44.

Cassian and the *Cloud*.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Main identifies passages from the Christian scriptures which support this method of contemplative practice. He mentions the parable of the man who prays in the temple using the single phrase “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,” and Jesus’ teaching that one should not pray in many words.<sup>47</sup> Main also appeals to Christian tradition to explain his suggestion that the Christian Meditation practitioner use the word *maranatha* as a verbal formula for this practice. Main writes that the practitioner should “choose a word that has been hallowed over the centuries by our Christian tradition,” and he explains that *maranatha* is found in the Christian scriptures and early Christian liturgies.<sup>48</sup>

While the contemplative practices of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are undertaken by individual persons in the present, they are also connected to theological doctrines and past contemplative traditions of Christianity. In this way, they are consistent with Robert Wuthnow’s description of a practice-oriented spirituality which connects the elements of personal practice and public religious tradition. Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are not contemplative practices in some abstract or general sense; rather, they are practices in which make use of the language, doctrines, and historical figures and texts of Christianity.

In addition to this linkage of personal practice and public tradition, Wuthnow discusses a number of other characteristics of spiritual practice. He defines spiritual practice

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<sup>46</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 9-10.

<sup>47</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 10. Cf. Luke 18:9-14; Matthew 6:7-8.

<sup>48</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 11.



as “a cluster of intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred.”<sup>49</sup> This description suggests that spiritual practices provide the practitioner with a particular activity in which to engage. Furthermore, these activities are entered into intentionally; that is, a person makes a conscious decision to undertake a particular spiritual practice. Wuthnow writes that “intentional spiritual practices are . . . generally ones that take a significant amount of time and energy . . . people who are seriously committed to cultivating their devotional life allocate this time explicitly to focusing on their relationship to God.”<sup>50</sup>

The importance of dedicating time and energy to spiritual practice is emphasized in the instructions for Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation. These instructions include details regarding the amount of time one should commit to these practices. As has been seen, both movements teach that one should engage in formal periods of contemplative prayer for twenty minutes, twice daily.<sup>51</sup> Main also underscores the level of commitment which the practice of Christian Meditation requires: “If you want to meditate, the first thing you require is to be serious about it . . . To see this as a serious invitation will lead you to the deepest personal actualization of your potential. If you want to learn to meditate, you must put aside the time for it every day of your life. Ideally you should find a time every morning and every evening.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Wuthnow, 170.

<sup>50</sup>Wuthnow, 177.

<sup>51</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 141; and Main, *Word into Silence*, [v].

<sup>52</sup>Main, *The Way of Unknowing*, 48.

Wuthnow also describes spiritual practice as a social activity, and he explains that this social dimension is present even when a practice is not explicitly tied to a particular religious community and/or when this practice is performed on an individual basis. He writes that “spiritual practices are inevitably *social*. Even someone who meditates alone is in this sense engaged in a social activity. This person’s style of meditation probably follows some tradition; it was passed on from mentor to pupil. The person may attend classes, read books, and discuss spirituality with people who practice in similar ways.”<sup>53</sup>

This social aspect of spiritual practice is reflected in the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements in a number of ways. There are organizations which have been established to promote these contemplative practices, provide information, and facilitate connections between practitioners. For Centering Prayer, this organization is Contemplative Outreach, Ltd. For Christian Meditation, it is The World Community for Christian Meditation. These organizations maintain websites where they provide information and products to practitioners and interested persons.<sup>54</sup> The Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements have a number of books and recorded lectures published by teachers of their respective traditions which instruct and guide persons in the practice of their particular form of contemplative prayer. In addition to their international organizations, both the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements include networks of local groups in which persons gather to discuss and practice contemplative prayer. The organization

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<sup>53</sup>Wuthnow, 181.

<sup>54</sup>Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org> (accessed October 25, 2010); and The World Community for Christian Meditation: <http://www.wccm.org> (accessed September 9, 2010).

promoting Christian Meditation sponsors an annual international meeting for its practitioners. The organization promoting Centering Prayer coordinates a number of workshops and retreats to introduce and support persons in this practice. These include Centering Prayer Introductory and Weekend Retreats, Intensive Centering Prayer Retreats (of between five and ten days), and nine-month courses in Contemplative Living.<sup>55</sup> In all of these activities, the Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation movements include a communal aspect in their practices. While the particular contemplative method is performed by an individual person, the practice is supported in a variety of ways by a community of teachers and fellow practitioners.

A final characteristic of spiritual practice which Wuthnow discusses is what he calls the “moral dimension,” by which he means that these practices have a significance that extends into the areas of decision-making and action in the life of the practitioner. Wuthnow writes that

practices involve a shaping of the person as well—becoming habituated to the practice to the point that one can exercise wisdom when new situations necessitate making difficult judgments, learning how to get along with other practitioners, being willing to pay the costs that may be associated with one’s principles, and knowing how to relate the practice responsibly to one’s other obligations and areas of life.<sup>56</sup>

As was seen in the last chapter, the connection of spiritual practice with one’s decisions and actions apart from the practice itself is expressed in the teaching on the “fruits” of Centering Prayer. Basil Pennington writes that the effect of Centering Prayer is manifested most clearly in the way the practitioner’s life is changed by this practice: “If we are faithful

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<sup>55</sup>This list of activities is taken from the newsletter for Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.: *Contemplative Outreach News* 21 (2006).

<sup>56</sup>Wuthnow, 184.

to this form of prayer, making it a regular part of our day, we very quickly come to discern—and often others discern it even more quickly—the maturing in our lives of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, benignity, kindness, gentleness—all the fruits of the Spirit.”<sup>57</sup> Thomas Keating writes that “the principle effects of centering prayer are experienced in daily life, not in the period of centering prayer itself.”<sup>58</sup> This discussion of the fruits of Centering Prayer is an example of Wuthnow’s suggestion that the effects of a spiritual practice extend out from the practice itself and influence the daily life of the practitioner.

This analysis of present-day Christian contemplative practices has broader implications for interpreting the category of mysticism. Considering not only mystical experience, but also the mystical practice which surrounds and provides a context for that experience, provides for a more comprehensive view of a particular mystical tradition. It shows the way mysticism is connected with a religious tradition, the way its practice calls for action on the part of the practitioner, and the way its effects are felt. In discussing mysticism, it is important to consider much more than mystical experience itself; rather, all that precedes, surrounds, and follows from that experience are also part of this subject.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Continuity of Medieval and Present-Day Christian Mysticism**

When discussing what is meant by the term “mysticism,” an issue which needs to be addressed is the continuity (or lack thereof) over time of the meaning of this word. This issue

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<sup>57</sup>Pennington, “Centering Prayer,” 20.

<sup>58</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 141.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi.

is especially relevant given the subject under discussion—the appropriation of a medieval mystical text for present-day practice. The discussion that follows will consider two studies that claim there is a significant disjunction between how mysticism was understood in the medieval Christian context as compared with the present-day. While these studies provide an important and necessary reminder that the meaning of Christian mysticism has been recontextualized over the centuries, it can also be suggested that such changes do not rule out a continuity of meaning between medieval and present-day Christian mysticism.

The first of these studies is Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Jantzen's argument begins with the claim that Christian mysticism is a social construction. Consequently, what mysticism means in Christianity has changed radically over time. According to Jantzen, what modern philosophers understand by the term mysticism is completely different from what medieval mystics themselves held to be important.<sup>60</sup>

Jantzen describes what the earliest meanings of the term mysticism were in the Christian context. In the Greek mystery religions which preceded early Christianity, “mystics” were persons who had been initiated into the rituals of the mystery religions and who did not speak of these rituals or of their initiation.<sup>61</sup> In early Christianity, the “mystical” referred to the “mystical meaning of scripture,” a level of meaning in the scriptural text

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<sup>60</sup>Jantzen, xiv. Jantzen's argument in this book is ultimately oriented to demonstrating that the social construction of Christian mysticism has been used as a tool for the subjugation of women. Of most interest for this discussion, however, is her claim for social construction itself, and her description of the shift in meaning of mysticism from the medieval to the present-day period.

<sup>61</sup>Jantzen, 27.

which was hidden beneath its literal meaning.<sup>62</sup> This understanding of the mystical likewise came to be applied to the rituals and symbols of the early Christian church.<sup>63</sup> In the context of early Christianity, the mystical referred to these secret and hidden levels of meaning of sacred texts and rituals.

Jantzen contrasts this early Christian understanding of mysticism with what this term has come to signify in modern discourse. She writes that “contemporary philosophers of religion have a clear idea that mystical experiences are private, subjective, intense psychological states.”<sup>64</sup> According to Jantzen, this psychologically-oriented definition of mysticism follows in large part from William James, who defined mystical experience with the characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.<sup>65</sup> Given this change in meaning, Jantzen concludes that “there has been a constantly shifting social and historical construction of mysticism.”<sup>66</sup>

This description of the modern social construction of mysticism as involving subjective experiences is pertinent to a discussion of present-day Christian contemplative practices. Jantzen writes that popular contemporary religious literature has a conception of spiritual practice which derives from this psychologically-oriented notion of mysticism:

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<sup>62</sup>Jantzen, 59.

<sup>63</sup>Jantzen, 86.

<sup>64</sup>Jantzen, 4.

<sup>65</sup>Jantzen, 7. Cf. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 299-301.

<sup>66</sup>Jantzen, 24.

If, for example, we look at some of the most widely sold books on prayer and spirituality, we find that the emphasis is on personal psychological well-being. Topics like anxiety, depression, and loneliness are regularly addressed, along with such matters as suffering, bereavement and sexual desires, all of which are treated as essentially private issues for an individual to work through in her or his own way, guided by the insights offered by the author of the book.<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, this conception of spirituality understands “prayer and spiritual exercises as strictly private, having to do with the relationship between the individual and the transcendent.”<sup>68</sup>

Jantzen explains that popular contemporary spirituality shares in the modern philosophical understanding of mysticism as involving subjective psychological experiences.<sup>69</sup>

Jantzen’s picture of contemporary spirituality does resemble the Christian contemplative tradition of Centering Prayer. This can be seen especially in Thomas Keating’s description of the psychological processes which are at work in the person who practices Centering Prayer. As has been discussed, Keating proposes a model for understanding the effects of this practice which explicitly uses the language of psychological therapy.<sup>70</sup> Keating describes contemplative practice as a therapeutic exercise: “The healing process is primarily the work of contemplative prayer, which, along with the homework of daily life, constitutes the Divine Therapy.”<sup>71</sup> It is clear that the model of psychological well-being plays an important role in Keating’s conception of the spiritual practice of Centering Prayer.

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<sup>67</sup>Jantzen, 18-19.

<sup>68</sup>Jantzen, 21.

<sup>69</sup>Jantzen, 21.

<sup>70</sup>E.g., Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 72.

<sup>71</sup>Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 75.

Yet it is also important to ask whether Jantzen's description of the contemporary conception of mysticism adequately interprets a Christian contemplative practice such as Centering Prayer. There are two reasons to suggest it does not. First, while Keating does describe the process of Centering Prayer in psychological terms, the description of this practice as being concerned with "private, subjective, intense psychological states," to use Jantzen's words, is not entirely accurate. As has been discussed, the practice of Centering Prayer is concerned not so much with experiences which arise during the time of contemplative practice as it is with the transformation of the practitioner's life outside of the practice. It would be a mistake to assume that this practice is only concerned with a private experience of God. On the contrary, much of the Centering Prayer literature discusses how the practice affects the practitioner's relationships with other persons.

A second reason to suggest that Jantzen's account of the contemporary conception of mysticism is not entirely satisfactory has to do with her contention that mysticism is a social construction. While I don't argue with this, the claim that mysticism is a social construction implies that contemporary constructions of mysticism are just as valid as, albeit different from, the earliest conceptions of this term in Christian tradition. If mysticism has no essence, as Jantzen argues, then a twentieth-century construction which includes psychological well-being is as much mysticism as an early Church understanding which emphasized the hidden levels of meaning found in sacred texts and rituals. Though significantly different, each can legitimately be called a form of Christian mysticism.

Another study that claims there is a disjunction between medieval and present-day conceptions of mysticism is Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian*



*Mysticism*. In this study, Turner addresses a shift in the understanding of apophatic mysticism over time, and he gives particular attention to the *Cloud* as one example of a medieval apophatic text. Like Jantzen, Turner begins by explaining that what a medieval author would have meant by “mysticism” is fundamentally different from how a present-day audience understands this term. In fact, Turner claims that these two conceptions are so far removed from each other that it is difficult to speak of a continuous tradition of Christian mysticism.<sup>72</sup>

The reason Turner argues that medieval and present-day conceptions of mysticism are so different has to do with the way a set of metaphors—such as “interiority,” “ascent,” “light and darkness,” and “oneness with God”—are employed in Christian apophatic spirituality.<sup>73</sup>

According to Turner,

whereas our employment of the metaphors of “inwardness” and “ascent” appears to be tied in with the achievement and the cultivation of a certain kind of experience—such as those recommended within the practice of what is called, nowadays, “centring” or “contemplative” prayer—the mediaeval employment of them was tied in with a “critique” of such religious experiences and practices. Whereas we appear to have “psychologized” the metaphors, the Neoplatonic mediaeval writer used the metaphors in an “apophatic” spirit to play down the value of the “experiential.”<sup>74</sup>

The crux of Turner’s argument is that medieval apophatic mysticism rejected the notion that a human being could have an experience of God, while present-day discussion of mysticism uses similar language and imagery to suggest the very possibility of this experience. In

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<sup>72</sup>Turner, 7.

<sup>73</sup>Turner, 1.

<sup>74</sup>Turner, 4.

making this claim, Turner specifically names the practice of Centering Prayer as a movement which has misread medieval Christian apophatic mysticism.

The discussion that follows will consider Turner's examination of the *Cloud* as an example of medieval apophatic mysticism. As the points Turner makes about the *Cloud* are addressed, they will in turn be compared with what is found in the Centering Prayer tradition. This will show that, while Turner does raise important issues regarding how mysticism is conceptualized in a medieval apophatic text such as the *Cloud*, there are nevertheless significant similarities between this text and the present-day contemplative practice of Centering Prayer which is based upon it.

As has been seen, the *Cloud* emphasizes forgetting, or "unknowing," ordinary modes of perception and thought, urging its reader to forget thoughts of creatures and even all spiritual thoughts.<sup>75</sup> Turner explains that this unknowing is a practice which must be actively undertaken by the contemplative:

The *Cloud* Author asks the disciple to be resolute in this negation of all cognitivity; nor is this resolution to be a merely passive determination to stay fast in it, for it must be an active work of denial and unknowing. For the *Cloud* Author, "unknowing" is an apophatic strategy, not a mere ignorance; it is an achievement of the work of "forgetting," a work which, as we shall see, is the normal routine of the spiritual life, a routine of progressive simplification and attenuation of the imagination and reason. To "unknow" is, for the *Cloud* Author, an active verb-form.<sup>76</sup>

It is not difficult to find parallels to this aspect of the *Cloud* in Centering Prayer literature, which likewise emphasizes forgetting and detachment from one's thoughts. As has been seen, the directions for Centering Prayer are concerned with how the practitioner is to

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<sup>75</sup>Turner, 195-196.

<sup>76</sup>Turner, 196-197.

handle thoughts which arise during the time of this practice. The “sacred word” is employed as a means to forget thoughts. Thomas Keating instructs, “Whenever you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.”<sup>77</sup> The various types of thoughts which must be forgotten include “the ordinary wanderings of the imagination,”<sup>78</sup> “any emotionally charged thought or image,”<sup>79</sup> “psychological insight,” an “urge to pray for someone,” “incredible inspiration,”<sup>80</sup> and self-reflective thought about one’s accomplishments in this practice.<sup>81</sup> Like the *Cloud* author, Keating teaches that all types of thought must be disregarded in this practice: “If you are going to practice centering prayer, the only way to do it is to ignore every thought.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the forgetting of thoughts is something the practitioner actively does through the recitation of the sacred word. In this, the Centering Prayer method involves a detachment from thought which is similar to Turner’s description of the *Cloud*.

A second point Turner makes in his analysis of the *Cloud* is that the author was concerned that his readers not pursue felt experiences of God as the goal of contemplative practice. He writes that the *Cloud* author “positively resists at least some of the manifestations of the affectivist imagery of touch, taste and smell,” because these have the

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<sup>77</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.

<sup>78</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 53.

<sup>79</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 56.

<sup>80</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 82.

<sup>81</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 87.

<sup>82</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 83.

potential of suggesting the possibility of a sensual experience of the divine.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Turner states that the *Cloud* author was concerned that the contemplative's love for God not be misinterpreted in experiential terms. He writes that the *Cloud* author "has little sympathy for the emotionalistic varieties of a florid 'affectivist' piety, which, he thought, too much understood the priority of love in terms of actual feelings of desire for God and seemed designed, in the spiritual practices in which it was manifest, for the cultivation of experienced phenomena of affectivity."<sup>84</sup> With these comments, Turner emphasizes that the *Cloud* author discourages experiences of God which involve one's senses and emotions.

With regard to this issue of the experience of God, the Centering Prayer tradition is in general agreement with the *Cloud* as Turner describes it. In Centering Prayer, the practitioner is instructed to disregard "felt" supernatural experiences. In his definition of contemplative prayer, Keating lists things which contemplation does not involve. He states that contemplation is not a "relaxation exercise,"<sup>85</sup> a "charismatic gift" such as speaking in tongues,<sup>86</sup> "parapsychological phenomena" ("precognition, knowledge of events at a distance, control over bodily processes such as heartbeat and breathing, out-of-body experiences, levitation, and other extraordinary sensory or psychic phenomena"),<sup>87</sup> or "mystical phenomena" ("bodily ecstasy, external and internal visions, external words, words

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<sup>83</sup>Turner, 202. Turner notes that the *Cloud* author's position was probably in some part a reaction to the sensual imagery used by Richard Rolle for mystical experience.

<sup>84</sup>Turner, 203.

<sup>85</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 5.

<sup>86</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 5-6.

<sup>87</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 7.

spoken in the imagination and words impressed upon one's spirit").<sup>88</sup> In fact, Keating states that experiencing contemplation, in the sense of consciously reflecting upon this experience, is itself not contemplation: "I am convinced that it is a mistake to identify the *experience* of contemplative prayer with contemplative prayer itself, which transcends any impression of God's radiating or inflowing presence."<sup>89</sup>

Thus, Keating denies that contemplation has a felt dimension which would make it similar in kind to other human experiences. Summarizing his position on this issue, he writes, "In contemplative prayer we should ignore our psychological experiences as much as we can and just let them happen . . . When you try to conceptualize, you are using your imagination, memory, and reason—all of which bear no proportion to the depth and immediacy of divine union."<sup>90</sup> This description of the contemplative practice of Centering Prayer shares the anti-experientialist orientation which Turner states is found in the *Cloud*. In this, the medieval text and the present-day practice are in agreement.

A third aspect of the *Cloud* which Turner addresses is the question of whether this text describes contemplation as a form of practice in which one may engage. He writes that the *Cloud* author situates contemplation within the traditional monastic exercise of *lectio*

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<sup>88</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 9.

<sup>89</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 10-11. Discussing this aspect of Keating's teaching, Joseph Conti writes that "Keating's reiteration of this point—that faith, not experience, is the touchstone of Centering Prayer—is another key aspect of his *apologia* for the 'orthodoxy' of the method, as it opposes experience-oriented soteriologies (e.g., that of Transcendental Meditation) which make the achievement of rarified states of consciousness the measure of one's spiritual maturity" (251-252).

<sup>90</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 85.

*divina*,<sup>91</sup> in which one reads a sacred text, meditatively reflects upon it, and responds with prayer. According to Turner, the *Cloud* author understands contemplation as a gift given by God in the midst of *lectio divina*: “Contemplation, therefore, is a pure grace, a flash of brilliant darkness which intrudes upon the normal everyday means of reading, meditation and prayer.”<sup>92</sup> With this statement, Turner is suggesting two things about the *Cloud* author’s understanding of contemplation. First, contemplation is organically connected to the exercises of reading, meditation, and prayer. Second, because it is a gift given by God, contemplation is a direct result of divine rather than human activity.

In Centering Prayer literature, both of these issues are also addressed. Like the *Cloud* author, Keating writes that the practice of Centering Prayer is connected to the exercises of *lectio divina*:

*Lectio* is a comprehensive method of communing with God which begins with the reading of a scripture passage. Reflection on the text moves easily into spontaneous prayer (talking to God about what you have read), and finally into resting in the presence of God. Centering Prayer is a way of moving from the first three phases of *lectio* to the final one of resting in God.<sup>93</sup>

While Turner wants to show that contemplation is situated within *lectio divina*, he also acknowledges that the *Cloud* author sees a qualitative difference between reading, meditation, and prayer, and the apophatic contemplation which is connected with them.

Turner writes of contemplation,

that breakthrough is the irruption of love into an ascetical work in which the cognitive powers have been progressively *attenuated* and reduced to a minimum of activity.

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<sup>91</sup>Turner, 197.

<sup>92</sup>Turner, 198.

<sup>93</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 29-30.

Hence, at the point of breakthrough love requires the total abandonment of all cognitivity, a cutting of all ties with the safe anchorage of the mind in its familiar images, meditations, and narratives of God.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, Keating writes that Centering Prayer is a way to prepare for the transformation of the exercises of *lectio divina* into contemplation: “Centering Prayer is a method designed to deepen the relationship with Christ begun in *lectio divina* and to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift.”<sup>95</sup> Turner describes the *Cloud* author’s understanding of contemplation as an attenuation of cognitive activity; Keating likewise explains that Centering Prayer is a means by which one’s consciousness may be transformed in preparation of the contemplative experience.

Turner also emphasizes that contemplation is a grace—a gift—of God, rather than an activity which the human practitioner performs. This issue is important because it concerns whether or not contemplation is a mystical practice which a person can undertake. For Turner, the answer to this question is “no.” According to Turner, the *Cloud* author believes “that contemplation is not itself a ‘practice,’ that it is something no technique or ‘menes’ can stage-manage, for it is a pure grace, prepared for by good practice, and by no means guaranteed by it.”<sup>96</sup> While Turner claims that contemplation is not understood in the *Cloud* as a practice, he does acknowledge that certain practices prepare one for the contemplative experience. In this, Turner’s language is strikingly similar to the description of Centering Prayer. Keating writes that Centering Prayer is “the specific method of preparing for the gift

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<sup>94</sup>Turner, 199.

<sup>95</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 139.

<sup>96</sup>Turner, 258.

of contemplation.”<sup>97</sup> Keating distinguishes between contemplation, which is understood as a gift of God’s grace, and Centering Prayer, which prepares a person for that gift. As in the *Cloud*, in the Centering Prayer tradition contemplation is not itself a practice, but through certain practices a person can prepare for contemplation by reducing cognitive activity and moving toward transcendent consciousness of God. Here again, the teachings of the *Cloud* author as this is described by Turner and that of the Centering Prayer tradition are quite similar.

If there is a distinction which can be drawn between Turner’s description of contemplation in the *Cloud* and the Centering Prayer tradition, it has to do with the particular nature of the practice which prepares one for contemplation. Turner claims that the *Cloud* author was not interested in mystical practices beyond the ordinary devotional exercises of Christian life. The *Cloud* author teaches “that the Christian should eschew all alternative, extraordinary—should we say ‘mystical’—routes to God, such as specialized ‘spiritualities’ might appear, spuriously, to offer.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Turner writes that the exercises of *lectio divina*—reading, meditation, and prayer—are the only practices that the aspiring contemplative can undertake; all else depends upon God’s grace.<sup>99</sup>

While the teachers of Centering Prayer would not claim that this practice is “alternative” to ordinary Christian devotional activities, they do present it as a practice with a distinctive quality. Keating writes that

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<sup>97</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 4.

<sup>98</sup>Turner, 210.

<sup>99</sup>Turner, 198-199.



Centering Prayer as a preparation for contemplative prayer is not something that someone invented in our day. Rather it is a means of regaining the traditional teaching on contemplative prayer and of making this teaching better known and more available. The only thing that is new is trying to communicate it in a methodical way. One needs help to get into it and follow-up to sustain and grow in it.<sup>100</sup>

Studies of mysticism such as Grace Jantzen and Denys Turner's emphasize an important factor to remember in addressing this subject: what is meant by "mysticism" today is not necessarily the same as what was emphasized by the authors of medieval Christian mystical texts. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that what is found in the *Cloud* is not as radically different from present-day Christian contemplative practice as these scholars would suggest. Instructional literature for Centering Prayer does not emphasize the acquisition of private or subjective experiences. Nor does it claim that mystical experiences can be compelled through human technique. What present-day Christian contemplative literature does emphasize is the formulation of a practice which can prepare a person for contemplation. It therefore serves as an illustration of the important role which practice can play in the concept of mysticism.

### **Implications of Mystical Practice for the Comparative Study of Mysticism**

This chapter has attempted to show that present-day Christian contemplative movements emphasize the place of mystical practice. Consideration of the subject of mystical practice also has implications for discussion concerning theories of mysticism. Specifically, it is applicable to the debate between proponents of what might be called the

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<sup>100</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 31.

“contextualist” and “pure consciousness” theories of mysticism.<sup>101</sup> Stated briefly, the contextualist theory argues that mystical experience is only comprehensible in terms of, and indeed is constructed from, the cultural and religious context in which it occurs. The pure consciousness theory claims that there are certain mystical experiences which are intentionally devoid of contextual conditioning. The discussion that follows will interpret the mystical practice found in the *Cloud*—a practice which is foregrounded in present-day Christian contemplative movements—in relation to these theories and consider the implications of this for the comparative study of mysticism across cultures and religions.

The foundation of the contextualist theory is Steven Katz’s essay “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism.” Early in this essay, Katz states the central philosophical underpinning of his theory: “*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences . . . That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.*”<sup>102</sup>

Having stated this central assumption, Katz claims that mystical experience is mediated to the mystic by the religious, historical, and cultural context in which it occurs. This context determines the shape, content, and significance of the experience. He explains that “the forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to experience set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be, i.e. on what will be experienced, and rule

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<sup>101</sup>These labels are two among many that have been applied to these two schools of thought. The contextualist position has also been called “constructivist” and “particularist,” while the pure consciousness position has also been called “essentialist” and “perennialist.”

<sup>102</sup>Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26.

out in advance what is ‘inexperientable’ in the particular given, concrete, context.”<sup>103</sup>

Because of this emphasis upon context as mediating experience, Katz claims that there is no such thing as a generic mysticism; rather, there is only the mysticism which is specific to each religious tradition.<sup>104</sup>

Most important to the concerns of this chapter is Katz’s suggestion that mystical experience is the culminating moment in a process of following a particular path of mystical practice. This practice constitutes part of the context which pre-figures the character of the experience undergone by the mystic. Particular religious practices set up expectations within the consciousness of the mystic regarding the mystical experience he hopes to realize. Katz writes that

mystical experience is conditioned both linguistically and cognitively by a variety of factors *including the expectation of what will be experienced*. Related to these expectations are also future directed activities such as meditation, fasting, ritual ablutions, self-mortification, and so on, which create further expectations about what the future and future states of consciousness will be like. There is obviously a self-fulfilling prophetic aspect to this sort of activity.<sup>105</sup>

Given this contextualist claim, it can be asked how the *Cloud* reflects the notion of the pre-conditioning of the mystic’s consciousness through the expectations generated by mystical practice. As has been seen, the *Cloud* author understands Christian spiritual life as a process of progressive growth through various stages leading toward union with God. Moreover, each stage in this process includes an attendant practice. Persons in the lower part of active life perform acts of charity in the world, persons in the higher part of active life and

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<sup>103</sup>Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 26-27.

<sup>104</sup>Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 45.

<sup>105</sup>Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 59.

the lower part of contemplative life meditate discursively upon holy subjects such as their sinfulness and the Passion of Christ, and persons in the higher part of contemplative life engage in a contemplative practice which aims at transcending these thoughts and actions.<sup>106</sup>

What is most important about a progression such as this through stages of spiritual life is that it implies an intentionality on the part of the aspiring mystic. This intentionality sets up certain “expectations,” to use Katz’s term, out of which the mystical experience is constructed. The experience which is the final goal of the *Cloud* is not possible without the mystic having first participated in preliminary practices. As William Gregg writes, the *Cloud* author “is very clear that the active and mixed life are morally and theologically good and prerequisite to a true contemplative life. One simply does not and cannot leap into mystical union with God.”<sup>107</sup> The mystical experience described in this text is fundamentally connected with, and therefore informed by, the earlier stages of Christian life and practice which provide its context. In this regard, the *Cloud* reflects the perspective of the contextualist theory of mysticism.

While it is not difficult to appreciate the value of this approach in interpreting mystical experience, the insights of the contextualist theory can be complemented by considering how a text such as the *Cloud* is further illuminated through comparison with other mystical traditions. While the contextualist theory does not rule out cross-cultural comparative studies of mysticism *per se*, it does imply that this type of study is of limited value given mysticism’s radical dependence upon context. Jonathan Herman suggests that

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<sup>106</sup>*Cloud*, 31/21-32/8.

<sup>107</sup>William O. Gregg, “The Presence of the Church in *The Cloud of Unknowing*,” *American Benedictine Review* 43 (1992): 188.

strict contextualism can lead to the conclusion that “an understanding of a particular, historical occurrence of mysticism cannot reveal anything of importance about a separate, contextually unrelated occurrence.”<sup>108</sup> Also addressing this concern, Bernard McGinn writes that extreme forms of contextualism should “be modified in the direction of a position that will both recognize the mediated aspects of all mystical experience and still not preclude the possibility of comparison.”<sup>109</sup>

One way the comparative study of mysticism might be carried out is through an analysis which emphasizes mystical practice rather than being solely concerned with mystical experience. As a simple example of this approach, the method of contemplative prayer recommended in the *Cloud* can be compared with the practice of sitting meditation (*zazen*) as this is described by Dogen, a thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Buddhist. The comparison of these two mystical traditions follows William Johnston’s suggestion that the *Cloud* “teaches a species of silent, imageless meditation not unlike Zen.”<sup>110</sup>

As has been discussed, the *Cloud* describes a mystical experience characterized by a silence and darkness beyond ordinary sense perception and thought, a “cloud of unknowing.”<sup>111</sup> This mystical experience is only made possible, however, by a mystical practice in which a person relinquishes his ordinary ways of knowing in a “cloud of

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<sup>108</sup>Jonathan R. Herman, “The Contextual Illusion: Comparative Mysticism and Postmodernism,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 93.

<sup>109</sup>McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 324.

<sup>110</sup>Johnston, *Christian Zen*, 4.

<sup>111</sup>*Cloud*, 17/1: “cloude of vnknowyng.”

forgetting.”<sup>112</sup> In his instructions for contemplative prayer, the *Cloud* author writes that thoughts of “all the creatures that have ever been made” must be forgotten, that these “all should be hid under the cloud of forgetting in this case.”<sup>113</sup>

The *Cloud* author’s most lucid statement about the condition of the mind during contemplation occurs perhaps in *The Book of Privy Counseling*. In this text, the author instructs his student to

forsake as well good thoughts as evil thoughts . . . And look that nothing lives in your working mind but a naked intent stretching into God, not clothed in any particular thought of God in himself, how he is in himself or in any of his works, but only that he is as he is. Let him be so, I pray you, and make him no other way. Seek no further in him by subtlety of intelligence. Let belief be your ground.<sup>114</sup>

With this, the author offers a descriptive ideal of the mind completely empty and open to the experience of union with God.

In his text the *Fukanzazengi* (“Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen”), the Zen Buddhist Dogen describes a meditative state of mind in language similar to that of the *Cloud* author: “You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate your self. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your

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<sup>112</sup>*Cloud*, 24/3: “cloude of forzetyng.”

<sup>113</sup>*Cloud*, 24/8, 14: “alle þe creatures þat euer ben maad,” “alle schuld be hid vnder þe cloude of forzetyng in þis caas.”

<sup>114</sup>*Privy Counseling*, 135/14, 19-24: “forsake as wel good þouȝtes as iuel þouȝtes . . . And loke þat noþing leue in þi worching mynde bot a nakid entent streching into God, not cloþid in any specyal þouȝt of God in hym-self, how he is in him-self or in any of his werkes, bot only þat he is as he is. Lat hym be so, I prey þee, & make him on none oþer wise. Seche no ferþer in hym by sotiltee of witte. Þat byleue be þi grounde.”

original face will be manifest.”<sup>115</sup> Further on in this text, Dogen reiterates his insistence that the meditative experience be devoid of the activity of human reason. He instructs the practitioner of *zazen* to “cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views.”<sup>116</sup> And in what is perhaps the most paradoxical passage of his text, Dogen states that in meditation one is to “think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of *zazen*.”<sup>117</sup>

In addition to describing the condition of the mind during *zazen*, Dogen also gives some practical instruction in the method of sitting meditation. This begins with a description of correct bodily posture.<sup>118</sup> And, while the *Fukanzazengi* does not itself go into detail concerning the awareness of one’s breathing as a technique for cognitive focusing, this is a well-known method in the practice of *zazen*. In this method, “the breath is used as a way to focus or concentrate the mind; that is, regulating the breath and regulating the mind are brought together. The basic method is to count one’s breaths in a repeating cycle of ten.

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<sup>115</sup>Dogen, *Fukanzazengi*, 122. Citations of this text are from “Dogen’s *Fukanzazengi* and *Shobogenzo zazengi*,” trans. Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *The Eastern Buddhist* 6 (1973).

<sup>116</sup>Dogen, *Fukanzazengi*, 122.

<sup>117</sup>Dogen, *Fukanzazengi*, 123.

<sup>118</sup>Dogen, *Fukanzazengi*, 122-123.

Through concentration on the simple technique of counting, the mind is less vulnerable to wandering thoughts.”<sup>119</sup>

In the *Cloud*, instruction is given for a contemplative method which bears some resemblance to that of *zazen*. As was discussed in the chapter on verbal formulas, the author instructs the aspiring contemplative to embody his intention for God in a single short word, and to repetitively recite this word as a means of responding to thoughts during contemplative practice.<sup>120</sup> As with the awareness of breathing practiced in Zen sitting meditation, the *Cloud* teaches a method by which ordinary thought is transcended. The recitation of the verbal formula is used to empty the mind, to cast all thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting. In so doing, the contemplative prepares to enter into the cloud of unknowing, the darkness and silence which are union with God.

The “pure consciousness” theory of mysticism, which presents itself as an alternative to the contextualist approach, establishes some support for the cross-cultural comparative study of mystical practices such as those found in the *Cloud* and Dogen’s instruction for *zazen*. This theory is represented by Robert Forman’s essay “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting.” In this essay, Forman considers a particular type of mystical experience, the “pure consciousness event,” which he defines as “a wakeful though

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<sup>119</sup>Sheng-Yen, “Zen Meditation,” in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 32.

<sup>120</sup>*Cloud*, 28/10-29/1.



contentless (nonintentional) consciousness.”<sup>121</sup> In the pure consciousness event, the mystic’s awareness is purposefully made devoid of all sensory input and rational content. Forman claims that this type of mystical experience cannot be explained by, and therefore calls into question, the assumptions of the contextualist theory of mysticism.

More specifically, Forman utilizes the *Cloud* as an example of a mystical text which discusses the pure consciousness event. In particular, he is concerned with the significance of the “cloud of forgetting,” beneath which all thoughts are trampled down as preparation for union with God in the “cloud of unknowing.”<sup>122</sup> Relating this text to his theory of pure consciousness, Forman writes that “‘the cloud of forgetting’ describes an event in which thought ceases, by which I understand a [pure consciousness event].”<sup>123</sup>

The existence of the pure consciousness event suggests that there can be some similarity in mysticism across different religious traditions. Because this state of consciousness is characterized by a lack of cognitive content, and such content would be necessary for the construction of a culturally specific mystical experience, Forman suggests that the pure consciousness event is an example of mystical experience which is found cross-culturally. He explains that “a formless trance in Buddhism may be experientially indistinguishable from one in Hinduism or Christianity.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Robert K.C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>122</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 31.

<sup>123</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 31.

<sup>124</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 39.

With specific reference to the mystical practice of the *Cloud*, Forman writes that the author of this text “teaches a mantramlike meditation technique, that is, a mental repetition of a one-syllable word,”<sup>125</sup> and he suggests that the contemplative practice taught in the *Cloud* is “strikingly parallel to Hindu and Buddhist mantram meditation techniques.”<sup>126</sup> This comparativist orientation of the pure consciousness theory of mysticism can be used to address the question of why culturally diverse traditions such as the medieval Christian *Cloud* and Dogen’s instructions for *zazen* teach such similar mystical practices.

Forman suggests an answer to this question by explaining how mystical practice is related to the pure consciousness event. He explains that an essential component of contemplative practice is “a recycling of a single subroutine”<sup>127</sup> in the consciousness of the practitioner. The repetition of a single short word in the *Cloud* and the counting of breaths in *zazen* are examples of these “subroutines,” which can be used to bring awareness to a state transcending sense perception and discursive thought. Forman describes the intended result of such practices: “There is a complete disappearance of any sense of thinking, perceiving, and so on. All perception and mental activity come to be forgotten. A vacuous state of emptiness, a nonresponsiveness to the external world, is evoked in the central nervous system by the catalytic action of the continuous subroutine.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 31.

<sup>126</sup>Forman, “Mystical Experience in the *Cloud*-Literature,” 185.

<sup>127</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 37.

<sup>128</sup>Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” 37.

The importance of the pure consciousness theory is that it provides a theoretical basis for comparing mystical practices found in diverse religious traditions. While it would go too far to suggest that the content or significance of the mystical experiences associated with the *Cloud* and Dogen's *Fukanzazengi* are identical, these texts do teach similar mystical practices which are oriented toward the practitioner's coming to consciousness of ultimate reality, however this might be understood. Addressing the importance of practice in interpreting mysticism, Peter Moore writes that "the varieties of mystical technique offer a better point of entry to the comparative study of mysticism than abstract ontologies or phenomenologies."<sup>129</sup> With respect to the examples of the *Cloud* and Zen sitting meditation, a consideration of practice provides a method with which these two mystical traditions might be compared.

### **Conclusion**

In his discussion of mystical practices, Peter Moore describes "contemplation" as an ambiguous term, "connoting as it does both an activity and an experience."<sup>130</sup> What this chapter has attempted to show is that contemplation can indeed be viewed as an activity which persons undertake. That is, contemplation can be understood as a practice. While this aspect of contemplation is implicit in the medieval text of the *Cloud*, it becomes explicit in present-day Christian contemplative movements such as Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, which are based in part upon the *Cloud*. These present-day contemplative traditions emphasize the importance of persons having something to do, a practice with

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<sup>129</sup>Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," 6357-6358.

<sup>130</sup>Moore, "Mysticism [Further Considerations]," 6357.

which they are able to journey on the mystical path. One way the present-day appropriation of the medieval mysticism of the *Cloud* is significant is in this emphasis upon practice. Giving attention to this allows us to see mysticism as encompassing more than just experience; rather, it includes the practices preceding and the effects following from that experience. Conceptualizing mysticism in this way allows for a more comprehensive perspective on the relationship of a mystical tradition with its cultural and religious context, and provides a means with which the comparative study of mysticism may be undertaken.

CONCLUSION: A WIDER VIEW  
OF MYSTICISM

“It is abundantly clear after reading the corpus of *The Cloud*,” writes Rene Tixier, “that contemplation is above all, and particularly in the beginning, hard work.”<sup>1</sup> Questions of difficulty aside, this comment points to a central feature of this text which has been considered in this dissertation. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a text in which the aspiring mystic is given “work” to do—a mystical practice—which he may employ as a means of preparing for the experience of union with God. The instruction in this work which the *Cloud* author provides to his student(s) takes on considerable importance in the way this text is read by persons in the present day who desire to practice Christian contemplation.

In some respects, the *Cloud* is a medieval mystical text which is difficult to place. Because it was written anonymously, one difficulty involved in interpreting the *Cloud* is the lack of certain information regarding its author and intended audience. One of the ways that the *Cloud* has been situated in past scholarship is as belonging to a group of authors commonly referred to as the “Middle English Mystics.” This group includes, in addition to the *Cloud* author, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe. The title of this group identifies the particular time and place that the *Cloud* was produced, and connects it with other contemporaneous medieval English mystical texts. Yet such a

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<sup>1</sup>Tixier, “‘Dis louely blinde werk,’” 114.

designation is also potentially problematic because it groups together a set of authors who each have idiosyncratic interests.<sup>2</sup> While there certainly are similarities among the authors of this group (in fact, this dissertation has made use of the *Cloud* author's similarities to Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle), the question remains as to what is distinctive about the *Cloud*.

If it is not entirely satisfactory to simply place the *Cloud* with these other medieval English mystical writers, how is it to be situated? Describing how a particular spiritual tradition is typically defined, Susan White writes that

in most cases when we speak of a 'tradition' of spirituality, we can be quite definite about its boundaries. They are usually set by the intention of the founder (or founding document) whose vision of a distinctive way of approaching the quest for relationship with God sets in motion a movement, an inclination in like-minded people to approach the disciplines of godliness in a particular way.<sup>3</sup>

While it may be difficult to define the exact circumstances surrounding the writing and initial reception of the *Cloud*, the text does express a particular understanding of the mystical way. Furthermore, if the scope of inquiry is widened, it is clear that a movement has arisen from the text. This movement is made up of present-day persons who find inspiration and instruction for mystical practice in the *Cloud*. While there are inherent limits upon describing this text in terms of where it came from, there is ample opportunity to examine the influence it has had in the contemporary period.

Considering the *Cloud* in this way helps to identify one of the text's most important features. The *Cloud* is oriented to mystical practice, and it is this characteristic which has

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<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Watson, "The Middle English Mystics," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 539.

<sup>3</sup>Susan J. White, *The Spirit of Worship: The Liturgical Tradition*, Traditions of Christian Spirituality (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 14.

been emphasized above all else in present-day Christian contemplative movements. Philip Sheldrake describes texts which are regarded as Christian “spiritual classics” as those which “avoid technical language, provide practical advice (especially for self-help), and effectively translate Christian ideas into life-style so that the connection between theory and practice is made explicit.”<sup>4</sup> This description is certainly applicable to the *Cloud*, and this is an important factor in its appropriation. As a letter of spiritual direction, the *Cloud* was written for the express purpose of providing its audience with guidance for the practice of religious life.

Furthermore, the *Cloud* is not only concerned with spiritual direction in some general sense; rather, it offers instruction in a specific mystical practice. Writing about the medieval English mystics, Joan Nuth states that the authors and texts of this tradition have a power and appeal for the present precisely because of their emphasis upon practice: “The English mystics wrote their texts intending that they be ‘performed,’ put into practice by their readers.”<sup>5</sup> She goes on to say that this concern with practice takes a particular shape in the *Cloud*. The *Cloud* author teaches a form of contemplative prayer with the intention that this be undertaken by those in his audience for whom it would be appropriate. According to Nuth, this feature gives the text a continuing relevance and appeal for its present-day audience:

I find *The Cloud*'s most helpful element for contemporary use to be its practical instruction about what to do when one feels drawn from the discursive, image-filled meditation to the prayer of quiet . . . The practice of centering prayer, including the use of a mantra to quiet one's inner self, so as to become consciously aware of God's presence and receptive of God's inspiration is something many practise regularly

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<sup>4</sup>Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 165.

<sup>5</sup>Nuth, 148.

today with profit. *The Cloud* author's practical and sensible advice about this way of praying can be beneficial.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Joseph Conti writes that the *Cloud* "impresses by its spiritual practicality," and he describes the text as "a veritable 'how to' book of contemplative prayer."<sup>7</sup> According to Conti, this orientation of the *Cloud* corresponds with and influences the emphasis upon practice which is evident in the Christian contemplative tradition of Centering Prayer: "The practical instruction of Centering Prayer as taught by [Thomas] Keating owes its greatest debt to *The Cloud of Unknowing*."<sup>8</sup> One of the reasons the *Cloud* holds such importance for those who are interested in present-day Christian mystical practice is that it is a text which gives persons something to do on the path toward the experience of mystical consciousness.

This emphasis upon practice, and the way it frames the *Cloud*, may perhaps be better appreciated by briefly considering an earlier appraisal of the value of this text. In his article "The Excellence of *The Cloud*," published in 1934, the medievalist David Knowles described the *Cloud* as "the most excellent work on contemplative prayer ever written in the English language."<sup>9</sup> Yet the particular details of Knowles' assessment are very different from what is found in present-day Christian contemplative literature. Describing the *Cloud* and *The Book of Privy Counseling*, Knowles writes that these texts "are professedly and primarily treatises of theology, and of mystical theology. They are treatises of theology: that is to say, they deal

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<sup>6</sup>Nuth, 152-153.

<sup>7</sup>Conti, 72.

<sup>8</sup>Conti, 244.

<sup>9</sup>David Knowles, "The Excellence of *The Cloud*," *The Downside Review* 52 (1934): 92.



directly and professedly with revealed truth. They are mystical: that is to say, they deal with matters that do not fall within the experience of all Christians.”<sup>10</sup> Whereas for Knowles, the *Cloud* is a work of mystical theology, for present-day Christian contemplative practitioners, it is a text which provides guidance for mystical practice. Whereas Knowles suggests that the mystical teaching of the *Cloud* is applicable to only a limited audience, the perspective expressed in present-day Christian contemplative literature is that this teaching and the experience to which it leads are at least potentially available to all persons who desire them.

The first chapter of this dissertation discussed the medieval context of the *Cloud* and considered the possibility that, although the author claims a rather exclusive audience, there is reason to think that this text was understood to have value for providing instruction in contemplative spirituality to a more diverse audience than just persons professed to the contemplative life. The second chapter addressed the way that Christian contemplation is conceptualized in the present-day and how this frames the reading of the *Cloud*. The contemporary view of contemplation suggests that it is a form of spirituality which is open to all persons. Furthermore, the importance of method in contemplative practice and the value of apophatic experience are emphasized in the contemporary perspective.

The third chapter examined the practice of employing a verbal formula, which is the centerpiece of the methods taught in present-day Christian contemplative movements. Whereas this method is referred to somewhat obliquely in the *Cloud* and other early Christian and medieval mystical texts, it is presented as an explicit practice in the present-day traditions. The use of a verbal formula is understood as a means to prepare the practitioner

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<sup>10</sup>Knowles, “The Excellence of *The Cloud*,” 73.

for mystical experience. The fourth chapter discussed the effects of mystical experience with regard to self-awareness and self-transcendence. In the *Cloud*, there is much emphasis put on forgetting the self in contemplation. While this is retained to a large degree in present-day Christian contemplative literature, attention is also given to the effects which contemplation can have in the life of a practitioner. Given these emphases in present-day Christian contemplative traditions upon the practice which precedes mystical experience and the consequences which follow from it, the fifth chapter considered the implications of this for understanding the category of mysticism.

Of course, it would be too bold to presume that this emphasis upon practice and the path which precedes and follows from mystical experience is novel or unique to the Christian contemplative movements that have been discussed in this dissertation. According to Michel de Certeau, when “mysticism” became concretized (as a substantive rather than an adjective) in the sixteenth century, it was characterized primarily by a concern with method, a concern which de Certeau suggests can itself be traced back to earlier practices: “Mystic science favored an exceptional development of methods. There are doubtless many reasons for this. It had at its disposal, with the monastic tradition, a mental and pedagogical technology that was already ancient and very refined.”<sup>11</sup> For de Certeau, the history of mysticism is a history of interest in practice.<sup>12</sup> Present-day Christian contemplative movements, and their appropriation of the *Cloud*, can be viewed in light of this tendency in Christian mysticism.

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<sup>11</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1 of *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 129.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Philip Sheldrake, “Unending Desire: De Certeau’s ‘Mystics,’” *The Way Supplement* 102 (2001): 39.

While this dissertation has considered the *Cloud* and present-day Christian contemplative practice from a variety of perspectives, what I hope it has shown is that it is important to expand the scope of what the term “mysticism” can be understood to include. According to Bernard McGinn, much of the past scholarship on mysticism has overemphasized mystical experience, resulting in a lack of attention being given to the more comprehensive mystical path which includes, but is not limited to, that experience:

Many of the philosophical investigators of mysticism so emphasize the moment of mystical contact or union with God that they neglect the study of the fullness of the *via mystica*, particularly the ascetical and moral preparation for such contact, which, for the most part is realized through ritual activity. Despite the numerous discussions of the relation between mysticism and ethics, there is often a tendency to forget about the effects of mystical consciousness on the mystic and on the community he or she addresses.<sup>13</sup>

The way that the *Cloud* is read in present-day Christian contemplative movements emphasizes the preparation for mystical experience which comes about through practice. Furthermore, these movements give attention to the effects of mystical practice and experience which manifest themselves in the life of the contemplative. They are quite concerned with the mystical path which precedes and follows from mystical experience. It might even be said that mystical experience is less discussed in these movements than is mystical practice. In this way, a consideration of the appropriation of the *Cloud* by present-day Christian contemplative practitioners can be helpful in contributing to a more comprehensive view of mysticism.

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<sup>13</sup>Bernard McGinn, foreword to *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, by Gershom Scholem (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), xv.

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## VITA

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