**Lorenzo Zaggia**

**Stirred, not Shaken: The Quest for Spiritual Transformation in *The Cloud of Unknowing***

One of the essential characteristics of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is its author’s anxiety that their words might be misunderstood, while they insist that the practice they are promoting — the work of contemplation, the highest degree of Christian life — is the simplest conceivable. What is essential, then, is knowing how to perform this work correctly.

Distinguishing between good and bad alterations of conscience is thus a central theme in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Much as the words of the texts have to be understood “goostely” (“spiritually”) and not “bodely” (“physically”), so there is a correct way of applying contemplation, through the soul, and a wrong one, through the body. The author does not hesitate to list the failures of contemplation, but refusing those who believe that the work of contemplation should be undertaken by the body does not mean that contemplation is an affair that only concerns the soul: subtle moments in the text indicate instead that these two worlds are in communication, and the work of the disciples must be to strike the correct balance between them.

This 20-minute presentation will thus delve first into the “many wonderful contenaunces” (“many remarkable habits”) of those who think they have understood contemplation but have actually failed to do so, believing the teaching of the book to be a physical one. The result of their misguidedness is a pointless and monstruous physical distortion; the author does not stop to their bodies, also providing a description of their mind which has been deceived by the devil’s false promises. The devil himself appears as the culmination of this exploration, where it is used as a conclusive example.

The author is also concerned with what happens to those who perform contemplation correctly: to disavow any physical interpretation of it, they declare the true space of contemplation to be a “nought” (“nothing”) in which the soul undertakes an emotional journey from despair to comfort to joy. Still, some hints and metaphors indicate that this activity also has physical repercussions: the ideal contemplative is in fact someone whose very appearance signals their wisdom and sensitivity; and the central metaphor with which the author describes what prompts men to become contemplatives is the “steryng” (stirring) of the soul, which has a bodily connotation. Rather than being merely a work of the soul, the author seems thus to argue that in contemplation body and soul are in necessary harmony.