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GOD OUR SUFFERING MOTHER? KENOTIC ATONEMENT IN
JULIAN OF NORWICH'S REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE

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Introduction

Suffering is perhaps the greatest challenge to belief in the Christian God. For many, suffering is experienced in silence, leading to much secret pondering about how it can be that a loving God allows his creation to experience pain. Some wonder aloud, challenging God or defending him, trying to make sense of something universally experienced. It is therefore surprising when suffering is requested, just as it was by Mother Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century. Julian, an anchorite and the earliest known female English writer, produced a work detailing her theology and experiences known as *Revelations of Divine Love*. This article examines the historical context of Julian's life and her theology of sin and argues that her theology of the Motherhood of God strengthens a kenotic understanding of Christ's atonement.¹

1. Kenosis refers to the theology of Christ's self-emptying love based on the Apostle Paul's words in Phil 2:6–8: "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (NRSV).

Biography

Modern historians know very few details regarding Julian of Norwich's life.² What is known directly of Julian's life experiences comes by way of what she shares in her only known work, *Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian's writings have survived in two formats, the "Short-Text" (ST), which includes initial reactions to a series of visions Julian experienced on what was perceived to be her death bed, and the "Long-Text" (LT), a subsequent work written fifteen to twenty years later which includes more profound reflections on her experience.³ Julian's visions are delineated into sixteen "showings," or "special revelations," and are explained over eighty-six chapters in the LT.⁴

For Julian, the only details of her life worth sharing were those which furthered the purpose of espousing God's great love for humanity.⁵ Any explicit personal details such as her family life, education, the context of her vocation as an anchoress, or even her given name, are absent in her writing.⁶ The LT reflects her growing understanding that what she was shown was not for her alone, but the church as a whole. Thus, almost every usage of a personal pronoun when referring to the recipient of her vision in the ST was replaced by the plural "we."⁷ Of importance for Julian is not her accomplishments, but "that our Lord God wishes us to have great regard for all the deeds he has done in the noble splendour of creating all things, and the excellence of man's creation (which is superior to all God's other works), and the

2. For more on the life of Julian, see Frykholm, *Julian*; Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*; and Rolf, *An Explorer's Guide*.

3. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 15.

4. For a medieval edition of Julian's works, see Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*. For a modern English translation, see Julian, *Revelations*.

5. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 4.

6. The name "Julian" arises from the custom of an anchoress adopting the name of the church to which she was associated with, thus Julian most likely took her name from the Church of St. Julian, a church built during the reign of Cnut the Great at the beginning of the tenth century (Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 4).

7. Turner, *Julian*, 73.

precious atonement which he has made for man's sin, turning all our blame into everlasting glory."⁸ For Julian, this accomplishment trumps anything she could say about herself.

There are some biographical details, however, which emerge when analyzing Julian's writing. She dates her vision as occurring on 8 May 1373, when she was roughly "thirty and a half years old."⁹ Based on this date Julian was born roughly in December of 1342. Julian was known to be "still alive in the year of our Lord 1413" and is thought to have died sometime after 1416.¹⁰ Julian is described as an anchorite (recluse) within *Revelations*, which is confirmed in four surviving wills dating between 1393/94 and 1416.¹¹ Some believe that before becoming an anchorite, Julian was a Benedictine nun who served at a convent in Carrow located a mile outside of Norwich.¹² Her response at the beginning of her revelation, "Benedicite dominus!" was a typical greeting formula used between Benedictine monks and nuns, and Christ thanked Julian in her vision for her service "in her youth," as though she had consecrated herself for Christian service.¹³

Although Julian is described as "one who could not read,"¹⁴ the sophistication she shows in understanding the implications of the theological concepts of late medieval theology suggests that she received a formal study of language.¹⁵ The conflict between the sophisticated Julian and the self-described "unlettered" Julian

8. Julian, *Revelations*, 40.

9. Julian, *Revelations*, 4.

10. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Julian of Norwich," [n.p.].

11. Roger Reed, rector of St. Michael's, Coslany, Norwich donated to her two shilling when he died in 1393/94 and Thomas Emund, a chantry priest in Aylesham, Norfolk, gave twelve pence in 1404/05 as well as eight pence to a certain "Sarah, living with her." John Plumpton, a Norfolk merchant, gave 40 pence in 1414 to "the anchoress in the church of St. Julian's." Finally, Isabel Ufford, an aristocratic nun at the great house of Campsey in Suffolk gave the sum of twenty shillings to Julian in 1416 (Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*, 5).

12. Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*, 4.

13. Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*, 4.

14. Julian, *Revelations*, 39.

15. Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*, 10.

remains an enigma.¹⁶ It may be possible that Julian lacked a robust education in Latin.¹⁷ Norwich, however, had great libraries as the Benedictine Monks had homes and centers just across from the Julian church, of which Julian perhaps availed herself.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the common and lowly English language, which Julian spoke, served as the perfect medium for someone seeking a humble life of service.¹⁹

Perhaps the most significant event of Julian's young life in Norwich was the arrival of the Black Death in the spring of 1349, which decimated a population of approximately thirteen thousand people in a vibrant economic center to half that number.²⁰ By the age of six or seven, Julian would have witnessed an unbelievable amount of death. The plague, which first devastated China, Central Asia, and the Middle East by killing approximately twenty-five million people from 1332–1357, set sail in October 1347 from the Black Sea port of Caffa aboard a cargo ship and landed in Messina, Italy, sweeping itself through Italy and making its way throughout Europe.²¹ The Church, which lost approximately half of all its clergy during this period, struggled to minister to the dying who feared eternal damnation.²² One must wonder when Julian asked for "three gifts of grace by God," including the experience of severe bodily sickness, if she held the horrific images of the Black Death in her mind as a reference point for her request.²³

The exact context of how the Black Death affected Julian is not surprisingly a matter of speculation. How much of her family survived?²⁴ Did she marry and did she have children? Did she

16. Watson and Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian*, 10.

17. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 16.

18. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 19.

19. Frykholm, *Julian*, 12.

20. Rolf, *An Explorer's Guide*, 28.

21. Rolf, *An Explorer's Guide*, 25.

22. Rolf, *An Explorer's Guide*, 30.

23. Julian, *Revelations*, 40.

24. One member of Julian's family that survived the Black Death was her mother, who was present during Julian's sickness and vision. See Julian, *Revelations*, 15.

lose children in the Black Death? Was she a widow? Perhaps Julian's unique approach to Trinitarian theology in which she intimately describes Jesus as "mother" in chapter 58 of the LT suggests first-hand experiential knowledge of parenthood?²⁵ Nonetheless, the details of Julian's life seem destined to remain in a type of "reputation-limbo," and continue to serve as an obstacle for her full canonization into sainthood by the Roman Catholic church.²⁶ In addition to such a devastating epidemic, Julian also experienced an "ugly age" of dislocation and confusion for the church as an adult.²⁷ Whether it be the Hundred Years War between England and France (1338–1453), the anxiety surrounding Lollardy and the "heretic" John Wycliffe, or the division of the Great Western Schism, Julian lived in remarkably tumultuous times.²⁸

From Shame to Honor

This bleak biographical context, however limited, stands in direct contrast to Julian's hopeful outlook. One of the remarkable aspects of Julian's writing is that she did not share in the prevailing view that God had sent the plague as an act of judgement for sin, nor the atonement as an event which placated the wrath of a vindictive God.²⁹ Although Julian believes that "wickedness has been allowed to rise up in opposition to goodness," this wickedness is met by a God who, "opposed wickedness and turned everything to goodness and to glory for all those who shall be saved; for that is the quality in God which does good against evil."³⁰ According to Julian, one has little trouble believing in a God of punishment but struggles to accept a God that loves humanity tenderly.³¹ As one Julian researcher notes: "Julian shrewdly penetrates into the strange inability of human nature to accept the

25. Julian, *Revelations*, 127.

26. Law, "In the Centre," 183.

27. Cooper, *Julian*, 9.

28. Cooper, *Julian*, 118.

29. Dearborn, "The Crucified Christ," 289.

30. Julian, *Revelations*, 128.

31. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 636.

self as lovable, making us paradoxically more comfortable with God the judge, whom we must always strive to please and appease, than with God the mother, who simply loves us as we are.”³² For Julian, how could such love without wrath co-exist with the realities of sin, Satan, and even church tradition?³³ According to Julian, this question brought about an answer of profound hope:

And, it seemed to me that if there had been no sin, we should all have been pure and like our Lord, as he made us; and so, in my folly, I had often wondered before this time why, through the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not prevented; for then, it seemed to me, all would have been well. I should have given up such thoughts, yet I grieved and sorrowed over this, unreasonably and without discretion. But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of everything needful to me, answered with these words and said, “*Sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*”³⁴

Christ’s power—both in his Incarnation and his Second Coming—is that of one who performs not an act of judgment, but of redemption, and all Julian can say is that she is confident that all manner of things shall be well.³⁵ In contemplating God in this mystery, “our use of our reason is now so blind, so base, so uninformed, that we cannot recognize the high, marvelous wisdom, the power, and the goodness of the blessed Trinity.”³⁶ And even though Julian accepts the teaching of the church that “many will be damned,” something she struggles to accept as consistent with all things being well, she hopefully believes that by God’s “great deed,” he will mysteriously bring about a salvation where “he will make well all that is not well.”³⁷ *What* exactly this great

32. Nuth, “Two Medieval Soteriologies,” 636.

33. Heath, “Judgement Without Wrath,” 38.

34. Julian, *Revelations*, 74–75. Italics added.

35. Heath, “Judgement Without Wrath,” 45.

36. Julian, *Revelations*, 79.

37. Julian, *Revelations*, 80.

deed will be and *how* Christ will accomplish it is veiled in mystery known to none “under Christ.”³⁸

Although not explicitly, Julian’s enigmatic approach to soteriology challenges the scholastic theological methods that had begun to dominate her time. The Middle Ages signifies a dramatic shift away from the ransom theory of the atonement by way of two dominant medieval figures, Anselm of Canterbury and Peter Abelard. In Anselm’s view, the ransom theory of the atonement created a double allegiance to both God and the devil and granted the former rights over humanity.³⁹ According to Anselm, the issue at hand is that God was robbed of his honor because of human disobedience and that Christ’s death makes a necessary atoning satisfaction for sin. According to Abelard, since the devil used seduction and the false promise of eternal life to ensnare humanity, the idea of him receiving rights over humanity in their ensuing sin is deeply problematic.⁴⁰ Both Anselm and Abelard recognize that since humanity sins only against God, the idea of a ransom being paid to the devil accounts for nothing.⁴¹ From there, however, Anselm and Abelard diverge in their understandings of the atonement. For Anselm, the Incarnation is that which allows both the object of sin (God) and the agent of sin (humanity) to make recompense for God’s lost honor, an approach he outlines in his work *Cur Deus Homo*, or, *Why God Became Human*.⁴² For Abelard, “the atonement was primarily an act of love that inspired love for him in humans.”⁴³ In the words of Abelard:

Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this unique act of grace manifested to us—in that his Son has taken upon himself our nature and preserved therein in teaching us by word and example even unto death—he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result

38. Julian, *Revelations*, 81.

39. Walters, “The Atonement,” 242.

40. Walters, “The Atonement,” 242.

41. Walters, “The Atonement,” 242.

42. Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” 260–355.

43. Walters, “The Atonement,” 245.

that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him.⁴⁴

These two theories, Anselm's satisfaction theory and Abelard's moral influence theory, were foundational for the ongoing medieval debate about the meaning of the life and death of Christ.

Where is Julian situated in this context? Unlike Anselm's investigation into the Incarnation in *Cur Deus Homo*, Julian is content to live in hopeful anticipation of future salvation without the need for a complete and reasonable explanation of why God became human. Like Anselm, Julian believes that Christ's suffering provides an adequate understanding of the central mysteries of Christianity and produces an intelligible answer for the Incarnation, but their theological methods differed significantly.⁴⁵ In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm hopes to produce a non-scriptural, rational argument for the Incarnation, while Julian focuses on her personal experience to take comfort in what can "cast out of her mind forever all fear of sin and damnation."⁴⁶ For Julian, the only clear answer for the Incarnation is the all-consuming love of God.⁴⁷ Should we force Julian into a category of an atonement theory, her focus on the all-consuming love of God shares the similar perspective of Abelard. Julian, however, conceives of the solution to sin in much more mystical terms. For Julian, Christian hope resides in an intense understanding of humanity's unity with Christ.

44. Quoted in Walters, "The Atonement," 245.

45. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 619.

46. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 620.

47. One of the ways Julian (*Revelations*, 45) perceives of this reality is through a vision of a little hazelnut: "And in this vision he also showed a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind's eye and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came in a general way, like this, 'It is all that is made.' I wondered how it could last, for it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God.'"

Julian's hope, however, while appearing to border on the naïve, is grounded not in a denial of the destructive capability of sin, but in examining sin while considering one's unity with Christ. The Incarnation reveals both that God considers humanity his noblest creation, and that "the supreme essence and the most exalted virtue is the blessed soul of Christ."⁴⁸ Unity, therefore, with Christ's beloved soul unites "with a knot so subtle and so strong that it is united to God," and that in this unity one is made endlessly holy without end."⁴⁹ With unity to Christ comes the great victory over sin. Accordingly, the battle between sin and love is radically unequal because sin is anticipated by love, and sin only attempts to find its meaning independently of what it attempts to deny—the love of God.⁵⁰ Sin, in this context, is "nothing," and a reflection of Augustine's understanding of sin as misdirected love.⁵¹ Sin, however, was not merely that which affected the human will to love, but that which brought about a cost to God, namely God's isolation from his creation and participation in humanity's suffering.⁵²

For Julian, God experiencing isolation and suffering produces a unique perspective on the Fall. Julian challenges a popular perception of human culpability in her version of the popular medieval Parable of the Lord and the Servant, a parable that Anselm describes in *Cur Deus Homo*:

But if there is blame inherent in the incapacity itself, the incapacity does not mitigate the sin itself, any more than it excuses the person who does not repay the debt. For suppose someone assigns his bondslave a task, and tells him not to leap into a pit from which he cannot by any means climb out, and that bondslave, despising the command and advice of his master, leaps into the pit which has been pointed out to him, so that he is completely unable to carry out the task assigned to him. Do you think that his incapacity serves in the

48. Julian, *Revelations*, 119.

49. Julian, *Revelations*, 119.

50. Turner, *Julian*, 94.

51. Shea, *Medieval Women*, 142. For Augustine's theology of sin as misdirected love, see *City of God* 12.8.

52. Shea, *Medieval Women*, 143.

slightest as a valid excuse for him not to perform the task assigned to him?⁵³

According to Anselm, the servant's decision to disobey his master is a direct result of his voluntary action, rendering him unable to carry out his duty to his master. The central problem for Anselm is that "there is nothing in the universal order more intolerable than that a creature should take away from the Creator the honor due to him, and not repay what he takes away."⁵⁴ In Anselm's theology, Christ's Incarnation and death restores humanity's debt of honor.⁵⁵

Now consider Julian's version of the parable:

So, for the first, I saw two persons in bodily likeness, that is to say, a lord and a servant; and with that God gave me spiritual understanding. The lord sits in solemn state, in rest and in peace; the servant stands by respectfully in front of his lord, ready to do his lord's will. The lord looks at his servant very lovingly and kindly, and he gently sends him to a certain place to do his will. The servant does not just walk but suddenly springs forward and runs in great haste to do his lord's will out of love. And at once he falls into a hollow and receives very severe injury. And then he groans and moans, and wails and writhes, but he cannot rise nor help himself in any way. And the greatest harm of all that I saw him in was a lack of comfort; for he could not turn his face to look at his loving Lord, who was very close to him and in whom is all comfort; but, like someone who was weak and foolish for the moment, he was intent on his own feelings and went on suffering in misery.⁵⁶

53. Anselm, "Why God Became Man," 309–10.

54. Anselm, "Why God Became Man," 262.

55. Anselm ("Why God Became Man," 349) notes that "No member of the human race except Christ ever gave to God, by dying, anything which that person was not at some time going to lose as a matter of necessity. Nor did anyone ever pay a debt to God which he did not owe. But Christ of his own accord gave to his Father what he was never going to lose as a matter of necessity, and he paid, on behalf of sinners, a debt which he did not owe."

56. Julian, *Revelations*, 106–7.

One notices significant differences between the two parables.⁵⁷ In Anselm's parable, the servant is fundamentally responsible for his fall, while in Julian's, the servant is eager to carry out his task and, in his haste, and out of love, he falls. For Julian, that humans sin and are deserving of punishment is not a complete truth but a necessary function to a greater truth: God will reward humanity if the knowledge of sin leads to contrition and penance which, in turn, allows God to respond with mercy and grace.⁵⁸ The remarkable suffering for Julian is that the servant appears to be utterly alone in his fallen state, but is only unaware that his lord can still see him.⁵⁹ Julian, who says it took "three months short of twenty years after the time of the revelation"⁶⁰ to understand the parable concludes that "only suffering blames and punishes, and our courteous Lord comforts and succors; he is always gladly regarding the soul, loving and longing to bring us bliss."⁶¹ Instead of blame and punishment, God views the servant with a double aspect—"one outward, most gently and kindly, with great compassion and pity, and this was the first aspect; the other was inward, more spiritual, and this was revealed through my understanding being led into the lord, when I saw him greatly rejoicing over the honourable restoring and nobility

57. Although the parable is medieval in origin, Thomas Bennett ("Julian of Norwich," 315) has noted several ways how the parable resembles biblical imagery: "In almost every way, Julian's parable is fashioned from imagery derived from the Gospels. The central characters are a lord and his servant, a common Gospel trope (e.g. Matt 18:21–35; 25:14–30). As in the biblical master-servant parables, the servant has a commission to be a laborer in the fields, thus paralleling a number of Jesus' parables concerning farms and vineyards. The servant is injured, in need of rescue, which may echo the parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7). Moreover, Julian explains the parable using what Sutherland deems 'the conventional tools of biblical interpretation.' That is, Julian first shares the parable, then she proceeds to explain its symbolism. This should remind us of, for example, the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15)."

58. Healy-Varley, "Wounds Shall be Worships," 194.

59. Heath, "Judgement Without Wrath," 39.

60. Julian, *Revelations*, 108.

61. Julian, *Revelations*, 109.

to which he would and must bring his servant through his abundant grace.”⁶²

The theological implications of Julian’s parable were a source of anxiety for her. In chapter 50 of the LT, which precedes the Parable of the Lord and the Servant, Julian admits her struggle to reconcile the God who does not “blame us in any way” with the “common teaching of Holy Church” that “the blame for our sins weighs upon continually.”⁶³ However, since human fallenness, according to Julian’s vision, is bound up in Christ’s own “fallenness,” some of her tension is alleviated. Julian realizes that the servant represents both Christ and Adam and that when Adam fell, Christ fell in order to save Adam from hell.⁶⁴ Christ, who has taken upon himself for all time human fallenness, commits himself to an utter solidarity with humanity, experiencing crucifixion and death, then descending into hell to perform a mighty deed of salvation.⁶⁵ Julian’s theology begins and ends with the infinite love of God, a love that transcends sin and permanently unites God and humanity.⁶⁶ As one Julian researcher notes: “While Julian never fully resolves the paradox of God’s mercy and justice co-mingled, she interprets the mystery she does not understand in light of the truth she knows. God may be trusted with the unknown, because God is trustworthy with the known. God is love. This is the basis for everything else.”⁶⁷

The Adam/Christ typology that plays a significant role in Anselm’s writing is based on an essential differentiation between Christ and humanity.⁶⁸ In Anselm’s theology of the Incarnation, Christ is divine and innocent whereas humanity is guilty; alternatively, in Julian’s theology there is almost no distinction.⁶⁹ Once again Julian finds herself dialoguing with the longstanding theological opinions of her era in a novel way. Unlike the

62. Julian, *Revelations*, 107.

63. Julian, *Revelations*, 105.

64. Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter*, 30.

65. Heath, “Judgement Without Wrath,” 41.

66. Heath, “Judgement Without Wrath,” 41.

67. Heath, “Judgement Without Wrath,” 41.

68. Nuth, “Two Medieval Soteriologies,” 632.

69. Nuth, “Two Medieval Soteriologies,” 632.

Augustinian tradition of seeing the ontological nature of the will as being in unified opposition to God and others, Julian differentiates between an “upper will” and “lower will,” with the higher will never having assented to sin.⁷⁰ Echoing Augustine’s notion of sin as misguided love, Julian agrees that “all our difficulty is because of a failure of love on our part,” but the lack of wrath and judgement she observes in her vision forces her to define the will in a sense more congruent to her developing theology of sin.

David Aers, in his book *Salvation and Sin*, notes that Julian’s theology of the unfallen will had already emerged as a point of criticism by Augustine in his book *Confessions*. Augustine, who encountered the Manichees in Rome, recalls how their teaching allowed him to think of sin as resulting from an alien nature so that it was as if he had done nothing wrong and remained “free of blame” when sinning.⁷¹ Although it would be difficult to claim that Julian intended to produce this response to her definition of the unfallen will, Aers rightfully sees this theology as problematic.⁷² By describing sin externally to a godly and untouched will, which is always united to God, “the sinner’s ‘godly wylle’ remains absent from the sinner’s acts, much as it had done in the Manichean Augustine . . . But even the most brilliant and devout theologians are capable of generating ideas whose implications have not been worked out and are in contradiction to other strands of their theology.”⁷³

Nonetheless, all of Julian’s theology is subservient to the broader purpose of her visions. According to Julian, Christ desires that all suffering will be turned to glory and advantage by virtue of his Passion, and “to know that we do not suffer alone but with him, and to see in him our foundation, and to see that

70. Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 161.

71. Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 163–64.

72. Aers (*Salvation and Sin*, 164) does concede that “Julian is obviously, here and elsewhere, trying to counteract what she took to be punitive standards in her Church’s treatment of sin and penance, ones that perhaps lacked adequate focus on God’s love.” Julian’s willingness to depart from the established views of the church seems, in part, due to her radical experience and conviction regarding the love of God.

73. Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 164.

his pains and his self-abnegation so far surpass all that we may suffer that it cannot be fully comprehended.”⁷⁴ Julian sees the atonement as that which reflects the loving unity of the Trinity. Christ, who thirsts from “the incompleteness of his bliss” will find himself satisfied when “we who are saved” are joined to him in the eschaton.⁷⁵ Julian can speak of salvation using such intimate language, for it is the language of the Trinity itself. In the LT, Julian’s reflection on the Passion has morphed into trinitarian doxology:

And in the same revelation the Trinity suddenly filled my heart full of the utmost joy, and I understood that it will be like that in heaven forever for all those who will come there. For the Trinity is God, and God is the Trinity; and the Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our unending joy and bliss, through our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

For her, the atonement is an act which heals the wounds of sin, where “all shame will be turned into honour and into greater joy.”⁷⁷

Kenotic Atonement and the Suffering God

In the modern atonement debate, there is a temptation to force a monolithic atonement paradigm onto the great theological periods of the past.⁷⁸ Remarkably, however, Julian’s thinking of the atonement is more in line with modern theological thought than medieval.⁷⁹ While not rejecting the ransom and satisfaction theories of her era, she develops her atonement theology in concert

74. Julian, *Revelations*, 76.

75. Julian, *Revelations*, 22.

76. Julian, *Revelations*, 44.

77. Julian, *Revelations*, 25.

78. I am speaking of the various atonement theory labels used in modern theology since Gustaf Aulén’s *Christus Victor*. For example, subjective vs. objective, *Christus Victor*, substitutionary, moral example, and others.

79. Tolley, “Love was His Meaning,” 102.

with her beliefs regarding the nature of human sin.⁸⁰ Since sin is that which allows Christ to turn shame into honor intimately, Julian's atonement theology finds no companion in that which would divorce God from creation and Christ's suffering.⁸¹ Instead, Julian focuses her theology of the atonement regarding her belief in the absolute love and faithfulness of the triune God, a theology in keeping with her strong emphasis on Christ's unity with suffering humanity.⁸² While Julian affirms that "Jesus Christ is Lord," the Lord of her vision exercises authority employing his kenosis.⁸³

Julian's kenotic atonement theology is something that anticipates modern trinitarian theological insight. German theologian Eberhard Jüngel, in his book, *God as the Mystery of the World*, discusses the relationship between the Trinity and Christ's suffering as a significant correction to Christian theology:

That the God who is love must be able to suffer and does suffer beyond all limits in the giving up of what is most authentically his for the sake of mortal man, is an indispensable insight of the newer theology schooled by Luther's Christology and Hegel's philosophy. Only the God who is identical with the Crucified one makes us certain of his love and thus of himself.⁸⁴

For Jüngel, the implications of the crucified God are an insight of modern theology and fundamental to one's conception of God:

When we attempt to think of God as the one who communicates and expresses himself in the person Jesus, then we must always remember that this man was crucified, that he was killed in the name of God's law. For responsible usage of the word 'God,' the Crucified One is virtually the real definition of what is meant with the word 'God.'⁸⁵

80. Tolley, "'Love was His Meaning,'" 106.

81. Tolley, "'Love was His Meaning,'" 106.

82. Tolley, "'Love was His Meaning,'" 106.

83. Heath, "Judgement Without Wrath," 45.

84. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 373.

85. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 13.

For the medieval Julian, such a concept was hardly novel. Likewise, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God* articulates his theology of hope in terms of Christ's suffering. Moltmann, whom himself lived in the era of "the hells of world wars, the hells of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Vietnam," places the crucified God as the central component of Christian theology.⁸⁶ Moltmann's experiences led him to consider the nature of God's response to a sinful and suffering world. God, according to Moltmann, is one who responds to suffering by becoming suffering:

God's being is in suffering and the suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love. It takes the 'metaphysical rebellion' up into itself because it recognizes in the cross of Christ a rebellion in metaphysics, or better, a rebellion in God himself: God himself loves and suffers the death of Christ in his love. He is no 'cold heavenly power,' nor does he 'tread his way over corpses,' but is known as the human God in the crucified Son of Man.⁸⁷

Before applying modern concepts of God to medieval ones, one must recognize the danger of harmonizing theological thought across historical contexts. To begin, Julian's reflection on the suffering triune God is hardly an academic endeavour but a devotional one. Furthermore, the questions Julian concerns herself with are the result of a deeply personal vision and not out of intellectual curiosity. There remains a sizeable methodological chasm between one who ponders God in an anchoritic cell and one who performs theology in an ivory tower. Nonetheless, all three of these individuals share a common concern for communicating the nature and economy of God in terms of emphasizing God's identification with human suffering.

In chapter 20 of *Revelations*, Julian communicates what she believes to be the three things worth remembering about Christ's Passion: "For the most fundamental implication to consider in the Passion is to recognize and comprehend what he is who suffered, also bearing in mind two lesser considerations: one is what

86. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 319.

87. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 332–33.

he suffered, and the other is for whom he suffered.”⁸⁸ Considering what he is who suffered, Julian remarks that “he who is highest and noblest was brought most low and most utterly despised.”⁸⁹ Regarding what he suffered and for whom he suffered, Julian explains that:

For just as he was most tender and pure, so he was strongest and most mighty to suffer. And he suffered for the sins of everyone who shall be saved; and he saw everyone’s sorrow and desolation and sorrowed out of kindness and love . . . For as long as he was liable to suffer, he suffered for us and sorrowed for us; and now he is risen again and no longer liable to suffering, he still suffers with us.⁹⁰

According to Julian, God resurrected Christ as one who “still suffers with us.” According to Moltmann, Christ constitutes his loving existence through the God-forsaken event of the cross, a type of suffering “which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive.”⁹¹ For both Julian and Moltmann, God’s Trinitarian love “for us” is demonstrated through God’s suffering on the cross.

Central to this trinitarian understanding for Julian is the revelation of the motherliness of God.⁹² In describing the Second Person of the Trinity, Julian writes:

The Second Person of the Trinity is our mother in nature, in our substantial creation, in whom we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother in mercy by taking on our sensory being. And so our mother—in whom the parts of us are kept undivided—works within us in various ways; for in our mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and, by virtue of his Passion and his death and resurrection, he unites us to our substance. So our mother acts mercifully to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him.⁹³

88. Julian, *Revelations*, 67.

89. Julian, *Revelations*, 67.

90. Julian, *Revelations*, 67.

91. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 361.

92. Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ,” 289.

93. Julian, *Revelations*, 127.

Elsewhere, Julian elaborates on how unity with Christ our “mother” effects humanity:

And in his taking on of our nature he gave us life; in his blessed dying upon the cross he gave birth to us into eternal life; and from that time, and now, and forever until the day of judgement, he feeds us and fosters us, just as the great and supreme lovingness of motherhood and the natural need of childhood require. Lovely and precious is our heavenly mother in the sight of our soul; precious and lovely are the children of grace in the sight of our heavenly mother, with gentleness and meekness, and all the lovely virtues which belong to children by nature; for naturally the child does not despair of the mother’s love; naturally the child does not presume to act by itself; naturally the child loves its mother, and each loves the other; these, and all others that are like them, are the fair virtues with which our heavenly mother is honoured and pleased.⁹⁴

When these two realities are considered together, Julian’s inability to perceive of God’s wrath and judgment and her hope that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well, the image of motherhood opens up as a meaningful metaphor to explain her revelation.⁹⁵ The relationship between Christ the “mother” and

94. Julian, *Revelations*, 135–36.

95. Julian explicitly addresses God’s lack of anger on three occasions in *Revelations*: “But there can be no anger in God, as it seems to me, for our good Lord has regard eternally for his own glory and the benefit of all who shall be saved. With power and justice he withstands the reprobates who, out of malice and malignity, busy themselves to scheme and to act against God’s will” (*Revelations*, 58). Later, Julian (*Revelations*, 102) states: “For I saw no anger except on man’s part, and he forgives that in us; for anger is nothing else but a resistance and contrariness to peace and to love, and it comes either from lack of strength, or from lack of wisdom, or from lack of goodness—and this lack is not in God, but it is on our part; for through sin and wretchedness we have in us a wretched and continual resistance to peace and to love, and he revealed this very often in his loving expression of pity and compassion; for the foundation of mercy is love, and the operation of mercy is to safeguard us in love; and this was revealed in such a way that I could not discern any aspect of mercy other than in love alone—that is to say, as it appeared to me.” Finally, Julian (*Revelations*, 104) concludes, “And so when we, through the working of mercy and grace, are made humble and gentle, we are completely safe. Suddenly the soul is united to God when it is truly at peace in itself, for no anger is to be found in God.”

his children is one of “natural love” where the child does not despair the mother’s love. In the tumultuous world in which Julian lived, one need see God as Father, but also God as Mother, a Mother who protects, nourishes, and loves his children regardless of what wretched state they may find themselves in.⁹⁶ Considering Julian’s strong emphasis on Christ’s unity with humanity, the intimate language of Mother emerges as that which captures her understanding of Christ.

The concept of God as Mother was not a new idea in Julian’s era. Anselm, in a famous song still used in The Church of England’s common book of prayer, writes:

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
 you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
 Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
 tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
 You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
 in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.
 Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life;
 by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
 Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
 through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.
 Your warmth gives life to the dead,
 your touch makes sinners righteous.
 Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;
 in your love and tenderness remake us.
 In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
 for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.⁹⁷

Julian, like Anselm, applies God’s Motherhood to the atoning sacrifice of Christ. What better way to express the new birth through Christ’s death than with the imagery of labour pains?⁹⁸ What image of eucharistic “nourishment” in Julian’s Catholic medieval world can trump the image of a mother feeding her

96. Throughout Julian’s usage of Mother as a descriptor in *Revelations*, she always maintains the masculine pronoun for Christ in keeping with Orthodox tradition.

97. Anselm, “A Song of Anselm,” [n.d.].

98. Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ,” 293.

child?⁹⁹ However, unlike Anselm, Julian allows this metaphor to inform one's self-perception as a sinner:

The mother may allow the child to fall sometimes and be hurt in various ways for its own benefit, but because of her love she can never allow any kind of danger to befall the child. And even though our earthly mother may let her child perish, our heavenly mother Jesus may not allow us who are his children to perish; for he is almighty, all wisdom, and all love, and so is none but he—blessed may he be!¹⁰⁰

For Julian, our falling is not disastrous, and God is not angry, for just as a mother allows her children to fall, so too does God our Mother to allow humanity to walk and eventually run back to God.¹⁰¹

Applying Julian Today

Through modern eyes, Julian of Norwich is an enigma—libraries dedicate stacks of biographies to the important individuals of our time, but here is a woman whose real name we do not know expounding intimate mysteries of the Trinity. What is one to make of a mystical revelation of an anchorite from the fourteenth century?

Jürgen Moltmann tells the story of when he was a prisoner of war during World War II at the young age of twenty. After reading the cry of dereliction of the suffering Christ on the cross, he describes an experience where he was “found by God,” as if God himself was speaking “to him with bloodied and parched lips in cries of pain and abandonment, bitter fruits of seemingly misplaced trust.”¹⁰² Sometimes when the world is wrong, the only answer for suffering is to look towards the suffering Christ. In Julian's broken world and from her small cell, she pondered what it meant to be a child of God: “So in our Father, God almighty, we have our being; and in our mother through mercy we

99. Dearborn, “The Crucified Christ,” 293.

100. Julian, *Revelations*, 132.

101. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 144.

102. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, ix.

have our reforming and restoring, in whom our parts are united and all made perfect man; and by the rewards and gracious gift of the Holy Spirit we are made complete.”¹⁰³ In our broken world, what is the suffering Christ speaking to us about being a child of God?

Julian’s theology begins and ends with God’s love. Just as Julian pondered the meaning of her revelation, recognizing that this love was not for her alone but all of God’s children, we too must look outward as the Spirit works inward. Julian was convinced that to be whole one must encounter the love of the triune God and experience God as both Father and Mother in unity through the Holy Spirit. An advantage for Julian was a deeply ingrained religious context to develop her theology, but one in which she was prepared to challenge when it did not fit her experience. Experience, while not entirely reliable as a foundation for theology, has the potential to begin a journey towards meaningful questions and answers. For Julian, her question was the meaning of sin in the context of God’s love. For us today, however, an experience is not often the starting point of a journey, but an end in of itself. As we preach Christ, and Christ crucified in the context not of a religious culture, but a culture of consumerism, that large image of God’s love is reduced to individual applicability. While Julian’s theology lacks the sophistication of a modern systematic theologian, it returns one to the heart of Christian theology: “its capacity to point to the living triune God and articulate the kind of life we should live in response to his revelation.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Julian reminds us to communicate Christ’s atonement as carefully and as meaningful as possible. In a world where a caricature of the cross is morally repugnant to many, Julian offers an image not of a wrathful Father God punishing Christ on the cross for sin, but of something far more solicitous. For Julian, “the blessed

103. Julian, *Revelations*, 128.

104. Kopic, “Has Academic Theology Lost its Way?” [n.p.].

wounds of our Saviour are open and rejoice to heal us; the sweet, gracious hands of our mother are ready and enfold us diligently; for in all this he performs the role of a kindly nurse who has nothing else to do but attend to the safety of her child.”¹⁰⁵

Atonement debates will continue to rage on. Theories will form, reform, be abandoned or corrected. Nonetheless, the love of Christ must remain in all. Thankfully, in Julian we get a glimpse of hope, one in which Christ’s love blinds sin and every child of God is safe from the spectre of Black Deaths, fragmented churches, World Wars, and suffering of every kind.

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105. Julian, *Revelations*, 133.

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