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# The Cloud Of Unknowing: With The Book Of Privy Counsel



THE CLOUD OF  
UNKNOWING

*With the Book of  
Privy Counsel*

*A New Translation by  
Carmen Acevedo Butcher*



## Synopsis

This anonymous fourteenth-century text is the glory of English mysticism, and one of the most practical and useful guides to finding union with God ever written. Carmen Acevedo Butcher's new translation is the first to bring the text into a modern English idiom - while remaining strictly faithful to the meaning of the original Middle English. The Cloud of Unknowing consists of a series of letters written by a monk to his student or disciple, instructing him (or her) in the way of Divine union. Its theology is presented in a way that is remarkably easy to understand, as well as practical, providing advice on prayer and contemplation that anyone can use. Previous translations of the Cloud have tended to veil its intimate, even friendly tone under medieval-sounding language. Carmen Butcher has boldly brought the text into language as appealing to modern ears as it was to its original readers more than five hundred years ago. Also included in the volume is the companion work attributed to the same anonymous author, The Book of Privy Counsel, which contains further advice for approaching God in a way that emphasizes real experience rather than human knowledge.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Having studied the Cloud of Unknowing and Book of Privy Counsel in the original Middle English and through its many subsequent translations, I confidently say that Dr. Carmen Butcher's is the most accessible book to the layman yet still retains all the mystique of the contemplative genre. Her introduction contextualizes this book both historically and in our own times, giving the reader an objective view of its place in the Middle Ages as well as a personal understanding of why this book is still so important to our daily lives and current times. Many of us wish we could only strengthen our

relationship with God and have sought numerous, often unfulfilling methods for accomplishing that goal; however, this text is a spiritual guidebook for coming to know God in the only way He can be known, rendered in the most transparent language for a most mystical subject. I can say no more about the specifics of the text, and anyone who reads it will know why I cannot.

In her beautiful translation of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Book of Privy Counsel*, Dr. Carmen Butcher does what every good scholar should do from time to time: she writes a very readable, knowledgeable and probing book for the non scholar. This is not to say that her book is beneath the professional scholar. It is not. All of her ability as a scholar is obvious in the book. But she makes it clear in simple language how one goes about addressing and communicating with God, how one becomes aware of the presence of God, all in understandable, modern English. Whether the reader is a university Ph.D, minister or a workaday Christian, serious about his or her religion, all will find the book to be an excellent, carefully written translation. For me personally, it was one of those books that I have been seeking for years, but did not realize it until I had read the book's first few pages. Then I found it rich in ideas that I had confronted but had never heard articulated. I recommend it highly for all who are interested in Christian thought and literature. When you put the book down, you will not be the same person who picked it up. Wilson Hall, Ph.D. Professor retired

Call it Meditation, Deep Prayer, or Contemplation, *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING* gives guidance for both the beginner or experienced spiritual mediator. Having studied the meditation practices of both eastern and western traditions, *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING* far exceeds the deepest teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism (even Zen,) and even the traditional Christian methods; they all seem to fall a little short of *THE CLOUD*. Even the popular Centering Prayer teachings come from *THE CLOUD*. While a Christian work, *THE CLOUD* is for all who seek God, regardless of your religious tradition, or even if you have no religious tradition. I have read a lot of translations of *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING*, but none are as clear and easily understood as Dr. Butcher's modern English translation of *THE CLOUD*. If you are going to read *THE CLOUD*, this is the translation you should read. Dr. Butcher deserves our thanks and praise for giving us this translation.

Carmen Butcher's exhaustive knowledge of Middle English, and her extensive etymological knowledge of Modern English supports her ability to write this beautiful, easily readable translation, which is both a pleasure to read, as well as extremely insightful into the contemplative practices. I would recommend this to any laymen, clergy, ministers, scholars, and students who are serious

about seeking and loving God, and only God, acknowledging their inability to "think their way to God."

I had previously read part of another translation of *The Cloud*, and while I felt drawn to the work, Dr. Butcher's translation really brought the text and its author to life for me. She has succeeded brilliantly in her attempt "to articulate the intimacy between the Cloud writer and his audience" (Introduction). Those who seek guidance on the path of contemplation will find in these pages a very special friend, confidant and teacher. You will be amazed at how he speaks to us so deeply and powerfully and in such simple and direct terms across the centuries, thanks in no small part to the work of Dr. Butcher.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is a 14th century Christian classic, the primary source-text for Centering Prayer and other forms of meditation and "prayer of the heart." This beautiful new translation by Carmen Acevedo Butcher has a more devotional quality than most previous translations of *The Cloud* and its "sequel," *The Book of Privy Counsel*. Butcher's versions of these texts are easy to read, and she captures the passion, deep faith, and occasional humor of their anonymous author. Butcher begins with an extended introduction to *The Cloud*, giving us the history of the book as well as what we do and do not know about its author. This introduction also gives us a summary of the theology and spirituality of the text, which, while solidly rooted in 14th century Christian faith, has been a deep inspiration to contemplatives of many other faith traditions throughout the last five centuries. The fact that this new translation is published by a Buddhist press shows that *The Cloud* transcends barriers of tradition and is a truly timeless classic. One of the "hidden treasures" of Butcher's translation is the Notes section at the end of the book, which give us a wealth of insight into the text. She occasionally quotes the Middle English to show us the wordplays and other aspects of the original text, and she also includes references to Scripture and other writings to illuminate various passages of *The Cloud*. It's definitely worth the trouble to flip to the back of the book to read the endnotes. I fell in love with *The Cloud of Unknowing* about 15 years ago through William Johnston's classic translation, and now I've fallen in love with it again. I feel like I've been re-introduced to an old friend. Even if you've read *The Cloud* in other translations, I highly recommend reading it again in Butcher's new and vibrant translation.

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