

David G. Robinson. *Cloud Devotion: Through the Year with The Cloud of Unknowing* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2020), pp. 269, paper, \$18.99, ISBN 978-1-64060-433-9.

DAVID ROBINSON IS a pastor and Benedictine oblate who has published numerous books, among my favorites being *The Sacred Art of Marriage*

and *Ancient Paths: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way*. In *Cloud Devotion*, he has revisited a fourteenth-century classic written by an unknown author in the vernacular rather than Latin, who wrote to the English middle class and especially those dwelling in the countryside. The spiritual journey is described in “down-to-earth, domestic language” with a “holistic and humble vision of everyday spirituality” (12). Robinson utilized the original Middle English text, sentence by sentence, with his own translation and paraphrasing. He has divided the text into 366 sections, adding a Scripture passage that fits well with each selection and adds questions for the reader’s pondering. Obviously, Robinson has set this up for use as a daily devotional.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* invites the reader to a closer relationship with God primarily through the affect/felt experience and to go beyond into the unknown. Trusting the “divine unknown” leads us to a deeper knowing of God. It’s the *via negativa*, the way of not knowing, without image or form. The focus is on the experience of God, and yet the “cloud of unknowing” is understood as hiding God from our fullest experience of God’s being.

Through the centuries, *The Cloud of Unknowing* has been a text both popular and held under suspicion. It was popular because, written in a century of intense violence and the plague, it spoke of God’s love, and popular because the author assured the reader that anyone wanting to deepen their prayer life could do so. And it was held under suspicion by ecclesiastical authorities who did not believe that the common person could become a contemplative, and because ecclesiastical authorities could not control the Holy Spirit. This resulted in accusations of heresy.

Note: we have *The Cloud of Unknowing* because Benedictine women of the English Congregation (in the Low Countries) would not let ecclesiastical authorities behind their grill to see what they were reading, with the authorities believing they had the right to censor what nuns read. With the Suppression in England and the burning of books that seemed “papist,” scholars tell us that *The Cloud of Unknowing* along with the works of Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton all but disappeared—but these strong women were determined to save their beloved books. The Benedictine nuns came to make their living printing books for sale, and *The Cloud of Unknowing* was one of their best sellers. I appreciate Rob-

inson's acknowledgment that the author may well have been a woman, whereas historically all unknown authors were presumed to be men.

As one who was first introduced to the *Cloud of Unknowing* forty years ago, replete with "thee's" and "thou's," I found this translation refreshing. As many know this was and is a text favored by those with a Centering Prayer practice. I admit I first went through and read Robinson's translations of the text only before returning and using it as part of my morning prayer. By breaking the text down into small portions, he invites readers to slow down and savor what the author was conveying. This allows for the slower pondering that shapes hearts, much like the intent of *lectio divina*. I highly recommend this.

*Cloud Devotion* includes two appendices: "Praying with the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*" and "The Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*," along with Endnotes and a Selected Bibliography.

Laura Swan, OSB / St. Placid Priory  
500 College Street NE / Lacey, WA 98516