



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 32

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Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich

Amy Laura Hall

*Dr. Amy Laura Hall is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School. She delivered the Women in Church and Ministry Lecture on February 26, 2015. This essay is part of a book manuscript entitled *Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World with Julian of Norwich*, forthcoming.*

Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be known? (ST: 6, 11)

Though the three persons of the Trinity are all equal in themselves, my soul understood love most clearly, yes, and God wants us to consider and enjoy love in everything. And this is the knowledge of which we are most ignorant; for some of us believe that God is all mighty and has power to do everything, and that he has wisdom and knows how to do everything, but that he is all love and is willing to do everything—there we stop. (LT: 73, 162)

Introduction

Julian looks the bloody truth in the eye and refuses to flinch. Sometime around 1373, when Julian was about thirty years old, she received a series of visions as an answer to prayer. Julian asked for “vivid perception of Christ’s Passion,” meaning, Jesus’ death on a cross. She asked for “bodily sickness.” And she asked for “three wounds” (ST: 1, 3).¹ This may sound bizarre today, but it was not odd during the Middle Ages for fervent Christians to ask God to possess their body. Julian interprets her prolonged battle with death as a gift from God. Focusing on a simple household crucifix, she sees everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be held safe by God.

Jesus Christ’s profligate gift of blood on the cross is the point in space and in time through which Julian begins to see everything and everyone. She writes “And after this I saw God in an instant, that is in my understanding, and in seeing this I saw that he is in everything” (ST, 8). Julian sees God’s disposition toward all that was, is, and will be fully disclosed through the cross as a gift of love. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we

1 Most of my citations from Julian’s writings refer to the Penguin Classics edition of Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*. The translation into everyday English from Julian’s original Middle English is by Elizabeth Spearling. Julian wrote both a Short Text and a Long Text about the visions of love that she received from God. When I quote from Julian, I will note first whether the quote is from the ST (Short Text) or LT (Long Text), then give the chapter number, then give the page number from the Penguin Edition.

become “kinned” with Jesus and “kinned” with one another. This led her to see the lines marking who is saved and who is lost, for example, or who is royal and who is common, bled together through our being made familiar to God through the cross.

I believe Julian received her visions of love as a kind of inoculation against dread. A reasonable response to the many traumas around her would have been precisely to catch a contagion of division and terror. Instead, Julian changes the whole scene. God gave her the blood of Jesus, straight from Jesus’ own body, in a way that changed how she sees the entire universe—including God. Seeing God’s “familiar love,” she knows God as “hanging about us in tender love,” like “our clothing.” It takes Julian two decades to sort out and think through and pray through what she first saw when God granted her a series of visions of love and truth. Rather than viewing the world around her as filled to the brim with misery or drained of all significance, Julian sees the everyday world glittering with simple miracles and resilient safety. The visions she received are a gift and a testimony against a religion of fear.

Vernacular Theology

Nicholas Watson and Jacquelyn Jenkins edited a volume on Julian that provides her original writings, in the Middle English and bountiful notes on the particular words and historical context of her writings. In their introduction to the volume, they write:

A Revelation [meaning the Long Text] is a work with no real precedent: a speculative vernacular theology, not modeled on earlier texts but structured as a prolonged investigation into the divine, whose prophetic goal is to birth a new understanding of human living into the world and of the nature of God in his interactions with the world, not just for theologians but for everyone.²

What they mean by “a speculative vernacular theology” is this: Julian was willing to ask questions that a woman was not supposed to ask. In fact, only men trained in theology at Oxford or Cambridge University were qualified to ask the questions she asked. Julian wrote in the vernacular, meaning, she wrote in English—the language normal people who were not trained at Oxford or Cambridge spoke to one another about everyday things. Julian was a churchwoman and a prophet who wanted people to catch sight of what she saw, and to become curious about what it means that God tells her that God’s meaning is, always, for eternity, love.

The name that Julian of Norwich’s mother gave her is not available. Julian was not part of the people “to be recorded for posterity” in England at that time. She was not of the aristocracy. We cannot look up the given name of Julian before she came to be called “Julian of Norwich.” We refer to her by that name because in the early fourteenth century she became an anchorite serving at St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, England. Anchorites

2 Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 2006), 3.

were a diverse group, but they had one thing in common: they were anchored to a particular church. At some point during their lives, they each dedicated their full-time existence to living in a small apartment attached to a church.

Julian was an anchorite in a busy city, at a busy church, and we know from historical records that she was a sought-after sage. So, while some anchorites were secluded, it is likely Julian was at least periodically busy. Catherynne M. Valente, a fantasy and science fiction writer who loves Julian and writes a blog about spirituality, describes the life of an anchorite this way: "She is an oracle, an academic, a hermit in the midst of life." People might have come to see Julian after seeing a beheading or after having buried a husband or after having been accused of heresy.

We do know a few facts and dates about Julian of Norwich, but they almost entirely come from her own writings. She was born in 1342. She received a series of visions from God in 1373, while she was on what she and others around her thought would be her death bed. She wrote about these visions in what are often referred to as the Short Text (ST) and the Long Text (LT). Both texts, all told, make up a workable volume of fewer than 200 pages in the 1998 Penguin Books edition, *Julian of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love*, translated by Elizabeth Spearing, including helpful notes and an introduction by A.C. Spearing.³ Although they are brief, her writings are considered classics of English literature.

Norwich, England during Julian's time was a swirling port city featuring what eventually came to be known as "Lollard's Pit," a place where heretics were burned alive. King Henry IV passed a statute in 1401 called *De heretico comburendo*, which ordered that anyone holding heretical views or books with heretical views would be burned in order to "strike fear" across the country. Heretics were burned to intimidate everyone around them to think inside the delineated box. At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, the king and the Archbishop of Canterbury were entangled in constant conflict. When they were not fighting against one another, they were reinforcing their own power with every intertwined form of control they had available. People were publically tortured as examples of what not to read and how not to see the world around the time that a few copies of Julian's writings were being cautiously circulated and read.

The century during which Julian grew up culminated in a royal decree to stop regular people from thinking about God. In 1409, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a document known as the "Arundel Constitutions." Nicholas Watson suggests this document was a response to a development in Christianity in England that had been growing for about sixty years.⁴ This was the period during which Julian was seeing, praying, and

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

4 Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70.4 (October 1995), 837.

writing. By 1409, there were strict restrictions on what could be taught and by whom, and the matter of who could translate any part of the Bible into English, or own any part of the Bible translated into English, was to be carefully regulated. As Watson explains, while earlier documents had delineated the “minimum necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved,” the Constitutions focused on “the maximum they may hear, read, or even discuss.”⁵ Watson continues, “No longer was it the ignorance of the laity and their priests that was a matter for concern; it was the laity’s too eager pursuit of knowledge.”⁶

At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century people who were literally hungry from wheat shortages and feudal machinations were also hungry to read scripture in their own language, to hold a scrap of scriptural verse in their own hands. It was a time also laden with despair and sadistic repression. Julian wrote with temerity at this intersection. It is one of the reasons people return to her words, and to the church now known for her name. It is a reason I turn to her—in order to look the ugly truth in the eye and not only refuse to flinch, but “to consider and enjoy love in everything.”

Julian’s Norwich was not so different than any post-disaster, apocalyptic human world in Western history. She was about eight years old when a horrific plague, known at the time as the “Great Plague,” spread from Europe and the Middle East to England, killing half of the people in many towns and creating a sense of impending disaster that reverberated for generations, both through recurrence in England of the deadly disease itself and graphic memories of loved ones lost. She was seeing visions of Jesus’ blood coming to her and for her, with no intermediary, during the same decade when, customarily, only priests received the cup of blessing (the blood) and the bread (or body) was parceled out by a strict division of who was above whom. With peasant uprisings throughout England, the rules that governed a system of feudalism were being challenged and violently reinforced.

English feudalism was similar to slavery in the United States, or apartheid in South Africa, only most people were born with skin that is “white.” Rules about who could speak to whom were kept in part by memory of who was whose child, by clothing, and by which language people spoke. If you spoke Latin, you were trained in theology and could talk about God. If you spoke French, you were part of the aristocracy. And if you spoke English, you were someone who mostly did not matter to the first two groups, unless you tried to change things. Then you were punished. Frederick Bauerschmidt quotes historian R. H. Tawney on this point:

The gross facts of the social order are accepted in all their harshness and brutality. They are accepted with astonishing docility, and, except on rare occasions, there is no question of reconstruction.⁷

5 Ibid., 828; emphasis in original.

6 Ibid.

7 Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 22.

Julian's Long Text was written at a time of national and personal crisis. Common sense included also a dose of death. The dread of death may have been just a whiff if you were among the few people who lived above the fray. But it was palpable if you were a starving peasant, or were a commoner who wanted to talk about scripture or changes to the feudal system, or if your village had a recurrence of plague. Part of what I found fascinating even the first time I read Julian is how, as Bauerschmidt puts it, hers is "a particularly crucial period of transition."⁸ The "docility" that Tawney described in his writings on medieval England is partly true. But there was resistance. I have come to read Julian right at the juncture of dread, docility, rebellion and hope. It was a time of holy mischief. Julian's visions help me see signs of openness and resistance to despair and division today.

In the mix of all of this, Julian received visions of love, love, and more love. These visions left her asking complex questions for over fifteen years about the meaning of what she had seen. The answer she receives, after praying on her visions, is clear. The answer she receives from God is repetitive and blunt. She writes "my spiritual understanding received an answer, which was this":

Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand or know from it anything else for all eternity. (LT: 86, 179)

She continues that "I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall" (LT: 86, 179). The last few pages of Julian's book about her visions leave us knowing Love, Love, Love, and Love. Focusing on these visions of Love will, with grace, lead us back into an answer of Love. Bauerschmidt writes that, for Julian, "From creation to consummation in heavenly bliss, God sees all of humanity as enfolded within the humanity of Christ."⁹ Focusing on the cross, Julian returns again and again to see God's vision of love.

God's Omniamity

A currently popular Christian writer and speaker in the United States named John Piper gave a short lecture in 2009 to the annual meeting of the Religious Newswriters Association about a movement and marketing scheme he calls "the New Calvinists." Piper gives a helpful summary of the basic message of "New Calvinism."¹⁰ By his explanation, the most important contribution of the group is its emphasis on human "insignificance."

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰ There are many different ways to read any theologian in the Christian tradition. John Calvin has been read in many different ways over the centuries. Piper was speaking about a particular way of reading Calvin today.

Using examples from a syndicated cartoon and a granola advertisement, Piper suggested to the reporters that there is a deep longing among people in the United States for an authoritative word about God's power, particularly after September 11, 2001. As Piper describes it, people desire the truth that God is omnipotent (all powerful) and that, in contrast, humans and our bodies and daily concerns are like dust. When faced with an unimaginable tragedy like September 11, what people most want, according to Piper, is an affirmation that God controls everything and mere human beings control nothing.

As I write, the "New Calvinists" often still proclaim this Gospel of Austerity to generations of Christians and seekers who are trying to live with the aftermath of two wars, during an economic debacle, hearing about drone strikes in Pakistan, dealing with the militarization of police in cities across the country and learning about torture in prisons from Chicago to Cuba. It is fair to characterize the neo-Calvinist message John Piper summarized this way: "If you are still alive in this age of terror, thank God, and stop whining about government surveillance. If you still have any job of any kind during this, the Second Great Depression, pick up your broom, and stop complaining about minimum wage. Oh, and keep going to church every Sunday, because God deserves your obeisance."¹¹

Julian of Norwich, who lived through a similarly tumultuous time in the Middle Ages in England, saw things differently. She asked a different sort of question, and she embodied a different answer. Julian assumed that God is all powerful. She did not have to prop up God's potency by accentuating our own unimportance. That God was all powerful was a given. She also assumed God's knowledge of all that is (God's omniscience). She didn't have to underscore God's knowledge by making sure everyone knows human beings are senseless. Her primary question was about God's love. The query that kept her going back again and again and again to the cross concerned neither God's omnipotence nor God's omniscience. Her query concerned God's omniamity.¹²

In her decades of writing and rewriting her one book, Julian returns to Jesus Christ on the cross like a dancer uses a focal point. When twirling in a circle, a dancer fixes on a point, to steady his balance and to avoid keeling over. Julian did the same with the image of Jesus on the cross. A metaphor that Julian uses is of a toddler who, when faced with danger, runs to her "mother's bosom." Christians seek the "Lord's breast" in this way (LT: 74, 164). Using maternal language for God does not mean that Julian softens the real monsters of her world. Plagues, public hangings, forms of domination subtle and overt, in a drastically hierarchical country infused with Christianity—these were not figments of a fearful toddler's nightmares. These cruelties were the bloody truth. But Jesus is also the truth. At a time when the language of faith was being used in multiple ways to reinforce

11 John Piper, "The Young & the Reformed." Religious Newswriters Association Conference. Minneapolis, MN, September 11, 2009. Panel Discussion.

12 This is a word I made up. "Omni" means all, and "amity" means love.

power and order, Julian seeks to see the world truthfully through Jesus. Jesus is the reason Julian is able to see the micro-fissures and gaping ramifications of evil and go past doubt in God's omniamity. As she explains in the quote with which I began this essay, God is "all love and is willing to do everything." That is our focal point, our mother's bosom, our question and our answer.

One of the earliest examples we have of someone reading Julian of Norwich is in the record of a nun named Margaret Gascoigne, from the seventeenth century in France. That was a long time ago, but Sister Margaret is not so far away. Margaret was writing about her struggles to believe that Jesus is actually *for her*. She was trying to believe in Jesus in a way that is more than just a required affirmation to which she says "YES" in order to be allowed into heaven. Margaret Gascoigne focused on a passage by Julian to help center herself. The passage Sister Margaret focused on is translated from the Middle English in this way. (God speaking): "Consider me alone my precious child, make me your object, *I am enough for you*" (LT: 36, 92). As Watson and Jenkins put it, Julian's vision "speaks words of comfort across two and a half centuries to a dying woman still beset by the uncertainties of a theologically gloomier age."¹³

You may have had or may eventually have your own snowflake-of-arsenic difficulties and social torments that lead you to doubt or scorn God's omniamity. If God is all knowing and all powerful—if both of those two things are true, then God may also be omni-cruel. Yet Julian of Norwich sees that God is all love and is willing to do everything. For us. For me. For you.

Julian's understanding of providence is different than one I have heard often used by praying Christians around me. In her later reflection on "providence," in the Long Text, she explains:

I saw God in an instant [or *poynte*], that is to say, in my understanding, and in seeing this I saw that he is in everything. I looked attentively, seeing and recognizing what I observed with quiet awe, and I thought, 'What is sin': For I saw truly that God does everything, no matter how small. And I saw that truly nothing happens by accident or luck, but everything by God's wise providence. (LT: 11, 58)

"God's wise providence" is not an affirmation pulled along toward resolution through a series of victories, whether minute or remarkable, private or public. "Accident," from Julian's perspective, is eliminated because she sees time itself through that small opening, that little camera lens, that reveals everything defined and situated by the cross. Her understanding of time is not that God works through discernable episodes wherein loss (tragic or slight) brings forth blessing (profound or precious).

I do not mean to be cruel toward people who tender-heartedly offer this perspective

to others or who try for solace to see the world this way themselves. In the midst of personal grief or large-scale tragedies, it seems to console some people to look for signs that pain is being transformed incrementally into blessing. These consolations can sometimes come in the “at least” form—as in, “at least” the pain was not worse, or the death-toll higher. This can be combined with the “silver lining” perspective, where one tries to find the arrow pointing upward out of pain. But this is not the way Julian has been given by God to see time. Julian pulls all that might be cast off as “accident or luck” through the central, focal point of the cross. She does not attest that there are clearly discernable arrows in our life moving up and away out of pain. Even more importantly, she does not tell a story that my pain results, ultimately, cumulatively, in God’s victory. The cross pulls all time inward toward Jesus.

Another way of describing God’s providence comes closer to Julian’s perspective, but is slightly and dangerously off-focus. This is the “we cannot know, but God knows” line. The person touting this view seems often to be trying to justify something most people would say is bad, but using a questionable version of “providence” as cover for their actions. This is not how Julian sees providence. I have heard devout church women say something similar when talking together about someone else’s pain. They seem to believe in their heart of hearts that they will end up on the right side of God’s holiness ledger. “We will see ...” becomes an alliance with a deity who holds out wisdom and leaves the rest of us befuddled and beset by grief. Providence is not, for Julian, a ladder up which we can climb in order better to see what those little people on the ground cannot see. Julian does not say that “we will see.” We have seen.

This question of God’s real love, here and now and not someday in the land of “we will see,” is not an academic puzzle for Julian. The material import of what Julian sees and thinks about is in her own blood and bone, as she focuses on Jesus’ blood poured out for her on the cross. A. C. Spearing explains that Julian “apprehends” God’s way of seeing “not as theory but as experience.”¹⁴

In his book on her period of England’s history, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Nicholas Watson helpfully explains how Julian’s readers may be tempted to understand her visions as hagiography, “approaching the verbal surface of a text with a mixture of aesthetic and religious awe.”¹⁵ Hagiography is a term that technically means writings about a saint. Writing hagiography today, in my world, means turning a merely human writer into an angel. Julian might become worthy of awe and study, but, with this sort of hagiographic misreading, most of us become unworthy of reading her as writing *for us*. That is, if one views Julian as an otherworldly angel, her writings become mystical visions with little connection to real human life. Watson, however, recommends a way

14 Spearing and Spearing, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xxxi.

15 Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

of reading that attends to the real political, social, and religious conflicts that animated these visions. He advises that when reading Julian's visions:

... focus instead on what we can call a mystical writer's "predicament" in formulating doctrinal positions, articulating an appropriately didactic discourse and describing mystical experience ... look at the specifically mundane pressures that beset a mystical text, impelling it toward complex and ambiguous claims for its own status as an embodiment of truth.¹⁶

In other words, think about this "mystical text" with the actual earth in mind. Watson is explaining to his own readers that it makes sense to read a writer like Julian as a person who was writing from a particular real life that involved "pressures" that are right here, on this ground, held by the same gravity that holds us today. Your "predicaments" will be unique, but to read Julian as a non-earth creature is to avoid not only her earthly challenges, but your own. Her claims to truth are "complex and ambiguous," as Watson notes, but that may make her writing all the more fascinating as an "embodiment of truth."

Julian's visions have import for thinking, living, and loving today. Can you imagine being told you could not talk about theology until you learned Latin? Or that you had no right to learn French because your blood was not the right sort of blood? Julian sees all of humanity "kinned" with Jesus. Her vernacular theology involves holy miscegenation. The language of Christianity at Julian's time was regimented to keep the social body—that is, the people who made up the daily life of reality—divided into layers. There were those allowed to read the holy words, handle the holy objects, be buried in the holiest places, and those who were not. And, there were gradations among the various layers. To be anachronistic to make a point, the Lords and Ladies went before the Ladies and Gentlemen went before the Doctors and Barristers went before the hotel heiresses and heirs went before the extended family of a once celebrated athlete and her third husband went before the common people who ride the bus because they can't afford a car, and so on Can you imagine if you walked into a church that required people to line up for the Lord's Supper that way?

The historic fact of the plague is also important for understanding how Julian's visions resist division and fear. Grace Jantzen vividly explains the human misery and church crisis brought on by the Great Plague:

People died, horribly and suddenly and in great numbers. It was so contagious that one contemporary witness describes how anyone who touched the sick or the dead immediately caught the disease and died himself, so that priests who ministered to the dying were flung into the same grave with their penitents. It was impossible for the clergy to keep

up with all those who required last rites, and to die unshriven was seen as a catastrophe of eternal proportions. Nor could the people who died be buried with dignity ... The psychological impact on the survivors was incalculable, made worse in subsequent years by the further outbreaks which occurred at unpredictable intervals.¹⁷

Jantzen explains that more than a third of the people of Norwich died during this relatively short period of time, and around half of the priests died.

Not only were people dying at frightening rates, but many died “unshriven,” that is, without the last rites. Jantzen explains that this was a crisis of “eternal proportions” because not only were people losing their beloveds left and right, but they were losing their beloveds in a way that would separate them forever from one another. Priests who were not fleeing the deadly plague were dying quickly, and so people were dying without receiving the practice that everyone believed was necessary in order to secure one’s hope for eternal life with God and one another.

Julian grew up in the wake of this tragedy, and she asked, during a time of misery and division, to receive a bodily experience of Jesus’ suffering. She asked for the wounds of Jesus to take her away from a cycle of despair, shame, domination, and the violence of retribution that tempts at least some people during times of political tumult. Julian’s answer of God’s omniamity is a redirection away from an obsessive rotation of fear, shame, domination, and submission. God has not favored the survivors over the afflicted.

One response to seeing human beings reduced to worse than nothingness through plague or famine or brutal warfare is to submit to and inhabit that version of religious truth. We are dust. Deal with it. Another response, Julian’s response, is, eventually, after years of trying to understand what she had received from God, to discern a vision of redemption:

At one time our good Lord said, ‘All manner of things shall be well’; and at another time he said, ‘You shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well’; and the soul understood these two sayings differently. On the one hand he wants us to know that he does not only concern himself with great and noble things, but also with small, humble, and simple things, with both one and the other; and this is what he means when he says, ‘All manner of things shall be well’: for he wants us to know that the smallest things shall not be forgotten. (LT: 32)

By the proper, analytically true reckoning of her time, a significant percentage of the population had been eternally lost through the crises of recurring plague and the tragedy of the unshriven. By the proper, political reckoning of her time the great and noble were the arbiters to restore proper order and win again God’s favor. And, I am willing to

wager that the proper, common-sense reckoning of many Christians during Julian's time was that it would be foolhardy to re-commit to hope in the "smallest things" at such an apocalyptically scary time. But Julian receives visions that embolden the words of lived lives, making them stand out as not just *not forgotten*, but brought bit by bit into God's goodness. She receives visions that underscore the holy significance of actual, daily, real people and our actual, daily, hopes and fears.

One way of sustaining faith in a classical conception of God during the crises that marked Julian's early life was to view them as God's punishment. No doubt many people in England decided the world was horribly random and cruel. They either did not have access to pen and parchment or were smart enough to keep their mouths and minds shut, because true atheism was, of course, punishable heresy. If you wanted to be mentally safe from state reprisal, or if you desired still to hold fast to Christian faith, the most reasonable explanation, and one with some scriptural warrant, was that God was, in a sense, culling the herd. The people who had perished were a macabre object lesson from God to remind everyone to be scared and grateful, so that the survivors would come closer to God, or at least become more obedient.

This theology that inspired fear of God was not unique to fourteenth-century England. Jonathan Edwards, a preacher in New England in the mid-eighteenth century, espoused a similar view in his classic sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Edwards wrote all sorts of things about God's love, but in this particular, well-known phrase, he emphasized the urgency of deciding to be a Christian. If not for God's mercy in Jesus Christ, we would all be flung into the pit of hell.

Four hundred years earlier than Jonathan Edwards, Julian had a very different view about the nature of God's love. She writes this about what she saw:

For this is what was shown: that our life is all grounded and rooted in love, and without love we cannot live; and therefore to the soul which through God's special grace sees so much of his great and marvelous goodness, and sees that we are joined to him in love for ever, it is the greatest impossibility conceivably that God should be angry, for anger and friendship are two contraries. It must needs be that he who wears away and extinguishes our anger and makes us gentle and kind, which is the contrary of anger; for I saw quite clearly where our Lord appears, everything is peaceful and there is no place for anger; for I saw no kind of anger in God, neither for a short time nor for a long one; indeed, it seems to me that if God could be even slightly angry we could never have any life or place or being ... (LT: 49, 112)

Julian receives a vision of God's abundant blood given in a way that a remarkably adoring mother gives a child her favorite and best food. We are children in the hands of a loving God. And, just to be clear here, Julian makes a logical argument in addition to

describing a vision of God's omniamity. She does not pose this as a form of debate, but there is an underlying challenge for her possible interlocutors. If you read between the lines in the long quote above, she basically says "So, dear survivors of the many disasters besetting our century, do you really think that you are around because you are better and more beloved by God than those beloveds who are no longer with us? No. I didn't think so." If God could be angry, none of us would be here. So, given we have "life" and "place" and "being," God's providence must be enfolded with God's love. The tragic and terrorizing "accidents" of this world are redeemed and held by God.

Conclusion

The fact that Christianity is not a matter of "facts" makes Christian faith a potentially stupefying brew. Christianity can be used to distract people from what is really happening to them or around them. In fact, many people who believe in God avoid going to church because they have seen churches dope people into ignoring the truth of the world around them. Julian affirms the wholeness of "Holy Church," and her unqualified confirmation that the blood of Jesus is truly there in the cup at the Lord's Supper or Communion (or Mass), even during a time of deep divisions within Western Christianity and deadly disagreements within Christendom—these are examples of an *avowal*, an active affirmation of truth.

Its opposite, *disavowal*, can be destructive. *Disavowal* is a confirmation of an untruth by way of ignoring the real truth. In my fifteen years of working as a pastor, I have seen and I have experienced the danger of being a Christian who disavows the truth of really bad unreality in front of our eyes. The word *disavowal* is slightly different than the word *denial*. To deny is to face evil and to refuse to acknowledge it. To disavow is to face evil but not see that evil at all. To disavow is not only to deny but to have avoided the reality that would require the energy of denial. I have listened to people whose faith involves their disavowal of evil. I have seen this when a man needed to face and eventually celebrate that God created him beautifully and wonderfully gay. I have seen this when a woman needed to tell her lover that she is worth more than being used as an unpaid therapist under the covers. I have seen this when a man with a life sentence tries to endure with dignity the spectacle that is coercion and power in a high security prison. I have seen this when a woman has faced either leaving the sisters she loves or naming that the "community" they help legitimate is an elaborate, intricately beautiful and powerful cult of lies.

Disavowal can be deadly, and Christianity can become intertwined with an unreality that looks very close to the reality of faithful truth. In his recent book on Julian's theology, Denys Turner thinks of Julian alongside the writings of an Italian poet named Dante Alighieri who lived and wrote about God shortly before Julian lived and wrote. Turner's section on their similar understandings of sin is very helpful on what Julian avows and

how her visions are not an example of disavowal:

... if we are to say that sin is a *refusal of reality*, this does not mean that it is in any way an unreal refusal, for to say that to live in sin is to live within illusion is by no means the same as to say that sin is illusory. Refusing reality can have every sort of real consequence, can cause every sort of pain and suffering, can weave warps and webs of fantasy and illusion, can create and sustain whole regimes of deceit, can motivate personalities distorted by such fears and self-deceptions so as to generate all the world's violence, all the world's need for it, and all the world's untold numbers of cruelties—all of which can join up into interlocked systems, into self-sustaining structures, which conspire to be a world made out of the material of its unreality ... Of course, then, sin is real, and there is nothing in Julian's theology that would suggest otherwise. But her saying that sin is 'real' is perfectly consistent with her also saying that sin has 'no substance, no manner of being' ... Sin is real in the sense that an unreality can become the real substance of a person's or of a society's existence, a kind of really lived refusal of the real.¹⁸

Sin, for Julian, can become a "really lived refusal of the real." I would add, and I think Denys Turner would consider this compatible with his reading, that my "really lived refusal of the real" can be particularly tenacious if my naming this unreality as unreal requires me to question the faith that I have been taught. If the "self-sustaining structures" of a mendacious form of Christianity have been for me a splint against the impending chaos of life, I may find it almost impossible to release my desperate grasp on this form of faith. If my particular community or practice of Christianity is intertwined with untruth, I may find it unthinkable to think in any different way. Put simply, evil is particularly hard for some Christians to face if that evil is intertwined with what looks very much like the faith we have practiced.

Julian of Norwich looked the truth in the face. She received the grace not to disavow, and she trusted that grace and kept searching, investigating God with the trust that God would not be offended by her questions. She continued to ask God again and again and again what it means that there is "love in everything." She returns actively to affirm—to avow—both the crises of her time and the omniamity of God. Whatchutzpah does such persistent inquisitiveness require of a woman, during a time when women were not supposed even to learn how to talk about theology in the language most people spoke and were able to hear? What does it mean to have such resilient moxie? I am still trying to learn.

18 Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 94–95; emphasis in original.