

The *Cloud* and Spiritual Soup

Graeme Watts

Introduction

The Cloud of Unknowing (hereafter the *Cloud*) is a text written towards the end of the fourteenth century by an anonymous author, most likely a hermit who had adopted a solitary contemplative life. The short text takes the form of advice to a young aspirant who it is assumed has been called to the same vocation. The *Cloud* made its first relatively modern appearance as a translation by Canon H. Collins in 1871 with the title of *The Divine Cloud of Unknowing*,¹ but more successfully by Evelyn Underhill in 1912² and Phyllis Hodgson in 1944,³ both under its original title of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A 1986 translation by Robert Way provides an easily accessible modernised text.⁴ However, the text used for repeated reference in this article is a text edited by Abbot Justin McCann. This text is in relatively contemporary English but sufficiently reflects its Middle English origin to convey something of the sound and spirit of the original manuscript.⁵

In the L'Arche community of three homes with which the author is associated, members of the community regularly meet to prepare a meal and to share prayers and songs in what has become known as 'Spiritual Soup' nights. The L'Arche movement originated in France in 1964, led by Jean Vanier (b. 1928), a former naval officer, philosopher, humanitarian

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¹ Henry Collins, *The Divine Cloud of Unknowing* (with notes and preface by Fr Augustine Baker) (London: T. Richardson, 1871).

² Evelyn Underhill, *The Cloud of Unknowing in Which a Soul is Oned with God* (London: John M. Walkins, 1912).

³ Phyllis Hodgson, *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling* (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1944).

⁴ Robert Way, *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Letter of Private Direction* (Trabuco Canyon, CA: Source Books, 1986).

⁵ Justin McCann, *The Cloud of Unknowing by an English Mystic of the Fourteenth Century*, 6th rev. ed. (London: Burns Oates, 1952 [1924]). References to the *Cloud* throughout this article will identify the page number/s from the McCann edition.

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(and the son of a former Governor General of Canada).⁶ While originally firmly based within the Roman Catholic tradition, the movement has significantly expanded its denominational and multi-faith connections. In its current form the L'Arche network constitutes an international federation of communities in which adults with an intellectual disability (generally referred to as 'core' members) live and work with non-disabled colleagues. A L'Arche home may be a simple stand-alone residence with a family grouping of three or four members with intellectual disabilities and a similar number of resident assistants. The essence of an individual L'Arche home is that persons with an intellectual disability are welcomed as permanent members of a household living with men and women who have committed themselves to creating a family environment together. In a L'Arche home persons with an intellectual disability are welcomed as family members and encouraged and assisted to contribute as colleagues in a shared community. In this context L'Arche homes seek to offer a sign to the broader community that persons with an intellectual disability can respond to an atmosphere of acceptance and trust, and so open the way for personal, social, and spiritual growth.⁷ It is with this focus on intellectual disability that Vanier urges society to reject the perception that disability may represent an inadequate image of humanity.⁸ L'Arche accepts the challenge that while people with an intellectual disability are often marginalized and sidelined from usual activities and discourse, they may live meaningful lives and share a spiritual dimension. Jean Vanier's founding principle is simple; every person is a divine creation and capable of spiritual growth. In its own way each life is a divine life.

Attempting to identify some form of common ground between the solitary pursuit of a fourteenth century hermit committed to the discipline of the *Cloud* and the social and sometimes boisterous experience of a contemporary Spiritual Soup night may be drawing a long bow. There is an obvious tension between the concept of spiritual insight as the preserve of a select few and the prospect of spiritual growth as a common calling for all humankind. Nevertheless, there are profound lessons to be learned from both perspectives, and perhaps there are more elements in common than may first appear.

⁶ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979).

⁷ Jean Vanier, *The Challenge of L'Arche* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982).

⁸ Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body* (Sydney: St. Paul's Publications, 1988), p.98.

The Cloud

The *Cloud* sits firmly within the apophatic tradition of spirituality in describing God by what God is not and in so doing facing the problem of trying to say what cannot be said. In this respect the author draws heavily upon the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, also an anonymous author, possibly a fifth or sixth century Syrian monk, who wrote in the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, a convert of St Paul (Acts 17:34). While engaged in preaching to the Athenians, Paul had noted an altar with the inscription “To an unknown god” (Acts 17:23) and this description of God as unknown was to provide the Pseudo-Dionysius with a concept which he subsequently developed into a rich and complex philosophy centred on God as transcendent, incomprehensible and, from any human perspective, ‘unknowable’. In the *Cloud* the author makes specific reference to Pseudo-Dionysius clearly taking his inspiration from this source:

And therefore it was that Saint Denis said: the most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing. And truly, whoso will look in Denis’s books, he shall find that his words will clearly confirm all that I have said or shall say, from the beginning of this treatise to the end.⁹

In this tradition the concept of God is described as being beyond human conception and, with reason abandoned, the soul of the spiritual pilgrim is engulfed in a mysterious experience of dark ‘unknowing’. It is the central theme of the *Cloud* that knowledge of God comes through the *via negativa*, the way of dark faith stripped of intellectual striving. In the opening statement of the *Cloud* this theme of unknowing is clearly identified:

Here beginneth a book of contemplation, the which is called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in the which a soul is oned with God.¹⁰

In this Prologue the author of the *Cloud* also makes it quite clear that seeking to be “oned” or united with God is not for everyone. In this respect he differs from other medieval mystics such as the Spanish Carmelite, St Teresa of Avila, who in her text, *The Interior Castle*, addressed even the common reader as a candidate for a soul’s journey seeking the Divine.¹¹ The reader for whom the *Cloud* was intended is strictly forbidden to allow the text to be read or even spoken about unless such a person intends to be a perfect follower of Christ not only in his daily life but also in the highest

⁹ *Cloud*, p. 93.

¹⁰ *Cloud*, p. 1.

¹¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books and Doubleday, 1989).

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possible practice of contemplative living. Further, as for “worldly praters” [chatterers], gossips and so on, the author “cared I never that they saw this book.”¹²

While the ‘praters’ may be an easy target, the author tightens access to the *Cloud* still further by noting that even with intelligent “full good men in active living, yet this matter accordeth nothing to them.”¹³ It is clear that the *Cloud* is directed to a select few and its content and discipline offers a challenge even for them.

Even so, in some respects the discipline of contemplation seems deceptively unsophisticated. Early in the *Cloud* the author offers a short summary:

Lift up thine heart unto God with a much stirring of love... And thereto look that thou loathe to think on aught but himself, so that naught work thy mind nor thy will but only himself.¹⁴

In short, the mystic is to simply look to God with love and strive to divest oneself of any other thought. At the same time, this simple advice comes with a warning. That is, that the first time this is attempted there is likely to be only a sense of darkness and a failure to make any progress through a reliance on reason or intellect. The path of contemplation is not a process which relies on understanding for any sense of clarity but rather:

a darkness, as it were a cloud of unknowing, and... this darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, is betwixt thee and thy God, and hindereth thee, so that thou mayst nether see him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason.¹⁵

Intellect and Emotion

This tension between the power of reason and power of love is to be played out throughout the teaching of the *Cloud*:

All reasonable creatures, angel and man, have in them, each one by himself, one principal working power, the which is called a *knowing* power, and another principal working power, the which is called a *loving* power. Of the which two powers, to the first, the which is a knowing power, God who is the maker of them is evermore incomprehensible; but to the second, the which is the loving power, he is, in every man diversely, all comprehensible to the full.¹⁶

¹² *Cloud*, p. 4.

¹³ *Cloud*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Cloud*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Cloud*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Cloud*, pp. 9-10.

It is in this early chapter that the author of the *Cloud* is at pains to warn against a reliance on intellect in seeking a spiritual contact with God:

For whoso heareth this work either read or spoken, and weeneth [thinks] that it may or should be come to by travail in their wits... Truly this man, whatsoever he be, is perilously deceived.¹⁷

Indeed, in stressing this point in rather melodramatic terms, the author warns that such dependence on intellect in an effort to understand and reach God may lead to a loss of reason, spiritual sin, and to be caught up by Satan such that:

he shall fall into frenzies, or else into other great mischiefs of ghostly sins and devil's deceits; through the which he may lightly be lost, both life and soul, without any end.¹⁸

Now it is quite reasonable to ask just how far this warning against a reliance on reason is to be taken. Has the author taken a position that could be interpreted as outright anti-intellectualism? This is an important issue in the general context of this article exploring any sharing of common ground between the *Cloud* and *Spiritual Soup*.

As already noted there are clearly grounds throughout the *Cloud* for reaching the conclusion that the contemplative life is an anti-intellectual pursuit. In an early chapter the author offers a general warning on a reliance on 'wits':

And therefore, for God's love beware of this work and travail not thy wits nor thy imagination in nowise. For I tell thee truly, it may not be come to by thy travail in them, and therefore leave them and work not with them.¹⁹

In a later chapter the author comments further on humanity's inclination to rely upon learning and intellectual effort in seeking to connect with God. The ever-present danger is for scholars to be proud of their endeavours to such an extent that intellectual pride leads them astray into becoming scholars of Satan. In this context the author notes that intellectual effort:

is evil, when it is swollen with pride and curiosity of much learning and letterly knowledge, as in clerks, and maketh them press on to be holden, not meek scholars and masters of divinity or of devotion, but proud scholars of the devil and masters of vanity and of falsehood.²⁰

¹⁷ *Cloud*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Cloud*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Cloud*, p. 12.

²⁰ *Cloud*, pp.17-18.

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The author's consistent message is to set aside a reliance on intellect and replace this with an effort to break through the cloud of unknowing with longing love:

And therefore, if thou wilt stand and not fall, cease never in thine intent, but beat evermore on the cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and thy God with a sharp dart of longing love.²¹

With direct reference to any novice contemplative the author's advice is to make the urging of love his life's work:

And therefore I pray thee, lean listily to this meek stirring of love in thine heart, and follow thereafter; for it will be thy guide in this life and bring thee to bliss in the other. It is the substance of all good living, and without it no good work may be begun nor endid.²²

Now, there is a difference, of course, in promoting what may be interpreted as an anti-intellectual stance in the *Cloud* and what may be recognised as a limited intellectual capacity on the part of the 'core' members of the L'Arche community. Core members are not consciously anti-intellectual in their approach to spiritual matters, but they do not easily engage in abstract intellectual discourse. It simply does not come within their frame of reference to grapple with the complexities of spiritual issues or to consciously pursue unfolding stages of spiritual growth.

In this light it is pertinent to be reminded that even though the author of the *Cloud* eschews intellectual effort in pursuit of his spiritual goal, he is by no means without a sharp intellect. He, the author, is a trained theologian, sufficiently accomplished to translate texts from their Latin origin, patently capable of building a compelling argument in favour of his preferred form of spiritual journey and possessing a keen insight into those human foibles of scholarship which may lead adherents astray. It is perhaps not so much that the author is anti-intellectual but rather an intelligent pilgrim whose insight and experience has led him to avoid a reliance on intellect as a means of communication with the Divine. And it is the same insight and experience which supports the author in his conclusion that he will only reach his ultimate spiritual goal through a channel of concentrated longing love.

And it is in this context of unquestioning love that the *Cloud* and *Spiritual Soup* may find some common ground.

²¹ *Cloud*, p. 24.

²² *Cloud*, p. 67.

Common Ground

That persons with an intellectual disability may be open to spiritual awareness, perhaps through the language of symbols or the influence of close personal relationships, is a matter explored at some length in an earlier essay.²³ In the present article, the focus is not so much on how persons with a diminished intellectual capacity may be personally supported in their spiritual growth but rather what avenue may be innately open to them as a given capacity for spiritual contact with the Divine.

This challenge is not to be approached lightly. In a book chapter entitled 'The Inner Life of Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities', Penny Lacey concluded:

People with profound and multiple learning difficulties demonstrate little or no capacity for cognitive tasks, cannot care for themselves physically, lack communication skills, and where the prospect of intellectual and social development seems remote, the issue of spiritual growth represents a challenge which is by far the most taxing.²⁴

It is this challenge which a L'Arche community faces head-on. The community as a whole is built on a foundation of mutual love and respect acknowledging the contribution which all members can make towards the collective good. In particular, any spiritual awareness is hopefully facilitated through the influence of long-term, committed, and loving relationships. Love is at the centre of a L'Arche Community with an acceptance of actual and relative weakness and dependence on others as a given for all humankind. Vanier directly addressed the need for everyone to accept the concept of weakness as being a common component in all humankind, and we should be ready to recognise this in ourselves as much as in others:

Most of us have been repeatedly told that we must be perfect. We are not allowed to be weak and broken, fragile and vulnerable. So deep in our minds is this image of perfection to which we must strive, that we are led to deny our own brokenness and to despise the brokenness of others; to condemn the community that is not perfect, or does not correspond to our ideal.²⁵

²³ Graeme Watts, 'Intellectual Disability and Spiritual Development', *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2011), pp. 238-245.

²⁴ Penny Lacey, 'The Inner Life of Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities', in ed. V.P. Varma, *The Inner Life of Children With Special Needs* (London: Whurr, 1996), p. 75.

²⁵ Vanier, *The Broken Body*, p. 98.

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If through the impact of love spiritual growth can be promoted, and at the same time untroubled by any influence of intellectual doubt and debate, then the core members gathering at Spiritual Soup evenings are clearly open to this potential. They have an open acceptance of the mystery which is God and their relationship with matters divine. They do not press the issue of having a ‘grip’ on all things. Core members assessed as having a mild intellectual disability express themselves unequivocally as ‘loving Jesus’ and ‘loving God’. Over time they become familiar enough with simple choruses to join in the singing and some will accompany the chorus on an ‘air’ guitar or with a choice of percussion noise makers. While they may not initiate prayers, they will follow solemnly what is being said and join in with a fervent ‘amen’.

Those core members with a more profound impairment may simply sit beside a favoured assistant, lean their head on a shoulder and enter into the mood of the occasion. There is a heavy reliance on close personal contact with this relationship seeming to influence even the most withdrawn core member into reflecting something of the spirit of the event. At times some may occasionally become hyperactive and subject to bouts of erratic movement and unusual vocalising but under the steadying influence of prayer and song eventually relax with house assistants. However, quiet as it may be at times, the tenor of Spiritual Soup is generally social and interactive, liable at any time to become disruptive, even boisterous, clearly far removed from that of the solitary, contemplative hermit. Yet in their own manner the participants at Spiritual Soup participate in song and prayer earnestly and whole-heartedly in what could be described in the language of the *Cloud* as compatible with a “sharp dart of longing love”.²⁶

In this context core members fall naturally into a category of those who love God but do not strive to understand the object of this love. If, however, they were capable of examining and reflecting on such a matter it would be fair to surmise that they would comfortably side with the author of the *Cloud*:

for of God himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. For why, he may well be loved, but not thought. By love may he be gotten and holden; but by thought neither.²⁷

Of course, the process is not that simple. While the author of the *Cloud* advises against a reliance on reason and intellect, he is, as already noted, an intelligent, scholarly and thoughtful participant in his contemplative practice. His ‘sharp

²⁶ *Cloud*, p. 14.

²⁷ *Cloud*, p. 14.

dart of love', his treading down of competing thoughts, and his concentration upon his central strategy are directed by reason and steadied by intellectual effort. His contemplative practice is based on love but in downplaying intellectual effort to reach his spiritual goal he is not without thought no matter how much he focuses on love. In this context where does this leave the Spiritual Soup participants who do not have the advantage of the same intellectual capacity and attention span? What they may be thinking, what they may actually understand is being said, or how they relate to what is generally going on may not be evident. It is pertinent to ask just how and under what circumstances is their spiritual life to be enhanced?

At least one insight comes from the author of the *Cloud* himself. In spite of all effort focussing on a dart of longing love, a mystic may labour at length without seeming to make any progress. The author addresses this situation quite clearly. That is, all human effort is only preparatory to a communication emanating from God who, by grace alone, may direct a response in the form of a spiritual light piercing the cloud of unknowing which is between God and the contemplative:

Then, will he (God) sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and him, and show thee some of his secrets, the which man may not and cannot speak.²⁸

The point is that any revelation, any advance in spiritual growth, is in the final analysis, the work of God and entirely by his grace. Throughout the *Cloud* the author is clearly occupied with the primacy of grace in facilitating the orientation of the soul towards God. Although labouring to be prepared, sheer personal effort will fall short leaving the contemplative as ultimately the passive recipient of an experience which the author of the *Cloud* can only describe as mysterious and unworldly. When caught up in this experience it seems that for a brief moment his heart is ablaze with love with an effect that is beyond words to describe even if he dared to try:

Then shall thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of his love, far more than I can tell thee, or may or will at this time. For of that work that pertaineth only to God dare I not take upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue: and shortly to say, although I durst I would not.²⁹

It is then, from a concentrated dart of longing love, not entirely unsupported by informed reason, the contemplative pilgrim may be rewarded with a striking spiritual experience. In the context of this article, what, if any, may L'Arche core members experience in response to loving prayers offered at Spiritual Soup? The prayers of the core members are sincere and open-hearted, and it

²⁸ *Cloud*, p. 43.

²⁹ *Cloud*, p. 43.

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would be inconceivable to conclude that they lack all possibility of any response through the grace of God.

In addition, is it possible that a person with diminished intellect is able to comprehend ‘God’s secrets’, those profound insights of which no one can speak? In this context arise challenges which at times have taxed the intellect of such spiritual giants as Augustine, Aquinas, Teresa of Avila and the like, challenges which in the final analysis have remained beyond a human capacity to unambiguously resolve. On the one hand it may have to be conceded that nothing short of a long and focussed spiritual preparation is necessary before one can have access to ‘God’s secrets’. At the same time, it is to be fervently hoped that through God’s grace the unsophisticated love expressed through Spiritual Soup prayer will draw a response from God even for those who may not fully comprehend what is happening.

The Soul

It would seem, then, that even the most experienced, devoted, and focussed contemplative must wait on the grace of God for any sense of divine contact or communication. Further, this ‘work’ of God may occur without dependence on any degree of merit on the part of the recipient, for it is the opinion of the *Cloud’s* author that neither saints nor angels can on their own accord achieve this blessing as God works when and how he wishes:

And this will he do, because he would seem all-merciful and almighty; and because he would be seen to work as he liketh, where he liketh, and when he liketh.³⁰

It is unlikely that the author of the *Cloud* would have given any consideration to the prospect of spiritual insight on the part of a person with diminished intellectual faculties. In fourteenth century society a person with an intellectual disability may possibly have been accorded the status of ‘holy fool’, but in general was not considered competent for any serious endeavour. Yet, if we accept that all humankind is made in the Image of God then the concept of ‘humankind’ occupies a broad and complex canvas. Intellectual capacity is an obviously significant component in the human character but there are others. And while intellectual capacity may be highly prized there is no fixed point on any scale where it can be declared that an individual is no longer a human being. In his ‘Theological Reflections on Disability’ John Macquarrie directly addressed this issue:

That is why we can never degrade a human being to mere thing-hood... Even when all natural possibilities have been reduced to the lowest conceivable level,

³⁰ *Cloud*, p. 49.

when sight and thought and movement and decision are all in abeyance, for the Christian, one has still not come to the point when that person can be written off as nothing or merely past, for the Christian believes in resurrection, and in the widest sense, that simply means that God can still bring forth something new.³¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries new insights from studies in psychology provided the basis for the concept of a subliminal psychic dimension to human personality. Notably, the clinical experience of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung led the way in identifying an unobservable interior character of human personality. These clinicians concluded that in an individual's subconscious there exists an inner self which is largely, if not entirely, beyond conscious recognition and control. In an influential text produced at the beginning of the twentieth century, and still in the pioneer years of so-called depth psychology, William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, went so far as to characterise the identification of a faculty existing beyond the ordinary conscious field as possibly the most important step forward that had occurred in psychology:

I call this the most important step forward because, unlike other advances which psychology has made, this discovery has revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature. No other step forward which psychology has made can proffer any such claim as this.³²

In this context James raises the possibility that in this faculty there may be an intuitive awareness quite beyond the ordinary senses or intellect. In a later mid-twentieth century commentary, and this time specifically referring to the *Cloud*, William Johnston added his support to the significance of this subliminal faculty:

[*The Cloud*'s] contemplative love enters deeply into the human psyche, exploring those parts of the mind that we moderns have come to call "subliminal" or "subconscious" and that remain untouched by ordinary reasoning and colloquies in prayer.³³

The possibility presents then, that at this interior depth of the personality, not directly open to intellect and reasoning, there exists a potential channel of communication with the Divine. And while there would by no means be ready agreement on such a specific point, it is within this inner state separated from a direct link with human intellect and senses, that there exists a spiritual seat

³¹ John Macquarrie, 'Theological Reflections on Disability', in ed. M.E. Bishop, *Religion and Disability: Essays in Scripture, Theology and Ethics* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1915), p. 29.

³² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Collins, 1960), p. 234.

³³ William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (Wheathampstead, UK: Anthony Clarke Books, 1978), p. 101.

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which some choose to call a soul. In his text *The Evolution of the Soul* Richard Swinburne provides a contemporary statement on this subject:

I shall therefore be arguing that man living on earth is a substance which consists of two substances, his body and his soul. The body is a material body, but the soul is not a material object of anything like it. (It occupies no volume of space). Body and soul are connected at present, in that events in the body affect events in the soul, and conversely. But the essential part of man is his soul; a man consists of his soul together with whatever, if any, body is connected to it.³⁴

It is the conviction of the author of this article that the soul is the spiritual seat, the spark of God, which exists in all humankind, even those tragically dehumanised by character, experience or intellect. In particular, it is certainly not necessary to possess a critical level of cognitive capacity in order to merit the privilege of a soul. And while individuals may set barriers around the soul, God's love and constant intent to communicate has the capacity to break through. It may be recalled that in the Prologue to the *Cloud* the author clearly identifies that it is not the mind or intellect but rather it is the soul which is "oned" with God.³⁵ For his part, the author of the *Cloud* then makes specific reference to the work of the soul in this process. It is by prayer and repentance that a soul may first make some progress towards being cleansed from sin and prepared for contact with the Divine:

For it is that work in the which a soul should travail all his lifetime... And the whiles that a soul is dwelling in this deadly flesh, it shall ever more see and feel this cumbrous cloud of unknowing betwixt him and his God.³⁶

If it can be accepted that God loves and intends an eternal existence for all human beings, quite independently of intellectual, sensory or physical capacity, then it is through God's direct communication with the soul that there exists a potential channel for Divine influence and spiritual growth. Any adequate concept of spirituality demands that everyone should be included, and it is somewhat arrogant, or at least thoughtless, to assert that the spiritual status of a human being could be limited by their level of intellect. In this light people with an intellectual disability may well be on a path of spiritual growth by simply living the life that God intended and under their present circumstances their spiritual status is simply a matter between their soul and God.

In the light of this context then, each life, with or without an enabling intellectual capacity, is a divine life. To make this point without reservation it is important to acknowledge that there are still others who fall into a category

³⁴ Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 10.

³⁵ *Cloud*, p. 1.

³⁶ *Cloud*, p. 44.

even more impaired than the core members at Spiritual Soup. While L'Arche core members have a diminished capacity to engage in prayer and study, let alone attempt the discipline of mystic contemplation, they do at least have a modest capacity to communicate, to engage in prayer, and to interact meaningfully with others. There are, however, those beyond the typical L'Arche environment who are pushed still further to the extreme of the human condition. Some, who for all observable purposes challenge the usual concept of what constitutes a normal life. Some, who are subject to profound intellectual disability, who may be without speech, without sight, existing within a body that seems helpless to move, and the necessary focus of twenty-four care to simply remain alive. In his book *Against an Infinite Horizon*, Ronald Rolheiser describes one such situation:

Donald Berrigan (priest, poet, peace activist) ... described how he goes regularly and sits by the bedside of a young boy who is deaf, mute, paralysed, and unable to react in any way to anything around him. He just lies in bed, helpless, powerless, unable to say or do anything... Nothing is said and nothing, seemingly, is exchanged. But, says Berrigan "I sit by his helplessness and I know that in his powerlessness God is speaking and speaking in the only way that God can speak in this world. Inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation – forges of depth, of soul, the voice of God".³⁷

It is in such contexts where physical, intellectual and sensory capacities seem to be beyond any observable level, there still remains a soul, which is subject to direct influence by the grace of God. Unlike the author of the *Cloud* such individuals will never consciously experience any sense of "a beam of ghostly light piercing the cloud of unknowing" between themselves and God. At the same time, it is a totally unacceptable concept to concede that such persons are entirely cut off from contact with the grace of God. Wolf Wolfensberger has addressed this issue especially with regard to persons with extreme intellectual impairment. He concluded that even the souls of the most profoundly disabled persons are able to make a fundamental choice to connect with God even though all sensory and mental barriers may seem to obscure any such contact.³⁸ It follows then, even in that situation where all human characteristics have been reduced to a minimum, or seemingly totally absent, the influence of Divine Grace may break through.

³⁷ Ronald Rolheiser, *Against an Infinite Horizon: The Finger of God in Our Everyday Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), p. 148.

³⁸ Wolf Wolfensberger, 'The Good Life for Mentally Retarded Persons', in eds W.C. Gaventa and D.L. Coulter, *The Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), p. 104. The original essay was published in 1984.

Conclusion

While intellectual, emotional or behavioural barriers may constitute an obstruction, it is at this subliminal level that all share the potential to be open to the influence of the Divine. A mystic in the tradition of the *Cloud* strives to open his soul to contact with the Divine by negating the influence of intellectual effort and replacing this with concentrated unquestioning love. God may choose to respond and, as already observed, if circumstances permit, the mystic may be favoured in consciously becoming aware of this contact. While not referring in any way to the *Cloud*, William James over a century ago described the subconscious as a mediating channel for the Divine, and with specific reference to mystical experiences he hypothesised as to “how striking a part invasions from this region play in religious life”.³⁹ While L’Arche members with an intellectual disability may not be preoccupied with the need to manage any mystic process, their soul remains open to direct communication from God and perhaps some may even become aware of this influence. For those more profoundly disabled in mind and body a relationship with God may not penetrate in any conscious form but within their soul they remain open to subliminal ‘invasion’. In company with all humankind, the archbishop and the peasant, the contemplative mystic and the intellectually disadvantaged, all will present as potentially receptive to God.

For many people the possibility of following the disciplined contemplative journey of the *Cloud* is indeed remote. Certainly for the participants at Spiritual Soup the character of their spiritual awareness is not ever likely to match that of the mystic. But while expressed in markedly different ways, both spiritual journeys are generated by a love of God. And it is in this love of God, and by the grace of God through a response directed to the soul, that these seemingly incompatible spiritual pilgrims join company.

³⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 487.