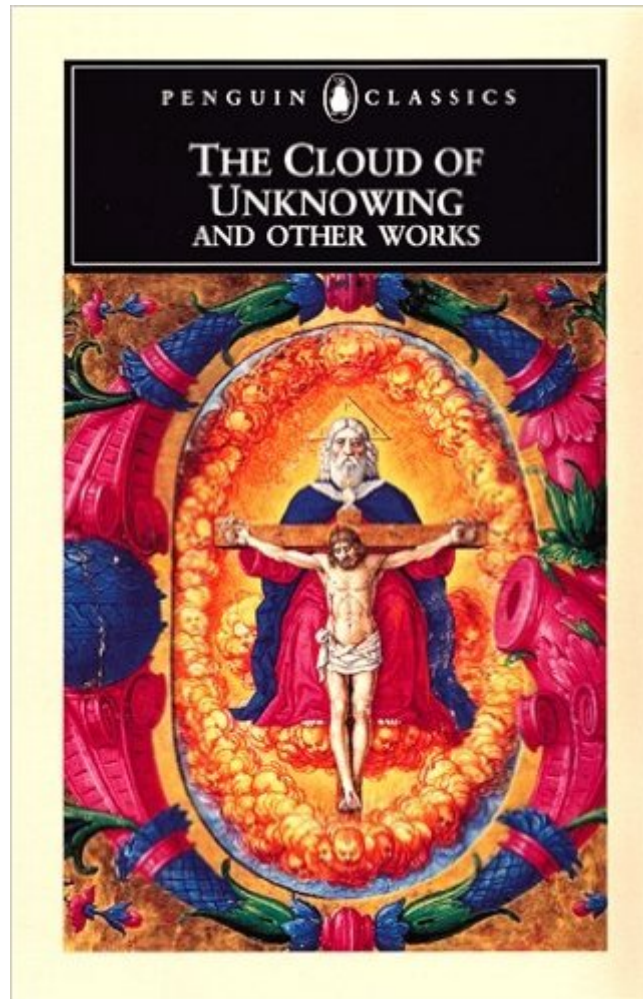


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# The Cloud Of Unknowing And Other Works (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

In the fourteenth century there was a great flourishing of religious writings in English, both orthodox and heretical. Many of these works focused on Christ's Passion and humanity, whereas *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes an abstract, transcendent God beyond human knowledge and human language. Drawing upon radically different traditions, it is a rich work full of intriguing contradictions that speaks to us with liveliness and wit even today. The unknown author, thought to be a priest and Carthusian monk, is also believed to have written the other three works in this volume: *The Mystical Theology of Saint Denis*, *The Book of Privy Counselling*, and *An Epistle on Prayer*, which, together with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, are the four texts at the core of medieval mystical theology. This Penguin Classics edition includes full explanatory notes, suggestions for further reading, an appendix that reproduces the Middle English text of a section of *The Mystical Theology of Saint Denis*, and an introduction that places the texts within the context of medieval religious writing. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

The Cloud of Unknowing, along with the other works by this humble contemplative, is certainly one of my favourite works in contemplative Christian mysticism, and in itself is also a lovely work of medieval English literature. The writer of the 'Cloud' also wrote several other works, including a translation of Dionysius the Aeropagite's 'Mystical Theology' and other works written for a monk starting his novitiate at the writer's monastery. The writer was probably a Carthusian monk, and also the spiritual director (or perhaps even the abbot) of a Carthusian monastery in medieval England. The writer had a standard though thorough education and he was influenced by St Thomas Aquinas, Richard of St Victor, and also by Dionysius the Aeropagite. The writer is an enthusiastic advocate of what is now called the 'via negativa' or the form of theology or mystical contemplation which emphasises the unknowability and 'darkness' of God. The writer counsels his 'spiritual friend in God' to discard any images he has of God, as well as consoling visions and feelings. The writer urges his student to put a 'cloud of forgetting' between himself and God, and between all creatures and God. When asked 'What is God' the writer replies 'I don't know' but carefully emphasises while God's essence cannot possibly be known by the human mind, God can be understood and grasped by a 'sharp dart of love' aimed at God. The rest of the writer's works unfold outlining and expanding on these themes, in a brilliantly lucid fashion which avoids any ornaments of rhetoric, condescending spiritual pride, and unnecessary displays of cleverness and erudition.

This classic guide to Christian contemplative prayer (effectively, what we call 'meditation' these days, rather - than 'asking' for something), is as meaningful now, as the day it was written. Still, it won't mean a thing if you aren't drawn to the contemplative life - but, as the appropriately 'anonymous' author points out, with almost Zen-like acuteness, if you are truly given to the spiritual art and discipline hinted at in his directions - you will find that it supervenes wherever you may happen to be ("for when you are nowhere physically, you are everywhere spiritually. . ."). Quite fairly then, this approach has been called 'Christian Zen' - and so it is. Spearing's translation of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' has replaced the previous Penguin edition presented by Clifton Walters. I would still recommend Walters' version, if you can find a copy. It gave a good introduction to the 'Cloud' and its background - useful to read alongside Spearing's introductory material. As we have remarked before, Christian 'prayer' is often taken to mean 'petitionary prayer' - asking for something (Eckhart said that "people want to use God, just as they would a cow" !). There is, of course, a perfectly noble and proper place for petitionary prayer, but in some ways, it does heighten our sense of separation from God - at the worst, leaving us as mere creatures, seeking creaturely rewards. The 'Way of Unknowing' - set forth in the 'Cloud,' represents a much neglected dimension of

Christianity - the way of self-emptying. In a certain sense, it is more suited to an age tired of religious formalism and the mere externals of faith. Some of the 'Cloud-author's' comments - about Christians who literally 'look upwards' - as if God were in the sky etc., might be those of a contemporary critic.

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