

Julian of Norwich's Anxiety

Sin and Salvation

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In perhaps the most well-known and popular quote to emerge from her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich wrote, "Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that I needed to know, answered with this assurance...all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."¹ In my view, this quote serves as the most succinct summary of the contents of what has been described as one of the most intricate theological texts of medieval England, which is made all the more astonishing because it was written by a woman.² Throughout the two texts composed by Julian, she attempts to convey to her readers what she was shown in 16 mystical "showings" or visions given to her by the Holy Trinity. God's mercy, love, forgiveness, and "courteousness" towards all of humankind are a central and recurring focus in her theology.³ In seeking to explain how on the last day, "the Holy Trinity shall make well all that is not well," Julian presents us with her theology regarding the nature of both sin and salvation from the unique perspective of not only a woman, but an astute theologian living through a tumultuous time of change and uncertainty.⁴

In this article, it is Julian's teachings (or as she would insist, God's teachings which He revealed to her) regarding sin and salvation I will be focusing on and exploring. First, I will provide a detailed source analysis, covering what little biographical information we have of Julian's own life and the times in which she wrote out her *Revelations*. In this analysis, I will pay careful attention to how

1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text and Long Text*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing and A.C. Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 79.

2 Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 22.

3 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 7.

4 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 86.

Julian maneuvers to avoid accusations of heresy from the ever watchful eye of the institutional Church, at a time in which the English Church felt particularly threatened by heresy. Then, I will elucidate on Julian's showings regarding sin, including what she was shown regarding the nature of sin, what constitutes sin, and the role sin plays in the salvation of humankind. Then I will present the implications of her teachings regarding salvation. In both of these sections, it would be impossible to explain her view regarding sin and salvation without also focusing on Julian's views of the character of God, and how she at times affirmed and at others departed from the orthodox teachings of the medieval Catholic Church. I will conclude with a brief summary of Julian's theology and its relationship to "Holy Church."

Biographical details regarding the author of *Revelations of Divine Love* are sadly very few. We do not even know her real name. Despite being known as Julian of Norwich, this title emerged from the fact that she lived as an anchoress at St. Julian's church in Norwich, a prosperous, mercantile port city in northern England.⁵ What we can say with certainty is that she (the first undoubtedly female English author) was born somewhere likely north of Norwich in approximately 1342—she tells us she received her revelations in 1373, at 31 and a half years of age.⁶ As a result of her visions, which God told her to share with everyone, she composed two texts. First the *Short Text* soon after she received her showings, and later expanded on her original writing in a substantially larger *Long Text* some time in the 1380s.⁷ From what we can tell, Julian, unlike other female mystics of her day, did not dictate her visions to a man, but wrote the texts herself in vernacular Middle English.⁸

For a woman of her time, she was clearly highly educated, though she describes herself as, "uneducated" or unlettered, meaning she (allegedly) did not receive rhetorical training in Latin.⁹ It should be made clear, however, that any assertion of "ignorance" is a fallacy, and that Julian's prose shows her to have been incredibly erudite, and familiar with both the Vulgate Bible and classical philosophical texts.¹⁰ Julian's claim of ignorance is in line with a trope among Christian authors, who desired to be humble (or to at least appear so), and often gestured to their supposed lack of knowledge, or inability to write anything useful for their readers.

Regarding her background, we can infer that Julian may have come from a middle-class merchant family involved in the textile trade, or from an even more upper-class life of "material comfort;" we deduce this from the fact that Julian

5 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xi.

6 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, viii, x.

7 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xii-xiii.

8 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xvi-xvii.

9 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 42.

10 Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 19-20.

employs mercantile language such as buying, compensating, and selling.¹¹ It appears that even while living as an anchoress she kept a maid in her employ, which would certainly indicate a comfortable background.¹² Scholars speculate that Julian was possibly an unmarried daughter, or even a widowed mother at the time of her spiritual visions, which may explain the “centrality of motherhood” found in the *Long Text* which she composed.¹³ “Dame Julian” is also independently attested to in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, in which Margery sought Julian out for spiritual advice; however, it appears from this text that Julian was most likely not disclosing that she had received spiritual visions.¹⁴ It seems that Julian kept her writings fairly private while she was alive, with her *Revelations* only gaining more widespread popularity in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ The texts may have been circulated via word of mouth among other women religious, but we cannot be certain of this.¹⁶

All to say, the information that we have regarding Julian presents us with a highly educated female theologian and teacher, living precisely in a time when the tolerance for women having any sort of spiritual prerogative, let alone teaching, was at an all-time low. The preceding twelfth and thirteenth centuries had seen a large increase in female religious life and saw the founding of many new religious orders and houses for women, particularly in continental Europe.¹⁷ The rapid expansion of the religious opportunities for women evidently made certain powerful male clerics in the fourteenth century (when Julian lived) hostile to any kind of spiritual authority held by women. This suspicion resulted in women being, “over-represented in the major heresies of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.”¹⁸ The suspicion of female piety was even more intense in England at this time than it was in continental Europe, as England was even more patriarchal and had no tradition of female visionaries.¹⁹ Along with the general intolerance of female spirituality, England was roiled in the Lollard heresy, a reformist group that was iconoclastic, anti-clerical, and opposed to eucharistic adoration.²⁰ As the Church sought to rid England of Lollards, anyone who deviated even slightly from official Church teaching was quickly accused of heresy.

No doubt aware of the danger writing her visions would put her in, Julian begins the *Short Text* by emphasizing her belief in “paintings of crucifixes...

11 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, x.

12 Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 18.

13 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, x.

14 Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 18-19.

15 Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 21.

16 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, viii.

17 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 15-16, 20.

18 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 16.

19 Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xvii-xviii.

20 Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 118.

in the likeness of Christ's passion according to the teaching of the Holy Church."²¹ She also emphasized her adherence to the Church's teachings, and was especially careful to indicate her deep reverence and love of the "holy rites" of the Church such as Holy Unction and the Eucharist.²² Seeking to avoid accusations that she is circumventing the authorities of clerics, she rather debases herself, saying she is a "poor, worldly and sinful creature," and "God forbid you should say or assume that I am a teacher...for I am a woman ignorant, weak and frail."²³ While she attributes her visions and writings fully to God, she seems to show us (perhaps) her inward opinion and poses the question, "just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw...his wish that [the vision] should be known?"²⁴ It should be said there is no doubt that Julian was a pious Catholic. She displays an orthodox Christology, affirms Mary as the Mother of God, and is staunchly trinitary. In fact, her theology is underpinned by these orthodox dogmas. However, regarding sin, salvation and the character of God, it is clear she had great difficulty accepting the teachings of the Church when she had direct revelations which contradicted them. There thus emerges a pattern: when Julian puts forth a teaching that is at odds with orthodoxy, it is quickly followed by lines affirming her devotion to "Holy Church," particularly regarding what she was shown of sin and salvation, which I will now explore.

While contemplating how Christ's Passion overcomes the "Fiend" (i.e. the devil) and reduces him to nothingness, Julian exclaims, "Ah, wretched sin! What are you? You are nothing. For I saw that God is all things: I saw nothing of you."²⁵ While in the temporal world, Julian saw "sin" all around her, in her vision, she did not see it. This perception of sin, however, was not relegated to only herself or her fellow religious. To put the enormity of this statement into context, one must understand that Julian was shown all of creation by God, which she described as follows: "in this vision, [God] showed me a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut, laying in the palm of my hand...I looked at it and thought, 'What can this be?' and the answer came to me, 'It is all that is made.'"²⁶ It was in this "thing" which Julian saw no sin. In her anxiety to know about the nature of salvation, Julian struggles with this revelation; however, as she cannot reconcile the teachings of "Holy Church" with what God has shown her. In response to her conundrum, God replies, "what is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall keep my word, in all things and I shall make all well."²⁷

Here we can observe the difference in Julian's understanding of God's character as opposed to the institutional medieval Church. The prevailing me-

21 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 3.

22 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 5.

23 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 9-11.

24 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 11.

25 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 35.

26 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 7.

27 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 86.

dieval interpretation of God's character and role as judge was quite harsh. Take for example the way God is described in the text of Requiem Mass, which was chanted at medieval funerals. The text of the Requiem describes the terror of Judgement Day, exclaiming, "what trembling there will be when the Judge shall come to weigh everything strictly."²⁸ Christ as the Judge is described as a "King of awful majesty," and the text contains many prayers begging for Christ's mercy and forgiveness.²⁹ The painful flames of Hell and Purgatory were a major focus in the piety in the medieval period, and caused great anxiety for many regarding their eternal salvation. As much as there is a focus on God's merciful character in medieval writings, God's wrath and judgement weighed heavily on the minds of most Christians. Many were so afraid of God's wrathful judgement, that they would not even take Communion out of fear of burning in Hell. Scholar Caroline Walker Bynum describes the terror of receiving the host among the medieval laity, writing, "many pious people in the later Middle Ages developed, along with a frenzied hunger for the host, an intense fear of receiving it."³⁰ The prevailing characterization of God in the late medieval period, as the harsh and strict judge, is quite a contrast to Julian's description of God. According to Julian, God is "courteous," and filled with such love for humanity that He hurts when we hurt, and is filled with compassion toward humankind. Theologian Kerrie Hide describes Julian's understanding of salvation, relying on Julian's usage of the middle English word "oneing," meaning to be "united, joined, blended, or fused" with God.³¹ To Julian, humanity is not separated from Christ, but is "eternally knotted and oned in God," as all of "creation is already one in the body of Christ."³² To Julian, Christ did not suffer on the cross as payment for the debt of sin, but did so out of His desire to grant the "gift of peace" to humanity.³³ Hide describes how Julian differed from standard medieval piety, writing,

"Julian's exploration of sin is distinctive because instead of focusing on human guilt, Christ rejects the popular images of Julian's day that stressed human willfulness as well as developed extensive lists and categories of sin...There is no sense [in Julian's writings] of Christ focusing on sin or blaming or condemning human beings. Christ sees the nothingness of sin, lovingly enters into the pain that it causes, and makes all things well. Human nature does not need to focus on sin, but on the desire of Christ who is love. Salvation is about loving."³⁴

Thus, Julian reinterprets the meaning of sin and what role it plays in hu-

28 "Requiem Mass (Missa Defunctoris)," *Latin Mass Funeral*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.latinmassfuneral.com/requiem-mass/>.

29 "Requiem Mass (Missa Defunctoris)."

30 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 58.

31 Kerrie Hide, in *Christian Theologies of Salvation: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 161, 163.

32 Hide, in *Christian Theologies of Salvation*, 164-165.

33 Hide, in *Christian Theologies of Salvation*, 170.

34 Hide, in *Christian Theologies of Salvation*, 167.

mankind's salvation. She provides us with a definition, telling us sin is, "all that is not good;" in particular, the "shameful humiliation" that Christ bore for all humankind.³⁵ Julian goes on to tell us that the worst sin ever committed was the sin of *Adam*. "Adam's sin was the greatest harm that was ever done or ever shall be."³⁶ In sharp contrast with the mainstream narratives from the beginning of Christianity regarding sin, Eve and her sin is never mentioned once in Julian's theology. We must however understand that Julian is not placing the blame on the first man Adam; but it would appear that when referring to "Adam," Julian is gesturing to humankind in general, as she states, "in the sight of God, all men are one."³⁷ This goes along with Julian's belief that her vision was for everyone, not only her. This generality comes from Julian's understanding that God does not see us in particular but in general, as one soul. With God viewing humankind in general, Julian explains further and tells us the Lord even sees our sins in general, not in particular.³⁸

God informed Julian that she, along with everyone else alive, will sin, but that "I [God] am keeping you very safe."³⁹ In Julian's theology, the soul, which is a part of God, cannot consent to sin, as the, "two [body and soul] are divided one part outward the other inward."⁴⁰ It is only our outward, mortal bodies which sin, a situation which Julian describes as, "the cursing of the flesh, without the agreement of the spirit, and to this, God attaches no blame."⁴¹ God does not attach blame to sins, as our spirits do not willingly consent to sin. Sin is the result of our separation from God, and as a result of this separation we suffer here on earth, for to Julian "sin" is the cause of all our mortal sufferings. Instead of drawing the ire of a wrathful, vengeful God, our sins elicit only compassion and pity towards us from Christ.

In our sinful state, Christ not only pities us, but willingly and continually suffers with us, and will never leave us alone in our bodily sufferings until the last day.⁴² When, due to our frail mortal nature we stumble into sin, God addresses us thus, "My darling, I am glad you have come to me. I have always been with you in all of your misery, and now you can see how much I love you and we are united in bliss."⁴³ God does not blame us for our sins, as according to Julian, there can be no anger in God. It is an "impossibility."⁴⁴ Julian asks to see Hell and Purgatory, but sees nothing and later on in her text concludes, "there is no hell but sin," which

35 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 79.

36 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 81-82.

37 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 118.

38 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 25.

39 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 93.

40 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 69.

41 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 69.

42 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 71.

43 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 97.

44 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 112.

seems to be choosing to live a life devoid of love and peace.⁴⁵ For it is only that “we think” God must be angry with us for our sins, but Julian tells us that we cannot see the way that God sees and that all sin has a purpose, and as Christ says, “sin is befitting.”⁴⁶ Still Julian repeatedly insists she adheres to the teachings of the Church, but when she presents us with two seemingly irreconcilable theologies, she leaves us with inconclusive mystery.

Sin is “befitting” because to Julian our sin is not to our shame but our glory, and the more we love God in our state of sin during our lives the more we are rewarded for our perseverance by God in heaven. Julian is very clear she is not encouraging sin, and that a soul that willingly chooses to sin cannot be saved, and living in sin on earth to Julian is even worse than hell.⁴⁷ Unchosen or accidental sin, as she tells us, plays an essential role in our salvation in that it causes our suffering, which drives us to search for God, and without searching for God, there cannot be salvation.⁴⁸ Throughout her writings, Julian makes many references to “all that shall be saved,” i.e. the elect that will go to heaven. While Julian speaks in some ways which certainly affirm the teachings that anybody outside the Church is damned, her numerous other conclusions about the nature of sin and how God feels and acts toward humankind are contradictory. Among the saved of humankind, Julian states salvation is, “for all men who are or shall be of goodwill.”⁴⁹ Later on, she emphasizes how different our human reason is from that of God’s and says that it is through our own feelings of disgust toward our own sin that we feel that we deserve hell, but God does not feel the same.

In fact, there is a transformative aspect of Julian’s revelation regarding sin and salvation, in that when we die, Christ—just as He did with His own Atonement—turns the greatest possible harm into the most beautiful good.⁵⁰ While on earth we suffer from sin, in heaven our sufferings are rewarded and transformed by God into glory: “Just as various sins receive various punishments, according to how serious they are, in the same way they will be rewarded with various joys in heaven according to how much pain and grief they caused the soul on earth.”⁵¹ Through God’s grace, and our contrition and compassion, we are made worthy of heaven and through these three attributes, “all souls come to heaven.”⁵² It would then appear that salvation for our souls, which to Julian are naturally drawn to God, rests on their ability to show goodwill, live in love and peace, and maintain a steadfast trust in God’s mercy. For the Lord is love, and the very foundation of

45 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 94, 98.

46 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 97.

47 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 27.

48 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 25.

49 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 21-22.

50 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text*, 21.

51 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 94.

52 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 96.

our existence and every good intention in us is not from Him, but rather is Him.⁵³

In conclusion, *Revelations of Divine Love* imparts to its reader, an innovative, miraculous, and deeply moving theology of divine love. Julian of Norwich's delicate and mellifluous language seeks to assure her reader that so long as they seek God they should rest assured that all shall be well. Julian's life and writings are distinct in the medieval period. As an educated woman, she took centuries of male dominated theological discourse focused on humankind's guilt and sin, and reinterpreted them in the light of her personal experience of Christ's all-powerful love. While she attempted to bring her vision into line with the centuries-old theology of the Church, in the end, it seems she could not, and admits that in comparison to her revelation, the Church's "lower judgement," which so routinely condemned so many to Hell, was just that, the lower judgement of humankind, which cannot see as God sees.⁵⁴

53 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 96.

54 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text*, 106.