

## Julian of Norwich of Norwich – A Theology of Hope

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In 1373 a young woman lies on her bed of sickness receiving her last rites; a crucifix is set before her that she might take comfort therein. Nonetheless she does not depart from this world and instead, with her eyes turned towards the cross, she embarks on a 'revelation of love – in sixteen showings.'<sup>1</sup> The woman is known as Julian of Norwich, the name she took on when she went into her anchor hold. What we know of her comes entirely from her book *The Revelations of Divine Love*, in which she penned her visions, firstly in what is known as the 'short text' and then, after twenty to thirty years of contemplation, the 'long text' is produced, 'filled with rich interpretations of what her showings meant.'<sup>2</sup>

The fourteenth century was a time of hardship, disease, disillusionment and corrupt power. Julian's theology of hope went against all that was true of the world around her. Through the years of contemplation of the sixteen showings she comes to the revelation that there is hope for everyone in every kind of sin. It is not a diminishing of sin and its consequences, but a realisation of the bigness of her God and the greatness of his work on the cross; the power of the blood that was able to reach even into hell.

In this essay I argue that Julian of Norwich was able to form a theology of hope that was counter to her circumstances. Through these showings she receives revelations of: God's love for her and all humanity; the smallness of creation and the vastness of the Creator, and the complete work of the cross in regards to sin and salvation, all of which radically inform and, at times, transform her theology into one of eternal hope.

### Julian's Reality

As we have already noted, Julian lived in turbulent times: the people were revolting against their lords; the rich were getting richer as the peasants looked on with displeasure and the church leaders were being exposed as people who looked after themselves.<sup>3</sup> In the wider church came the Great Schism (1377), which activated a crusade led by the Bishop of Norwich, Henry Despenser, who was 'ruthless and merciless' in the way he 'quelled [the peasants] riots,' a revolt due to the tragedies of 'plague and famine and harsh taxation.'<sup>4</sup> His crusade promised the 'full remission of sins to those who gave military or financial support to the cause even extending to their dead relatives.'<sup>5</sup> 'Gold and silver piled up for the bishop, as people bought the forgiveness of God.'<sup>6</sup> There would have been a real tension in Julian as she penned these showings

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<sup>1</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Walsh, "Re-imagining Redemption: Universal Salvation in the Theology of Julian of Norwich," *Horizons* 39 (2012): 189-207, p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Hall, *Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich*, vol. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987), 10.

and their meanings; she wanted to remain faithful to the church, but it stood in stark contrast to the gentle and compassionate Lord of her visions.

## The Hazelnut

The first showing reveals the suffering of Christ on the cross and the hazelnut analogy - it was key in giving Julian a new lens in which to view God. Through this showing Julian saw the smallness of creation in relation to the one who is uncreated and understood that he is not just the Creator, but the Sustainer who sustains creation because he *loves* it.

‘Also in this He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand...’ She is told it represents everything that is made; amazed by its fragility she wonders how it could last. She is given the answer, ‘It lasteth, and ever shall for that God loveth it.’<sup>7</sup> It is in the smallness and fragility of everything created that she sees the futility of humankind trying to find rest in it. She does not despise it, for she understands that God loves it; he ‘made it, and loves it, and preserves it.’<sup>8</sup>

It is out of this vision of the hazelnut that her creation theology is formed, but more than that it is this vision alongside the image of the ‘copious bleeding of Christ on the cross’ that sets a foundation of love through which the rest of the showings are received.<sup>9</sup>

## The Soul

Julian’s view of the soul was that its natural yearnings are to come back to God, its creator, and it will only find peace when it does so. As both Jantzen and Szarmach note that this shows ‘Julian is deeply Augustinian’ in her thinking, as we can see him drawing the same conclusion about humankind in the *Confessions* - ‘You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you.’<sup>10</sup> Julian obtains further insight on this when she has a vision of a lord and his servant; she sees the lord seated on the ground awaiting the time when he can once again dwell in the human soul. She explains, ‘He made man’s soul to be his own city and his dwelling place, which is the most pleasing to him of all his works.’<sup>11</sup> She understands that part of our suffering on earth is because we are not one with him; the fall brought sin into the world and thus prevents us being truly united with him. There is a oneness and a wholeness in her description between God and our soul. In essence she is saying, we were made for God and in nothing else will we find comfort.

## Sin and Eschatological Hope

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<sup>7</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh; : Paulist Press, 1978), 129.

<sup>10</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987), 128. Paul Szarmach, ed., *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 272.

It is clear from her writings that Julian was dedicated to the teachings and practices of Holy Church, but when she beheld the vision of Christ on the cross and saw the love for his creation she had to wonder at the ease at which Holy Church taught of people being damned. The hopelessness she would have witnessed of the people during the plague (1349) believing their loved ones had entered eternal damnation due to the lack of a priest must have grated up against her understanding of Christ's 'love-longing, to have us altogether whole in him' and that 'the thirst that he had on the cross won't be satisfied until the last soul saved is come up to bliss.'<sup>12</sup>

In the thirteenth revelation Julian enquires why sin was allowed in the world for, as she saw it, it was what hindered her from being with him fully. Walsh identifies that Julian's correlation between sin and pain was new, as she did not just note the 'physical discomfort and ineptitude', but also the 'resulting intellectual and emotional disorientation, isolation and anxiety.'<sup>13</sup> God answers that sin is 'behovable' (plays a needful part), but 'all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'<sup>14</sup> She seeks further insight on this, for to her sin and its consequences are great indeed; she lived in a time where it was widely believed that the plague was sent by God as a consequence for sin. Of course, we cannot know if this was Julian's conviction, but surrounded by this line of thought she could not remain unaffected by it. In this revelation we see her focus being moved from the enormity of sin to the glorious atonement, which is revealed as far outweighing Adam's sin - 'the most harm that ever was done, or ever shall be, to the world's end.'<sup>15</sup>

Julian wrestles within the framework of church teaching and these new revelations regarding sin.<sup>16</sup> In the fiftieth chapter she writes: 'For I know by the ordinary teaching of Holy Church and by my own feeling that the blame of our sins continually hangs upon us, from the first man until the time that we come up into heaven.' She is then perplexed when she sees 'God showing no more blame to us than if we were as pure and as holy as the angels are in heaven.'<sup>17</sup> So convinced is she by her previous learnings that at first she is afraid to accept this new notion for fear of being deceived by it, but she cannot rest until she understands it further. In response to her seeking, God gives her an example of a lord and a servant. This parable undoes what she previously thought about how God looked on sin and indeed how he looks on humankind, for she comes to accept (after twenty years of contemplation on the parable) that God does not blame humanity for sin; instead he looks on 'most tenderly...very meekly and mildly, with great compassion and pity.' Moreover, he wishes the servant (that is representative of humanity) to be rewarded forever, 'above what he would have been if he had not fallen,' and so much so that the suffering he received through his falling will be turned into 'high, surpassing honour and endless bliss.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Maureen Walsh, "Re-imagining Redemption: Universal Salvation in the Theology of Julian of Norwich," *Horizons* 39 (2012): 189-207, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra J. McEntire, ed., *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays* (Routledge, 2013), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 266.

<sup>18</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 268-269.

Henceforth Julian's theology is led by the awe and wonder she has for the love and compassion shown to human-kind in this parable, and the knowledge that not only does he say we are blameless in regards to sin but he protects us in it. This is far removed from the guilt and shame led theology common to her day.

## Salvation

It was not unusual to meditate on the passion of Christ; to enter into Christ's sufferings had 'roots reaching back through Aelred and Anselm to St Paul,' although Julian appears to ask for more than meditative entry, as seen in chapter two of the long text; she asks for a 'bodily vision of Christ on the cross, an actual experience of the passion.'<sup>19</sup> In her visions of the cross that weave through the whole of the larger narrative she comes to understand its power and the magnitude of salvation.

The redeeming power of the blood of Christ that she saw reaching into hell and heaven, 'rejoicing in the salvation of all mankind,' appears to burst the boundaries of where Holy Church allows.<sup>20</sup> Cyprian (210-258AD), the bishop of *Carthage*, had infamously declared, "*Extra ecclesia nulla salus*" (no salvation outside the Church).<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that, 'closer to the time of Julian, Cyprian's answer to the question of salvation outside the church would be formalized as an ecclesiastical doctrine at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and then again in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through papal decrees.'<sup>22</sup> But through the showings, Julian had witnessed the saving power of the blood - she knew of its plenteous supply; enough to cover the whole earth and wash all people. For some this appears that she is a Universalist, but I propose that after twenty years of immersing herself in the showings and receiving revelation after revelation of God's love and mercy towards human-kind, she cannot concede that all would be well with God if people 'outside of Holy Church' should be 'eternally condemned to hell.'<sup>23</sup>

Further still, chapter forty-nine speaks of there being no wrath in God, only on our side. As she sees it, if there were wrath in God we could not exist, for we have our being out of his wisdom and goodness in this we are preserved also. Part of our salvation is to bring us 'into endless peace' by a working out of our 'contrariness', which is contrary to God's nature, for only then are we 'truly saved.'<sup>24</sup>

Salvation for Julian is release from our struggle with sin, and that will fully come when we are finally 'at bliss with him' because, as she so adequately states, 'our soul is his beloved wife.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 1987), 58.

<sup>20</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 200.

<sup>21</sup> Maureen Walsh, "Re-imagining Redemption: Universal Salvation in the Theology of Julian of Norwich," *Horizons* 39 (2012): 189-207, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Walsh, "Re-imagining Redemption," *Horizons* 193.

<sup>23</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 233.

<sup>24</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 264-265.

<sup>25</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 279.

## God our Mother

It would be remiss of me to conclude this essay without noting Julian's extraordinary work on God as mother, she writes 'As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.'<sup>26</sup> Such images were used by others who had gone before her: 'Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, and Ambrose.'<sup>27</sup> It was 'St Augustine who assimilated what these Latin and Greek Fathers had said and transmitted' those through his works, but Julian pushed the concept further applying motherhood to the Trinity, creation and redemption.<sup>28</sup> This was not an attempt to replace the metaphor of God as Father but rather give a fuller picture of what God is like.

## Conclusion

Julian allowed the ecstatic visions to 'interrogate her life;' the wounded parts were allowed to surface and question the love of God.<sup>29</sup> It was in the continual beholding and questioning that her theology was formed; a theology of hope rooted in the love of God for human-kind and her trust that he would make 'all things well', and even though she would not fully understand that promise in her earthly life-time, she did not come up with substitute answers but chose to trust in the one that made it.

To embrace Julian of Norwich as a 'Doctor of the church' is to say a 'yes' to a theology of hope and her unique contribution toward understanding wrath and sin, particularly in relation to pain reflected in the condition of the soul. Her extensive theorising on the motherhood of God is exceptional and has gone a long way in ensuring we have a fuller view on the character of God. Hers is a teaching that crosses time and cultures containing riches that every generation needs to hear.

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<sup>26</sup> Norwich, *Showings*, 296.

<sup>27</sup> Szarmach, *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Szarmach, *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, 209.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Fruehwirth, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*

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