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Julian of Norwich: The Visible Writings of an Invisible Recluse

Abstract

Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, written in the 14th century Norwich, described her mystical visions without telling much about her personal life. The article attempts to discuss the contrast between her lack of physical visibility, and the abundance of complex visions which outline quite clearly her theological views. This mystic was an anchorite observing the rules specific to her station, and a few details about her can be learnt from Margery Kempe's autobiography, as a meeting between the two is mentioned. Margery's visit and her trust in Julian's opinion shows how respected the latter was.

Julian's work is not only a recording of religious images, but rather it presents a profound theological insight, which insists on an optimistic understanding of the world and an unshaken confidence in its bright future. Although the official point of view of the Church differs greatly from her perception, and despite the controversial images she depicts sometimes, her text has always been accepted by the Church and has become a point of reference for all Christians interested in a mystical approach to theology. By starting from Julian of Norwich's apparent invisibility, locked inside her cell, the author aims to reveal new aspects of her theology and to probe into the relevance of her work and life for the 21st century society.

Keywords: medieval; mystical theology; optimistic perception.

Resumen

La obra de Juliana de Norwich *Revelaciones del Amor Divino*, escrita en el siglo XIV en Norwich, describe sus visiones místicas sin contar demasiado sobre su vida personal. Este artículo intenta discutir el contraste entre su falta de visibilidad física y sus abundantes y complejas visiones, que subrayan de forma notable su visión teológica. Esta mística fue una ermitaña que observó las normas específicas de su condición. Unos pocos detalles sobre ella se pueden encontrar en la autobiografía de Margery Kempe, puesto que se menciona un encuentro entre ambas.

La obra de Juliana no es solo un registro de imágenes religiosas, sino que también presenta un profundo conocimiento teológico, que hace hincapié en una comprensión

optimista del mundo y una confianza inquebrantable en su brillante futuro. Aunque el punto de vista oficial de la Iglesia difiere sobremedida de su percepción, y a pesar de las imágenes controvertidas que a veces describe, su texto siempre ha sido aceptado por la Iglesia y se ha convertido en un punto de referencia para aquellas personas cristianas interesadas en una aproximación mística a la teología. Comenzando por la aparente invisibilidad de Juliana de Norwich, encerrada en su celda, la autora tiene como objetivo revelar nuevos aspectos de su teología e indagar en la relevancia de su vida y obra para la sociedad del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Edad Media; teología mística; percepción optimista.

Zusammenfassung

Die *Offenbarungen der göttlichen Liebe* von Juliana von Norwich, geschrieben in Norwich im 14. Jahrhundert, beschreibt ihre mystischen Visionen, ohne viel über ihr persönliches Leben zu sagen. Der Artikel diskutiert den Gegensatz zwischen ihrer fehlenden physischen Sichtbarkeit und dem Überfluss komplexer Visionen, die deutlich ihre theologischen Ansichten umreißen. Diese Mystikerin war eine Einsiedlerin, die die spezifischen Regeln ihres Standortes befolgte. Einige Details über sie können aus Margery Kempes Autobiographie entnommen werden, in der ein Treffen der beiden erwähnt ist. Margerys Besuch und ihr Vertrauen auf Julianas Meinung zeigt, wie sehr letztere respektiert war.

Julianas Werk ist nicht nur eine Aufzeichnung religiöser Bilder, sondern präsentiert vielmehr eine tiefgehende theologische Einsicht, die auf einem optimistischen Verständnis der Welt und einem unerschütterlichen Vertrauen in ihre leuchtende Zukunft besteht. Obwohl der offizielle Standpunkt der Kirche stark von ihrer Wahrnehmung abweicht und trotz kontroversieller Bilder, die sie manchmal zeichnet, wurde ihr Text immer von der Kirche anerkannt und wurde ein Bezugspunkt für alle Christ*innen, die an einem mystischen Zugang zur Theologie interessiert sind. Ausgehend von Julianas offensichtlicher Unsichtbarkeit, eingeschlossen in ihre Zelle, will die Autorin neue Aspekte ihrer Theologie aufdecken und die Relevanz ihres Werkes und Lebens für die Gesellschaft des 20. Jahrhunderts untersuchen.

Schlagwörter: Mittelalter; mystische Theologie; optimistische Wahrnehmung.

[...] *al shal be wel, and al shal be wel,
and al manner of thyng shal be wele.*

Chapter XXVII (the 13th revelation)

Julian of Norwich's work was appreciated in medieval times in the monastic environment. It was often copied by nuns, and a few manuscripts can still be analysed nowadays.¹ However, hardly any facts regarding her personal life are known, and the only fact known with certainty is that she was a recluse in 14th-century Norwich and as such she observed the rules specific to this station, which made her at the same time invisible to and respected by her contemporaries.

The present article will insist on the sharp discrepancy between the lack of information regarding Julian's physical existence (as she is known only by association with the place where she lived and the people she met) and the wealth of information regarding her inner perception of God, which can be clearly inferred from her work. A specific feature of her theology is her insistence on God's kindness and forgiveness, and her conviction which can be summed up in the words "all will be well," despite the existence of sin and pain.

Julian of Norwich's invisibility, as vocation

Medieval records are notorious for omitting women's achievements and thoughts, so it becomes necessary to make an effort in order to bring to light women's contribution to history, and this essay is part of the body of research clearly outlined by Kathleen Biddick and Joan Wallach Scott in their work: *The Shock of Medievalism*, who explain that much recent work in medieval women's history has focused on women mystics in a "vowed effort to rewrite a traditional historiography whose contempt and fear of these women's bodily practices had rendered them 'invisible' [...] the desire to make historical women visible is both the effect of modern visualizing technologies and the possibility for their resignification."²

¹ There still are eight medieval manuscripts (of which the oldest are: The Amherst Manuscript, early 15th century, The Westminster Manuscript, around 1500, The Paris Manuscript, around 1580 in the region near Antwerp). The first edition of *The Revelations of Love* was supervised by Serenus Cressy, O.S.B. and was published in 1670 (*Julian's Showing of Love in A Nutshell: Her Manuscripts and Their Contexts* <http://www.umilta.net/tablet.html>, 20 November 2019).

² Kathleen Biddick and Joan Wallach Scott, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Duke University Press: Durham and London 1998), 135-136.

Up until late 20th century research, our understanding of female mystical devotion was based on medieval male interpretations, as the writing of historical records and the authenticating of cult and miracles were controlled by (clergy)men.³ Naturally, such a perspective was biased, and thus a more holistic and profound approach is required in order to better comprehend the dynamics of popular devotion to female saints and the benefits 20th century audiences can draw from reading their works.

Details regarding Julian's quiet life, living as an anchoress near Saint Julian Church in Norwich, are almost unknown, and the little information that we have about her existence comes from wills⁴ which mentioned her as the beneficiary. Actually, not even her name is known, since the name Julian was the name of the patron saint of the church next to which she resided. Although her solid theological education is indisputable, there is no clear evidence where she acquired it, nor is her social status known but "there is a strong possibility she was a nun at the Benedictine convent at Carrow, a mile from the church of St. Julian's, Conesford, in Norwich where she was later enclosed as an anchoress," according to the introduction of the 2006 edition of her work.⁵ It is certain that she lived in Norwich⁶ at least between 1393 (when she was mentioned in a will) and 1413 (when she was visited by Margery Kempe), but nothing of the turmoil specific to a prosperous harbour, nor any hint at the Hundred Years' War can be found in her work, which deals strictly with the recording of her mystical experiences and their interpretation for the spiritual benefit of those who read them.

A few details about her can be learnt from Margery Kempe's autobiography (as a meeting between the two is mentioned), and also from *Ancrene Riwe*, the book regulating the life of the recluses which she probably used in order

³ Margaret Schaus, *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge: New York 2006), 351.

⁴ Very often the wills are the most reliable sources with regards to the place where recluses lived, because they were legal documents, and as such they recorded the actual situation, and in addition they were preserved in archives.

⁵ Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (eds.), *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (The Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania 2006), 4.

⁶ It is of importance to point out that she was just one of many other recluses who lived in Norwich anchorage and Blomefield's *History of Norfolk* (vol. iv. p. 81) enumerates other women who lived as recluses there: in 1472 Dame Agnes; in 1481, Dame Elizabeth Scott; in 1510, Lady Elizabeth; in 1524, Dame Agnes Edrygge – as it is mentioned in the introduction to *Revelations of Divine Love*, Recorded by Julian, Anchoress at Norwich, (Methuen & Company: London 1901), xvii.

to organise the practical aspects of her life. Just like other anchoresses, Julian lived all her life in a cell, which had three windows: one for the Holy Communion (which opened inside the church), one for food (the window of the house, used for the maid to communicate with her), and another one that opened into a parlour, where she could talk to people asking for her advice. These means of communication with the outside world were carefully supervised, because seclusion was essential for strengthening her connection with God. Thus *The Ancrene Riwe* describes: “Hold no conversation with any man out of a church window, but respect it for the sake of the holy sacrament which you see therein, and sometimes take your woman to the window of the house; the other men and women to the window of the parlour, to speak when necessary; nor ought you but at these two windows.”⁷

It is probably through the parlour window that Margery Kempe talked to Julian, when the former came to ask for the anchorite’s advice and support. Unfortunately, they talked exclusively about Margery, or at least this is what she recorded, so there is no information about Julian as a person, her habits or her preferences. Julian’s words for Margery were a confirmation of the latter’s choice of life and an urge to persevere.⁸

A brief comparison between these two women, who both wrote on mystical issues, may help better understand the religious context in Norfolk area. There is a sharp contrast between the ways in which Julian and Margery chose to express their devotion to God, and this divergence is obvious from the first vision they each received. Despite the fact that they both first saw Jesus Christ while they were gravely ill, so much so that they both believed they would die of their respective illnesses, their visions differed: Julian of Norwich saw Jesus during His Passion, wearing the crown of thorns, whereas Margery Kempe saw Him in the likeness of a pleasant visitor “most beauteous and most amiable.”⁹

⁷ “Ancrene Riwe,” paragraph 48–Chapter 2, Of the Senses, part 2: Of Speech, “The Ancrene Riwe” <http://readeralexey.narod.ru/Library/AncreneRiwe2.html>, 20 November 2019.

⁸ “Any creature that has these tokens [the abundant tears whenever she prayed to God], may steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost dwells in his [Margery’s] soul. And much more, when God visits a creature with tears of contrition, devotion or compassion, he may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in his [Margery’s] soul. [...] Patience is necessary for you, for in that shall you keep your soul”, Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Penguin Books: London 2004), 78.

⁹ Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 42

As a matter of fact, Julian and Margery were situated at opposite ends of the spectrum of 14th century feminine devotion (which encompassed different aspects: nuns, beguines¹⁰ or devout women leading an ordinary existence): the anchorite was invisible, living a quiet existence which involved a certain degree of anonymity, whereas Margery needed to cry out her devotion and her loud tears as well as her outspokenness turned her into a conspicuous, controversial figure¹¹ everywhere she went. Moreover, people's distrust of her vocation was not surprising, as she was not part of an acknowledged form of consecrated life, a fact which made her vulnerable to accusations of heresy and dissent.

Despite Julian's traditional stance with respect to lifestyle, her work is unique and different from the norm, as it emphasises a distinct mystical path towards God. Julian can hear Jesus's voice loud and clear, and she quotes God's words, an experience which brings about the feeling of comfort, as she feels the constant and strong connection with God. Actually, the word which characterises Julian's *Revelation* is "joy," which is perhaps the first step to feel "bliss." The visions she receives are a constant and inexhaustible source of joy and bliss, which she constantly feels whenever she writes, talks or thinks about God. Therefore, her *Revelations of Divine Love* is not only a recording of mystical visions, but rather presents a profound theological insight, which insists on an optimistic understanding of the world and an unshaken confidence in its bright future.

The image of the Passion of Christ is the first revelation which was granted to her, after her prayer and it is not unexpected since it was the focus of people's devotion in the 14th century. For instance, one of the most famous

¹⁰ Although there is no clear evidence of beguinages in England, considering the trade between Norwich and the Low Countries it is probable that the notion was known to Julian's contemporaries. Furthermore, there is an accepted theory that Briton's Arms in Elm Hill (dating from the late 14th century), which is a three-storied timber frame building in Norwich, was used as a residence by several unmarried, or widowed devoted Christian women, making it a kind of beguinage. "Norfolk Record Office" <https://norfolkrecordofficeblog.org/2019/11/19/an-elizabethan-beguinage-in-hempstead-cum-eccles-norfolk/>, 16 April 2020.

¹¹ Despite Margery Kempe's preoccupation with listening to and obeying God's will, as well as with respecting the doctrine of the Church, she was often considered an outcast in the 14th-century patriarchal society, which desired and admired silent obedient women. However, she was not unique in such behaviour, as there were other holy women (even saints), who had an abnormal, and even scandalous behaviour: Christina (*Mirabilis*) the Astonishing or Marie of Oignies (both living in the early 13th century), both mentioned in her book; the former was incarcerated twice for her shocking actions, while the latter was described as crying unceasingly for several days during Holy Week.

treasures of Norwich Cathedral was the Despenser Retable (late 14th century), which depicts the Passion of Christ, His crucifixion and Resurrection in five conventional scenes. Unlike these simple and rather static depictions, Julian's words are powerful and emotional, as she insists on details like "the red blood trickle down from under the Garland hot and freshly and right plenteously, as it were in the time of His Passion." While watching closely details from the crucifixion scene, she also experiences a profound feeling of joy: "Trinity fulfilled my heart most of joy."¹² So in this first instance, as well as in all the others, the vivid image of the suffering face of Christ (regardless of how sorrowful it is) awakens in her a feeling of joy, because her mind does not stop at the level of contemplation, but rather it moves beyond, as she understands the spiritual implication of this sufferance, namely it is exactly this sacrifice that opens the way towards salvation.

Unlike other mystical writers, who seem confident in what they experience and what they know (for instance Richard Rolle or the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*), Julian confesses to a feeling of surprise that she (a simple, ordinary human being) is granted such powerful, and yet intimately warm visions: "full greatly was astonished for wonder and marvel [...] that He that is so reverend and dreadful will be so homely with a sinful creature living in wretched flesh."¹³ These two feelings, of joy and of humble astonishment, characterise her work and define the uniqueness of her style setting her apart from other mystical writers.

The Invisible Body of the Female Mystic

Although today there is no trace left of the anchorites' presence, in the 12th century (and up until the 14th century) there were hundreds of them spread all over Europe. This institution was well-known and supported financially not only by affluent people, but also by the city, given that there are documents which attest to the fact that a small amount of the municipality's expenses, one

¹² "sodenly the Trinite fulfilled the herte most of joy," Julian of Norwich, chapter IV, the 1st vision. I have used the original medieval text: *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, TEAMS Middle English Texts, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/crampton-shewings-of-julian-norwich>, 21 November 2019; and the modern version: *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian, anchoress at Norwich*, edited by Grace Warrack (Methuen & Company: London 1901).

¹³ "full gretly was astonyed for wonder and mervel [...], that He that is so reverend and dredfull will be so homley with a synfull creature liveing in wretched flesh." Julian of Norwich, chapter IV, the 1st vision.

or two percent, were used for the maintenance of the recluses.¹⁴ It shows that this practice was accepted and esteemed by the community. In time though, isolation started to acquire negative connotations, especially since the judicial system used inclosing as penance for female offenders.¹⁵

Our present effort to make the anchorites' (and Julian's) body visible is partly in contradiction with their desire, as, obviously, one of the purposes of being enclosed was to remain outside the ordinary, daily existence and to focus on their inner spiritual life. It has been pointed out that "Life in an anchorhold offered women protection from intrusive relatives or lustful men and the guarantee that they could not be brushed aside as hypocrites or frauds. They lived in full view of the people, which in itself ruled out deception. It was convincing proof of divine inspiration."¹⁶ Thus, being an anchoress offered at the same time security and a recognised social status, which in time granted her authority in theological matters. Although this choice implied a wish not to be disturbed by her contemporaries, that did not actually mean that the recluse was invisible to them, but rather that she had a profound desire to be extremely visible to God.

However, according to Carolyn Walker Bynum, the emphasis on the salvation of the soul did not imply a neglect of the body, since it was not perceived as something negative, or an impediment to receiving divine revelations. Rather, any reference to the body was an attempt to elevate it, and thus to use it in order to obtain a spiritual benefit "control, discipline, even torture of the flesh is, in medieval devotion, not so much the rejection of physicality as the elevation of it."¹⁷ In Julian's case her physical illness and weakness were the starting point for her revelations. Her prayer is to use bodily suffering in order to be united spiritually with God: "that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of His blessed Passion. For I would that His pains were my pains,

¹⁴ Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, "Le reclus dans la ville au Bas Moyen Âge," *Journal des Savants* t. 3, no 3-4, 1988, 219-262, hier 254.

¹⁵ L'Hermite-Leclercq believes that one reason for the fall in the number of recluses could be the fact that life imprisonment in a small place resembling a reclusory became a type of punishment which replaced death penalty. Once enforced reclusion (incarceration) became common, voluntary reclusion did not seem so attractive, any more, L'Hermite-Leclercq, "Le reclus dans la ville au Bas Moyen Âge," 256-257.

¹⁶ Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, *Lives of the Anchoresses: The Rise of the Urban Recluse in Medieval Europe*, (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2005), 46.

¹⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, (Zone Books: New York 1994), 182.

with compassion and afterward longing to God. [...] therefore I desired to suffer with Him.”¹⁸

Moreover, her choice of living in an isolated hermit’s cell might tempt the modern audience to consider it as her renunciation of the beautiful aspects of life, and thus a way of suppressing the body and its needs. Nevertheless, this would be a grave misunderstanding of her motivation, for living in the anchorage made it possible for her to shape her life according to her will: “she wanted for her daily living to be measured by the standard of Christ¹⁹ [...] Every thought and action and decision”²⁰ were motivated by her will to strengthen her connection with Christ. Hence, physical enclosure is only a means of helping her remain completely absorbed by and available to God.

For a bishop blessed the reclusory when the recluse first entered it, she (or he) was under the supervision of the Church. For Julian, this was confirmed by her writings which have been accepted by the Church. However, Julian’s authority was not due to her rigorous rendering of the ideas that circulated in the ecclesiastical circles, but to her reputable and chaste station. She did not feel the constraint to rehash ideas which were usually found in sermons, but rather, her work is sometimes unexpectedly original, and one of her most quoted controversial images is her presentation of Christ as Mother: “And furthermore I saw that the Second Person, which is our Mother as anent the Substance, that same dearworthy Person is become our Mother as anent the Sense-soul [...] For in our Mother Christ we profit and increase, and in Mercy He reformeth us and restoreth, and, by the virtue of His Passion and His Death and Uprising, oneth us to our Substance.”²¹ I will not insist on this image, but I have to point out the feminization of Christ, which stems from the recognition of the fact that traditionally the giver of life, as well as the giver of food, is the mother, in other words, the woman.

This gendered assessment of human behaviour, which regarded obedience and silence as feminine features, may have placed religious men in a rather awkward position, as, in order to follow their vocation, they had to form their

¹⁸ “that my body might be fulfilled with minde and felyng of His blissid passion, for I would that His peynes were my peynes, with compassion, and, afterward, longeing to God. [...] therefore I desired to suffer with Him.” Julian of Norwich, chapter 3.

¹⁹ Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (Paulist Press: New Jersey 2000), 90.

²⁰ Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 157.

²¹ “And ferthermore I saw that the Second Person, which is our Moder substantial, that same derworthy person is become our Moder sensual [...] For in our Moder Criste we profitten and encresin, and in mercy He reformith us and restorith; and, be the vertue of His passion and His deth and uprising, onyth us to our substance” – Julian of Norwich, chapter 58.

habits using characteristics exalted in women as a point of reference. It has been mentioned that medieval times witnessed a feminization of the clerics' behaviour and appearance once they renounced their worldly life: "religious men became extraneous to contemporary gender construction."²² It comes as no surprise that when Richard Rolle adopted the status of a hermit, he used one of his sister's dresses to make a habit, since the clerical clothes resembled the feminine attire. This situation seems to raise another issue, that of genderless appearance or in terms of visibility and invisibility the apparent effacement of gender differences in devoted Christians.

An issue which was often debated in medieval sermons and literature and which tended to make the body at the same time invisible and genderless was chastity. This choice appears as a denial of carnal desires, asserting, thus, the power of the soul over the body and it was expected of all religious people. However, Julian did not mention it at all, so, clearly, although she took this vow, she did not consider it an essential topic as most male theologians²³ did. Julian emphasised just the need to create a close relationship with God, and to rely completely on God's love. This absolute spiritual commitment was essential, whereas bodily restrictions were just means to achieve it.

Therefore, the body was just a tool for Julian, to be used in order to elevate the soul. For instance, the pain felt within the body was turned from a weakness into a means of experiencing the unity with God, as He Himself felt pain. The visibility of the body was neither an impediment nor an advantage, as it was just a connection with the world around her, a link which was not really important for Julian. She loved her fellow Christians and advised them if they so desired, but she did not really need their presence for her spiritual advancement, and, thus, did not choose to be visible to them

Julian's serenity versus 14th century anxiety

A Christian's purpose in life was (and still is) salvation and Julian often mentioned how Christ's incarnation was the source of "our endless salvation,"²⁴ since one can be saved through prayer and devotion only because of Christ's sacrifice. Thus in Julian's *Revelations His Passion* was part of "all the deeds

²² Dawn Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, (Routledge: Abingdon 2014), 168.

²³ For instance, in "The Fire of Love", Richard Rolle dedicates an entire chapter (no. 24) to "the stink of lechery and the peril of touching." Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (Methuen & Company: London 1920), 102-106.

²⁴ Julian of Norwich, Chapter VI.

that Jesus hath done about our salvation”²⁵ and thus, it did not bring about sadness, despite the excruciating pain that Christ’s Passion involved and which was minutely described. On the contrary, remembering it engendered a feeling of gratitude and love, as well as hopes for an endless life in His presence. Kari Elisabeth Børresen, also emphasises this aspect in her study on Julian of Norwich, “Julian’s focus on Christ’s passion is typically late medieval, but she does not share the fascination with Christ’s suffering as such. In contrast to the period’s anguished search for a merciful God, Julian’s basic trust in universal salvation.”²⁶ Her strong optimism is rooted in her visions and she presents it fearlessly, unconcerned that it might differ from the official policy of the Church.

The message conveyed by the Church, and which can be witnessed in most of the 14th-century sermons and chronicles, produced the impression of “immense sadness”²⁷ and depicted a gruesome life after death, with horrors and punishment, being thus in stark contradiction to Julian’s optimistic message, which insisted on salvation. Huizinga further points out that: “Since the thirteenth century the popular preaching of the mendicant orders had made the eternal admonition to remember death swell into a sombre chorus ringing throughout the world.”²⁸ And even more than the sermons, the walls of churches and cathedrals presented for the illiterate a rather gloomy picture of their life, as demons interfered almost freely on Earth and every single sin was punishable by pain, either immediately or on the Judgement Day. One such example of people being overwhelmed by demons is the medieval limestone frieze of Lincoln Cathedral (late 12th century) which depicts the Torments of the Damned in Hell – for instance on the West Front of the cathedral, one can see an adulterous couple being punished by wyverns (*id est serpent-dragons*) by having their hair pulled. These freezes were, in a way, religious caricatures of salvation and damnation, aimed at an illiterate, vulnerable public, in an attempt to scare them so that they became obedient and submissive to the will of the Church.

This fear-provoking ideology contrasts profoundly with Julian’s words, which emphasise the omnipotence of God’s love, as well as the conviction that Jesus’ sacrifice can cleanse man’s sins, while his duty is only to believe and

²⁵ “al the dedes that Jesus hath done aboute our salvation,” Julian of Norwich, Chapter XXII.

²⁶ Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (eds.), *The High Middle Ages* (SBL Press: Atlanta 2015), 169.

²⁷ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Penguin Books: London 1922), 31.

²⁸ Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 140.

rely on Jesus Christ. This complete confidence in God's love has been regarded as the core of her theology:

“because the starting point for Julian's understanding of creation is the love of God, and because this permeates her reflection, her emphasis is on the nobility of the soul and the delight God takes in it, rather than upon the sin [...] For Julian the primary fact is that we are loved by God and are the honourable place of his dwelling.”²⁹

However, Julian was not blind to human suffering, but she interpreted it as God's manner of bringing people closer to Him. Misfortune and suffering became instruments that were used to cure people of their spiritual illnesses, like selfishness or pride. Accordingly, a rather violent image is projected, of Christ “breaking” Christians – (allowing for the sufferance to happen) in order to rid them of their “vicious pride” (in other words to purify them) and then “gathering” – reconstructing them – making them “clean and holy,” in order to unite them with Him:

“And this He does for to hinder the harm that they should take from the pomp and the vain-glory of this wretched life, and make their way ready to come to Heaven, and up-raise them in His bliss everlasting. For He saith: ‘I shall wholly break you of your vain affections and your vicious pride; and after that I shall together gather you, and make you mild and meek, clean and holy, by oneing to me.’”³⁰

It is through this process that people should understand their pains, in other words their misfortunes and tribulations, and bear them without despair. Sin was regarded as a grave impediment for acceding to the Kingdom of God and salvation, and people regarded daily the horrors that were the consequences of their sins. While “Julian is fully aware that her fundamental belief in divine love affronts traditional concepts of sin, damnation and God's jealous justice,”³¹ she gives logical and mystical arguments to support her vision and encourage people to follow her optimism. So just like Christ's Passion brought

²⁹ Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 130.

³⁰ “And this He doith for to lettyn the harme that thei shuld take of the pompe and the veyn glory of this wrechid lif, and mak ther way redy to come to Hevyn, and heynen them in His bliss without end lestyng. For He seith, I shall al tobreke you for your veyn affections and your vicious pryde, and after that I shal togeder gader you, and make you mylde and meke, clene and holy, by onyng to me.” Julian of Norwich, chapter XXVIII.

³¹ Børresen and Valerio (eds.), *The High Middle Ages*, 170.

about the salvation of the world, 14th-century people's misfortunes become a source of salvation. Regardless of the present hardships, or of the sins committed, we receive the reassurance in Christ's words: 'It is truth (sothe) that sin is the cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner [of] thing shall be well.'³² Therefore, there is no despondency or lamentation anywhere in her lines, but rather the constant mentioning of the joy she feels when receiving the divine revelations and the bliss she expects in Heaven together with the other human beings. Perhaps the most conclusive vision is the image of the world being the size of hazel-nut "He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; [...] In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God keepeth it."³³ This delicate image is also very representative of her theology. The world is little, insignificant, and so is each and every one of us, and yet God shows great care and concern for the smallest creature. Visibility in her city was thus irrelevant for Julian, since she wished for divine visibility and believed wholeheartedly that God can see us all and will protect us all, out of His great love.

The purpose of focusing on women's visibility in the Middle Ages is to better ascertain their theology and especially the orthodoxy of their writings, as well as their role (and influence) in contemporary society.³⁴ Such studies might help us understand the dramatic shift in the perception of the Church with regards to these women³⁵, as in many cases their personality may be better appreciated by and sometimes even more relevant to 21st-century believers than her contemporaries.

³² "It is sothe that synne is cause of all this peyne, but al shal be wele, and al shall be wele, and all manner thing shal be wele." Julian of Norwich, chapter. XXVII, but this promise which is repeated in subsequent chapters XXXI, XXXII, XXXIV, LXVIII.

³³ "He shewed a littil thing the quantitye of an hesil nutt in the palme of my hand, In this littil thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God kepith it." Julian of Norwich, chapter 5.

³⁴ Julian of Norwich's invisible and secluded life as an anchorite inspired Christians in their resistance against 2020 pandemic, as, when the coronavirus restrictions began, the Bishop of Norwich, the Right Reverend Graham Usher, said, he found himself "going back to the writings of Mother Julian of Norwich." In the midst of all of that, she was self-isolating in her cell with the noise of the street going on roundabout her. (Nic Rigby, "Coronavirus: Mystic's 'relevance' to self-isolating world," BBC News, East, 30 March 2020. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-norfolk-52020227>, 26 April 2020)

³⁵ Joan of Arc was burned at stake as a heretic in the 15th century, but canonised as a Catholic saint in the 20th (1920).

Conclusions

For Julian of Norwich her lack of visibility was not a source of annoyance or resignation, as it was not relevant for her spiritual path. Her interactions with her contemporaries were restricted to short conversations through a small window, as was the norm for an anchorite. Despite her invisible presence, she was admired and thus financially supported by the Christian community in Norwich.

The most important feature of her theology was an unwavering faith in God's love and in His wish to save all Christians and raise their souls into Heaven. Her optimistic ideology was not part of the official message of the Church, which preached damnation, and neither was it correlated with the visual depictions that were popular at the time. Therefore, her words remained relatively marginal in medieval times, and influenced just a few congregations of nuns who copied her manuscript. However, her ideas are considerably more appealing to 21st-century believers, who are tuned to her all-encompassing love and have a more tolerant and self-possessed approach to life than medieval fearful worshippers used to have.

In addition, her theology of love and undeterred optimism can also help us transcend suffering, as it is considered just a temporary situation unfalteringly followed by relief which is regarded as a miracle. Thus, pain only highlights the miracle that brings about relief. Such a perspective on reality is an example of recovering female mystics' theology, and can become a response to contemporary secularism, as well as an important step in the wide-reaching revival of women's spirituality.

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