

# THE SPIRITUAL CLASSICS AS SPIRITUAL GUIDES

By WENDY M. WRIGHT

I WILL NEVER FORGET, AS A VERY YOUNG college student in California, being handed a copy of *The cloud of unknowing* by a medieval history professor who had intuited my budding interest in mysticism. Clutching the book tightly under my jacket to protect it from the rain I scurried off to the library to find a secret place deep in the bowels of the musty stacks where I could be alone with my treasure. As I spread back the leaves of the first page, the words of the foreword fairly leapt off the paper.

Whoever you are possessing this book, know that I charge you with a serious responsibility, to which I attach the sternest sanctions that the bonds of love can bear. It does not matter whether this book belongs to you, whether you are keeping it for someone else, whether you are taking it to someone or borrowing it; you are not to read it, write or speak of it; nor allow another to do so, unless you really believe that he is a person who, over and above the good works of the active life, has resolved to follow Christ perfectly.<sup>1</sup>

I felt myself to be directly addressed by the author and trembled interiorly at the thought that I might not be a person truly resolved to follow Christ perfectly. But deep within I *knew* that this was *my* book. I was entrusted with a grave and holy responsibility. These were *my* words, meant for me at this very moment, uttered by some unknown person (I was totally unaware at what temporal and spatial distance) with me clearly in mind. The book was a numinous and longed for companion teasing me deeper into some unfolding part of myself that I knew to be connected with God.

Several decades have passed since in the innocence of my first naïveté I encountered *The cloud*. Along the way I have read many other spiritual classics, a few of them, in the early years, with that same sense that they fairly glowed on the page: Augustine's *Confessions* (about which I collapsed sobbing upon the desk of another

history professor), fragments of St Symeon the New Theologian, Br Lawrence's *Practice of the presence of God*, *The interior castle* of Teresa of Avila. It was my feeling that these were timeless pieces of literature, gems of living wisdom undimmed by the passage of centuries. I suppose it was that feeling that caused me eventually to become an historian of Christian spirituality. Over the years I have certainly learned to read the classic texts of our spiritual heritage differently, asking all the pertinent critical historiographical questions. Plus I no longer experience the life of prayer as some distant foreign landscape into which I am being invited. While the experience of prayer continues to unfold as mystery, I am no longer an outsider peering over the fence of an exotic garden but one gardener among many, tending the soil and delighting in the astonishing variety of fruits and blossoms that grow in the garden of the Christian spiritual tradition. So some of my earlier sense of these texts as missives breaking in from the spiritual realm is modified for me now.

#### *First naïveté*

Many of my students, some of them of traditional college age, others of them older, come to the classic texts of spirituality with the same fresh wonder as I had done. They hear the advice of Jean-Pierre de Caussade's *Abandonment to divine providence* as constructed especially for them and calling them to a new level of trust in God's loving action working through the ordinary events of their lives.

The present moment is like a desert in which these uncomplicated souls (those abandoned to providence) see and enjoy only God and attend to nothing but his will. Everything else is ignored and forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

Or they read the dramatic *passio* of the martyrdom of Sts Perpetua and Felicitas and find themselves overwhelmed by the heroic faith of these women and inspired to re-examine their own willingness to take their religious commitments seriously.

You need only go into a modern-day religious bookstore of any quality to find the shelves stacked with the classics of the Christian spiritual life. The readers of these volumes are not mainly scholars in the field (although in the last twenty years serious research, new translations and groundbreaking interpretative work has been done in the area) but Christians from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives who are hungry for the living wisdom they uncover there. So you get busy housewives and mothers receiving spiritual

formation from the words of medieval women whose choice of lifestyle assumed that marriage and motherhood were antithetical to a life of true prayer. And you find (as in my own case with *The cloud*) an active American university student imbibing the advice most likely intended for someone already well acquainted with communal monastic life and now being initiated into the contemplative life of a solitary. Or you discover a forty-five-year-old businessman trying to understand his twentieth-century mid-life crisis through study of the writings of a sixteenth-century priest imprisoned for attempting daring reforms of his religious order.

Many of these readers come to the great texts of our heritage with what philosopher Paul Ricoeur termed 'first *naïveté*'. This does not simply mean that they read uncritically but that they also read with a freshness and openness that allows them to be eager recipients of what they read. They are like the 'good soil' alluded to in the gospel that is fertile ground for genuinely hearing the word (in this case the word refracted through the lives and thoughts of the most faithful of the faithful).

For the most part, devotional readers of the classics like these hear well what I would call the heartbeat of the text's author. When I collapsed in tears in my professor's office after reading *The confessions* it was not because St Augustine's refutation of the Manichaean philosophy of evil was so convincing or because I too had come to understand my childhood as evidence of the tenacity of original sin. No, I sobbed my way through the text because I experienced the same overwhelming desire for the something more that the North African bishop did. Probing my own capacity to love I too had discovered the traces of an inexhaustible love that compelled me out of myself. And I felt deeply the bishop's rhapsodic prayer, his passionate gratitude, his wonder at the marvellous discovery of the God-life within. Augustine mirrored for me my own capacity for prayer, my own ultimate vocation as lover of God. The hearts of the great writers of our contemplative tradition are audible in the texts they have written. Readers hungry for God eagerly press their ears against those ancient beating hearts to detect the same Godward movements beating in their own breasts.

*The chasm of the centuries*

But there are sometimes difficulties in reading from the vantage point of the first *naïveté*. Open ears take in everything uncritically. So the words coming forth from one seeker of spiritual freedom may

become words of spiritual bondage for another separated by time and place. I will never forget the anguish of a Lutheran pastor who attended a graduate seminar I offered in the history of spirituality. His seminary training, otherwise theologically sophisticated, had included no exposure to devotional classics. Later in life, longing for a deeper intimacy with God, he had begun delving into medieval literature on prayer. He heard there the most authentic beating of his own heart. But the books he was reading also told him that he had to flee the world truly to find God, that he must renounce all earthly ties to bind his life to the divine lover. The pastor, owing to his wife's employment in a nearby city, was not only immersed in a busy ministry but was primary care-taker of their two school-age children in the after-school hours. Discouraged, sure that he would never achieve the deep spiritual intimacy he longed for, he began to experience his family as a hated and impassable obstacle in the path home to God.

Similarly, I remember the instance of a caring older woman who had made the letters of St Margaret Mary Alacoque her spiritual nourishment for one Lenten season. Moved by the saint's profound intercessory prayer she too began to imagine herself suffering for the souls in purgatory, desiring to take on herself their pains. She was a woman relatively new to prayer, of fragile ego boundaries and deeply concerned about the difficulties her own grown daughter was facing in an abusive marriage. At one point, during a group retreat in which participants were encouraged to engage in some exercises for depth spiritual healing, she decided she would 'change places' with her daughter. When the exercises were concluded and retreat participants surfaced from their reveries to discuss what they had experienced, she remained deep in prayer. A neighbour finally noted her absorption when the group was dismissed for lunch. Gently, someone touched her shoulder. She did not respond. It took some vigorous intervention on the part of the other retreatants to bring her to. When she was able to speak, she recalled in terror 'getting lost' and not being able to find her way back to ordinary consciousness. Her journey had not been one of intercession or of expansion of consciousness, but of psychic disintegration and possession by unbenign spirits.

In both these cases, writings intended to encourage spiritual freedom and maturity were encountered in a way that produced the opposite effect. In other cases, uncritical reading of words penned under very different circumstances from our own could lead to a kind

of slavish literalism, intolerance, undue fearfulness (what used to be called scrupulosity) or narrow self-righteousness. Whatever the outcome, the wonderful sponge-like receptivity of the first *naïveté* can sometimes close in on itself. The heartbeat of God becomes obscured in the literal details of a text.

For most of our Christian spiritual classics were produced in eras separated from our own by the chasm of centuries. In our delight to find guides in the spiritual life we often forget the fact that life is not static. Rather, as theologian Karl Rahner has noted (conceiving the Christian spiritual life as a life of holiness with the saints as adventurers in that life):

. . . there is a history of holiness i.e., the always unique, unrepeatable history of the appropriation of God's grace and of the partaking of God's holiness . . . The nature of Christian holiness appears from the life of Christ and of his Saints, and what appears there cannot be translated absolutely into a general theory but must be experienced in the encounter with the historical which takes place from one individual case to the other. The history of Christian holiness (of what, in other words, is the business of every Christian, since everyone is sanctified and called to holiness) is in its totality a unique history and not the eternal return of the same. Hence, this history has its always new, unique phases; hence it must always be discovered anew . . .<sup>3</sup>

Rahner's insights alert us both to the continuity of the Christian spiritual tradition and to its distinctive unfolding quality. It does not stay the same. It is not static. The vast gulf of the centuries that separates us from Augustine and the author of *The cloud of unknowing* and Margaret Mary Alacoque is bridgeable in some ways and not in others.

In reading the literature of our spiritual heritage it is best then to be aware of historical context. This means being aware of the fact that an author lived in an earlier century and wrote in a different language and thus comes to us as an historically-bounded person rooted in a very different socio-political and ecclesial reality from our own. Human cultures change. Likewise the Church has not from the beginning been the same polity. Her theological language has evolved. Her life *vis à vis* the surrounding culture has been ever changing. Her styles of praying and notions of the Christian life continue to grow. We may know this, but when we pick up the spiritual classics we tend to forget what we know. We tend to view

spiritual advice as something timeless, something which directly mirrors the eternal reality toward which it so ardently longs.

In part, this impression is reinforced by the literature itself. The witness of a life profoundly centred in God carries its own authenticity. This is the real thing, we intuitively sense. And, inevitably, spiritual wisdom is grounded in real experience so that the authors of our classics teach from the powerful vantage point of lived experience. They have done it, we say, let us do what they did. Further, our authors speak not merely out of a context of personal wisdom but out of the collective and cumulative wisdom of the entire Christian community. As such, they witness to religious values, practices and lifestyles that have a validity well beyond their own experience. How many people have safely gone to God this or that way, we observe, it must be a way we might well emulate.

Despite this, we would do well to try to analyse the values—both explicit and implicit—that inform a particular piece of spiritual literature. We can only do this adequately by knowing something of the history of the period, the author and the audience to which he or she was writing. For example, the Lutheran pastor might have profited from knowing the little anonymous treatise he was reading entitled *Mystical theology* was a late fourteenth-century English treatise presumably written by a solitary for other solitaries at a time in Christendom when it was assumed that the life of withdrawal from the world was the most authentic response to the gospel.<sup>4</sup> It was also a time when the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius were being circulated and commented upon. This earlier contemplative author based his spiritual vision on neoplatonic precepts which posited that the most sure way into intimacy with the divine was through the *via negativa*, the abandonment of all human capacities (the ‘knowing’ discovered in verbal and visual imagery) and ties. Had the Lutheran pastor known this, along with knowing that our Christian spiritual heritage is a many-flowered garden that has continued to produce vigorous hybrid styles of spirituality from a common plant, he might have been more able to distill life-giving nectar from the particular plant he was enjoying.

### *Living with the language*

Developing a critical consciousness about these texts does not, for the Christian who is not a professional scholar, mean becoming an expert in the field. It does not mean having to read the texts in their original languages with a view to searching for signs of influence of

other writers or developing novel theories about what the text means in its own historical context. Developing a consciousness of the chasm of the centuries means simply that one must become aware of the values that explicitly or implicitly inform the classic texts. It means being willing to accept an author as a person of his or her moment in history. It means being aware of ourselves as participants in an ongoing exploration of the Christian life. As historian Margaret Miles has noted, 'The activity of continuous reappropriation is what it means to participate in a tradition'.<sup>5</sup>

This is not something new. Sts Augustine and Teresa or the author of *The cloud* were similarly engaged in the task of making the holiness of Christ unfold in the uniqueness of their historical moment. As Miles observes,

Religious leaders of the past found, focused and emphasized aspects of Christian faith that they found useful and useable . . . they adjusted the weight, central focus and the emotional intensity of Christian faith in radical new ways that responded to the religious needs of their contemporaries.<sup>6</sup>

I have found that for me, as a devotional reader, this means living with the language of the classic texts in two distinct ways. First, it means becoming aware of values, images and assumptions that are so specific to the author's time that they do not translate. Sometimes an author's advice may, for all her or his wisdom, even be antithetical to a vital faith in our contemporary world. Let such language simply slough off. Second, there may be concepts which appear foreign or distasteful which need to be lived with and lovingly contemplated, as it were, in order for the kernel of universal religious meaning to be hulled from the husk of its historical appearance. Let such language unfold.

Over the years I have spent a great deal of time with the writings of Sts Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, friends who sought to live vibrant lives of discipleship at the turn of the seventeenth century in France and Savoy. He was Bishop of Geneva, a prominent churchman, preacher and admired author. She was a widow who became the superior of a religious community, the Visitation, which they co-founded. It is through wrestling with the witness of these two luminaries that I have learned to exercise these two critical options: letting some of their language simply slough off and letting some of it unfold. Certainly when I am approaching their writings as a professional historian I try to recapture their vision in its specific

integrity and try not to slough off or reinterpret anything. But when I come to read them as devotional guides, I must meet them half way. Across the chasm of the centuries I must listen for words that give life in the twentieth century, an age of terrifying technological power and destructive capability, an age of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, an age of ecological crisis, an intellectual age of post-modernism.

Language and ideas that might well be sloughed off are both explicit and implicit in a text. Sometimes the quaint antiquity of an idea makes this patently obvious. An example of this might be the advice given about hearing Mass in Francis de Sales' treatise *Introduction to the devout life*, an immensely popular devotional guide intended for the instruction of the laity in the spiritual life.<sup>7</sup> An innovative book for its time, it made available to all members of the Church what had up until then been generally considered the prerogatives of the ordained or 'professional' religious: prayer and the life of perfection. St Francis provides his readers with a list of meditations to undertake while attending Mass because at that time in the Church's history the liturgy was said in Latin and people were not necessarily conversant with the ecclesiastical tongue. He also does not advise receiving communion daily, even if one attends Mass, a practice which has changed over the centuries. Such advice is obviously relevant primarily in his time and place.

Other assumptions of questionable contemporary value that texts such as *Introduction to the devout life* might contain are less explicit. Take for instance, the Genevan bishop's perspective on 'How to practise real poverty, being, notwithstanding, really rich'.<sup>8</sup> It is not his specific advice that might cause us to re-evaluate what he says: he counsels a holy indifference to wealth as well as responsible stewardship. The assumption that underlies that advice that might well be challenged is the assumption that wealth and position and conversely, material poverty and thus lack of viable participation in society are God-ordained. Francis de Sales lived at a time in Christian culture when the medieval notion of the divine right of kingship still hung in the air. Never holding up the lens of the gospel to the social and political institutions of his day, he did not see institutions as created primarily by human effort. He certainly is not to be blamed for this, for that insight was to come to western European culture during the Enlightenment. For the bishop sin resided in personal response to a presumably God-given and fixed social situation. Certainly, it had always been seen as saintly to give

everything away and become voluntarily poor for the sake of the kingdom. But the theological construct underlying such heroic gestures from our past was always cast in terms of personal salvation, as an individual desire to flee the world and be remade, through self-renunciation of all sorts including wealth, in the image of God in Christ.

In our contemporary Church context the scope of the question about poverty and wealth has been radically enlarged. One hundred years have passed since the publication of the first papal encyclical on social justice. In the ensuing century the Church has come to analyse in a new manner the question that the author of *The introduction* addressed.<sup>9</sup> Sin is no longer perceived to be primarily personal, it is seen to be structural as well. Persons, communities and nations may construct and support social systems that promote the full dignity of the human person (the bottom line for the social teaching tradition) or they may not. It is fully within the purview of Christian morality to confront (through the use of non-violent means) governments, policies or practices that diminish the dignity of any person. Thus poverty, which effectively marginalizes an entire segment of the population from full participation in society, must be seen, not as an inevitable or 'chosen' state of affairs, but against the backdrop of the excessive and unbridled accumulation of wealth. Questions of distributive justice understood to emerge from the imperative of the gospel itself may be raised. The questions confronting the 'very rich' today are wider in scope than in the seventeenth century. If one finds oneself with great wealth, in what does stewardship consist? Is dismantling economic structures that created such imbalanced distribution imperative? How do the need for personal security and the needs of the marginalized coincide? What does it mean to confront structural sin? The queries are endless, the responses varied and complex. The point is: the changes in both the socio-cultural and theological climates have been so marked in the past four hundred years, that the bishop's specific advice must be weighed against new standards.

Such language might well be sloughed off.

On the other hand, we find in the pages of our classic texts some language which, at first glance, strikes us as necessarily antiquated or obtuse to which, I would suggest, we would be well advised to give more careful attention. Some language needs to unfold contemplatively in our prayer. We need the bite of an intellectual nutcracker to crack open the rich spiritual nourishment hidden in the inedible looking husks.

For a number of years, as I was thick into my research for my dissertation on Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal,<sup>10</sup> I bridled at the phrase they would occasionally employ: 'loving your abjections'.<sup>11</sup> Used in the context of the deepened virtue of humility, abjection in Jane and Francis' view refers to the 'lowliness, meanness, and baseness that exist in us without our knowledge'.<sup>12</sup> As steady fare for spiritual reading I found this hard to take. It triggered for me a sense of unhealthy self-loathing, that too often legitimates victimization, and self-hatred. It sounded like the stereotype of a world and body-denying kind of teaching that would have humankind grovelling around in the slime of its own deprivation. Yet this was impossible to reconcile with what I knew of the Christian humanist optimism that permeates the thinking of Francis and Jane. So I waited on the phrase. I left it alone as an area of study. I let it ripen in my prayer.

Gradually I began to find a referent, something that I knew to be deeply life-giving in my own spiritual journey, against which to evaluate the teaching on 'love your abjections'. I began to live into my own limitations, those pesky arenas of brokenness and blindness that seem always to be there whether we want them or not. Gradually I began (as mid-life neared) to realize that my task was not so much to eliminate them, for this was in fact impossible, although I could certainly work on them. Rather, my task was to recognize and accept them. My abjections were my unwanted limitations. It was then that the radical wisdom of the *Introduction* became clear to me. For the call there was not simply to accept but to *love* my abjections. What could this mean? To embrace, to cherish those parts of the self that one would prefer not to claim, much less make public. What an astonishing thought. But the more I lived with this, the more I let it unfold as an experience of self-revelation in prayer, the more I began to delight in it. To *love* our abjections is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is to have compassion on ourselves. It is to begin to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weaknesses. It is to know ourselves as wounded yet beloved and thus to begin to know each other most truly. For it is not in our strengths that we find one another, it is in our lack. For in our need we call each other forth. To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human and from there to begin to love all humans most truly. To love our abjections is indeed a sublime spiritual teaching.

Yet it is a teaching I had to let unfold. It was one that caused me to work through false perceptions of the spiritual life and of self in order to come closer to God. The language of the spiritual classics is sometimes best sloughed off. Sometimes it is best waited upon to unfold in its own time in prayer.

*With the Communion of Saints*

On occasion I will meet someone or find myself in the midst of a community of Christians who have departed so dramatically from the world of the first *naïveté* and entered with such vehemence upon the critical endeavour of seeing the religious classics across the chasm of the centuries that they no longer experience them as at all relevant to their lives.

One summer I taught a course in the history of Christian spirituality at a West Coast university where consciousness of contemporary ecclesial issues and debates was very high. Virtually every primary text from the tradition that I assigned was immediately dismissed with intense opposition. Augustine's *Confessions* were riddled with evidence of sexual dysfunction, the imagery of John Climacus' *Ladder of divine ascent* was too hierarchical, the desert fathers were misogynist. The women's texts were greeted with somewhat less repugnance, but were generally chided for being too tainted with a body-denying ethos. In fact, I do not disagree with these evaluations. Awakening to the possibility of life-denying elements of a spiritual teaching is part of the process of coming into a mature relationship with a text. But one cannot stop there.

What happened to these students is that they had moved beyond the first *naïveté* but had not engaged with the texts on the level of second *naïveté*. They had learned to look hard but in the process they had forgotten how to hear with their hearts. Perhaps, as in any vital and long term relationship, we must fall in and out of love a number of times with the classics of our tradition. At each falling out we will have learned to see them a little more clearly, learned to know their faults and foibles more intimately. At each return we will learn to confront or refuse to embrace life-denying aspects of our relationship. Yet we will return. And our new falling in love will be richer, more mature, more grasped by the divine heartbeat that pulses through the hearts of our authors, less fixated on the particular manifestation of a divine/human love.

The dynamic goes both ways. It is not a bad idea to let an Augustine, a John Climacus or a Hildegard of Bingen, rooted as they

are in their historical moment, become the catalyst for the discovery of our own limited frames of reference. If we can begin to read their words with both a sense of critical awareness *and* with a sense of our shared longings, our common life, I think we can become conscious of how we too are shaped by our moment, how we are both given the task of allowing new forms of holiness adapted to our times to emerge as well as the task of realizing ourselves as part of an ongoing tradition of searching for God.

Must *The cloud of unknowing* be embraced as a literal blueprint for all Christians searching for God? No. Must *The cloud* be utterly rejected because the neoplatonic philosophy forming it opposes our contemporary quest to live as reverent creatures on an endangered planet? No. But our task of reappropriation must be an active one. We must engage in it with as much energy as we would when cultivating an intimate relationship. We must be willing to be thoughtfully critical, sloughing off ideas and images that cannot sustain Christian life in the twentieth century, and letting those maddening and undecipherable gems of wisdom hidden in antique garb gradually reveal themselves to us.

Most of all this active reappropriation of our tradition will be an experience of empowerment. We will discover that this is *our* tradition, one we are called to live creatively and with great risk. We are called to chart the vast and unexplored sea of holiness that floods forth from the inexhaustible source that is the holiness of Christ. But we will also have an experience of companionship, of being one with the women and men of our shared path who explored that same uncharted sea. We will discover ourselves in the Communion of Saints, straining to tack the fragile vessels of our lives in the direction of God as did they before us. We are certainly not alone. For the human heart, despite the centuries, has not changed, its fundamental rhythm is still the heartbeat of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The cloud of unknowing*, ed William Johnston (Garden City, New York, 1973), p 43.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to divine providence* (New York, 1975), p 78.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations*, Vol III, *Theology of the spiritual life* (London, 1967), pp 97-98.

<sup>4</sup> Author of *The cloud of unknowing, A letter of private direction and other treatises* (New York, 1981), pp 79-80.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: critical perspectives for an embodied spirituality* (New York, 1988), p 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> St Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the devout life*, trans John K. Ryan (New York, 1955), pp 99-101. This English translation of the *Introduction* is perhaps the most standard and widely available. A more recent version (1990) is edited by Fr Armind Nazareth M.S.F.S., Fr Antony Mookenthottam M.S.F.S., Fr Antony Kolencherry M.S.F.S. and available through S.F.S. Publications, Bangalore, India.

<sup>8</sup> *Introduction*, Ryan trans., pp 163-164.

<sup>9</sup> *Rerum novarum* was published in 1892.

<sup>10</sup> *Bond of perfection: Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales* (New York, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> In the Ryan *Introduction* the phase is discussed at length on pp 135-138.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 135.