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Mount Sinai and the Burning Bush

The Cloud of Unknowing, the Altar to the Unknown God, and the Dark Night of the Soul

Glenn F. Chesnut

In this second chapter, let us look at another very famous conversion story — and it begins as a conversion story, even though most sermons on it and theological discussions about it tend to forget that aspect of it. The central figure in this story is Moses. His two major encounters with God — first in the story of the Burning Bush, which occurred before he led the Israelites out of Egypt, and then in the story of his ascent up Mount Sinai to receive the Law, which happened after the Israelites had successfully made their escape — were central to the basic understanding of God in both Judaism and Christianity. We see Christian spiritual writers writing long commentaries on the ascent of Mount Sinai as early as St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Denis in the fourth and fifth centuries.

When Moses encountered God for the first time, in the story of the Burning Bush, he was a man who had lost everything. He had once held a high position in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh, but was now a fugitive from justice, an escaped murderer who had been forced to seek refuge among the desert nomads, who were regarded in the ancient world as the lowest of the low. At this low point, where Moses' life seemed to have hit rock bottom, God reached out to him in an astonishing way. It is in fact a conversion story, because Moses did not know God at that point. Almost his first question was, “Who are you?” He knew that his ancestors had worshiped a God, but he seems to have had very little knowledge about who that God was. It was at this point in the tale that the mysterious x-factor spoke for himself. This is the part that we will need to focus on —

the words which God spoke to Moses out of the Burning Bush, and what they imply about what we can and cannot know about him.

Moses' second major encounter with God has provided an extended metaphor for discussing the way we come to know God, for a long and fascinating series of Christian spiritual teachers over the past two thousand years. Along with the vivid images in the Song of Songs, it has furnished one of the three or four most important clusters of metaphors and symbols in the Christian spiritual tradition. Moses was going to have a much more profound experience of God this time, and in order to do that, he had to leave the normal world behind and walk into the dark cloud which now covered the slopes of Mount Sinai. The first time he met God on that mountain, it had been in bright daylight and he had seen a vision of an even brighter heavenly Light. But this time he met God in pitch blackness. And it was there in the dark that he heard God's voice giving him a much fuller message, the full message of salvation, both for him and for his people. An English spiritual writer from the medieval Catholic period (the fourteenth century) called this the Cloud of Unknowing. All of the authors who have commented on this story, in whatever century they lived, have stressed the way in which we must first enter a realm of ignorance and nothingness, in which all our previous claims of knowledge about ourselves and the universe and God have been stripped away, before we can begin to hear the fullness of God's message to us, and receive a totally new way of thinking about the world.

The x-factor which saves us is real, it turns our lives around and creates a new and far better kind of life for us, and it even allows us to enter its presence, but it never loses its intrinsic mystery, not even for a spiritual giant like Moses. No human beings are allowed to climb the Mountain of God and truly speak with God, who have not cast aside all their claims to "explain" God in terms of the kinds of scientific reasoning and natural philosophy and psychology which we employ for analyzing and describing the ordinary events of this world.

Moses out in the desert sees the light

With this introduction in mind, let us now turn to the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and see how the story of Moses is told. The opening chapter explains how the Israelites had been put into slave labor camps in Egypt, and forced to make bricks for the pharaoh's building projects. Moses, even though an

Israelite, had gained a position in the royal court of Egypt, and had escaped that fate. But when he saw an Egyptian forced labor gang boss savagely beating one of his fellow tribesman, he fell into a rage and attacked the Egyptian and killed him. He had to flee the country and hide out somewhere out of reach of the Egyptian authorities. He ended up finding sanctuary with a tribe of violent desert nomads called the Midianites, who gave him a job herding sheep and serving in the band of warriors which they used for fighting the other tribes in that part of the desert.

In America and northern Europe, when we try to conjure up an image of human beings living in the most primitive possible state of existence, we think of cave men, a crude and brutish lot. Among civilized people in the ancient Mediterranean world, it was the desert nomads who were thought of that way. They were regarded as thieves, robbers, and murderers, who would slit your throat if they thought you had a few coins in your purse, and steal anything that was not kept locked or under guard. When a band visited your area, they traded wool, goatskins, and cheese for wheat and olive oil, and perhaps a few handfuls of raisins or dried figs or dates for a treat. You watched them every second while the basic business transaction was carried out, and then you encourage them to be on their way back out into the desert again, speedily.

When Moses appeared in the part of the desert where the nomadic tribe called the Midianites held the water and grazing rights, dressed in Egyptian garb, he must have been a strange and startling sight. But when it finally came out that he was an escaped murderer, fleeing from the law, they must have chuckled with glee, for a man who had already made his first kill would be a welcome addition to their little warrior band which they used for raids on neighboring tribes.

From Moses' point of view, he had indeed hit bottom. He had once lived in a palace in the greatest civilization of the entire area, and now he was reduced to sleeping on the ground in a tent made out of cloth woven from goat hair, and reminding the occupant by the pungent odor, where the hair in the cloth had come from. It should also be noted that, except for the random moments of sheer terror when a war band from a neighboring tribe attacked, or one of the lions which still roamed the area in that century tried to seize a lamb or a kid and carry it off for dinner, the life of a shepherd, which mostly consisted of sitting on the rocky ground and watching sheep and goats munch grass, has to be one of the most boring ways ever devised for spending monotonous days and weeks and months, seemingly without end. The Sinai Peninsula is not a romantic desert of flowing sand dunes, but a stark wasteland of dark reddish rocks and crags and cliffs, where you pick

your way on narrow pathways through the valleys and ravines, over fallen rocks and stones, in the midst of a constant oven-like heat.

We can easily imagine the thoughts which filled his mind, the bitter sense of a wasted life, of the futility of existence, of rage at the Egyptians, and rage perhaps also at himself, for having lost his temper so dangerously. And there was no meaningful future for him anymore, not for someone raised in the bustling civilized life of Egypt, with its great temples and palaces, and markets teeming with every delicacy, and books to read, and educated people to talk to.

It was while he was watching the flock of sheep and goats to which he had been assigned, on the barren, rocky slopes of Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:1), that the strange event occurred. He suddenly saw what looked, as best he could describe it, as a desert bush bursting into flame. When a bone dry desert bush is set on fire, it literally almost explodes, as the dry leaves and twigs burst into fiery fragments that go shooting through the air. But in this case, the flashes of sparkling light continued and continued.

One of my Hebrew professors in seminary once pointed out to us students, quite correctly, that “if anyone thinks he could have lit his cigar off the burning bush, he does not understand at all what the story was saying.” The light metaphor, in one form or another, is frequently used in religions around the world to describe the encounter with the sacred realm. When a small Protestant evangelical congregation sings lustily at a Wednesday evening service out in the countryside, “I saw the light, oh, I saw the light! No more darkness, no more night,” if someone suggested to them that they could therefore switch off the electric lights in the sanctuary and continue to read their hymnals and bibles with no trouble, they would stare at the person in blank amazement. The metaphor of “divine light” does not normally refer to the kind of visible light emitted by the sun, the moon, and electric light bulbs.

We are told that what Moses “saw” was an angel, a *mal’ak* or divine “messenger” in Hebrew. C. S. Lewis, in his Perelandra trilogy, describes the appearance of an angel on a couple of occasions, in language which I believe accurately sums up what the ancient Hebrew author was trying to describe to us. Lewis’ angel was like small, swiftly moving jewels of glittering light, which you could “see” out “there” in front of you at one level, while simultaneously being aware that it wasn’t really “there” in the sense in which physical objects are “there.” But it was a presence whose emotions you could feel, and which emitted an aura of power so great that you would not dare do anything but stand quietly and listen with the utmost respect.

I am who I am

The conversation with God (speaking through this angel) had barely begun, when Moses asked what, to him, was the most important question of all: “What is your name?” Moses wanted to write a theology! He wanted to fit the voice from heaven into a nice, neat system of thought, where everything had labels and names and fit into proper categories, so he could then start figuring out how to manipulate and control the strange power. He wanted to be able to figure out all the rules, so that he could do such-and-such if he wanted the strange power to do thus-and-so, and would on the other hand, take great pains never to do such-and-such, which infuriated gods and goddesses and desert demons and genies and the other strange supernatural beings who lived out in the desert wastes.

We human beings, at all times and places down through history, believe that if we can put names and labels on everything, that we will be able to reduce all of these things to the natural order of reality with which we are accustomed to deal. We believe that if we can only do this, that we will be able to fit what is happening into a theological theory, or a philosophical theory, or a psychological theory, and then we will be back in control again. This can be a dangerous illusion, because the mysterious x-factor that saves us when we have fallen as low as Moses had fallen, can never be under our control. This was an illusion which God knew he had to disabuse Moses of, right on the spot.

So with a sort of divine shrug, the voice from the Burning Bush answered only, “I am who I am.” (Exodus 3:14) The Hebrew phrase was *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*. The word *'ehyeh* in Hebrew is the first person singular imperfect of the verb to be, and the conjunction *'asher* is used in a way similar to English connectives like who, which, and what, so the three-word statement at first appears misleadingly simple. But ancient Hebrew did not have tenses like modern European languages do. In English, a verb has to be put in some form of the present tense, the past tense, or the future tense. In Hebrew, the two basic forms of the verb were very different, and were called the perfect and the imperfect. The imperfect form of the verb referred to something which was going on right now and had not been completed yet, or something which was not going to happen until sometime in the future, or something which happened in the past over and over again for a long period of time.

So in fact, in order to translate that simple three-word phrase into English, we would need at least three phrases:

I have always been who and what I have always been.

I am now who I am now.

I will become whoever or whatever I want to become.

Or in other words, the voice is telling Moses that he can appear under any name he wants to. It is made clear in the context of that part of the Bible, that he was already known under a variety of names to the Israelites and their kinsmen: some called him El Elyon, others called him El Shaddai, and the people of Jerusalem at that time called him Zedek. For Elijah on Mount Sinai many centuries later, he was the Bath Qol, the still, small voice, literally in Hebrew “the daughter of a voice.” In later Judaism, people got around the problem in part by sometimes simply referring to him as Hashem, “the Name.” It did not matter to the voice from the Burning Bush. And this in turn meant that God reserved the right to act in situations where the human beings involved did not even use the name “God” to describe what they were experiencing.

And yet at another level, the voice does tell Moses quite clearly who he is. He speaks in the first person singular, that is, he makes it clear that he is “I am” and not an “it.” He is a deeply personal being. By the end of the story of Moses in the book of Exodus, after many subsequent adventures, he had become friends with the divine Voice, and talked with him all day long, throughout the day, “as a man speaks with his friend.” (Exodus 33:11)

And the heavenly voice reveals himself as a figure of compassion. Almost the first words out of his mouth, at the beginning of the story of the Burning Bush, are the words “I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cries under their taskmasters. I am totally aware of their sufferings, and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians.” (Exod. 3:7–8)

So the mysterious x-factor who saves us is a person, not a thing, and a personal being who hears our cries of grief and sees our bitter sufferings and offers his help to lead us by his power out of our misery and suffering. Throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, this higher power is portrayed as the one who hears and feels the cries of anguish of the downtrodden, the powerless, the enslaved, the hopeless, and the broken. The people he loves are the slave laborers in the prison camps, the widows and the orphans, the poor people without food or homes, the people who have to sleep in hedges and ditches and alleys, the resident aliens searching for jobs in a country where they barely know the language, the people dying with no one to hold their hands, the

people rotting in dirty prisons, the prostitutes, the victims of abuse, and all the rest of the “outsiders.” And the “proper people” in society look down on them with smugness and contempt, and murmur things like “but those people don’t deserve help.” And the voice from the Burning Bush says, “I didn’t ask you that, I asked you to help them.” And they murmur, “but they brought it on themselves because they were lazy and shiftless and immoral.” And the voice from the Burning Bush says, “I didn’t ask you that, I asked you to help them.”

In our own world, the proper people in society looked down above all on drunks and drug addicts. “Punish them, scold them, fire them from their jobs, threaten them with hell fire!” They shouted at these alcoholics and addicts: “Just get hold of yourselves and show some will power!” But the light from the Burning Bush appeared once again in 1934, not to one of these proper people, simpering with their smugness, but to one of the lowest drunks in America, and said, “I am going to save you by sending you to save countless others. And I will lead all of you out of the house of bondage, and into a land flowing with milk and honey.” And Bill W. was lifted up to the top of the Mountain of God, and felt the wind of the spirit blowing through him, and saw everything filled with the divine light. And he obeyed, and as is always the case — as with Moses or Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Albert Schweitzer or any of the others who have heard and obeyed the Heavenly Voice — it came to pass just as the divine power had promised.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

And the voice from heaven reminded Moses that his ancestors had been poor, struggling desert nomads just like the Midianites. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been the ancient leaders of the little Israelite band which had wandered through the deserts of what is now Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. They had no money, they slept in tents on the bare ground, and everything they had smelled like sheep and goats. But he had gotten them through every difficulty that they encountered, as long as they trusted him, and were willing to venture into the unknown on his command, as a pure act of trust. Many centuries later, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul used “the faith of Abraham” as his central example of the faith that saves. When Abraham was in the deserts of Syria, he told him to take his sheep and goats and “go south,” down into the hill country of Palestine. And Abraham trusted God enough to pull up his tent stakes and head south, into the totally unknown. That is what the New Testament word “faith” really means, not

believing in hundreds of theological doctrines and dogmas, but being willing to venture forth into the unknown, one step at a time, depending totally and utterly on God to tell us, when we have taken one step, what the next one is to be. The faith that saves is the faith of a desert nomad venturing into the unknown. That is the only way we can respond to a mysterious x-factor whose very nature is such that he must always remain locked in mystery.

During the early days of A.A. in northern Indiana, a colorful spiritual leader named Goshen Bill, a little black man with a glass eye and one wooden leg, and the longest, boniest fingers anyone had ever seen (he used to point them in your face or stick them in your chest), told the following tale. Once upon a time there were two men. One was a newcomer to the A.A. program, who kept on going back out and returning to the bottle, over and over again. He said that he was an atheist, and didn't believe in any kind of God. The other man was his sponsor, who had been sober for a long time, and prayed to God every morning and evening. "You have to pray if you want to get sober," he told the newcomer. "But who do I pray to? What? How?" And the newcomer kept on going back out and getting drunk. But finally one day, the newcomer fell down on his knees and looked up at heaven, and pointed at his sponsor and said, "Whoever it is helping that man, please help me." And Goshen Bill said that the newcomer never had another drink again after that day.

So the voice from the Burning Bush was telling Moses, "I'm the one who helped Abraham. I'm the one who helped Isaac. I'm the one who helped Jacob. That's all you need to know. If you want to say 'Whoever it was helped those three men, help me,' that's plenty good enough."

But it was time to quit trying to fit everything into names and categories and labels and theories. It didn't matter whether they were theological theories, or theories of natural science, or psychological theories, God was too big to fit into any of those. God is the power who disrupts and overturns the established order. As it says in the great revolutionary anthem called the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-53):

My soul celebrates the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.
For he has looked with favor
on the humbleness of his servant.
For see how, from now on,
all generations will call me blessed.

For the Powerful One has done great things for me,
 and holy is *Hashem*
 [the Name that is not a name].
 His *hesed* [merciful and compassionate loving kindness]
 is for those who stand in awe of him,
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown the force of his arm;
 he has scattered the prideful
 in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has cast down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the humble.
 He has filled the starving with good things,
 and the rich he has sent empty away.

We do not first figure out who and what God is, so that we can then decide whether or not we want to commit ourselves to him — or better yet, figure out a way around him so we can figure out how to save ourselves by ourselves. He is the power who disrupts all our careful plans, and sets to naught all our clever schemes. He is the x-factor which refuses to be domesticated and turned into our servant. And that is why, unfortunately, most human beings never take up the spiritual life with any real seriousness until they have lost everything they hold dear, and all of their most precious theories about the world and life have been proven to be utter failures. If it were not for our human pridefulness and arrogance — and fear of not being “in control” — this would not be necessary. But the only way to gain God’s help is on God’s terms, and his terms do not involve elaborate explanations about who he is and how he works. “If you don’t want my help, there’s the door.”

The altar to the Agnôstô Theô, the Unknown God

Before we go back to Moses’ story, let us insert another little story, this one from the New Testament. The book of Acts, in chapter seventeen, tells about the Apostle Paul’s visit to the city of Athens in Greece. He noticed statues of all the Greek gods and goddesses everywhere he looked: Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, and so on. These ancient Athenians were people who wanted to give names to their gods and

describe them in detail, which is something we human beings almost automatically seem to want to do, including so many of the men and women who come into the twelve step program today. “Before I can turn my will and my life over to the care of God, first I have to know what he looks like! I need *a theory of God*. Otherwise, I’m not going to do that.” The fallen human heart is a naturally pagan thing. What we need to remember however, is that if the A.A. old timers drew you a picture of God of the sort you keep on asking for, the picture they handed you would not be God. It would only be an idol, an image constructed by human hands and ideas. It would be incapable of giving you any help at all. “A theory of God” of that sort would do you no more good, in terms of getting you sober, than buying a little concrete statue of one of the Greek gods or goddesses from a roadside vendor, and setting it up in your back yard and planting flowers around it. It might look nice, but it wouldn’t have the power to get you sober.

The Apostle Paul had been walking around the ancient city of Athens, and had noted all of these futile attempts that people had made to save themselves, by trying to figure out how to draw an accurate picture of God. And finally he got an opportunity to begin preaching to the Athenians. He noted that, amongst all this statuary, he had noticed that they had one strange little altar. There was no statue, no image, not even a name. Instead there was inscribed on the altar the simple words, *Agnôstô Theô*, “To an Unknown God.” So he began preaching to them about this strange Anonymous God (Acts 17:23-28):

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things He is not far from each one of us, for “in him we live and move and have our being.”

And Paul’s message makes some people uncomfortable, even to this day. You don’t need to go to church to find God. The real God doesn’t need a church building to live in. You don’t need to put money into the collection plate at church in order to “pay” for God’s services. The real God doesn’t need money! You don’t need to go into a church and sing special hymns and chants, and listen to music that sounds all “churchy.” If you think that, you are as bad as the ancient Athenians whom Paul was scolding. You meet the real God in the desert, in the marketplace at Athens, wherever you might be. We exist “in” God at all times, in the same way that fish live in the ocean. In the case of the

fish, the ocean is always there surrounding them at all times. In our case, God's presence is always here surrounding us at all times: "in him we live and move and have our being."

The ancient Athenians believed themselves to be far too smart for that. They loved to discuss psychology and physics and philosophy. How ignorant this Paul fellow was! He couldn't explain anything to them the way they wanted it explained.

Most of these proud philosophers walked away, but one stayed, a man named St. Denis (Dionysius in Greek, see Acts 17:34). St. Denis understood what Paul was saying about the Anonymous God, the mysterious x-factor, the unknowable God in whom we live and move and have our being, who saves our souls from destruction. St. Denis was converted on that day. This is another little conversion story for us to think about. Newcomers to the twelve step program frequently badger the old timers continually, saying in effect, "If you would just explain to me adequately who and what this Higher Power is that you keep talking about, then I might be willing to be converted into becoming a believer in this Higher Power." But that was not what the Apostle Paul did when he was preaching to the proud intellectuals of ancient Athens, the intellectual center of the ancient world. Paul told them, "You're looking in the wrong place. It's over there, where that little nondescript altar is that you've been ignoring, the one with no picture of God, no description of God, just the simple words *Agnôstô Theô*. That's the real altar of God. The Anonymous God."

Paul was not being perverse, and these proud intellectuals to whom he was preaching were not nearly as intelligent and knowledgeable about the higher reaches of philosophy as they thought they were. The central theological problem arises here because no human language can ever adequately describe who and what God really is. The real God is infinite and eternal. You cannot stick "infinity" as one of the variables into a mathematical equation like the physicists use and get an intelligible answer. When one writes equations like $E = mc^2$ and $F = ma$, one cannot set one of the variables at infinity and calculate the value of the others. God's *ousia* (his essential Being) lies outside the box of space and time in which we human beings are compelled to think. The real God is far more powerful than the whole rest of the visible universe put together, and is not bound by the laws of physics which apply to everything else in the universe, such as the laws of thermodynamics for example, particularly the law of entropy.

If it is a real God that we are talking about — and that is the only kind of God who is going to have the power to save us when all our natural human abilities have failed us — then this will of necessity be a God to whom our normal scientific formulas and

explanatory methods will not apply. That is the essential choice which is laid before a newcomer to the twelve step program. If you want a God whom you can explain and understand, this kind of God will not have the power to save you from your obsessive and compulsive drive towards total self-destruction. If you want a God who will have the power to stop your downward plunge and start lifting you back up again, it will have to be a God whom you would never have the power to fully explain or understand.

What can be done to help newcomers, lost and bewildered, and lacking any knowledge of where to turn next? What we can do is to come up with metaphors and symbols (like referring to God as the x-factor in conversion) which point towards God, and tell us which way to look and listen. If the metaphors and symbols are good ones, these newcomers will ultimately come into immediate personal contact with God's presence, in a way that they can feel and powerfully intuit.¹

And perhaps even more importantly, we can tell them things to do. Pray in the morning and evening, do a moral self-inventory, make amends to those whom you have harmed, and so on. The twelve step program is a list of things to do, not a list of things to analyze intellectually. After we have done each of these steps — but only afterwards — we will understand what that step was designed to teach us. Action first, then understanding, not vice versa.

Of necessity, we must stand before the altar with the simple inscription *Agnôstô Theô*, the altar to the Anonymous God. When we ask his name, he simply tells us, "I am who I am." But we do know that he is a person who says "I" when he speaks to us, not some impersonal "it" which we can analyze and dissect and slice up and put on microscope slides. And we can walk into a twelve step meeting (particularly an A.A. or N.A. meeting) and say to ourselves, "Whatever this mysterious x-factor is, it has to be real, because there are people walking around here alive who should have been *dead*, and dead long before this point." Or we can read the Bible, and say to ourselves, "Whatever this higher power is, it was the power which guided Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; it was the power which saved Moses; it was the power which grasped the Apostle Paul and St. Denis."

And at that point, all I have to pray is, "Whoever it was saved all these people, I'm praying to you now. Whoever you are, please save me too." This God — the Anonymous God — is the only God who actually has the power to save us, when we have hit absolute bottom and have no hope left in this world of any sort.

The Cloud of Unknowing: passing through the Dark Night of the Soul

But let us return to the story of Moses. After leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses guided them back to Mount Sinai. The mountain became covered with a dense, dark cloud (Exodus 19-20 and 24). Moses went up the mountain and into the thickest part of the cloud, where it was pitch black, with no light to see by at all. That was when God spoke to him, and gave him and the Israelites a *nomos*, a moral code, a new set of values to live by. It centered on the Ten Commandments and the Two Great Commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

In the western spiritual tradition, this part of Moses’ story was for many centuries regarded as one of the key metaphors and symbols for talking about the spiritual life. As we enter the spiritual life, we too (like Moses) have to enter the dark cloud, metaphorically speaking, in order to climb up the mountain of God.

This image was at the very heart of the spiritual system taught by a Christian author who wrote a number of major works around 500 A.D. under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. This pen name was a reference to the story of the Apostle Paul preaching in Athens about the Unknown God, where this was the name of one of the few Greek philosophers who was willing to pay serious attention to Paul’s message. The Middle Ages knew this mysterious and anonymous author as “St. Denis.” What makes St. Denis so important is that he was, along with St. Augustine, one of the four or five most formative figures in the history of Christian theology. A good deal of western mysticism followed in St. Denis’ footsteps, not only throughout the Middle Ages, but later on as well, where figures like St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century and Thomas Merton in the twentieth century were deeply influenced by St. Denis’ ideas.

One of St. Denis’ followers was a famous medieval English spiritual writer from the fourteenth century who wrote about the spiritual life in a work called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This is such a nice term for referring to the central metaphor, that I will borrow it and use it in what I am writing here. It is also sometimes called the Dark Night of the Soul.

The first step and hitting bottom

In order to work the twelve steps, we first have to “hit bottom” in some way. Hitting bottom is entering the Cloud of Unknowing. We have to get to the point where all of our old ideas about the world and life and God have become totally unworkable, so that we see the very fabric of our life crashing down around us. The first step begins by talking about the dark thing that has enslaved us: alcohol, drugs, compulsive overeating, gambling, codependent relationships with other people, the absence of all anger control, a destructive sexual addiction, or what have you. But then it continues by talking about “unmanageability.” Our ideas about life do not work anymore. No matter what we do, we seem to fail over and over again, and we suddenly realize that, honestly speaking, we do not have the slightest idea why. For years we have been blaming other people for everything that is wrong in our own lives, when suddenly we realize that, with this much calamity going on and the specter of further destruction looming ahead of us, there has to be something “wrong” with us too.

It is when it all comes crashing down and we no longer know which way to go, that we enter the Cloud of Unknowing. It is a state of radical disorientation. We may be flailing out in angry rages at everyone around us, or we may be lying under the covers whimpering and paralyzed, but we honestly do not have any idea what to do next. Nothing that we can see is going to work.

When newcomers to the twelve step program ask the good old timers to explain to them exactly who and what this God is whom they are supposed to pray to, they are simply trying to avoid going all the way into the Cloud of Unknowing. The problem is that they will not get the answer they are seeking — God will not “speak” to them metaphorically speaking — until they enter that cloud all the way.

We have to let go of, not only everything we think we know about ourselves and the world and life, but also everything we think we know about God. When Catholic priests and nuns and Protestant pastors come into A.A., they are sometimes among the hardest people to deal with. They are apt to think that they already know exactly who God is. One of the major crises that these self-styled “experts on God” will have to pass through, is coming to realize that their old ideas about God had fatal flaws in them, and that it is precisely these mistaken beliefs about God which have been destroying them. Sister Ruth, a Catholic nun in the A.A. fellowship who lives here in northern Indiana, said that in her case, she had to learn to read the Third Step in a different way. The actual words

of the step talked about turning our will and our lives “over to the care of God *as we understood Him.*” And she heard other people in the fellowship talking about how working the steps had allowed them to find “a God of their understanding.” But she said that for herself, she had to think about it as turning her will and her life over to the care of “the God of my nonunderstanding.” She finally understood the point that the Apostle Paul had been making when he preached his sermon at the altar to the *Agnôstô Theô*, the Unknown God.

Most people have to let go of almost all of the theological doctrines and dogmas that they have learned. This includes even dogmas like the substitutionary doctrine of the atonement (the medieval idea that Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty to God for our sins), the doctrine of the incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, and other complex ideas like that. There is a fatal flaw in our theology somewhere, and we do not know where it is, so we have to let go, for now, of everything. We are seeking the God whom Paul Tillich, in *The Courage to Be*, called “the God beyond God, who appears when the God of theism has disappeared.”

The most famous scene in the Big Book is the one on pages 10 to 12, where Bill Wilson is sitting at his kitchen table, telling Ebby Thacher that he has lost all faith in any kind of traditional Christian belief. He does not believe in any kind of loving personal God, he does not believe in the divinity of Christ, and he does not believe in the Devil either, but if any of these divine beings existed, he says, the Devil was the one who would seem to be in actual control of the universe. And what Ebby says back to him, in effect, is “Then drop it all. Let go of all those ideas.” And it is only when Bill Wilson is willing to let go of the entire world of theological doctrines and dogmas that the scales fall from his eyes and he becomes able to actually encounter God. He had to enter the Cloud of Unknowing before the real God would reveal himself to him.

In order to work the twelve steps, it is also necessary to let go of all of our previous values and moral rules, such as they may be. “Good boys should always do this.” “Good girls ought never do that.” “Being praised and thought well of by other people is the most important thing.” “Having lots of money is the most important thing.” “If someone says such-and-such to you, you have to slug that person in the mouth, or you are not a real man.” “Don’t get mad, get even.” “Obeying the laws is for those obnoxious church people with all their praying and screaming and carrying on.” “If someone else is unhappy it must be my fault.” “It is my responsibility to make sure that all the other people in the world do things right.”

We have to lay all of these rules aside also, at least for now, in order to enter the Cloud of Unknowing. There will be fatal flaws, perhaps even many of them, in our present set of values and rules of behavior, and we do not know where these flaws lie. So we have to set all of them aside for now.

Am I allowed to take any beliefs at all into the Cloud of Unknowing with me? I will need some sort of faith or confidence that the God whom I will meet there, just might be willing to heal me and help me. I will not have the strength to step into that cloud until, somehow or other, I can get just the glimmer of the notion that there is a higher power who has helped people who were just like me. Bill Wilson saw Ebby Thacher sitting at his kitchen table, sober and happy, and he could not deny the evidence of his own eyes and ears. But in terms of going much past that point, I will need to strip myself of all my previous beliefs.

Hearing God speak from the Cloud

When Moses entered the Cloud of Unknowing, he heard God speaking to him. God's words laid out for him a *nomos*, a new set of values and guidelines for living, a new and different kind of moral code. We are talking about a metaphor here, a way of using symbolic language to talk about inner spiritual events. There are people in the twelve step program who have heard an actual voice speaking in their head, where God spoke to them in that kind of direct way. But that is not the way that God usually speaks even to these people, and most people in the twelve step program have never had an experience like that at all.

God speaks to us most often through other people. Someone at an A.A. meeting says something that I suddenly realize is God speaking to me, using that human being as a channel for communicating with me. Or a single line in a book I am reading may suddenly, as it were, leap out at me. And I realize that this applies to me, and that the truth it contains will allow me to live my life in a much better way. In the New Testament, the "word" of God was the *Logos*, which means something logical that suddenly makes sense out of a part of my life that never made any real sense before. The *Logos* reveals *Alêtheia*, which is the Truth. It is the truth about the world and God and myself, coming in a moment of insight which strips away all the denial and alibis and excuses, and displays the real truth about things (which I have been trying so hard to avoid looking at) in the clear light of day.

This metaphor of the Cloud of Unknowing contains paradoxical qualities, for it talks about receiving Illumination by entering the Divine Darkness. It talks about hearing the Word of God by entering the Divine Silence.

When God touches me within the Cloud of Unknowing, it may not be conceptual knowledge that he will give me. It may not be words that I hear or read. It may be things that I see, like walking into a twelve step meeting, and seeing someone smile with pleasure to see me there. It may be someone giving me a hug when I need comforting.

It may be in the form of what the Germans call *Gefühl* and *Ahnung*, words which are translated into English rather weakly as “feeling” and “intuition” and other words like that. When Bill Wilson was sitting at his kitchen table talking with Ebby Thacher, and Ebby finally got Bill to let go of all of his preconceived notions about God and enter the Cloud of Unknowing, what popped into Bill’s mind was the *Gefühl* of the sacred presence which he had felt while standing in Winchester Cathedral. It was a kind of awareness, a kind of real knowledge which was nevertheless not conceptual knowledge, not an intellectual theory. Ellen Lantz, one of the good old timers from northern Indiana, said that when she walked into an A.A. meeting, she could just “feel” the love. And when she and one of the young women whom she sponsored were sitting together chatting in her home, she could “feel” the love there too. That was what was going to heal the young woman’s soul, in a way that was far more important than any kind of statements of ideas and principles that Ellen could give her.

Nomos

When God spoke to Moses in the dark cloud, he gave him the Law, the *nomos*, the Torah. As the letter of James says, the true *nomos* is not a set of mechanical rules which we can use for discriminating against other people and sitting in judgment over them and condemning them. The true *nomos* is what James called the Law of Freedom. As the A.A. old timer Raymond puts it, it is the simple rule that tells us to “do good and show love.”

We will have to restructure our lives, and reframe the cognitive structures of our minds, in order to actually live the new way of life we are being given. A large part of the twelve steps, in fact, is simply a very well put together system for carrying out this process. It leads me step by step through the journey I must go through in order to remold and remake myself. I have to put away the old Me and wander for a while

through the Cloud of Unknowing — the Dark Night of the Soul — confused and bewildered, while letting the twelve step program and the people in the program slowly help me figure out a new Me, one which I can live with inside my own mind without continual guilt, anxiety, fear, resentment, and remorse.

The first time God spoke to Moses, in the story of the Burning Bush, Moses wanted to know who and what God was, and what his name was. God spoke only those puzzling words, “I am who I am.” We must complete our escape from Egypt (which stands metaphorically for the alcohol or drugs or lack of anger control or codependency or whatever it was which held us enslaved) and then enter the Cloud of Unknowing as we begin climbing up the Mountain of God. Going up one side of the mountain there are twelve steps, which can make the going much easier, although there are other paths up the mountain which will also work. By the time I get to the top of the mountain, I will realize who and what God is. God is the power who will heal me and give me a new self, built around the simple principles of love and service (“Do good and show love”). That is all I need to know about God, and all I will ever need to know.

If you who are reading this book today are a skeptic and a doubter, that is not necessarily a bad thing. It may make it easier to enter the Cloud of Unknowing, where everything at first must be cast into doubt and uncertainty. But if, amidst all your skepticism and doubt, you could perhaps have the tiniest bit of hope that, within that dark cloud, you might meet something which will heal you and give you a new and better self, it will be a big help. This is not an absurd hope. You would not be the first person in the world who climbed the mountain, immersed in the darkness of the Cloud of Unknowing, and like Moses, ultimately found the sunlight of the spirit at the top.²

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NOTES

1. That is the way the Bible is written. It is filled with a prodigious number of helpful metaphors and analogies: God is our Friend, the good Father (who holds his little child in his arms, and feeds him from a spoon, and holds his hands when he is first learning to walk, and hugs and kisses him and consoles him when he falls and hurts himself), the Good Boss for whom we work, the Farmer (where we are the farm animals, the donkeys and camels and the oxen who pull the plow). God's power is described as Lady Wisdom giving birth to the sun, moon, stars, earth, trees, flowers, and animals. In the Christian tradition, we see God portrayed metaphorically as the King or Mighty Lord whom we serve gallantly and honorably as knights and ladies and warriors, a two-edged Sword, the Rock of Ages, and the great ocean of Love in which we live and move and have our being.

Friend (Exod. 33:11, 2 Chron. 20:7, Isa. 41:8, James 2:23), good father (Hosea 11:1–4), good boss (passages like Matt. 20:1–15, for in current American English we say boss and employee instead of master and servant), Lady Wisdom (Prov. 8:22–31, Sirach [Ecclesiasticus] 1:4–9, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–27), two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12–13), rock (Pss. 18:2, 28:1, 31:2–3, 42:9, 62:2, 71:3; Matt. 7:24–25; in the phrase “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee” there is an allegorical linkage to Isa. 2:10 and 19).

Mighty lord with his knights and ladies: the repeated Old Testament references to God as “the Lord of Hosts,” i.e., Yahweh of the Warriors, and similar militant metaphors, were interpreted in the language of chivalry in the western European middle ages, see Glenn F. Chesnut, “Eusebius, Augustine, Orosius, and the Later Patristic and Medieval Christian Historians” in Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (eds.), *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), pp. 687–713.

We find the ocean metaphor, which I believe is especially useful and helpful, as early as the eighteenth century in John Wesley, Sermon 36, “The Law Established through Faith, Discourse II,” 2.3, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2, *Sermons II: 34–70* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). “Love existed from eternity, in God, the great Ocean of Love. Love had a place in all the children of God, from the moment of their creation. They received at once from their gracious Creator to exist, and to love.” By the time of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, at the beginning of the twentieth century, this metaphor had become very widely used in western spirituality. Sigmund Freud commented on it (negatively of course, but the fact that he singled it out for special attack was a mark of how widely known the metaphor had become).

2. In Exodus 33:18, the Prayer of Moses is, “I pray you, show me your glory,” and towards the very end of his story, God grants him that request. This is the light and glory of the infinite

sacred and holy reality which shines through in all the works of creation. It is what is sung about in the Song of the Seraphim in Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; all the world is filled with his glory.” Bill Wilson came into its presence in Winchester Cathedral, and Bill’s grandfather felt it when he gazed up into the starry heavens at night. It shines in the faces of some of the A.A. good old timers.