



Julian of Norwich: Mysticism and Philosophy

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Abstract

Parts of Julian's *Showings* are examined for their didactic quality, and her work is briefly compared to that of Mechthild and Hildegard. The commentary of Tobin, Chervin and others is alluded to, and it is concluded that Julian is an exemplary teacher.

Julian of Norwich, well-known fourteenth century mystic and anchoress, is often mentioned today in the same breath with such other female medieval thinkers as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen.¹ As Jean LeClerc says, "Our times require feminine models."²

But if it makes sense, on one construal, to think of a number of women mystics as falling under one rubric, so to speak, on another it does not—each person has her particular mode of thought, her particular focus of inquiry, and her special style of mysticism. In this paper I will argue that, while Julian has some areas of similarity with other mystics, her own revelations can be interpreted along a number of lines of analysis, some of which have not commonly been employed to address medieval thought.

Commentators have noted the extent to which Julian employs feminine imagery in her depictions of her encounters with God,³ but another noteworthy feature of her work is what might be termed an epistemic feature: Julian feels that she has been blessed with a special mode of knowing, and yet she feels that all can be so blessed. In other words, Julian's revelations are a sort of teaching, but one to which everyone can aspire. Although there are elements of this in, for example, the work of Mechthild, Julian's *Showings* do not possess the intensely personal, shut-in nature of much of what Mechthild wrote. It is as if Julian herself is giving us lessons in the nature of the divine, and by attempting to follow her thought, we can see how we, too, might profit.

¹ Jean LeClerc, "Preface," *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, p. 3

² *Ibid.*, *ibid.*

³ Ronda de Sola Chervin, *Prayers of the Women Mystics*, Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992, p. 71.

I

In the short text of her *Showings*, Julian repeatedly offers the pronouncement that all may come to know.⁴ For example, in Chapter vii she says:

[F]or we are all one in love. And in all this I
was humbly moved in love toward my fellow Christians,
that they might all see and know the same as I saw,
for I wished it to be a comfort to them all, as it is to
me; for this vision was shown for all men, and not for
me alone.⁵

Although some commentators have emphasized that the sheer difficulty of Julian's teachings has a great deal to do with what sets her apart from other women thinkers of the era, another factor might be deemed to be her emphasis on the human capacity for knowledge.⁶

At least some of the other thinkers who popularly fall under the rubric "women mystics" tended toward a much more interior view of the Divine, and in some cases one is tempted to think that the sorts of concerns that moved Julian were not evident.

A fruitful basis for comparison comes with a look at the work of Mechthild of Magdeburg. Mechthild's work has often been cited for its delineation of a relationship of lovers: Mechthild is concerned with the personal, and casts her relationship with God in these terms. She writes:

I cannot endure a single consolation
But my beloved.
I love my earthly friends
As companions in eternity
And I love my enemies
With a painful and holy longing
For their blessedness.
In all things God has a sufficiency
But in the touching of my soul.⁷

Far from emphasizing that this is an experience that can be had by all, Mechthild's work is so intensely internalized that we might be tempted to characterize it as a series of love letters—and, in any case,

⁴ The short text in the LeClerc edition comprises pp. 125–170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶ The editors of the Paulist Press edition note in the "Introduction" that "Julian's book is by far the most profound and difficult of all mediaeval English spiritual writings . . ." (*Showings*, eds. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, "Introduction," p. 22)

⁷ Mechthild of Magdeburg, in *Beguine Spirituality*, ed. Fiona Bowie, New York: Crossroad, 1990, p. 69.

commentators on her work have also noted that there are questions of authority, since Mechthild asserted that God was the author of her work.⁸

Julian wants to share her experience with us that we, too, may profit from the experience—and even have a similar set of sensations. In the short text, she is precise about what it is that she came to understand, and she is also precise about how it is that this comprehension came about. Like many other thinkers, Julian appears to have had experiences that might be thought to fall under the rubrics of both the visionary and the mystical—Tobin, for one, has made a point of characterizing these two sorts of constructs as fundamentally different.⁹ But in any case, at the opening of Chapter v of the short version, Julian says:

And during the time that our Lord showed me
this spiritual vision which I have now described,
I saw the bodily vision of the copious bleeding of the
head persist, and as long as I saw it I said, many times:
Blessed be the Lord! In this first revelation of the
Lord I saw in my understanding six things.¹⁰

Among these six things, Julian notes that one is the “blessed divinity,” and another that “he has made everything which is made for love.”¹¹

The didactic nature of Julian’s experience is not in itself extraordinary, and parts of her visions might remind us, among other thinkers, of Augustine. Many passages of the *Confessions* indicate lessons that Augustine has learned, and, like Julian, he has made the decision that he wants to share the lessons with us. He wrote:

For, inquiring whence it was that I admired the
beauty of bodies whether celestial or terrestrial, and
what supported me in judging correctly on things
mutable, and pronouncing, “This should be, this not,”—
inquiring, then, whence I so judged, seeing I did so
judge, I had found the unchangeable and true eter-
nity of Truth, above my changeable mind.¹²

But unlike Augustine, Julian has no particular traumas to share—hers is the pure experiential message. And, as we have said, unlike Mechthild, the personal nature of the visions and revelations does

⁸ Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Rediscovering Women Philosophers*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, *passim*.

⁹ Frank Tobin, *Mechthild of Magdeburg: a Medieval Mystic in Modern Eyes*, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995, p. 113.

¹⁰ Julian, *Showings*, p. 132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

¹² Augustine, *Confessions*, New York: Liveright, 1943, pp. 154–55.

not appear to leave her in a state such that she deems portions of them to be uncommunicable. Julian wants us to learn, and, at least in the short version of *Showings*, she appears to be saying that we can learn at a fairly rapid clip.

II

As part of her instructional mode, Julian wants us also to understand that it is not the here-and-now Julian, in the body, who is ultimately the teacher. In Chapters vi and vii of the short version she makes this explicitly clear; she says “and I counsel you for your own profit, that you disregard . . . the sinful creature to whom it was shown . . . ,”¹³

and “[I desire] . . . it should be to every man the same profit that I asked for myself.”¹⁴

The ultimate Teacher is God, and Julian wants us to know this. But it is also clear that, on another level, Julian is probably asserting that she was chosen as a vehicle for this message precisely because she is capable of giving it to others. As Julian says, “Sometimes a man is left in the pain of himself for the profit of his soul . . . ,”¹⁵ it is clear that there is a path to such profit, and that we are being shown it.

Julian’s experiences had a great deal to do with bodily illness, as she tells us, but it is also part of her message that there is a greater ill than bodily illness. In Chapter x of the shorter version, she is straightforward about this, and this also becomes part of what she wishes to transmit to us in her didactic mode. As she writes:

[I]t seemed to me that my pains exceeded any mortal death. I thought: Is there any pain in hell like this? And in my reason I was answered that despair is greater, for that is a spiritual pain.¹⁶

Here it becomes clear that what Julian wants us to know is that there is an antidote and palliative to a great deal of that which ails us on this earth, and that palliative is Christ and Christ’s love. Moreover, to those who are under the impression that they already suffer (and she herself was clearly under such an impression), she reminds them that the suffering of despair—of feeling cut off from the divine, for whatever sort of reason—is a greater suffering than any physical

¹³ Julian, *Showings*, p. 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

pain, but that that suffering also has a comfort available. So to pull together two lines of argument, Julian feels that she has been granted her visions so that she may teach others, as they are ready to receive and even have similar experiences, and at least one of the visions that she has had specifically has to do with the notion of pain and the concomitant of suffering.

In Chapter xiii, Julian has the well-known experience of inquiring, mentally, into how it can be that sin exists, and being answered by the Lord that “all will be well.”¹⁷ The point here is that sin is that which forces us to experience the despair of which she has just written, and in so experiencing it, we are driven to seek the source of comfort. As she says, “For we are all in part denied, and we ought to be denied, following our master Jesus until we are fully purged, that is to say until we have completely denied our own mortal flesh and all our inward affections which are not good.”¹⁸ In other words, there is a double didacticism here—part of it is Julian’s own desire to instruct, and part of it is the presumably didactic spirit in which pain and sin are given to us, so that we may make that turn that will lead us to the path of the divine. As she also says, “And in this I was taught that we shall rejoice only in our blessed Saviour Jesus, and trust in him for everything.”¹⁹

In other words, not only are Julian’s visions exemplary—the conduct in which she engages is also itself exemplary. In addition, Julian gradually comes to see that sin is a part of the life of many whom she has admired for their fortitude and heroism; because they were human, sin could not but be a part of their lives. Julian notes:

God also showed me that sin is no shame, but honour to man, for in this vision my understanding was lifted up into heaven; and then there came truly to my mind David, Peter and Paul, Thomas of India and Mary Magdalen, how they are known, with their sins, to their honour in the Church on earth. And it is to them no shame that they have sinned—shame is no more than in the bliss of heaven—for there the tokens of sin are turned into honours.²⁰

Sin is not only a learning experience; it is also an experience by which God may, as Julian says, “heal.”²¹ In other words, to articulate the situation in still another way, full awareness of God’s bounty, and knowledge of God, requires first this turning away and then a reorientation—and the reorientation is part of what makes all things

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

well. The straightening and healing process cannot properly take place until there has been some prior rupture, and sin is that rupture. Although Julian admits, in the early sections of the shorter version, to confusion over the existence of sin, she is later brought to see its place.

III

The sorts of distinctions between religious experiences that are made by Tobin and other commentators are often alluded to only within the context of the medieval tradition, but visions and revelations have been a part of the human experience for thousands of years. Intriguingly, given the length of this larger tradition and the commentary on it, one would expect that Julian's experiences might stand out in some way as striking. In a sense, however, the experiences that resulted in the *Showings* are rather understated; they are not as fantastical as Hildegard's visions (despite the fact that Hildegard was also the author of a medical treatise, *Causae et Curae*), and they do not exhibit the extreme personalism of those of Mechthild of Magdeburg. Neither, as experiences purporting to have a visionary component go, do they exhibit any of the semi-hallucinatory qualities described by many other prophets and mystics. Although his experiences were alleged to have happened hundreds of years later, the founder of the Latter Day Saints, Joseph Smith, had no difficulty articulating a series of visions with a certain sort of explosive quality. In writing about them, Jon Krakauer notes:

One night in the autumn of 1823, when Joseph was seventeen, ethereal light filled his bedroom, followed by the appearance of an angel, who introduced himself as Moroni and explained that he had been sent by God. He had come to tell Joseph of a sacred text inscribed on gold plates that had been buried fourteen hundred years earlier under a rock on a nearby hillside. Moroni then conjured a vision in Joseph's mind, showing him the exact place the plates were hidden.²²

Although enormous cultural change—not to mention geographic distance—separate Julian's experiences from those of Joseph Smith, it is interesting to note that it is the latter, and not Julian's, that seem to have the more phantasmagorical quality, and that Julian's descriptions are understated by comparison.

²² Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, New York: Anchor Books, 2004, pp. 59–60.

This may well be at least in part because Julian aims to try to impart crucial components of Church doctrine, and she is willing to share the more visual parts of the experience, in general, only insofar as they assist her in getting her message across. The descriptions of Jesus's suffering, although pronounced, take up only a small part of the text (and tend to occur in the first chapters of the shorter edition). In Chapter xviii, Julian asserts "For what God said is an endless strengthening, which protects us very safely."²³

I have been arguing that Julian's teachings are largely didactic, and that what she has experienced is something that she feels others can undergo, and learn from. It is interesting to note that, although Julian's experiences began in bodily illness and pain, it is not bodily illness so much that she sees as the catalyst—rather, the pain of sin (which she repeatedly mentions is a sensation of being cut off from the grace of God) is one of the sorts of pains that she thinks we all endure and which, if properly categorized, can serve as a catalyst to further growth. Julian sees, then, that part of the human condition is a series of states that, by the will of God, can lead us to a better understanding of the deity. Her aim is to try to articulate these points in such a way as to make them fathomable to all.

IV

Toward the end of her *Showings*, Julian tells us that she was assaulted by the Devil, and that when she finally recovered from her illness, others around her told her that she had been "raving."²⁴

In the last few lines of the shorter version, she remarks that God wants us to "reject false fear." If we know God's goodness, we will see our various trials as teaching exercises, and we will be able to learn from them, as she was able to learn from hers.

The teacherly quality of Julian's work is that which has recommended it to many, and over a period of time she has become renowned as one of the most venerated of the medieval women thinkers. As Ronda Chervin says, "Too often we sink into melancholy because of the pain of this world. Like Julian of Norwich, let us allow God to sing his songs of hope in our hearts."²⁵ Part of the project of recovering the voices of the women of this period is not only to give them their historical due, but to allow us to come to grips with what it is that they might have to offer. Julian's work speaks to us today because she seems to offer a note of comfort to a torn planet. She gives us the feeling that each painful experience can

²³ Julian, *Showings*, p. 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁵ Chervin, *Prayers*, p. 72.

be an energizer for further growth, and that the path to this growth is available to us if we only open our eyes. Whereas Hildegard writes of *viriditas* and Mechthild of her beloved, Julian tells us that we—each of us—can conquer our personal fear and pain if we use these experiences as learning opportunities. Perhaps part of Julian's appeal is that each of us would like a teacher who would help us down the path, and we find a decided lack of teachers around us, in all too many cases. Julian can serve as a personal teacher to all, and in that sense her work is more than relevant to our contemporary lives.

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