

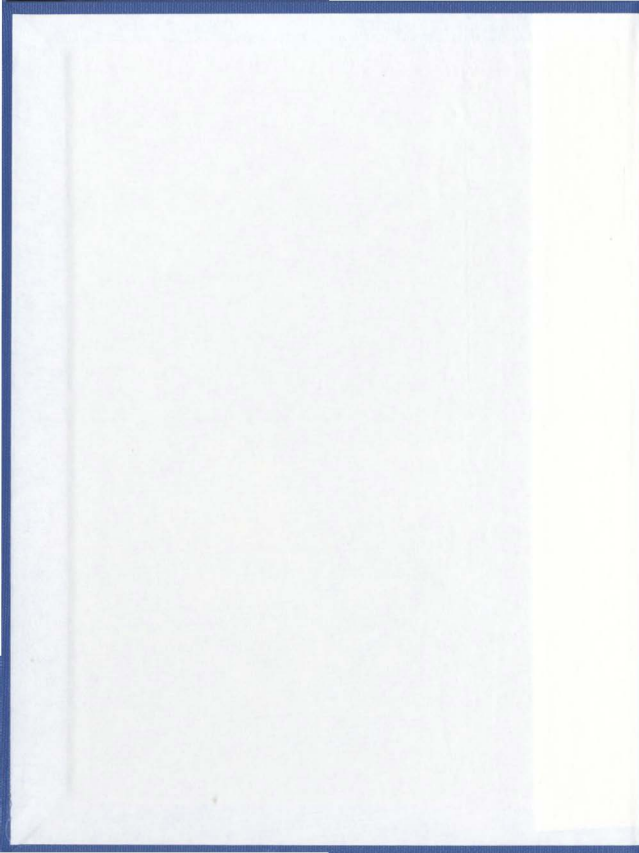
THE TRANSFORMATION FROM EXISTENTIAL TO
THEORETICAL THEODICY IN THE WORK
OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**The Transformation From Existential
To Theoretical Theodicy in the Work of Julian Of Norwich**

by

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A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The Department of Religious Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland

December 2002

ABSTRACT

Much has been written about Julian of Norwich's theological conclusions that "alle schalle be wele" and that "loue was his menyng." Less attention has been paid to how Julian arrived at these affirmations. It is herein argued that an examination of the two direct questions Julian asked God during her visionary experience demonstrates that theodicy was her purpose. Essentially, Julian was struggling with the most religious of all questions: how could she reconcile the existence of a loving God with the prevalence of suffering and evil in her world? Her world consisted of plague, war, and pestilence, and because every aspect of medieval life held symbolic religious meaning, interpreted and delivered by the Church, social conditions of life could not be disentangled from one's religiosity. These two aspects of Julian's consciousness, her medieval world and the religious meaning assigned to it, are crucial to one's understanding of Julian's central theological concern and are reflected in her questions to God. Julian's vision is an optimistic answer to her anxieties, and although it provided direct emotional consolation, it did not leave her intellectually satisfied. Julian would spend another twenty years studying her visionary insights before the deeper theological meaning surfaced. This intellectual examination transformed Julian's work from an existential theodicy to an enduring theoretical theodicy with which she could be satisfied. This thesis will examine that progression.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to the Department of Religious Studies for its support and encouragement during the writing of this thesis. To the professors, Dr. Porter, Dr. DeRoche, Dr. Shute, Dr. Rollmann, Dr. Parker, and Dr. Hawkin for their encouragement, advice, great chats, and insights. To Mary Walsh, whose cheerful manner and help made it a pleasure to come to the 4th floor.

And especially to Dr. David Bell, my supervisor, for his knowledge, patience, forbearance, and most of all for his prodding! Without him, this project, most assuredly, would never have been completed. It was a privilege working with him.

This thesis is dedicated to my children, David and Anna Delaney.

Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Chapter One: The Question.....	1
Chapter Two: Julian's Despair.....	20
Chapter Three: Religion and Religiosity.....	41
Chapter Four: Julian's Existential Theodicy.....	73
Chapter Five: Julian's Theoretical Resolution.....	95
Chapter Six: Summation and Conclusion.....	116
Bibliography of Works Cited.....	120

Chapter One

The Question

Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth-century English mystic who was profoundly concerned with suffering and the nature of sin. As a child, Julian's preoccupation with suffering found expression in her concentrated devotion to the corporeal humanity of Christ. Christ's physical pain and death on the cross was emblematic of the suffering she saw around her. Her medieval world was one of plague and war. She would have witnessed unspeakable suffering, fear, and death. As a medieval Christian, she would have been told that suffering and evil were punishments from God, brought on by sin. On the other hand, as a monotheistic Christian she also believed that God was all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving. A despairing Julian was unable to reconcile the idea of a loving God with the pervasive suffering in her world. When Julian was thirty years old she became deathly ill, with a sickness for which she had prayed. She had a mystical experience while gazing upon a crucifix. During her vision she pondered the problems of sin and suffering and asked God about them. She was answered that "alle shalle be wele" and was consoled. She received many more comforting words from God, which provided existential relief. But Julian was not totally satisfied. As she matured, she was not content with simple emotional soothing; she wanted to understand, through the use of reason, how the notion of a loving God could be reconciled with human suffering. Essentially and existentially, Julian was struggling with the most fundamental of all religious and philosophical questions, the question of theodicy. Her struggle would lead

her from hopelessness and despair, to existential relief, to theological probing and finally to intellectual reconciliation.

Julian of Norwich was born in 1342. We know this because she writes that she received her vision on May 13, 1373 and that she was thirty and a half years old at the time.¹ Other than this very scant information on the details of her life, we know practically nothing. "We do not know where she was born, who or what her family were, what her religious history was or when she died."² It is not known where she was born although E. I. Watkins speculates that Julian came from the north of England and moved to Norwich later in life. This supposition is based on the fact that Julian's "earliest manuscript is not in the Midland dialect used in East Anglia but in the northern dialect not spoken south of the Humber."³ However, Julian's later manuscript, written twenty years after the first one, *is* in the Midland dialect which shows that this version "was dictated and written later when Julian had spent many years in Norfolk and moreover employed a scribe whose dialect was Midland."⁴ Whether she lived in the north or in the eastern part of England, young Julian would have been subject to similar external religious influences. As a child, growing up in medieval England, Julian would have been immersed in Catholic rituals and teachings, especially the celebration of the mass, which was the central point in Catholic devotion. It was a re-enactment of Christ's Last Supper

¹ Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Julian of Norwich Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 19.

² *Ibid.*

³ Edward I. Watkin, *On Julian of Norwich, And In Defense of Margery Kempe* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1979), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

whereby bread and wine were literally changed into the body and blood of Christ, embodied in a small wafer, and consumed. This was the ultimate manifestation of Christ's continuing presence and union with the faithful. "Heralded by the peal of bells, striking in its special lights and effects, it was attractive as a moment of encounter with the very Christ, from which some very real physical and spiritual benefits flowed."⁵ The importance of the Eucharist cannot be over emphasized because of the real, physical encounter with Christ that it afforded. "Acceptance of transubstantiation made the mass the focal point at which to appreciate the corporeal humanity of an incarnate God."⁶ The image of the corporeal humanity of Christ, inherent in the transubstantiated host, was not limited to the imagination. Julian would also have been exposed to vivid, graphic paintings of the crucifixion.⁷ Both engendered in young Julian a great devotion to the passion of Christ. She says "me thought I hadde grete felynge in the passyom of Cryste, botte yitte I desyrede to haue mare be the grace of god." [I thought I had great feeling for the passion of Christ but yet I desired to have more by the grace of God.]⁸ Her desire to have deeper feeling inspired the child to pray for three gifts. The first was to have "mynde of Cryste es passiom. The secombe was bodelye syeknes, and the thyrd was to

⁵ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63.

⁶ Robert N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-1515* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137.

⁷ The sacraments and pictorial imagery as influences on medieval piety and practice will be examined in depth in subsequent chapters.

⁸ *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 vols. Studies and Texts, 35 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 1: 201. (Vol. 1 citations refer to the Short Text. Vol. 2 citations indicate references taken from the Long Text.)

haue of goddys gyfte thre wonndys." [mind of Christ's passion, the second was a bodily sickness, and the third was to have of God's gift three wounds]⁹

To be put in mind of Christ's passion, Julian prayed for a vision or a mystical experience. This would not have been unusual. Mysticism was not an esoteric preoccupation. On the contrary, it was a constant theme in medieval spirituality, the heights of which "were considered attainable within the world, and there were clearly many who hoped to attain them."¹⁰ Julian prayed for the vision and a deathly illness so she could feel even more compassion for the suffering of Christ. She specifically mentioned the age of thirty as a time for the sickness to occur. Julian tells us that when she grew up she forgot about the first two petitions to God. However, her third request for three wounds, "that es to saye the wounnd (e) of *contricyoun*, the wonnde of *compassyoun* and the wonnde of wylfulle langgyng to god...dwellyd *contynuele*." [that is to say the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of willful longing for god...dwelled continually]¹¹

By divulging her youthful prayer for three gifts, Julian provides insight into the inner life she had as a child. Because of this, one is able to study Julian's spiritual and intellectual growth as she matured. In her desire for a vision, and in her continual longing for God, young Julian exhibited an affective type of mysticism. Affective mysticism was emotional and was "rooted in the search for identity with Christ by concentrating on the

⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 201.

¹⁰ Swanson, 178.

¹¹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 209.

Passion and Christocentric devotions, often in language which is more than faintly erotic, it emphasized love and ecstatic achievement."¹² This was not an uncommon pursuit in medieval Christianity and Julian's mystical desire was, indeed, highly affective. However, her attitude would eventually become transformed as she developed her mysticism from an affective to an intellectual approach in her search for a theodicy with which she could be satisfied.

In May, 1373, when Julian was thirty and a half years old, she became very ill, to the point of death.¹³ She suffered for seven days. As she lay dying she lost all feeling in her lower body and felt "my bodye dede fra the myddys downwarde, as to me felynge." [my body dead from the middle downwards, as to my feeling]¹⁴ The parson was called to administer last rites on the fourth day of her sickness. Julian suffered for another two days. Her condition became so grave that the curate was called back to attend to her at her death. He placed a crucifix in front of her. Julian's eyes became fixed upon it and she could not speak. As she lay gazing upon the crucifix she experienced an instant recovery. "Sodeynlye alle my payne was awaye for me, and I was alle hole, and namely in the overe partye of my bodye, as evere I was before or after." [suddenly all my pain was

¹² Swanson, 178.

¹³ The following account is reconstructed from *Julian of Norwich Showings (Short text)*, Ch. 1-1V, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 208.

away from me, and I was as sound, particularly in the upper part of my body, as ever I was before or after] ¹⁵

For the next twelve hours, as her gaze remained transfixed on the crucifix, Julian perceived that the icon was transformed into a graphic, living image of the bloodied body of Christ nailed to the cross.

And aftyr this I sawe be haldande the bodye plenteuouslye bledande, hate *and* freschlye and lyfelye, ryzt as I sawe before in the heede. And this was schewyd me in the semes of scowrgynge, and this ranne so plenteuouslye to my syght that me thought, zyf itt hadde bene so in kynde, for þat tyme itt schulde hafe made the bedde alle on blode *and* hafe passede *om* abowte.

[And after this I saw the body bleeding profusely, hot and fresh and lifelike, just as I had seen before in the head. And this was shown to me as if by scourging, and it ran so plentifully in front of me that I thought if it had been real, it would have covered the bed and flowed all over it.] ¹⁶

Julian's affective approach is evident in her loving and compassionate attitude towards Christ; manifested in the adjectives she uses to describe his countenance, despite the horrific image in front of her. She talks about his "fayer face and tender bodie." [fair face and tender body] ¹⁷

While experiencing the vision, Julian perceived sixteen showings or teachings. They came in three forms. "Alle this blyssede techynge of oure lorde god was schewyd to me in thre partyes, that is be bodylye syght, and be worde formede in myne vndyrstandynge, *and* be gastelye syght." [all this blessed teaching of our Lord God was

¹⁵ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

shown to me in three parts, that is by bodily sight, by words formed in my understanding, and by ghostly sight.]¹⁸ The vision was to become a harbinger of the personal transformation Julian would encounter.

Towards the end of the vision the “bodylye syght” of the crucified Christ was suddenly transfigured into an image of joy and glory. Julian’s experience of Christ changed from a corporeal likeness to a spiritual likeness. As she saw the transformed vision of Christ, Julian felt a transformation in herself: “from a preoccupation with suffering and death, to an inexpressible joy and sense of absolute assurance.”¹⁹ This fleeting transformation during her vision was a foreshadowing of what was to become Julian’s theological transformation from existential despair to theoretical certainty.

Julian experienced the first fifteen revelations during her twelve- hour vision. When the image of Christ disappeared, Julian’s pain returned, but this time she was certain she would not die. She told the priest about her experience, saying she was raving because of fever. However, the priest believed that Julian had had a mystical experience.

When Julian slept that night her vision re-surfaced. This constituted the sixteenth and final vision of Christ. When Julian recalled that she had earlier prayed for an illness and a vision to take place “whene I were in threttye zeere eelde,” [when I was thirty years old]²⁰ she was certain that the vision was real; that it was an answer to her prayers, sent to her for her own comfort and for the comfort of others.

¹⁸ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 224.

¹⁹ Brant Pelphrey, *Love Was His Meaning: The Theology and Mysticism of Julian of Norwich* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1982), 4.

²⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 204.

Julian gave an account of her sixteen showings in the two books that she wrote, commonly referred to as the Short Text and the Long Text. The Short Text is thought to have been written shortly after the actual visionary experience. The Long Text is a study of the original text and a theological examination of the teachings. Of the six extant manuscripts of her work, only two are pre-Dissolution: London, British Library, Additional 37790 (referred to as the Amherst Text after a previous owner) is mid-fifteenth century, and the Westminster, Archdiocesan Archives MS was produced around 1500. Four later manuscripts were copied at religious houses on the Continent around 1650: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds anglais 40, London, British Library, Sloane 2499 and Sloane 3705, and St. Joseph's College, Upholland (Lancashire, England). The earliest evidence of a printed version of Julian's book is that which was published by the Benedictine monk Serenus Cressy in 1670. Cressy's text is believed to have been made from Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds anglais 40, "probably during the brief period when he served as chaplain in Paris to the English Benedictine nuns, whose house had recently been founded from Cambrai."²¹ The preservation of the Long Text is attributed to the "piety and learning of Augustine Baker and his spiritual school among the exiled English Benedictine monks and nuns in the Low Countries and France."²² Augustine Baker (1575-1641) entered the Benedictine Order at Padua in 1605, was ordained a priest in 1613 and worked at Cambrai. Although he was a chaplain he was best known for his ascetic writings. The most famous among them survive in the *Sancta Sophia* or *Holy*

²¹ Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 22.

²² *Ibid.*

Wisdom collection (2 vols. 1657).²³ His area of concentration was the contemplative way of prayer but he also wrote an important history of the Benedictine Order in England. Because of his interest in and astute care of ascetical writings, Julian's words survived and could be passed on through the centuries. Without his pursuit, Julian's work may have been lost to obscurity. Although we have her work, we have little knowledge of her personal life. It is not even known if Julian was her real name. Most likely it is the name taken from the Church in Norwich to which she was attached as an anchoress.

Although she does not say so in the body of her own text, there is no question that Julian eventually became an anchoress. In the Prologue to the Short Text a scribe writes: "Here es a visionm schewed be the goodenes of god to a deuoute womann, and hir name es Julyan, that is recluse atte Norwyche." [here is a vision shown by the goodness of God to a devout woman, and her name is Julian, a recluse at Norwich]²⁴ and the Long Text ends with the words "deo gracias. Explicit liber revelacionum Julyane ana(c)orite Norwyche, cuius anime propicietur deus." [By the grace of God here is a book of revelations of Julian, anchoress at Norwich, may God have mercy on her soul]²⁵

Other sources confirm Julian's vocation, particularly four wills which bequeathed money to her.²⁶ The earliest will, left by Roger Reed of Norwich, is dated 1393 or 1394, when Julian would have been fifty-one years old. The will of Thomas Edmund, dated

²³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, Frank L. Cross, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145.

²⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 201.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2: 734.

²⁶ The following account of the wills mentioning Julian's name is found in Pelphrey, 10-12.

1404, left money to "*Juliane anchorite apud St. Juliane in Norwico.*" John Plumpton of Norwich left Julian money in 1315 and Isabel Ufford, who died in 1416, left twenty shillings to "*Julian recluz a Norwich.*" This was a considerable sum at the time.

The only literary source for Julian is found in the writings of Margery Kempe of Lynn, a pilgrim who reports visiting the anchoress for guidance. In her autobiography, Kempe writes that she sought spiritual advice from Julian of Norwich because Julian "was expert in such things and good counsel could give."²⁷

The life of an anchoress was, in theory, one of strict enclosure; in fact an anchoress was to view her way of life as a living death. She would become dead to the world and a ceremony would be conducted to inaugurate her withdrawal.

The officiating priest administers extreme unction to the postulant, and recites prayers for the dying as she or he enters the anchorhouse-never, in theory, to leave it alive-through a door which is then blocked from the outside.²⁸

The life of enclosure was considered penitential, consisting of long years of living "in a cramped, lightless, bare and uncomfortable cell, vulnerable to cold, damp and heat, often literally surrounded by the graves of the dead."²⁹

There were a number of books written to guide an anchoress once she was inside her cell. Most notable among them was *Ancrene Wisse*.³⁰ The book provided a rule to

²⁷ Sanford Meech and Hope Allen, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (EETS OS 212, 1940), 276.

²⁸ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, "Introduction," *Anchoritic Spirituality*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 16.

²⁹ Savage and Watson, 16.

which anchoresses could conform. It offered a guide to the spiritual life of prayer and devotions, as well as a code of conduct appropriate to the vocation. It contained a dress code, for example. The author cautioned the women against sins of pride in their dress, declaring that "anchoresses sometimes sin in the way they are wimpled."³¹ Although the life of an anchoress was characterized by self-denial and sacrifice, the author recommended against self-inflicted pain. He wrote, "all that I have said of mortification of the flesh is not meant for you, my dear sisters, who sometimes suffer more than I would like."³² To soften the austerity of an anchoress' life, she was permitted to have a cat, and to bathe as often as she liked. Said the author, "Dirt was never dear to God, though poverty and plainness are precious to him."³³ Although they lived solitary lives, in practice, anchoresses were not totally isolated. They required the services of a maid with whom they obviously needed to communicate when giving instructions, they had three windows through which they could communicate and, as we have seen, according to the testimony of Margery Kempe, Julian was a highly regarded spiritual advisor who have counseled people through her window.

Julian's early prayers to have a bodily sickness so she could feel every kind of physical and spiritual pain, and her desire for a bodily sight to feel more deeply the

³⁰ The book is believed to have been written between 1200 and 1230 by the spiritual director of an anchoress. This would have been a century before Julian's time and although there is no evidence that Julian read the actual work, it stands to reason that, as a popular rule for anchoresses, it would have set a standard form of behavior with which anchoresses would have been familiar.

³¹ *Ancrene Wisse*, trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 202.

³² *Ibid.*, 187.

³³ *Ibid.*, 204.

passion of Christ, were consistent with the spiritual desires of one to whom an anchorhold would appeal. Julian's mystical experience would constitute a natural entrée into that world. Devotion to Christ's suffering was a standard spiritual practice for the period and as an anchoress, Julian would have been expected to be "intensely aware of the passion of Christ at all times."³⁴ The depth of passion is reflected in a prayer that was said at the end of the day to re-dedicate an anchoress to her vocation. "May my body hang with your body, nailed on the cross, fastened, transfixed within four walls-and I will hang with you and nevermore come from my cross until I die."³⁵ A like reference is found in the *Ancrene Wisse*, when the author advised that "night and day you are up on God's cross"³⁶ The author encouraged the anchoress to identify with Christ in her solitude, when he posed the rhetorical question: "Was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb?"³⁷

Julian's compassion for Christ would also have been reinforced by the artistic treatment of the Crucifixion in the fourteenth century. Visual art depicting the slain body of Jesus, the emergence of the Pietà and the "gory urge to share in the spectacle and agony of Christ's death which appear [ed] in the devotional literature,"³⁸ all contributed to the heightened sense in Julian of a vivid passion for Christ and a deep sense of identity

³⁴ Savage and Watson, "Introduction," *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 22.

³⁵ *The Wooing of Our Lord*, trans. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 256.

³⁶ *Ancrene Wisse*, 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Swanson, 88.

with Christ's early followers. " Me thought I wolde haue bene that tyme with Mary Mawdeleyne and with othere that were Crystes loverse, that I myght have sene bodylye the passio^m of oure lorde that he sufferede for me, that I myght have sufferde with hym as othere dyd that lovyd hym." [I thought I would have been at that time with Mary Magdelene and with the others who loved Christ, that I might have witnessed the passion of our Lord that he suffered for me, that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him] ³⁹

Julian did not grow out of her childhood anxiety over the suffering of Christ. She tells us that her illness and visionary experience were the culmination of her childhood desire to suffer as he had suffered. Her choice to live as an anchoress enabled her to live out her spirituality in a concrete way, while examine the meaning of her visionary experience.

Although Julian gives little information about her personal life, an image of her inner spiritual life is discernible. It emerges from her own work, authored by her own hand. From her description of the great feeling for the passion of Christ that she had as a child, through her visionary revelations at the age of thirty, to her mature life as an anchoress and author, a picture unfolds. Her books, both the Short Text and the Long Text, come to us as testaments to that life.

Academic study of Julian's work falls into three main categories: literary, feminist, and theological. Because she was the first woman we know of ever to have written a book in the English language, her writing has garnered literary interest and her

book " is now recognized as one of the best examples of Middle English prose that we have."⁴⁰ Many scholars focus on the literary content of Julian's work. Others use the ideas of postmodern language theorists to examine her writing.⁴¹ Mary Olsen describes how Julian took literary images and turned them into theological concepts. For example, she identifies Julian's pervasive use of the word 'courteous' to describe God's attitude towards humanity. Olsen links the word to 'courtly love', a common literary theme used by secular writers of the period.⁴² She says Julian uses the term to designate God's kindness and devotion of which courtly love is only a poor imitation. While an awareness of the etiology of Julian's language obviously deepens the understanding of her work, a lack of it is perilous. In fact, Patricia M. Vinje asserts that most of Julian's literary genius is lost on twentieth-century readers because of the "impoverishment of symbolic understanding in contemporary society"⁴³ and she stresses the imperative that Julian scholarship be grounded in the fourteenth century. She fears that the modern critic's tendency toward "the literalization and reduction of literary and religious symbols is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a proper understanding of Julian of Norwich's notion

³⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 201.

⁴⁰ Pelphrey, x.

⁴¹ See Brad Peters, "Julian of Norwich And Her Conceptual Development of Evil," *Mystics Quarterly* 17 (1991), 181-188, which presents a critique of Julian's work from the point of view of language theorist Lev Vygotsky who creates a schema for the conceptual development of Julian's evolving notion of evil.

⁴² Mary Olsen, "God's Inappropriate Grace: Images of Courtesy in Julian of Norwich's Showings," *Mystics Quarterly* 20 (1994), 47-59.

⁴³ Patricia M. Vinje, *An Understanding of Love According to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1983), 30.

of love.”⁴⁴ Literary analysis of Julian’s work also demonstrates the freedom of expression that comes with a newly born activity. As one of the first women to write a book in English, Julian was free to cull the language to create new theological imagery.

Theologically, Julian’s book has been studied on many fronts. The first purpose was to translate her work and make it accessible to the reading public. After this was accomplished, scholars began to mine the work for religious themes. Although the work is pregnant with theological concepts, Julian’s gender surfaced as the leading criterion of study.

Modern feminist theology probed Julian’s work and asked such questions as “what does theology look like when done by a woman? Is it substantially different from that done by a man? In what ways and why? What effect does it have on our understanding of theology as such? Is there any continuity between past and contemporary woman theologians?”⁴⁵ When feminist scholars discovered Julian of Norwich, they found a spiritual paradigm. Feminist theological studies of Julian have been launched on two fronts. Both have political undertones. The first claims Julian as a writer of feminist spiritual literature. The most obvious reason was the discovery of Julian’s frequent use of the image of the motherhood of God. A recent article by Catherine Innes-Parker illustrates the attraction:

Julian’s redefinition of the image of woman by which she will define herself as a female visionary involves not so much the active reconstruction of the images of female

⁴⁴ Vinge, 30.

⁴⁵ Joan Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 2.

humanity, but the reconstruction of a male icon, the ultimate male model in whose image all humankind is created, into a female figure, the mother of us all in whom we find, male and female alike, the *ground of our being*.⁴⁶

Many feminist writers have taken Julian's thematic imagery of the motherhood of God to mean that Julian yearned for an egalitarian religious system, with full enfranchisement for women.⁴⁷ This suggestion has been tempered by further scholarship, which demonstrates that the idea of the motherhood of God did not originate with Julian. The theme is found repeatedly in the Bible, Patristic literature, and twelfth century Cistercian writing.⁴⁸ Nor did it stem from gender advocacy which would obviously have been anachronistic. Although the image of the motherhood of God has a deep tradition in Christian literature, scholars who explore the idea in Julian's work conclude that Julian's thorough treatment transcends the tradition. "Julian presents her vision of God in the feminine maternal role not in the isolated fragments of the tradition but in a complete connected cycle of life from before birth through after death."⁴⁹ Colledge and Walsh write that Julian's teaching on the motherhood of God is magisterial and "stands as a unique theological achievement in the Church's spiritual traditions."⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Catherine Innes-Parker, "Subversion and Conformity in Julian's Revelation: Authority, Vision and the Motherhood of God," *Mystics Quarterly* 23 (1997), 7-35.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth P. Armstrong, "Motives of Charity in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and St. Theresa of Avila," *Mystics Quarterly* 16 (1990), 9-26.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive study of the imagery see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Jennifer Heimmel, *God is Our Mother: Julian of Norwich and the Medieval Image of Christian Feminine Divinity* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1982).

⁴⁹ Heimmel, 54.

⁵⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1:151.

Scholars have not limited their work on Julian to her imagery of the motherhood of God. Another approach to Julian studies attempts to elevate Julian from an author of devotional literature to a serious theological writer. Two scholars in particular who have produced seminal works on Julian's theology are Grace Jantzen, a philosopher of religion,⁵¹ and Joan Nuth, a theologian. Their works have closed the debate on whether Julian belongs in the theological canon. Nuth demonstrates that Julian's doctrinal teachings in the context of systematic theology covers all the main areas of traditional theological enterprise. She concludes that Julian's work is characterized by a coherent and comprehensive theological unity.

Jantzen characterizes Julian as a "theologian of integration" because of Julian's concern with the re-integration of a fractured spiritual self. Jantzen outlines three methods articulated by Julian to effect this integration: the use of natural reason, the teaching of the church (Jantzen's discourse on this should still the mistaken idea that Julian's purpose was to criticize the Church), and the grace-giving operation of the Holy Spirit.

Although the value of literary, source and feminist criticism is acknowledged, one recognizes that these approaches do not focus on the social and economic conditions through which Julian lived. It is this aspect of fourteenth-century life, the social reality, coupled with the religious ethos of the period, which gives Julian's work a fuller texture and meaning. By concentrating on issues of gender and Julian's place in modern spirituality, much contemporary scholarship has omitted what I believe to be Julian's

⁵¹ Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1987).

main purpose: her attempt to ascertain a theodicy during the period of horrendous suffering through which she lived her life.⁵²

Even the works of Nuth and Jantzen, although both address the problems of evil and suffering, are problematic, due in large part to their points of departure. Both scholars study Julian from a contemporary viewpoint. Jantzen says in her preface that the main reason for writing her book was to “integrate the findings of scholarship with the interests of contemporary spirituality.” Nuth is likewise modern. In her preface she poses the rhetorical question, “are there no paradigms in the whole history of theology from whom contemporary women theologians can draw inspiration?”⁵³ Many contemporary scholars bring Julian forward, rather than step back into Julian’s world to discover her meaning. They pose questions from a contemporary standpoint and Julian’s life becomes diminished. One scholar is notable for going against the contemporary trend. Denise Nowakowski Baker’s *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, situates Julian in the fourteenth century and discusses Julian’s development of a theodicy. But Baker’s purpose is to present a comparative analysis of the theodicies of Julian and Augustine, not to conduct a study into Julian’s own transformation in her search for a theodicy, as this thesis aims to do. Baker points out that Julian differs from Augustine because “her writing reflects a concentration on purpose and ends, instead of the Augustinian emphasis on causes and

⁵² By theodicy is meant the attempt to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God. This idea will be explored in depth in later chapters.

⁵³ Nuth, 2. It is interesting to note that Nuth’s later work addresses historical context. See page 74.

consequences.”⁵⁴ She says suffering serves a pedagogical purpose for Julian, and she notes how this differs from the prevailing Augustinian tradition. “In contrast to the etiological preoccupation of Augustinian theodicy, Julian’s solution to the problem of evil is teleological.”⁵⁵

Baker delivers the most thorough analysis of the theodicy of Julian of Norwich to date. Although, like Baker’s work, my thesis will also situate Julian in the religious context of the fourteenth century, it will not focus on Julian’s place in the prevailing Augustinian tradition. While Baker does not explore the connection between Julian’s theodicy and the social conditions in which she lived, my thesis contends that Julian’s theodicy can not be fully understood without such a consideration since Julian’s existential approach to theodicy had its genesis in her experience of fourteenth-century life in England. This thesis will provide evidence that Julian displayed the two major types of approaches to the theodical problem during her lifetime: existential and theoretical. The first approach is born of despair and the need to be comforted, and the second approach is intellectual. By rooting Julian in the social and religious conditions of her world, and by listening to her own voice embedded in the narrative, it is possible to trace Julian’s progress from an existential or affective mysticism to a theoretical, intellectual theodicy with which she could be satisfied.

⁵⁴ Denise Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showing: From Vision To Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter Two

Julian's Despair

Julian's despair is evident in both the Short Text and the Long Text. She writes, "Thare was none ese ne na comforthe to my felynge botte hope, faythe, and charyte, and this y hadde in trowthe botte fulle lytill in felynge." [There was no ease or comfort to my feelings but for hope, faith and charity, and for this I had, in truth, little feeling.] ⁵⁶In fact, she had such little hope that she clearly states that she wished to die. She is disappointed when she suddenly recovers from her illness and discovers she is without pain. She says, "ne the felynge of this ese was ne fulle ese to me, for me thought I hadde leuere bene delyverede of this worlde, for me herte was wilfulle thereto." [the feeling of this comfort was not comforting to me for I thought I'd rather be delivered of this world, for my heart willed it so.] ⁵⁷ This sentiment is repeated several times in Julian's work. "Here felyd I sothfastlye that y lovede Criste so mekille abouen my selfe that me thought it hadde beene a grete eese to me to hafe dyede bodylye." [I felt steadfastly that I loved Christ so much that I thought it would be so comforting to have died bodily.] ⁵⁸ She says, "I hadde ofte grete langyng and desyred of goddys gyfte to be delyuered of this warlde and of this lyfe...for ofte tymes I behelde the waa that is here." [I had great longing and

⁵⁶ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 231.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 209.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 235.

desired by God's gift to be delivered of this world and this life...for often I beheld the woe that is here.] ⁵⁹ The Middle English Dictionary defines the word 'woe' as "misery, distress, wretchedness" ⁶⁰ and Julian's anxiety is caused by the bitter suffering she sees around her. It is so great that she would rather die than live to behold it.

In this chapter, we will examine the experience of life in the fourteenth century to find out why Julian revealed such hopelessness and despair. The historical record of a society is often limited to a quantifiable account of warfare, monarchies, significant dates or power struggles, but such a focus sometimes leaves one at a loss when searching the historical canon for what may be called the consciousness of an age. One's search is rewarded, however, when the discipline of history is widened. When Julian's words are superimposed over the historical data a discernment of consciousness is possible. A symbiotic relationship emerges. Julian's work adds texture and richness to the historical record, and without the historical record, much of Julian's meaning is lost. The historical data will locate the source of Julian's despair in the conditions of the late medieval world in which she lived. This will give her work perspective and meaning. It will also demonstrate that Julian was a woman of her day: a fourteenth-century Christian woman caught up in the travails of her time. It will lend clarity and understanding to her work especially where it concerns her need for an existential theodicy.

⁵⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 262.

⁶⁰ *The Middle English Dictionary*, Part W. 5., ed. Robert E. Lewis (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 801.

Historians have come to regard the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as an “age of transition in which an old world was dying and a new world was struggling to be born.”⁶¹ The birth process was indeed arduous. It was a time of crisis and dissolution, manifested in economic depression, famines, war, pestilence and social disorder. The psychological impact of the time created a consciousness of fear, anxiety, terror and panic. Julian sheds light on the condition of the minds of men and women when she describes the four kinds of fear that she encountered. “Fore I saw foure maner of dredes. One is drede of a fray, that *commes* to a man sodanly be frelty...The second is drede of payne...the thyerde is doutfull drede..it is a spice of dispayre..the fourthe is reuerente drede.” [for I saw four manners of fear. One is fear of assault that comes to a man suddenly because of timidity....the second is fear of pain....the third is doubtful fear.....it has the suggestion of despair...the fourth is reverent fear] ⁶² The instability of the time, however, is not something concluded in retrospect by historians alone. As Julian’s work attests, “the men and women living at the time were themselves aware that theirs was a troubled world.”⁶³

Ironically, the eve of the fourteenth century had been a period of growth for England. By 1300, much land was in productive use and an expanding network of commerce had been implemented. The growth and expansion ceased, however, when a number of catastrophes struck the country, especially during the first fifty years of the

⁶¹ Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: A Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History, The Life and Death of a Civilization* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 483.

⁶² Colledge and Walsh, 1: 276.

⁶³ Cantor, 481.

century. A series of wet summers in 1315-16-17 caused a succession of crop failures leading to a famine which killed half the population. Several years after the famine disaster struck again with a murrain of cattle. The chronicler, Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon of Leicester, also reported a great murrain of sheep in the realm, "so much so that in one place more than five thousand sheep died in a single pasture, and their bodies were so corrupt that no animal or bird would touch them."⁶⁴ The famine caused high unemployment and death by starvation. The ensuing economic instability and social unrest was reflected in a heightened crime rate and brutal reparations were exacted for wrongdoings. "Cutting off a hand or a foot, blinding, and other forms of mutilation were not uncommon punishments for theft, disloyalty and other offenses. Human life was cheap, and fear of punishment by God ran high."⁶⁵ While the population was still reeling from the famine, war broke out. The Hundred Years War began in 1337, The war was fought over land with the neighbouring country of France, and it ended with England "losing its last foothold on the soil of France, bar Calais."⁶⁶ It was waged primarily on French soil so the English people did not have to worry about raids, rape and pillage in their own communities. However, battle on foreign ground one day did not preclude an attack on their own soil the next. Fear of retaliation and assault was constant. The population was profoundly affected by the war, especially those who went to fight.

⁶⁴ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnithon Monachi Leycestrensis* ed. Joseph R. Lumby, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 1889-95, 1158-65, quoted in Rosemary Horrox, ed. *Manchester Medieval Sources Series, The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 75.

⁶⁵ Shawn Madigan, *Mystics, Visionaries and Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 191.

⁶⁶ Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages, 1348-1500* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 6.

"So were the attitudes of their kinsfolk, neighbours and connections, and all others who listened for news of the campaigns, welcomed the returning soldiers, admired the prizes of their prowess and pitied them for their wounds."⁶⁷ It is important to note that the war was being funded by taxation. As the war dragged on, this fact would become increasingly problematic and would contribute to the upcoming civil rebellion and the loosening of the parameters of the social structure.

The fighting warriors were taken from a well-defined class. English society was organized along a hierarchy of three levels consisting of the priesthood, knighthood and the labouring class. One was obligated to one's station by birth. Each estate had a functional relationship to the other: "the clergy whose business was with prayer and spiritual well-being, the warriors who defended the land and the people with their arms, and the labourers whose toil supported the other two orders."⁶⁸

In the minds of men at that age, the relations of deference and service that persisted between **the grades** were the basis of social order, of its **essence**: they had not yet come to regard social distinctions as divisive, as forces with the potential to tear society apart, as Rousseau and later, Marx, were to do.⁶⁹

The structure was accepted and unquestioned. It did not occur to medieval men and women to seek or demand an alternative social, political or economic structure. To do so would have been considered against the law of God. The system was re-enforced by the clergy who put it in a Christian framework during sermons.

⁶⁷ Keen, 131.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

And one thing I dare well say, that he that is not labouring in this world on studying, on prayers, on preaching for help of the people-as it falleth on priests; nor in ruling the people, maintaining them and defending them from their enemies, as it falleth to knights; nor labouring on earth in divers crafts, as it falleth to labourers: when the day of reckoning cometh right as he lived here without labour, so he shall there lack the reward of the penny, that is the endless joy of heaven.⁷⁰

Within this social system, the majority of people lived in small villages and rural areas. Ninety per cent of the population lived in communities of less than one thousand people. Rural people were farming tenants who rented land from wealthy landowners or wage-earning labourers who worked directly for the landowner. Both groups were beholden to their landowners and neither could ever hope to own the land. The townspeople had a modest amount of economic autonomy because they were involved in overseas trade. Those involved in trades and crafts also established local commerce by setting up markets to sell their wares. However, people were still struggling to gain a stronger foothold in the aftermath of the social and economic downturn caused by famine. The economy remained largely feudal, the tripartite social structure was entrenched, and the Church had a stranglehold on ideas and behavior.

"The people were yet but little civilized. The church had indeed subdued them...the cities were fortresses for their own defense. Witches and heretics were burned alive. Wild passions, severity, and cruelty, everywhere predominated."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Keen, 1.

⁷⁰ An unattributed account of a medieval sermon in Keen, 2.

The heretical movements and peasant revolt would come in the latter half of the century, making the entire hundred-year period one of huge unrest and instability. Although any one of these occurrences would have entitled the fourteenth century to be known as the age of anxiety, the most deeply shocking event happened in the middle of the century. The bubonic plague struck England in 1348, when Julian of Norwich was six years old. There were three recurrences during her lifetime. It was a devastating epidemic that left people dying in the streets, often abandoned by family and friends who were too afraid to go near them. It was a bleak time characterized by fear, anxiety and a pessimistic outlook on life. It was this event which probably had the greatest impact on consciousness. And although she never mentions the word 'pestilence' in her books, the themes of pain, suffering, fear and sorrow are unceasingly addressed.

The plague was a highly contagious infectious disease carried by the fleas of black rats. A bacterial strain known as *yersinia pestis* lived in the stomachs of the fleas. For unknown reasons, sometimes the fleas' intestines would become over capacitated and a blockage would occur. When this happened, the flea would be forced to regurgitate the contents of his stomach while feeding off its host. The *y. pestis* would then burrow into the host, usually a rat, and the infection would be passed on. Although other animals may be carriers of the fleas, rats were considered to be the most invasive carriers in Europe because they lived so close to humans. "An excellent climber, *R. rattus* was well-suited to both the thatched roofs of peasant dwellings and the high roof beams and dark

⁷¹ Justus F. Hecker, *The Black Death, and the Dancing Mania of the Middle Ages*, trans. Benjamin Babington. (New York: The Humboldt Publishing Co., 1988), 15.

corners of urban houses.”⁷² The flea would infest a human after the rat had succumbed to its infection. When the flea regurgitates, the plague bacilli enters the blood stream of the host. They are carried to the lymphatic system and lodge in the lymph node closest to the point of entry. They multiply and create a swelling in the groin, armpit or neck.

The first sign of illness was a sudden coldness
and a prickling sensation like pins and needles,
accompanied by extreme tiredness and depression.
by the time the swellings had formed the patient
would be in a high fever with severe headaches.⁷³

This form of the disease is called bubonic plague and is so named because of the occurrence of “subcutaneous hemorrhaging which causes purplish blotches on the skin called buboes.”⁷⁴ The plague later came to be known as the Black Death because of the dark buboes observed on its victims. The bubonic plague is the most common form of plague and is not as deadly as the other two forms. It kills “fifty to sixty per cent of its victims.”⁷⁵ Pneumonic plague, as the name suggests, attacks the lungs of its prey, causing the discharge of a bloody cough. The sputum contains *y. pestis*, making transmission of the disease airborne and thus direct from human to human. Death occurs in ninety-five to one hundred per cent of the cases. So, although it less frequent, it is far more deadly than the bubonic form. The fact that the pneumonic plague could be passed from human to

⁷² Hecker, 7.

⁷³ Horrox, 4.

⁷⁴ Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1983), 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

human accounts for the “surprising continuance of the disease.”⁷⁶ The third type of plague is called septicaemic and it is the most rare and most severe type. The host will get a rash within hours of exposure “and death occurs within a day, before the buboes even have time to form.”⁷⁷ All three varieties were prevalent during this most virulent attack.

The plague’s earliest manifestations appeared on the shores of the Black Sea and it was spread through caravans and ships in the trading business. Most scholars now accept the theory of William MacNeil as to the plague’s origins.⁷⁸ MacNeil situates the plague’s beginnings in the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan. The empire was strategic because it was a conduit for business activity between China, India, the Middle East and Europe. Mongol horsemen facilitated the business. By the late thirteenth century the Empire had reached the Yunan region in southern China “which is today an inveterate focus of plague and many scholars believe that it has been such since the sixth century when *y. pestis* came from East Africa during the first pandemic.”⁷⁹

MacNeil and others argue that the Mongol horsemen and supply trains picked up the infected insect or rodent hosts and “carried them throughout the far-flung Empire.”⁸⁰ Early accounts of the incursion into Europe are well documented. In October 1347, for example, a Genoese fleet entered the harbour in Sicily with a very sick crew, apparently

⁷⁶ Gottfried, 8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁸ William MacNeil, *Plagues and People* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 149-98.

⁷⁹ Gottfried, 34.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

suffering from a disease they had picked up from the Orient.⁸¹ The crew was quarantined, but it was not men but rats and fleas that brought the sickness and they scurried ashore as the first ropes were tied to the docks. Within six months half the population died or fled as the rats and fleas carried the disease further abroad. "The scene was repeated thousands of times in ports and fishing villages across Eurasia and North Africa heralding the coming of the greatest natural disaster in European History."⁸²

The plague devastated Western Europe between 1347 and 1351, "killing twenty-five to fifty per cent of Europe's population."⁸³ It was first reported in England in 1348, one year after its arrival in Italy. The following account comes from the *Anonimale Chronicle* written by an unknown author.⁸⁴

In 1348, about the feast of St. Peter in chains [August 1] the first pestilence arrived in England in Bristol, carried by merchants and sailors, and it lasted in the south country around Bristol throughout August and all winter. And in **the following year**, that is to say, in 1349, the pestilence **began** in other regions of England and lasted for a whole year, with the result that the living were hardly able to bury the dead.

In all of England's regions, "the most severely affected was East Anglia."⁸⁵ Because of its geographical location and economic orientation to the sea, the area was particularly

⁸¹ Michael of Piazza, *Bibliotheca scriptorum qui res in Sicilia gestas retulere*, I, 562. Quoted in Gottfried, xiii.

⁸² Gottfried. xiii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *The Anonimale Chronicle*, ed. V.H. Galbraith, Manchester, 1970, p 30. Quoted in Horrox, 62.

vulnerable to the transmission of disease through the ports and harbours which were busy with trade and traffic from the continent. Norwich was the capital of the region with a population of ten to twelve thousand people, making it the second or third largest town in England at the time. "In East Anglia the Black Death came in January 1349, at some point probably took the pneumonic form and lasted until spring 1350. About half the beneficed clergy and forty to fifty per cent of the secular population died."⁸⁶ The rapid and inexorable onslaught of the plague led to a prevailing mood of frenzy, gloom, despair and decay, as can be well imagined.

Many people believed the recurring pestilence was an eschatological sign, signaling the end of the world. "Against this background of disaster, Antichrist's coming seemed imminent and rumours circulating in Rome claimed that he had already been born and was a beautiful child of ten in 1349."⁸⁷ It is evident from the writings of chroniclers of the period that many did not expect the world to survive. Brother John Clyn of the Friars Minor of Kilkenny wrote the following:

I have written in the book the notable events which befell in my time, which I saw for myself or have **learned** from men worthy of belief. So that notable **deeds** should not perish with time, and be lost from the memory of future generations, I, seeing these many ills, and that the whole world is encompassed by evil, waiting among the dead for death to come, have committed to writing what I have truly heard and examined; and so that the writing does not perish with the writer, or the work fail with the workman, I leave parchment for continuing the work, in case

⁸⁵ Gottfried, 65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁷ Horrox, 99.

anyone should still be alive in the future
 and any son of Adam can escape this pestilence
 and continue the work thus begun.⁸⁸

John Clynn is reporting two of the most common reactions to the plague. The pestilence is so toxic that he does not expect to survive himself, nor does he have confidence that the world itself can survive. The other certitude expressed is that evil had engulfed the world. In medieval England, the plague was seen not as a disease spread by the fleas of rats—its etiology was unknown-- but as an act of God to punish the evil world for its sinfulness and to frighten people into repentance. In a letter circulated throughout his parish, the Bishop of Winchester, William Edendon, rendered this opinion as to the cause of the savage pestilence: "It is to be feared that the most likely explanation is that human sensuality—that fire which blazed up as a result of Adam's sin and which from adolescence onwards is an incitement to wrongdoing—has now plumbed greater depths of evil, producing a multitude of sins which have provoked the divine anger, by a just judgement, to this revenge."⁸⁹

Repentance was the order of the day and extreme penitential groups began to flourish, most notably the Flagellants. This was a group of people who roamed the streets whipping themselves and each other. The self-mutilations were "prompted by the

⁸⁸ Horrox, 84.

⁸⁹ Hampshire Record Office, Reg. Edyngdon, 21 M65 A1/9 fo.17, quoted in Horrox, 115.

conviction that the body was physically vile.”⁹⁰ The whip has been described as a stick with three tails on it, with each tail having large knots on it.

Right through the knots iron spikes as
sharp as needles were thrust. With
such scourges they beat themselves on
their naked bodies so that they became
swollen and blue, the blood ran down
to the ground and bespattered the walls
of the churches in which they scourged
themselves.⁹¹

The Flagellants were not only attempting to purge themselves of their own sinfulness; they were also protesting corruption in the church and calling for reform. There is a good probability that Julian would have witnessed, if not Flagellants, other penitential processions through the streets of Norwich. It is clear that she had some sympathetic agreement. She certainly believed that painful penitence was salvific, and writes that she had prayed for a sickness for that very purpose.

I wolde hafe no comforth of no fleschlye
nother erthelye lyfe. In this sekenes I
desyrede to hafe alle manere of paynes,
bodelye and gastelye, that I schulde have
zyt I schulde dye, alle the dredes *and*
tempestes of feyndys, *and* all manere of
paynes, safe of the owzte passynge of the
sawlle, for I hoped that it myzt be to me a spede
wher I schulde dye.⁹²

[I wanted no comfort from any human, earthly

⁹⁰ Denys Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London and New York: Longman Inc., 1966), 327.

⁹¹ George Deaux, *The Black Death, 1347* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969), 185.

⁹² Colledge and Walsh, 1: 204.

life. In this sickness I wanted to have every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual which I should **have** if I were dying, every fear and assault from **devils**, and every other kind of pain except the departure of the soul, for I hoped that this would be profitable to me when I should die.]

Julian also agreed that the body was vile.⁹³ She writes that she is a “wrechid wor(m)e and synfulle creature.” [wretched worm and sinful creature]⁹⁴

The moral and psychological crisis of the age was not confined to the human population. It was also manifested in the physical geography. People died so rapidly and in such high numbers that there was no one to look after the fields; some fled and others gave up in despair, waiting for death to come. “The landscape everywhere gave proof of physical decay-houses had collapsed, fields were grassed over, manor houses were abandoned.”⁹⁵

In Julian’s lifetime there were four separate epidemics of plague. The most devastating was the first one that hit in 1348-51 when Julian would have been six or seven years old. The three subsequent outbreaks occurred in 1360 when Julian was eighteen, in 1369 when she was twenty-seven and in 1375 when she was thirty-three. By the time she had her vision in 1373, Julian had lived through the most shocking and frightening period in England’s history.

The mental shock sustained by all nations during the prevalence of the Black Plague is without

⁹³ Her view of the body, like her theodicy would be transformed in the *Long Text*.

⁹⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 219.

⁹⁵ Nigel Saul, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 161.

parallel and beyond description. In the eyes of the timorous, danger was the certain harbinger of death, many fell victims to fear on the first appearance of distemper and the most stout-hearted lost their confidence.⁹⁶

England was indeed a defeated and despairing land in the second half of the fourteenth century and an “exhausted and demoralized society did not easily recover from the repeated blows it received.”⁹⁷ The chaos and uncertainty that ensued opened the way for civil unrest, rebellion and heresy. In the aftermath of the Black Death, social convention began to crack and crumble. The population had been decimated with estimates of loss at up to forty and fifty per cent. Landlords could not get enough labourers to staff their farms and tenant farmers were expected to pay much higher rents to compensate. The war with France continued, requiring unprecedented levies of taxation. The country was a breeding ground for discontent. The solid parameters of the old social structure were weakening, leading to uprisings against the ruling class and the church. Two major historical events occurred during this period: the Peasant’s revolt of 1381 and the Lollard heresy. The Lollards marked the first heretical movement in England in more than a millenium. The Lollard movement received its intellectual ignition from John Wyclif (1330-84). He was a scholar at Oxford, very well connected, with supporters in every sector of society, including the king’s court. His message was disseminated by knights, courtiers, lower clergy, and laymen. Wyclif held what were deemed to be heretical views on the sacraments, he condemned the corruption of the

⁹⁶ Hecker, 21.

⁹⁷ Cantor, 481.

priesthood, and he advocated that laymen take over the properties of the church. He attacked celibacy, oral confessions and the practice of indulgences. The Lollards based their teachings on personal faith, divine election and the Bible. Although they had a list of grievances against the church, there were two major points of dissent. They believed that the Bible should hold supremacy for the faithful, that it had sole spiritual authority, and that everyone had the right to interpret the scriptures for themselves. Since Wyclif believed the Bible should be accessible to all, he had it translated into the vernacular. He and his followers made a huge effort to get copies of the Bible out to people. Their views on the Eucharist were the most inflammatory. They did not accept the official dogma on transubstantiation. Wyclif believed “the material bread and wine in the Eucharist remained after consecration, although he did not deny the spiritual presence of Christ in the host, which he saw as transmuted sacramentally but not physically.”⁹⁸ Either position would have normally earned a heretic a position at the stake, but the early absence of systematic persecution in the Lollard movement was “probably due to the patronage which it had from influential men.”⁹⁹ The movement gained momentum throughout the land and caused panic among the authorities of the church. However, not until after the Lollard rising of 1414 “when Lollardy was equated with treason, would an English king unequivocally align the power of the state with that of the church to try to eradicate it.”¹⁰⁰ Still, it is believed that “probably fewer than one hundred suffered the ultimate penalty

⁹⁸ John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England, 1370-1529* (London: Longman Inc., 1983), 356.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁰⁰ Saul, 121.

of burning and the number of those to have abjured does not approach the one thousand mark.”¹⁰¹ Wyclif himself escaped persecution because he died of a stroke in 1384 at the age of fifty-five.

The pervasiveness of the Lollard¹⁰² membership among all groups demonstrates the local interest and popular discussion of religious ideas and spiritual matters during the later medieval period. In fact, the heresy trials show “the extent to which religious debate in late medieval England was not confined to any particular milieu; such matters touched men and women of all social classes and backgrounds.”¹⁰³ Lollardy laid the roots of Protestantism and was a harbinger of things to come “by providing areas and minds receptive to Lutheranism.”¹⁰⁴

There is no question that Julian would have been exposed to these ideas and would have known the dangers and consequences of writing anything that may have been considered objectionable. Anyone writing about religious matters ran the “occupational risk that their intellectual speculation might overstep the bounds of accepted orthodoxy.”¹⁰⁵ But Julian was adamant in her support of the Church. She writes, “but in all thing I beleue as holy chyrch prechyth and techyth. For the feyth of holy chyrch, which I had beforehand vnderstandyng, and as I hope by the grace of god wyll fully

¹⁰¹ Thomson, 365.

¹⁰² There is an extensive body of literature on Lollardy. See Margaret Aston, *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishers, 1997). and Curtis V. Bostick, *The Antichrist and the Lollards* (Boston: Brill, 1998).

¹⁰³ Saul, 198.

¹⁰⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 884.

kepe it in vse and in custome, stode contynually in my syghte, wyllnyg and meanyng never to receyve any thyng that myght be contrary ther to." [but in everything I believe as Holy Church preaches and teaches. For the faith of Holy Church, which I had beforehand understood, and which I hope by the grace of god, to preserve whole and in practice, was always in my sight, and I wished and intended never to accept anything which might be contrary to it.] ¹⁰⁶

Besides religious rebellion, there were also several outbreaks of violence giving evidence of discontent during the aftermath of the Black Death, but the most serious and violent one was the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. It had a wide ground of support from various locations in the country "making it the most serious social revolt in the history of medieval England." ¹⁰⁷ The spark that fueled the tension was the poll tax of 1380. It was extremely high because of a seemingly endless war bill. The burdened taxpayer had a sense that the ruling class was mismanaging things and they called for an end to the tax as well as other reforms. Because of the depopulation in post plague England, the peasant class had a newly recognized worth. Their numbers had diminished so their services should have been at a premium but their attempts for economic and social mobility were suppressed. There was also a shortage of tenant farmers so the landowners were not getting the rent they were accustomed to receiving. In the towns, there was also mounting frustration and disillusionment with the system. What started out as post-plague higher wages returned to previous low levels. The "Statute of Labourers" gave justices of the

¹⁰⁵ Thomson, 355.

¹⁰⁶ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 223.

peace the power to punish anyone who demanded wages that were higher than the pre-plague wage of 1346. The ruling class supported the landowner and demands for higher wages were met with systematic and harsh punishment. What the peasants really wanted was an end to the old tripartite system. They proposed an end to lordship, except for the king, an abolition of church hierarchy, except for the bishop, and the confiscation of church property and its redistribution among the people.

When their demands were left unaddressed, their discontent exploded in the street of London. "Several thousand rebels led by Wat Tyler and the demagogue priest John Ball, occupied the city for three days; the chancellor and treasurer were decapitated on Tower Hill, and hundreds of others—lawyers, foreigners, lesser officers of the Crown—murdered in the streets; looting, burning, and private grudge-settling abounded."¹⁰⁸ The rebellion was quashed and the rebels dispersed in quick order, but after 1381 a poll tax was never again applied, wages went up and there was a slight loosening of the rigid stratification. The biggest impact of the revolt, however, seems to be in the fear it instilled in the ruling classes, "for a society in which this sort of thing could happen."¹⁰⁹

As we can see, the consciousness of the age in which Julian lived can be described as turbulent. It was an age of fear and uncertainty. It was a time of social unrest and instability when institutions that were previously held sacrosanct were being scrutinized and found wanting. Death was everywhere "in the air." When not in actuality, it was a constant threat in the minds of the people. It was the main topic of

¹⁰⁷ Thomson, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Saul, 119.

sermons and the dominant subject in literature and art. Francesco Traini's fresco entitled *Triumph of Death* of 1350 reflects the mood of the period. "Like the sermons of the time, each part warned of the imminence of death, the terrors of hell if the soul were claimed by the devil, or the bliss of being carried off by the angels."¹⁰⁹ The painting referenced all sectors of society with knights pursuing a chase, only to discover that their prey was death. Another corner depicts three open coffins with serpents consuming the corpses of Popes and Emperors. Nearby an anchorite monk unfolds a scroll with words warning people to repent. "The only relief from this scene of horror and desolation is found in the upper left where some monks are gathered around a chapel busying themselves with the usual monastic duties. Apparently only those who renounce the world can find respite from its general turmoil and terror of death."¹¹¹

The artistic rendering of the monks resonates with Julian's own words. After her vision she writes, "and I thouzt to my selfe, menande: thowe hase nowe grete besynes; walde *pou* noew fra this tyme euer mare be so besy to kepe the fro synne, this ware a soferayne *and* a goode occupacioun. For I trowe sothlye, ware I saffe fra synne I ware fulle saife fra alle the fendes of helle *and* enmyse of my saule." [and I thought privately to myself: you now have plenty to do; if from now on you would be so busy in keeping yourself free of sin, that would be a most excellent occupation. For I truly

¹⁰⁹ Keen, 43.

¹¹⁰ William Fleming, *Art, Music and Ideas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), 152.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

believe that if I were safe from sin I should be very safe from all the devils of hell and the enemies of my soul.]¹¹²

Julian's disposition, and her desire for an anchorhold are quite understandable, given the circumstances and conditions of her medieval world. In this chapter we have discovered the depth of anguish experienced by fourteenth century people: anguish brought on by famines, murrains of cattle, unceasing war, rebellions, and the horrors of recurring plagues. In the next chapter we shall look at the religious meaning ascribed to these conditions. Since everything in the medieval world held a religious connotation, the religious interpretation of events is critical to an understanding of Julian's purpose and meaning.

¹¹² Colledge and Walsh, 1: 270.

Chapter Three

Religion and Religiosity

In the last chapter we examined the social and economic conditions of fourteenth-century England and discovered that it was a time of war, famine and pestilence. We learned that the Black Death with its several recurrences ravaged the population, eliminating entire families and communities. The result was a country torn apart, not only by fear and despair, but by an enormous sense of guilt and self-deprecation. Fear and despair would have been rational responses given the circumstances described above, but to understand why guilt, self-deprecation, and frenzied behaviour were so pervasive, our study must be broadened to include the belief system of the period.

In this chapter we will examine the religious ethos of the fourteenth century—that is, its religion and its religiosity—which was formed in two ways: by the obligatory doctrine and dogma delivered by the official Christian church, and by the people's response to it. The religion of Christianity was informed by the set of rituals and beliefs passed down by the Church of Rome. Religiosity, on the other hand, is more personal. It involves the inner response. It is an individualized construction, characterized by piety and devotion.

It is our contention that “cultures respond in certain ways to events because they are already predisposed to do so,”¹¹³ and the predisposition of the fourteenth-century

mind was informed by late medieval Christianity and piety. The medieval church was a theological, juridical and administrative structure led by an institutional hierarchy headed by an infallible pope. Christianity and the Christian Church reached like tentacles into the hearts, minds and behaviour of its adherents. Christian dogma was so deeply rooted in consciousness, that even social and political systems were seen as metaphors for religious systems. The most obvious example was the pervasive use of the Trinitarian “three.” Society had three tiers; the clergy, the knighthood and the labouring class. The church itself had three components; the church militant, the church dormant and the church triumphant. In a more general sense, the Trinitarian ‘three’ was seen in the triad of heaven, hell and earth, and was manifested in human nature in the mind, body and soul.

The idea of ‘three’ was routinely encountered in Julian’s work. She prayed for three gifts and she asked for three wounds. She had three ways of understanding her vision: by bodily sight, by words formed in her understanding, and by ghostly sight. She saw three heavens and there were three degrees of bliss in heaven. She saw three ways to tarry well on earth. In the medieval mind, religious symbolism was ubiquitous.

Julian belonged to the church and repeatedly asserted her devotion and commitment to it. She was immersed in its traditions and dogma. She says, “in alle thyng I lyeve as haly kyrke techis” [in all things I believe as Holy Church teaches.]¹¹⁴ She remained unwavering on this point. Both the Short Text and the Long Text testify to her lifelong commitment and intention to “wilfully submyttes me to the techyng of haly

¹¹³ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 129.

¹¹⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 223.

kyrke with alle myne euen crystern in the end of my lyfe.” [willfully submit myself to the teachings of holy church with all my fellow Christians to the end of my life.]¹¹⁵ The fact that Julian spent her adult life in an anchorhold, attached to a church, also attests to the fact that she was a devoted Christian and churchwoman. To establish what it meant to be a Christian woman in the fourteenth century we will begin with an examination of the religious doctrine of the period, that is, what Julian would have accepted as fundamental truths and how those truths would have informed her personal devotion and piety.

Creeds and Councils of the Church

Christianity became officially tolerated with the so-called *Edict of Toleration* in 311-313. Because of the subsequent rapid expansion of the religion, and the number of “heretical” interpretations,¹¹⁶ Christians needed to clarify their positions on matters of doctrine. They needed to formulate a coherent statement of beliefs to which new converts could be referred. The creeds needed to be authoritative, so they were rooted in biblical texts. The Apostle’s Creed is the simplest of the creeds and its basic theology has endured throughout the centuries:

I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried. He descended into hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended into Heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty; thence

¹¹⁵ Colledge and Walsh, 1:223.

¹¹⁶ For a synopsis on various controversies and heresies during the establishment of Christian doctrine refer to D.N. Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses: An Introductory History of the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications), 1989.

he shall come to judge the living and the dead; I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.¹¹⁷

Belief in this simple list of tenets of Christianity was obligatory and it held “an unrivalled place in the formulation of belief.”¹¹⁸ It was “the keystone of most people’s awareness of the faith throughout the centuries.”¹¹⁹ As Christianity grew, questions would be raised over ambiguities in the creeds and other dogma. An official Church council would be assembled to address the controversial questions, and although the gatherings were often incendiary, the men of the church would emerge with a decree on the theological query. For example, the Council of Nicaea (325) was formed to debate the Arian controversy over the divinity of Jesus Christ. The council concluded that God had become fully human in Jesus Christ and prepared a creed stating belief in “one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, that is from the essence of the Father. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence of the Father...”¹²⁰ It became official church doctrine. The Council of Chalcedon (451) was formed to debate and settle the question of Christ’s humanity. The question before the council was “In what sense was he truly man. How was he both God and man?”¹²¹ The council concluded that Jesus was “as the same reality as God as

¹¹⁷ Leith, 24-25.

¹¹⁸ Swanson, 16.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Leith, 30-31.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we are ourselves as far as his human-ness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted.”¹²² There were numerous other councils assembled throughout the centuries in an attempt to clarify and enhance the Christian tenets of faith. They ruled on such things as the role of images in the church, the co-equality of the Holy Ghost, and the position of Mary as the mother of God. In many respects the councils were only as progressive as their leaders. At times, questions were quashed and questioners either banished or put to death. During the sixth century, for example, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) entrenched the tenets of the faith and declared that if any man did not accept them “let him be anathema.”¹²³ If one is anathematized, one is cursed, detested and excommunicated.

The medieval church grew out of this tradition and continued to evolve in its theology and practice. It held to the central truths found in the creeds. The crucified Christ, the Virgin Mary, the judging of the dead, the forgiveness of sins and the communion of saints would remain fundamental in the development of religious thought. The creeds were expanded by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. This crucial council was headed by Pope Innocent III who was considered “one of the most dynamic and influential of all the medieval popes.”¹²⁴ His leadership provoked a transformation in religious life, stimulating what was later called the medieval transformation. The Lateran Council was attended by more than twelve hundred ecclesiastics, “making it truly

¹²² Leith, 46.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Swanson, 10.

representative of the universal church,"¹²⁵ at least in the west. It elaborated on the universality of the church; it defined and clarified its orthodox position and entrenched the power of the seven sacraments in the stages of Christian life. Of significance was the council's affirmation of marriage as a sacrament, officially acknowledging for the first time that married people were meritorious of eternal life. The council's ruling on transubstantiation stilled official church debate on the presence of Christ in the communion host for the next seven centuries. It stated:

In this church the priest and sacrifice is the same Jesus Christ himself, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the figures of bread and wine, the bread having **been transubstantiated** into his body and the wine **into his blood** by divine power, so that, to accomplish the mystery of our union, we may receive of him what he has received of us.¹²⁶

The council made it mandatory to receive the sacrament of communion at least once a year. It also demanded that one's confession of sins be heard annually. It was during the sacrament of confession that one was tested on the precepts of the church. For example, one was expected to recite the creed, demonstrating one's knowledge and acceptance of the faith. Although Pope Innocent III was influential in the area of religious dogma, his most significant legacy would be his influence on medieval piety. He encouraged personal religious experience and allowed individualized spirituality as long as it was under the auspices of ecclesiastical control. His predilection for personal

¹²⁵ Swanson, 10.

¹²⁶ Leith, 58.

piety was made manifest by his authorization of the *vita apostolica* embodied in the new mendicant orders. In fact, the apostolate of Francis of Assisi “was legitimized only through the personal intervention of Innocent III and his successors.”¹²⁷ The papal approval “showed that the pope at least was willing to embrace and aid the spiritual developments born of the twelfth century, and to encourage the creation of a church which, by adapting to meet new demands, would be able to take the lead in the process of Christianizing lay society.”¹²⁸ The Fourth Lateran Council, under the leadership of Innocent III, adopted a wide-ranging program which has been “characterized as effecting a pastoral revolution, intended to move the Church into the forefront of personal experience and individual existence.”¹²⁹

The ever-evolving creeds and councils illustrate the controversial yet fluid nature of the early and medieval churches. They were not static institutions. Particularly, the Church that grew out of the Fourth Lateran Council was not the intransigent, monolithic structure it would become in later years. Although the creeds were entrenched and obligatory, their genesis was often responsive rather than unilateral. They were the church’s attempt to “satisfy and direct the religious and devotional desires of the laity, to meet their scruples and to answer their questions.”¹³⁰ Since its inception, Christianity was characterized by examination, study and debate. It was an evolving system of queries and

¹²⁷ Swanson, 15.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

beliefs. It was theological, “involving men in theological reflection and calling them to declarations of faith.”¹³¹ This two-pronged tradition in Christianity, theology and faith, was mediated by the use of reason. Faith in the tenets set down by the creeds was one thing, but it must be made intelligible. “Just because he is *intelligens* the Christian, of all men, has to learn to discern with agonizing clarity what is conceivable by him about God himself.”¹³² The tradition of intellectual probing and theological interpretation would routinely lead to dissensions, controversies and schisms. This historical reality is important to keep in mind because it forms the basis for understanding the religiosity of the medieval period. It was also a key methodological tool in Julian’s quest for a theodicy. She adhered to the basic teachings of the Church and she operated within its parameters, but she also used her reason to decipher her personal religious experiences.

Sacramental Primacy of the Mass and Eucharist

While the Creeds were the foundation of what people believed, the sacraments, especially the mass, were the foundation of what people practiced. Participation in the sacraments marked one’s life as a progression towards salvation, which was the *raison d’être* for the medieval Christian. Time was simply a linear way to mark out one’s salvific destiny, culminating in the Last Judgement. For the medieval Christian, “this eschatological view of time could yield a powerful, cumulative and comprehensive vision

¹³¹ Leith, John H., ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, 3 rd. ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), I.

¹³² Barth, Karl, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960), 20-21.

of world history as fundamentally one of sin, redemption and salvation.¹³³ The seven Christian sacraments demonstrated and affirmed one's membership in the Christian church and provided a religious ceremony marking the spiritual stages of one's life. The themes of sin, punishment, repentance and redemption are embodied in these rites of passage. Baptism was a cleansing ritual that wiped away original sin. Christians believed they were born "in Adam" in that they were a fallen humanity, bearing the mark and paying for the sin of the first man who, through disobedience and sin, was banished from the Garden of Eden. Christ was the second Adam, whose death paid for Adam's sin and redeemed humanity. Confession continued the theme of sins, in that one could be forgiven for them. Confession had to be made orally to a priest who would mete out a penance, the performance of which was mandatory "on pain of excommunication and the deprivation of Christian burial and resurrection."¹³⁴ Confession was crucial because without Christian burial, resurrection was impossible. Penance presupposed purgatory, a place of extreme suffering between heaven and hell, where souls went to finish working out their salvation. It was "a place of temporary punishment where they could expiate their sins and then, cleansed and purified, move on to the blissful experience of the Beatific Vision."¹³⁵ The idea of purgatory would become an essential tool in understanding medieval piety because it reinforced the idea of the benefit of suffering on

¹³³ Binski, 25.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³⁵ Bell, David N., *Many Mansions: An Introduction to the Development and Diversity of Medieval Theology West and East* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 348.

earth and beyond. For the confessed, suffering and purgatory could be put in the treasury as future insurance against posthumous perdition.

Because admission to purgatory guaranteed eventual admission to Heaven, an effort was made to quicken the process. Indulgences, acts of contrition, prayers, relics, and invocations to saints could be offered on earth to lessen one's purgatorial time. The same could be offered up for a loved one who had already died. For medieval Christians purgatory "was obviously a major element in contemporary spirituality; many of the major manifestations of piety were predicated on its existence and on making due preparation for it."¹³⁶ Julian believed unconditionally in the concept and purpose of Hell and Purgatory. She says, "I beleued sothfastly that hel and purgatory is for pe same ende pat holy church techyth for." [I believe steadfastly that hell and purgatory is for the purpose taught by Holy Church]¹³⁷ She also believed that suffering on earth was beneficial. Julian prayed for a bodily sickness so that she could attain future merit. She says, 'In thiis sekenes I desyrede to hafe akllle manere of paynes, bodelye and gastelye...that it myzt be to me a spede whenn I schulde dye.'" [In this sickness I desired to have all manner of pains, both physical and spiritual, that it might help me when I should die.]¹³⁸ Extreme Unction was the last sacrament and it continued the theme of sin and redemption. One received it on one's deathbed; an anointing with blessed oils, consecrating one's soul in preparation for death and the Last Judgement.

¹³⁶ Swanson, 38.

¹³⁷ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 426.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 204.

Although all the sacraments were considered imperatives, the sacrament of the Eucharist held special significance. It was the consecration of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and it was performed at the mass. This sacrament, above all others, facilitated the intersection between religion and religiosity and underscored the Christian worldview of sin, redemption and salvation.

The mass was a liturgical event celebrating the quintessence of the Eucharist. The word 'Eucharist' comes from the Greek, meaning 'thanksgiving' and its inauguration into Christianity is traced back to the biblical Last Supper when Jesus, surrounded by his twelve disciples, took bread, blessed it, and broke it and gave it to the disciples and said "Take, eat, this is my body."¹³⁹ This gesture led to the institutionalized practice of communion, eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood, in the forms of a piece of bread and a sip of wine. The ritual culminated in frenzied devotion during Julian's day. "At the centre of the whole religious system of the later Middle Ages lay a ritual which turned bread into flesh-a fragile, small, wheaten disc into God. This was the Eucharist: host, ritual, God among mortals."¹⁴⁰ Incredible claims were made on its behalf and its power is not to be underestimated. It was believed "that God and humans could meet and unite, mix and merge, that a disc of baked wheaten dough could embody the saving body of Christ, that the lives of men and women, of cities and nations, could be encompassed, redeemed, transformed or forsaken through it."¹⁴¹ During the Middle Ages the Eucharist

¹³⁹ For complete reference see Matthew 26, 26-8.

¹⁴⁰ Rubin, 1.

became such a treasured symbol of meaning that “people lived and died, armies marched, bodies were tormented or controlled by self-imposed asceticism”¹⁴² because of it.

Historically, the Eucharist was accepted by faith as the body and blood of Christ despite eruptions of controversies over the years, many of which asked how the physical attributes of bread and wine could change into the body and blood while still retaining their physical properties.¹⁴³ The debates and official theological inquiries subsided after the term transubstantiation was given “papal and conciliar recognition at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.”¹⁴⁴ The fact that the council of 1215 confirmed the concept that the bread and wine did indeed change to the body and blood of Christ, and that Christ was indeed present in the flesh after the host was consecrated, led to a heightened sense of urgency during devotions. Because faith in this process was inculcated into church doctrine “the mass became the focal point at which to appreciate the corporeal humanity of an incarnate Christ.”¹⁴⁵

During mass, the ritual was approached with a visceral, rising anticipation. The consecrated host was the holiest of the holy, and exposure to it gave people a profound sense of a personal union with Christ. This not only provided an occasion for worship and re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Christ, but in more practical terms, it secured a method of immediate divine intervention. Masses could be offered up for

¹⁴¹ Rubin, 1.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ See D.N. Bell, *Many Mansions*, p. 285-302 for discussions of ‘*horror cruoris*’ for example.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁴⁵ Bell, 136.

special intentions or for deceased relatives. Attendance at mass was salvific, earning participants their own salvation points. There were also promises of rather astonishing immediate personal results. For example, “in his *Instructions for Parish Priests*, John Mirk stressed the benefits which accrued from presence at a mass; for one thing, sight of the elevated host guaranteed preservation from sudden death that day.”¹⁴⁶ While Christians were only required to consume the host once a year, witnessing the mere elevation of it became a deep emotional experience. In fact, “many went into ecstasy or burst into uncontrollable weeping”¹⁴⁷ at the sight of it. Its elevation purposely inspired an emotional response as it was accompanied by the ringing of bells, burning of incense, lighting of candles, clasping of hands and mouthing of petitions. The pealing of bells was meant to signal the arrival of Christ into their presence, and prepare them for their divine encounter. The moment of consecration had to be specific and well known because it was a momentous transition with consequences. “Before it, gazing at and adoring matter was tantamount to idolatry; after it, spiritual gazing could convey great benefits.”¹⁴⁸ The elevation and consecration of the host were the sacramental benefactors for parishioners but there were other rituals that linked the faithful to the Eucharist and were deemed beneficiary, such as the sharing of blessed bread at the end of the mass and the distribution of the *pax* for touching, kissing and healing. The *pax* “was usually an object as round and smooth as the host, made of wood or precious metal, and inscribed with a

¹⁴⁶ Swanson, 141.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁴⁸ Rubin, 73.

crucifixion scene or the lamb of God.”¹⁴⁹ The *pax* and the blessed bread, although not viewed as sacramental like the host, were accepted as vehicles that joined the faithful to the Eucharist in a practical, visceral way.

For services outside the church, the host was equally venerated. “As it was escorted to its destination by candles and bells, bystanders had to offer due reverence. Failure to conform could lead to charges of irreligiosity.”¹⁵⁰ Attending the processions to the sick was not only encouraged; it was rewarded. “An addition made c.1260 to the synodal statutes of Cambrai increased the indulgences for kneeling and venerating the *viaticum* from ten to twenty days.”¹⁵¹

Besides being a venue for the consecration of the host, the mass was also a forum for interpreting the faith. Priests were already consigned supernatural power based on their exclusive right to consecrate the host. It follows that their words would be deemed divinely inspired. Julian’s fourteenth-century world was imbued with spiritual symbolism and allegory. Everything in life had religious symbolism and preachers reinforced it from the pulpit. For example, living in the seaport of Norwich, Julian would have heard many sermons related to the sea. A ship at sea was rich with spiritual meaning. The sea was a metaphor for the world, “salt and bitter, restless, swelling and foul.”¹⁵² To cross the sea one needs a ship, with a good mast and sails and a

¹⁴⁹ Rubin, 74.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

knowledgeable captain at the helm. These seafaring words were ripe for a preacher's interpretation. The ship signifies the Faith; the sentences of Holy Scripture are its planks, and the authorities of the Holy Doctors its rudder. The ship is narrow in prow and stern, and broad in the middle, and so is the Faith. For it was narrow at the beginning, in the days of Abraham and the Patriarchs; it broadened out at the Advent of Christ, and will be narrow once more at the coming of Antichrist; and so forth."¹⁵³ The ship was also used as a metaphor for the Holy Church, steering its way through the nasty and desolate sea of the world. The pulpit echoed the predominant medieval themes of a corrupt world, sinful and vile creatures, salvation through penance and Holy Church, and either ultimate reward in heaven or eternal damnation in hell.

Despite the pervasiveness of doom and gloom, there are examples of sermons reminiscent of the love lyric among some English preachers of the fourteenth century, as evidenced by the following excerpt. "Turne azen and set ti love e Crist, longe and desir as a lover after his blisse."¹⁵⁴ However, these were not typical fare. "At the most, these blissful passages-alas-are but rare oases in the dreary desert of English pre-Reformation preaching. The note of gloom and repression easily dominates."¹⁵⁵ From the pulpit, priests would recall Christ's suffering, admonish the congregation to be more charitable or simply remind people of the tenets of the faith and the consequences for disobeying

¹⁵² Gerald R. Owst, *Literature And Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 68.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ MS. Worc. Cath. Libr. F. 10, fol. 45b, quoted in Owst, 21.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

them. Sin and repentance were constant themes, often embodied in gruesome tales “of divine justice warning against unconfessed sin and, even worse, the prospect of death without confessing.”¹⁵⁶ Medieval preachers also had a dour view of beauty. They denounced it in all forms, whether human or artistic if it did not point to some spiritual goodness underneath. Beauty for beauty’s sake was shunned and criminalized in the eyes of the preacher. “Wheresoever beauty shows upon the face, there lurks much filth beneath the skin.”¹⁵⁷ Owst says this expressed doctrine of beauty accounts for the great divide between the perception of religious and secular art.

As we saw in this section, the encounter with the host was the pre-eminent repository for emotion and was put forth by the Church as its central unifying *symbol*. In the next section we shall see how the artistically created depiction of the bloodied and bruised crucified Christ, would become the essential *image* of medieval piety and devotion.

Iconography

During the Middle Ages theological ideas were communicated to the laity primarily through sermons and the visual arts. Keeping in mind that we are talking about an age well before the printing press and widespread education, the visual arts were, essentially, the religious books of the illiterate, in that “art was visual publicity for theology; theology interpreted Scripture, art interpreted theology...theology was

¹⁵⁶ Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23.

interwoven with art.”¹⁵⁸ The use of art for religious purposes was manifested in sculpture, painting and stained glass. It was meant to give people a visual guide to their devotions, and churches bulged with statuary of saints and paintings of angels to tell the story of Christianity and aid in prayerful focus and concentration.

The role of art would become even more intense in Julian’s day. Because the story of Christianity came to be increasingly represented by the image of the cross, much of medieval art depicted the crucifixion. As the Middle Ages progressed, it became more and more graphic and prompted deep emotional responses in the viewer. By the height of the late medieval period, artistic renditions of the cross gave detailed pictures of the agonizing and bloodied wounds of Christ. The face of Christ was anguished and twisted in obvious and unspeakable suffering. The wounds became significant inspiration in contemplative prayer. Anchoresses were instructed to meditate on the wounds as metaphors for their own sinfulness. “Ah, Jesus, your mercy! Jesus, hung on the cross for my sins. For those same five wounds from which you bled on it, heal my bloody soul from all the sins by which she is wounded through my five senses.”¹⁵⁹ Be it so in memory of those wounds, precious Lord.”¹⁶⁰ Devotion to the wounds was not just personally advantageous. It also held the power of indulgence and “was specially linked to intercession for the dead and deliverance from Purgatory.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Master Rypon, MS. Harl. 4894, fol. 180, quoted in Owst, 48.

¹⁵⁸ Terry N. Kinder, *A Note on the Illustrations*, in Bell’s *Many Mansions*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Here again we see the religious symbolism: five wounds, five senses.

¹⁶⁰ *Ancrene Wisse*, 57.

Given the anxiety-ridden times, it is not difficult to understand why this type of devotion would be so popular. The image of the crucifixion emphasized the suffering humanity and physicality of Jesus which led to an enormous sense of pity and guilt among the faithful. "Contemplating vivid imaginings of Christ's suffering served to heighten the sense of Christ's love and the self's unworthiness, so as to produce a response of what, at least since Gregory the Great, was called 'compunction': a divinely inspired piercing of the heart by sorrow for sin and longing for God."¹⁶² The themes of suffering and mourning in the art of the crucified Christ "invited medieval Christians to remember actively the events of his death, to enter into the events and to weep and mourn at his sufferings along with and in imitation of his first-century followers."¹⁶³

Besides stimulating their compassion, viewers were also reminded of their own complicity in the death of Christ because the "bleeding wounds make tangible the sin based alienation of the human from the Divine."¹⁶⁴ The image of the crucifixion became so entrenched in religious consciousness that "canon law eventually required the presence of this sign of expiation on the altar before the priest at mass, the mystical commemoration of this sacrifice."¹⁶⁵ The moving experience of seeing the elevated host, as discussed above, was merged to the crucified Christ in a new way. "Eucharistic

¹⁶¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 246.

¹⁶² Frederick Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁶³ Ross, 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Binski, 45.

communion triggers mystical union; reception of the vivifying host in turn lends life to the image of Christ."¹⁶⁶ The result was twofold. While iconography provoked the viewer's own sense of compassion, culpability, and guilt, it also became a vehicle towards union with the divine. Images became imbued with intrinsic potency. The faithful started using them as charms, "intended to function as instruments of visionary experience, in other words, to induce, channel, and focus that experience."¹⁶⁷ People believed that "any work of art could prompt a vision"¹⁶⁸ and they acted accordingly.

Ever a woman of her day, Julian was so affected by the artistic images of the crucified Christ that she refers to religious art in the first paragraph of her book. She also reports on the first page, that she prayed for a bodily sight, or vision, to gain more knowledge of Christ's passion and she asked for three wounds. She makes a correlation between her devotion to the passion of Christ and the religious paintings to which she was exposed. She believed, as the Church taught, that the art was divinely inspired. She says "the payntyngys of crucyfexes that er made be the grace of god aftere the techynge of halye kyrke to the lyknes of Crystes passyonn, als farfurthe as man ys witte maye reche." [the paintings of crucifixes were made by the grace of God according to the Holy Church to resemble Christ's passion, as far as human ability is able.]¹⁶⁹ When placed in the context of the popular piety of her day, it is clear that Julian was deeply immersed in,

¹⁶⁶ Jeffrey Hamburger, "The Visual And The Visionary," *Viator* 20 (1989), 173.

¹⁶⁷ Hamburger, 174.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁶⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 202.

and influenced by, all aspects of her social and religious culture. Graphic and sometimes gory religious art had church sanction and theological authority and rendered in Julian a profound compassion and compulsion to suffer as Christ had suffered.

While Julian exhibited an intense devotion to the crucifix, she also related to the women at the cross. Much of medieval iconography included images of the mother and friends of Jesus, mourning at the foot of the cross. These witnesses were important because “their affective gestures and expressions of despair marked out a mode of response relevant to the audiences of such images.”¹⁷⁰ Julian longed to feel the depth of that despair. She says “Me thought I wolde haue bene that tyme with Mary Mawdeleyne and with othere that were Crystes loverse, that I myght have sene bodylye the passionn or oure lorde that he sufferede for me, that I myght have sufferede with hym as othere dyd that lovyd hym.” [I thought I would have been with Mary Magdalen at that time and with the others who loved Christ, that I might have seen myself the passion of our lorde that he suffered for me, that I might have suffered with him as others did who loved him.”]¹⁷¹ Although the crucifixion scene was the most pervasive in medieval art, the image of Mary became very popular as well. Her role as the suffering mother became immortalized in the construction of the *Pietà*, the mother of pity, showing her holding the dead body of her son, her face emanating sorrow, resignation and acceptance.

The proliferation of iconography depicting the agony and death of Christ, and the profoundly sorrowful mother of God grew in tandem with the social chaos and

¹⁷⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1:202.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the fourteenth-century preoccupation with death that was inspired by the Plague.

Iconography as tools for mediation with the divine did not happen in isolation either. It was legitimized and strengthened because of other popular religious beliefs and practices. "Many factors contributed to the erosion of the barriers that separated art and mystical experience. The cult of relics and the corresponding evolution of reliquaries played a decisive role, in the monastic as well as in the popular sphere."¹⁷² In the next section we will examine the popular sphere in an effort to discover the other religious influences in which Julian would have been immersed.

Religiosity

The religiosity of a people is characterized by their personal response to a belief system. While belief in the tenets of the faith found in the creeds and repeated during mass and other ritualistic events was mandatory, the emotional response and religious behaviour of the participants could not be controlled. Medieval Christians were weaned on a sense of their primal sinfulness. It was written in the creeds, embellished by zealous sermonizers and expounded upon in popular literature.¹⁷³ Repercussions for sin would be dealt with after this life, either in hell or purgatory. Medieval Christians were told in vivid detail about the excruciating and eternal pains of hell and purgatory, either from the pulpit or from a visionary's account after a mystical visit there. The prognosis for sinners was appalling. "Visitors to purgatory saw souls in every posture of physical torment-

¹⁷² Hamburger, 162.

suspended by meat-hooks driven through jaws, tongue or sexual organs, frozen into ice, and boiling in vats of liquid metal or fire."¹⁷⁴ Often the punishment was visibly indicative of the crime: "the sexually promiscuous were tormented in the loins, the gluttonous forced to drink scalding venom or nauseous filth, the backbiters and liars had their tongues or lips sliced away."¹⁷⁵ Life on earth was the only chance to affect or reduce one's coming torment because penance and good works were applied to the sinner's account. For example, "one day of sickness or tribulation patiently borne while we are still in this world was equivalent to a year's torment in Purgatory."¹⁷⁶ These equivalencies were preached and well known and were designed "to move the Christian to action on his own behalf while still in health, to complete his penance, to live a mortified life, and to be generous in charity."¹⁷⁷ One's self-perception of vileness and need for repentance was ever present and as we saw above, theological art depicting a broken and bloodied Christ at their hands, confirmed their culpability.

Christians knew they were in dire need of confession and penance and they engaged in a methodical working out of their redemption by practicing the sacraments and following the Ten Commandments. But then the pestilence came and a more intense religious experience was sought. Self-loathing and feelings of despair and inadequacy, and the immediacy of death, led to an inordinate beseeching and dependence on outside

¹⁷³ For a good example see *The Arte Or Crafte To Lyve Well*, W. de Worde 1505, RSTC 792.

¹⁷⁴ Duffy, 339.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

help. People formed groups who practiced special worship and ritual techniques together. These cults were looking for a more direct route to God. There were Christ-centered cults, cults dedicated to the Virgin Mary and cults honouring the saints. It was believed that saints could act on one's behalf, as powerful intercessors between humanity and God. Direct communication with saints and, as we shall see, with God in mystical experience, was believed to be possible and totally within the realm of earthly experience. Devotion to the saints often led to "reverence of their relics, and the erection of images and statues which often served as a foci for devotion."¹⁷⁸ Relics and shrines were everywhere in medieval Europe. People flocked to them for penance and healing. A very good example is found in the people's response to the death of Cardinal Peter of Luxembourg who was considered a saint while still alive. His death and burial in 1387 was described by a correspondent of Francesco Datini then in Avignon:¹⁷⁹

Hardly had he been put in the ground, than the lower people began to place candles there, and certain one-armed people, the crippled and the lame, as well as various other sick people, has themselves carried to near the cardinal...and gathered around his burial place...since the very day of his interment up to today there are so many people you would say it is a consecration. Certainly a hundredweight of candles (and more) are carried there each day, and there are already so many waxed images that they exceed a thousand, of one sort or another. The learned as well as the ignorant, the idiot, the poor go there as to a great indulgence, and that both morning, afternoon and evening. Consider that every night 200 people sleep and keep watch out of devotion in that spot. Many sick people have gone there and, having completed their novenas, have been completely cured. From outside, from the fortified villages of the region, have come the lame, the crippled, the one-armed and paralytics, who have been cured by the powers of God and this holy cardinal.

¹⁷⁸ Swanson, 35.

¹⁷⁹ The following account is in Swanson, 152-53, and although it is long it encapsulates the essence of medieval devotional piety and activity.

Shrines and relics were thought to be able to “trap the power of the saint”¹⁸⁰ and there was often a macabre clamor to attain “skeletons, bits of hair, bones and so on”¹⁸¹ of saintly people who had died. Relics were considered so powerful that each church had its own reliquary, and individually owned relics would be a prized bequest, willed to covetous relatives. Just as intercessions by saints could help reduce your time in purgatory, and the time of your loved ones, indulgences could also garner favour. They afforded opportunities to reduce time according to works accomplished while still on earth; self-improvement being impossible after death. The “Treasury of Merits” put forth by Pope Clement VI in 1343, stated that the saints, and pre-eminently Christ by his Passion, had built up a super-abundance of merit before God which the church could direct to other causes; a theory which allowed the hierarchs, primarily the pope, to distribute indulgences which remitted the pains to be incurred after death. Pilgrimages to a shrine or the acquisition of a relic or indulgence were thought to be penitential, hearkening back to the growing pessimism of purgatorial certainty. People reported that prayers were answered, sicknesses healed and miracles performed. Sometimes intercession and amulets weren’t necessary because it was possible to have a direct experience of the presence of God.

¹⁸⁰ Swanson, 158.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Mysticism

Mysticism¹⁸² is beyond the communion of saints. It involves personal experience and consciousness of God's presence. "The mystical element in Christianity is that part of its beliefs and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to, what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."¹⁸³ Historically this was achieved through asceticism and contemplation and was prevalent among the monastic religious orders, whose members sought a cloistered life of solitude and silence. Besides a consciousness of the presence of God, mysticism was also a vehicle for special knowledge. A mystic usually reports an infusion of wisdom that would otherwise have been unattainable through normal human effort. Unearthing hidden and secret meaning in scripture was also a form of mystical endeavor. One could penetrate the *mystical* depths of scripture through biblical exegesis. Either way, a mystical experience was impossible without an infusion of God's grace, from which flowed "a loving knowledge, a secret wisdom that short-circuits the memory and stupefies the intellect because it surpasses abstract, conceptual knowledge."¹⁸⁴ An accepted characteristic of mysticism is that the experience defies exact explication. It is ineffable and therefore, what we read or understand to be revelatory is but a pale and colourless shadow of the actual occurrence.

¹⁸² The word 'mystical' entered definitively into Christian vocabulary through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, a sixth century Syrian monk. The noun 'mysticism' came into common usage in the 17th century.

¹⁸³ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), xvii.

¹⁸⁴ Harvey Egan, S.J. *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), xxiii.

There was a solid tradition of mysticism in Christianity since shortly after its inception as a religion, but the thirteenth century ushered in a significantly unique version. "It was the combination of extraordinary penitential practices and what the mystics themselves often spoke of as love's excess, insanity, madness, and folly that was distinctive to the new mystical trends of the era."¹⁸⁵ It was "rooted in the search for identity with Christ by concentrating on the passion and Christocentric devotion, often in language which is more that faintly erotic, emphasizing love and ecstatic achievement."¹⁸⁶ The new mysticism of the later medieval period can be characterized with words such as "visionary, ecstatic and excessive"¹⁸⁷ and was "accepted and encouraged as a valid way of seeking contact with God."¹⁸⁸ It became an increasingly popular goal of medieval Christians and "was pioneered by women and came to expression in the nascent vernacular theology."¹⁸⁹

In his seminal series entitled *A History Of Western Christian Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn attributes the extraordinary rise in visionary mysticism of the period to the fact that a number of cultural trends coincided, most specifically the rise in secularization, especially in literature and the change in acceptable *gendered* religious response. Religious books of theology and devotion were increasingly available in the vernacular

¹⁸⁵ McGinn, 157.

¹⁸⁶ Swanson, 178.

¹⁸⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 154.

¹⁸⁸ Swanson, 180.

¹⁸⁹ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 30.

and, as the medieval period progressed, the works became increasingly emotive.¹⁹⁰ A woman's access to legitimate religious experience was affirmed in the literature. In fact, many devotional treatises and rules were written solely for a female audience.¹⁹¹ Not only was a woman's mystical experience *personally* advantageous, it gave her status as a holy person in the eyes of the community and a special significance in the church because "ecclesiastical officials employed miracle working women ecstasies as useful counters to the role of women in contemporary heretical movements."¹⁹² Another important thing to remember is that mysticism, visionary or otherwise, no longer resided in the exclusive domain of the religious cloister. It was believed that the presence of God could be perceived by all people of faith in their regular experience of life.

Another factor that cannot be underestimated in the new, highly affective mysticism of the fourteenth century was the role that iconography played. As we saw, sacred images played a vital role in the dissemination of popular devotional practice and "gazing at images often induced visionary experience."¹⁹³ McGinn points out that "nuns were probably among those members of society with the most sophisticated visual skills of comparison and juxtaposition, precisely because every aspect of their lives, from attending mass to private devotions and prayer, was lived in the constant presence of images."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ See the examples of anchoritic literature cited in chapter two, for example.

¹⁹¹ See the *Ancrene Wisse*, cited above.

¹⁹² McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 154.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 319.

The highly affective nature of fourteenth century mysticism is not surprising since one would expect it to echo the prevailing religiosity of the day. As in other forms of behavioural piety discussed above, mysticism cannot be separated from the culture or social conditions within which it is achieved and like the rest of religious expression in the fourteenth century, mystical experience was highly visionary and emotional.

The religion and religiosity of the medieval period, coupled with the social reality of the period, created a culture of death. It was two-pronged in that, religiously, "the gaze of late medieval England was fixed on the broken body of a wounded and bloody Jesus,"¹⁹⁵ and, socially, medieval Christians were fixated on their own deaths. The bloodied body of Christ on the cross was the central visual focus of the period and the dramatic symbol of Christianity's belief system. "Christianity, after all, placed a death at the center of its drama of salvation...its central sign was in effect an implement of lethal torture."¹⁹⁶ The cross also implicated one's own culpability. It urged reflection upon one's own essence as a sinner in dire need of the redemption effected by the crucified Christ. But Christ's death only opened the gates of Heaven; getting there still remained an extreme source of anxiety for the medieval Christian. The fires of hell forever licked at their heels and one felt an urgency to do whatever was necessary to assure one's passage upward instead of downward.

¹⁹⁴ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 30.

¹⁹⁵ Ross, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Binski, 9.

The panic and religious behaviour during the Plague years can be further understood when the social and religious conditions are viewed against the specific Augustinian theology of sin and suffering, which was pervasive during the period.

Doctrine of Sin and Suffering

The belief about sin and suffering in the fourteenth century was rooted in the Bible, which was “far and away the most influential and important book for the Middle Ages.”¹⁹⁷ The Bible routinely stated that evil and suffering were perpetrated on a sinful world by a just God. “Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?” (Amos 3:6) “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?” (Lam. 3:38) “I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things.” (Isa. 45:7) “The Lord your God pronounced this evil against this place; the Lord has brought it about, and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you.” (Jer. 40:2-3)

During the Middle Ages, biblical commentaries were popular reading among monks and ecclesiastics, especially those written by Augustine of Hippo (354-430), “one of the two or three most influential thinkers in all of Christian thought, and perhaps the seminal figure in determining the way the Middle Ages looked at reality.”¹⁹⁸ Western Christians would have been ruled by the authority of the Augustinian concept of sin which held that because all came from Adam, “we are what Adam was in consequence:

¹⁹⁷ William R. Cook, and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1883), 3.

¹⁹⁸ Cook and Herzman, 81.

fallen, damned, doomed, condemned.”¹⁹⁹ He taught that “humanity inherited Adam’s sin and guilt and that, apart from the unmerited grace of God, there is no hope of escaping judgment and divine justice.”²⁰⁰ Augustine contended that God’s wrath was not blameworthy because what he created was essentially good (Adam and Eve before the fall), but turned bad as a result of the free will (which was essentially a good thing wrongly executed) that God lovingly bestowed upon them. It was humanity’s use, or misuse, of its free will that caused its own downfall which was another reason for the gruesome self-loathing of the medieval Christian. Adam’s sin corrupted the good and marred subsequent generations with the mark of original sin, preventing them from ever escaping the mire into which they had been thrust.

The legacy of Adam was turned around in the New Testament in the letters of Paul, particularly in his discourse on Christ’s role as the second Adam. He writes: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Cor. 15:22) In Paul’s Adam-Christ typology, Adam is the original transgressor and all of humanity inherits his sinfulness. Paul says “as was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust.” (1 Cor. 48) In his typology Paul sets up two ages, one of Adam and one of the new age of Christ. Through his death and resurrection, Christ redeems, saves and renews the fallen corpus. “Humanity sinned; Humanity was condemned; Humanity must die. Humanity therefore *did* die; but it was not we who were executed, but the *Second Adam*. It was Christ, the

¹⁹⁹ Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, 147.

²⁰⁰ Thomas E. Helm, *The Christian Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 105.

new humanity, who bore our sins, paid our debt, released us from God's condemnation, and thereby enabled us to benefit from the effects of his restoration." ²⁰¹

The words of redemption, however, seemed lost on medieval Christians. The despair and circumstances of life in the fourteenth century obscured the risen Christ side of the typology. ²⁰² As we saw above, rather than a symbol of resurrection, the medieval depiction of Christ was death: the crucified Christ, brutally and painfully murdered by wicked and sinful human beings.

Conclusion

As we have seen, pilgrimages, shrines, relics and indulgences were all routes away from hell and were used incessantly by medieval Christians as a means of indulgence and penance. These practices thinned the veil between the living and the dead, paving the way for mystical experiences. Prayers to the saints, and the saints' response obviated by miracles, weakened the great barrier between heaven and earth, life and death and the living and the dead. "The barriers between the seen and the unseen, between natural and supernatural power, whether angelic or demonic, were deemed to be more porous in the late Middle Ages than they are now. That indeed is the most profound single difference between the mental structure of the religious attitudes of that day, and of

²⁰¹ Bell, *Many Mansions*, 161.

²⁰² This typology will become more significant in the chapter on Julian's theoretical theodicy. I introduce it now to lay a foundation for what is to come and to show how, before her vision, Julian's despair obscured its meaning.

the religiously committed in ours.”²⁰³ Preparation for death and the afterlife was seen as the purpose of life and all the stops were pulled to ensure one’s salvation.

Death was such a preoccupation between the Fourth Lateran and Fifth Lateran (1515) councils, that “the whole period seems to be overshadowed by four words used as a poetic refrain by the English monk, John Lydgate (d. 1449/50) and the Scot William Dunbar (d.c. 1520): *Timor mortis conturbat me*—the fear of death sets me in turmoil.”²⁰⁴ The words were taken from the Office for the Dead and represent “an obsession with death and its consequences, and a somewhat panic-stricken desire to limit the effects of divine retribution.”²⁰⁵ As we have seen in the previous chapter, these sentiments were at their height during the plague years of 1348-49 and their aftermath. Although the fear of death may have peaked with the onslaught of plague, “cultures respond in certain ways to events because they are already predisposed to do so.”²⁰⁶ This chapter demonstrates that the predisposition to such despair was informed by the religion and religiosity that preceded it. That religious ethos would continue to dominate the consciousness of the medieval mind for centuries. In the next chapter we will examine how the religious culture, coupled with the social conditions of the fourteenth century, determined the quest for an existential theodicy in the writings of Julian of Norwich.

²⁰³ Keen, 297.

²⁰⁴ Swanson, 191.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁰⁶ Binski, 129.

Chapter Four

Julian's Existential Theodicy

In chapter two we saw that the social conditions of the fourteenth century, especially the plague, caused unspeakable suffering and despair during Julian's lifetime. More than a third of the population of England perished with the first and most deadly incursion of the so-called Black Death in 1348. It swept through towns and villages leaving diseased and corrupt corpses in its wake as well as a stunned and panic-stricken population. The destruction was so swift and pervasive that many people thought it was apocalyptic. "The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair"²⁰⁷ and "ignorance of the cause augmented the sense of horror."²⁰⁸ In chapter three we established that the agitation was reinforced by the religious ethos of the period. Christians believed "that a scourge so sweeping and unsparing without any visible cause could only be seen as Divine punishment upon mankind for its sins."²⁰⁹ This idea was reinforced by the prevailing Augustinian theology on sin and suffering. The ungodly circumstances created a medieval culture of death and panic, which saw the increase of indulgences, relics, religious processions, flagellants, and pilgrimages, as a frenzied and

²⁰⁷ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 99.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

self-loathing population attempted to save itself and appease a wrathful and punishing God.

As a woman of her day, Julian was obviously immersed in the religious culture and identity. Her own anxiety about her human, sinful nature is evident in the Short Text. Whenever she refers to herself directly, she is self-effacing and condemning. She says she is a “synfulle creature lyevande in this wrecchyd flesh [sinful creature living in this wretched flesh]”²¹⁰ and a “wrecchyd worme.” [wretched worm]²¹¹

In this chapter we will explore Julian’s existential difficulty. We will examine how the social conditions and medieval doctrine of sin caused a crisis of faith for her. By a crisis of faith I do not mean to imply that her belief in God was questioned. That would have been unthinkable in the fourteenth century. Julian’s crisis stemmed from the fact that she witnessed a great deal of suffering and she could find neither existential comfort in a loving God, nor a reasonable explanation for it. She says she rued her life and hardly had the patience to go on living because “thare was none ese ne na comforth to my felynge botte hope, faythe and charyte, and this y hadde in trowthe botte full lytille in felynge.[there was no ease or comfort for me except hope, faith and charity and truly I felt very little of this]”²¹²

Julian’s problem stimulates the question: how can we believe in an all-powerful and all-loving God when all around us there exists such devastating evil and suffering? The paradox of “*Unde malum?*, from whence evil-if there be a God? was first known to

²¹⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 219.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 211.

be formulated in Western philosophy by Epicurus ca. 300 B.C.E.”²¹³ Sometimes the question cannot be answered satisfactorily and it becomes a natural barrier to belief. David Hume, the seventeenth century philosopher, articulated the problem. About God, he asks: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both willing and able? whence then is evil.”²¹⁴ Hume’s solution to the problem is to remove himself from the question, concluding that belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God in the face of evil, is illogical. For Hume, evil is the quintessential proof of the non-existence of God.

For those who believe in God, but are shaken in that belief, the question becomes more specific. It does not ponder God’s existence in the face of evil because God’s existence is indisputable. For monotheists, the question becomes more complex. It attempts to solve the problem of evil while maintaining the belief in an all powerful, all-loving and all-knowing deity. When one is addressing the problem of evil within *monotheistic* parameters, one’s quest becomes a *theodicy*. Theodicy is defined as “the vindication or defense of divine providence in view of the existence of evil.”²¹⁵ It is the *religious* response to the problem of evil. It derives from the Greek *theos* (God) and *dike* (justice). It removes blame from God and replaces it with a defense. The term was first introduced by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716). He

²¹² Colledge and Walsh, 1: 230-231.

²¹³ David Birnbaum, *God and Evil: A Unified Theodicy/Theology/Philosophy* (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 1989), xx.

²¹⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part x, quoted in Michael L. Peterson, *The Problem of Evil* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 44.

²¹⁵ Barber, 1503.

wrote, “there remains, then, the question of natural theology, how a sole Principle, all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful, has been able to admit evil, and especially to permit sin.”²¹⁶

Theodicy can be approached in two ways. The theoretical or philosophical method attempts to make the problem of evil understood and intelligible. It is an intellectual pursuit, concentrating on principles of logic and employing the use of reason to examine the problem.²¹⁷

The other approach is existential, which “focuses on the sufferer and practical means to cope with and to overcome the suffering. In the face of suffering the question becomes, “where is God?” The emphasis is not upon understanding and explanation, but with the everyday struggles against evil.”²¹⁸ The personal experience or witness to horrific evil or suffering, “while not logically refuting the existence of God, actually has the psychological power to separate one from belief in God.”²¹⁹ Although Julian did not disbelieve in God, she felt a *separation* from that belief and this led to a despair that she said could only be cured by faith and hope of which she had very little.

Julian is so troubled that she admits to questioning God’s motives. She says, “and me thought zyf synn hadde nought bene, we schulde alle hafe bene clene and lyke to oure

²¹⁶ Gottfried. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 98:43.

²¹⁷ We will examine theoretical theodicy in the next chapter.

²¹⁸ Barry Whitney, *Theodicy, An Annotated Bibliography On The Problem of Evil 1960-1990* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 10.

²¹⁹ Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 85.

lorde as he made vs. And thus in my folye before this tyme ofte I wondrede why, be the grete forseande wysdome of god, syn was not lettede.” [and I often thought that if sin was not created, we should all have been clean and like our lord as he made us. And thus in my folly²²⁰ before this time I often wondered why, by the great prescient wisdom of God, sin was not prevented]²²¹

Julian does not understand why God would allow something (sin) to be created that would cause such suffering among the people and such personal despair within herself. Her use of the word ‘prescient,’ is significant. As a Christian monotheist, she was taught that God created everything and knew everything and had power over everything. Julian concluded therefore, that God knew beforehand the disastrous affect that sin would have on his creatures and that he had foreknowledge of the suffering and despair that would be visited upon the human race because of sin. He knew that sin would produce a vile and weak species that could never be free of sin no matter how great the attempt at avoidance. Julian wanted to know why God would knowingly allow such a scourge. Surely He could have created a world that was more to his liking, making such evil and suffering unnecessary?

Julian’s agitation over the question is not unique, nor is it surprising. In the corpus of Christian thought theologians have struggled with this fundamental issue continuously. For example, after converting to Christianity, Augustine wrote: “Whence is evil? What

²²⁰ We see a foreshadowing here in which the reader is alerted to a change or transformation in Julian’s thinking that results from her vision. She clearly distinguishes between the time (of folly) before her vision and the time after her vision.

²²¹ Colledge and Walsh, I: 244.

torments there were in my heart in its time of labor, O my God, what groans! When I sought an answer...the unspoken sufferings of my soul were mighty cries for your mercy. You know what I suffered...all that I roared with the groaning of my heart went into your ears, and my desire was before you."²²² Augustine's words illustrate the mental anguish that proceeds from the question and further supports the idea that Julian would have suffered a great deal of anxiety without a theodicy which would give her the ease and comfort for which she longed.

Julian's vision gave her the opportunity to pose the questions that so troubled her. When God assures her that "all shalle be wele", Julian says that, with great fear, she responded "A, goode lorde, howe myght alle be wele for the grete harme that is comorn by synne to thy creatures?" [Ah, good Lord, how might all things be well given the great harm that has come to your people through sin.]²²³ This question forms the crux of Julian's thought but because she was a medieval Christian and felt guilty and agitated for even questioning God's purpose, it drove her further into despair. She says "this styrmge was mekylle to forsayke; and mournynge and sorrowe I made therfore with outyn resone and dyscrecionn of fulle grete pryde." [the impulse to think this was greatly to be shunned and I mourned and sorrowed on this account, unreasonably, lacking discretion, filled with pride]²²⁴ Julian lacked the necessary faith and hope needed to endure. If she had complete and unshakeable belief she would have employed the faith solution and would have accepted "that all earthly events, all goods and evils, are the direct result of

²²² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* VII, II, quoted in Robert J. O'Connell, S.J. *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1969), 72.

²²³ Colledge and Walsh, I: 247.

the omnibenevolent will and omnipotent causal agency of God and that human beings have no right to question the divine distribution of goods and evils."²²⁵ If she had complete hope she would have accepted that, "God's plan for his creation is clearly beyond the reach of human comprehension,"²²⁶ and she would have resigned herself to her life. Julian could do neither. Her probing is a question of theodicy and despite her discomfort with it, the question forms the basis of her religious concerns and is the vehicle for her transformation. Her visionary question to God also reveals that she was a thoughtful and intelligent woman who was not content to accept dogma without thinking.

During her visionary experience Julian tries to recover her faith and hope. She seeks to understand God's purpose in the world, and to be reassured of his loving nature. Before she can be returned to a sense of "ese and comforth," her "hope, faythe and charyte" must be restored. She longs for reassurance from God despite the jeopardy in which he has placed his creatures. She wants answers to her pressing concerns: how can all be well given the great harm that has come through sin to your creatures? Why, by the great prescient wisdom of God, was sin not prevented?

Julian's ease and comfort were restored through the insights gleaned during her vision. The first insight addressed the first half of the theodical equation, that is, the idea of an all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing God. The revelation of a loving God addresses that aspect of God which was most hidden from Julian and her fellow

²²⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 247.

²²⁵ Barry Whitney, *Evil And The Process God* (New York and Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 98.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

Christians. Medieval Christians certainly believed that God was all-powerful and all-knowing, but they did not apprehend that God was all-loving. God's love was not obvious during the fourteenth century. As we saw, it was eclipsed by the suffering of the people and the doctrine of a wrathful and punishing God. Julian says, "for many *men* and *women* leues that god is alle myghty *and* may do alle, and that he is alle wisdom and can do alle, but that he is alle *love* and *wille* do alle, par thay stynte." [for many men and women believe that God is almighty and may do everything, and that he is all wisdom and can do everything, but that he is all love and wishes to do everything, that is where they fail]²²⁷

When her vision of the corporeal body of Christ began, Julian's first comprehension was that "oure lorde schewyd me a gastelye sight of his hamly lovyng." [our Lord showed me a spiritual sight of his familiar love].²²⁸ She describes a God quite different from the wrathful and punishing God of her religious tradition. She did not perceive the God of the Old Testament whom people feared and were in such a panic to appease. Her vision showed a God who loved them. Julian's sense of security in a loving and all-powerful God comes to her in the form of an allegory.

She relates the image of a hazelnut that is so small that it fits in the palm of her hand. As she peers at it she sees, "thre partyes. The fyrste is that god made it, the secon^dde ys that he loves it, the thyrd ys that god kepes it." [three properties. The first

²²⁷ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 275.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 212.

is that god made it, the second is that he loves it, and the third is that he preserves it.]²²⁹ Julian perceives that the hazelnut is the “whole universe, everything that exists.”²³⁰ The allegory teaches Julian that “alle thynges habe the beynges thorowe the love of god.” [all things have being through the love of God.]²³¹

Through her vision Julian achieves an existential theodicy by ascertaining that God’s love is constant but people are blind, and in their despair, can not see it. She learns that people despair for two reasons: they do not realize how much God loves them, and they do not realize how deserving they are of that love. This lack of perception is caused by the blindness of sin, “whilke scourge it alle for bettes mann *and* womann, and alle for brekes thamm, *and* noghtez hym selfe in thare awne syght sa fare forth yhat hym thynke that he is noght worthy bot as it ware to synke in to helle.” [which scourge belabours and breaks men and women, and they become so despicable in their own sight that it seems to them that they are fit for nothing but as it were to sink into hell.]²³² Contrary to the prevailing self-image of vileness, Julian’s visionary sight depicts a humanity worthy of being enfolded in the love of God. She says, “He es oure clethyng, for loove wappes vs and wyndes vs, halses vs and alle be teches vs, hynges a boutte vs for tendyr loove, that he maye nevere leve vs.” [he is our clothing, for he is that love that wraps and enfolds us, embraces us and guides us, surrounds us for his love which is so tender that he may never

²²⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 213.

²³⁰ Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 127.

²³¹ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 213.

²³² *Ibid.*, 1: 256.

leave us] ²³³ The allegory of the hazelnut convinces Julian of God's love, power, and wisdom and satisfies the first half of the theodical equation.

Although Julian becomes convinced of God's love and protection, the other half of the theodical equation, whence sin and suffering, has yet to be satisfied. When God tells her not to worry, that all shall be well, her question remains, "how can all be well because of the great harm that has come through sin to your creatures?" As we have seen, her belief up to this point has been that sin is the root of all moral and natural evil and suffering is its consequence sent by God as punishment. Because of her new awareness of the love of God and the absence of punitive wrath on his part, Julian is more puzzled than ever about the nature and role of sin. She asks, "whate es synne? For I sawe trulye that god dothe alle thyng, be itt nevere so litille, nor nathynge es done be happe ne be eventure, botte the endeles forlue of the wysdome of god. Whare fore me behovede nedes grawnte that alle thyng that es done es wele done." [what is sin? Because I truly saw that God does everything, however small it may be, and that nothing is done by chance, but is of the endless providence of God's wisdom. Therefore I was compelled to admit that everything which is done is well done]. ²³⁴ Julian asked for further edification but none came. At this point in the Short Text she is confused by what she sees and, despite the comforting insights, her anxiety about sin does not abate. Her basic question remains; if God makes, loves and preserves his creatures, why was sin not prevented, so that His creatures would not have to suffer so. She says God specifically answered her

²³³ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 212.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1: 226.

with the words, “synne is behouelye.” [sin is necessary.] ²³⁵ By understanding that sin is necessary, Julian gleans that sin serves a purpose, but she does not elaborate except to say that it “purgede, that is to say to we be fully/noghted of oure awne dedely flesche, and of alle oure inwarde affecciom(s) whilke ere nought goode.” [purges us, that is to say it helps us deny our own mortal flesh and all our inward affections which are not good.] ²³⁶ It is clear that Julian does not understand the pedagogical significance of this spiritual insight at this point because even as she repeatedly hears that “all will be well,” she repeatedly asks about sin. “A good Lorde, howe myght alle be wele for the grete harme that is comom by synne to thy creatures?” ²³⁷

In God’s answer, we again find the Adam-Christ typology, as Julian is reminded of the release from Adam’s legacy and the salvation executed by the resurrection of Christ. Julian says: “he lered me that I schulde be halde the gloriouse asethe, for this aseth makyng is mare plesande to the blissede godhede and mare wyschippulle to mannes saluaciom with owtene comparysom than euer was the synne of Adam harmfulle.” [he taught me that I should contemplate his glorious atonement, for this atoning is more pleasing to the blessed Divinity and more honourable for man’s salvation, without comparison, than ever Adam’s sin was harmful] ²³⁸

²³⁵ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 244.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 245.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 247.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 247.

God advises Julian to move her gaze from the sin of Adam to the salvation of the risen Christ. She is told to concentrate on the hope of Christ, and not on the legacy of the sin and despair of Adam. There was a finitude to the age of Adam. His corporate reign ended with the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ brought hope in the promise of salvation and there is no limit to his age. God told Julian that since he had set right the greatest of harms by sending his son to pay for the sin of Adam, she should rest assured that he will set right everything that is less. God teaches Julian that suffering must be accepted, but he assures her that just as there was a limit to the age of Adam there is also a limit to suffering. "He sayde nought: *pou* schalle not be tempestyd, thowe schalle not be *trauayled*, *pou* schalle not be deseted; bot he sayde: *pou* schalle nouzt be *ouercommen*." [he did not say: you will not be assailed, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted, but he said: you will not be overcome]²³⁹

Julian perceives, in words formed in her understanding, that, as in the age of Adam, pain and suffering will also pass away and God's preserving love will take its place, just as the new age of Christ replaced the old age of Adam. She sees that it is important not to wallow in pain, but to see it as the transient thing it is: "*paym* es *passande* *and* schalle be brought to nought. There fore it es nought goddys wille that we folowe the felynges of payne in sorrowynge and in mournynge for *thaim*, botte sodaynlye *passe ouer* *and* halde vs in endesse lykyng, that es god allee myghtty oure lovere and kepare." [pain is passing and will be reduced to nothing. Therefore it is not God's will that when we feel pain we should pursue it, sorrowing and mourning for it, but that

suddenly we should pass over it and preserve ourselves in endless delight, because God is almighty, our lover and preserver] ²⁴⁰ Julian advises people to have patience and trust in God and they will be rewarded. "For pacience *and* for sufferamnce: sudanly thowe schalle be takene fra alle thy payne, fra alle thy disse and fra alle thy waa." [for patience and endurance: suddenly you will be taken from all your pain, from all your sickness and from all your woe], ²⁴¹ "and powe schalle be fulfyllde of ioye and blysse, *and* powe scalle neuer hafe na maner of payne, na maner of sekenes, na maner of myslykyng, na wantyng of willer, botte euer ioye *and* blysse with outem ende. Whate schulde it than greve the to suffyr a while, *seem* it is my wille and my wirschippe?" [and you shall be filled full of joy and bliss, and you will never have any kind of pain, no kind of sickness, any kind of displeasure, any kind of disappointment, but always endless joy and bliss. Why should it grieve you to suffer a while since it is my will and my honour?] ²⁴²

Julian was admonished not to preoccupy herself with the woes of the world but to "trist in hym for alle thyng." [trust in him in for everything.] ²⁴³ She understands that it is necessary for a person "sum tyme to be in comforth *and* sum tyme to fayle *and* be lefte to hym selfe. God wille that we knowe that he kepes vs euere lyke syekyr, in wele and in woo, *and* als mykille loves vs in woo as in wele." [to be comforted at one time,

²⁴⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 232.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 263.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1: 248.

and at another to fail and to be left to himself. God wishes us to know that he keeps us safe at all time, in joy and in sorrow, and that he loves us as much in sorrow as in joy.]²⁴⁴

God showed Julian two kinds of sickness that needed to be cured. "The tone is incypence, for we bere our trauaylle and oure payne heuely. The tothere is dispayre of douteffulle drede, as I schalle saye efterwarde. And thiese twa er it that moste travayles vs and tempertes vs, as by that oure lorde schewed me, and maste lefe to hym that thiese be amendede." [The first one is impatience, for we bear our troubles and our pain heavily. The other is despair, coming from doubtful fear, as I shall say afterward. And it is these two which most belabour and assail us by what our Lord showed me, and it is most pleasing to him that they should be amended.]²⁴⁵

This message of love and hope was revealed to Julian by bodily vision and words formed in her understanding. She says she repeated the words formed just as she understood them and when she assented to them "alle vanyshed awaye, *and* I was brought to gret reste and pees, *with* outene seknes of bodye or drede of conscyence." [everything vanished and I was able to have rest and peace, without bodily sickness or fear of conscience.]²⁴⁶

Julian's fear and despair left her and she accepted that all would be well. The revelation of hope succeeded in giving Julian much solace. Her ease and comfort were returned when her faith, hope and charity were restored. Her sense of separation from

²⁴⁴ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 231.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1: 274.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 267.

God vanished. She felt re-connected and assured of God's love. Of the restoration of her faith she says, "Than sawe I wele with the faythe that y felyd that thare ware nathynge be twyx the crosse *and* heuerm that myght hafe desesyde me." [then I saw with the faith that I felt that there was nothing between the cross and heaven that might have grieved me.] ²⁴⁷

Julian's hope was restored with her firm belief and conviction that "all shall be well," despite the devastation and woe she saw around her. "And thus oure good lorde answered to alle the questyons and doutes that I myght make, sayande fulle comfortabyle on this wyse: I wille make alle thyng wele, I schalle make alle thyng wele, I maye make alle thyng wele and I can make alle thyng wele; and powe scgalle se *pat* thy selfe, that alle thyng schalle be wele." [and so our good Lord answered me in all the questions and doubts I could raise, saying most comfortingly in this way: I will make all things well, I shall make all things well, I may make all things well and I can make all things well and you shall see that for yourself, that all things will be well.] ²⁴⁸

Julian says this message of hope was revealed very tenderly, showing no kind of blame to her or to anyone who will be saved. Instead of blame, there was compassion. Julian concludes that she had wrongly blamed God for the sin and suffering in the world. She says "than were it a grete vnkyndenesse of me to blame or wondyr of god for my synnes, *synn* he blames not me for synne." [it would be most unkind of me to blame God or marvel at him on account of my sins, since he does not blame me for sin.] ²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Colledge and Walsh 1: 236.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 249.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 246.

Julian's sense of charity was replenished and manifested in the writing of her book. She wanted to share the message she received from her visionary experience. She says, "I vnderstande a myghtty *comforthe*" [I understood powerful consolation]²⁵⁰ and "this schewed oure lord me, to make vs gladde and merry." [our lord showed this to me to make us glad and merry]²⁵¹ Julian believed that her vision was not meant for her alone and that God's message of love and hope was for the benefit of all those who were suffering in such turbulent times. She says God, "of his curtais love and of his endles goodnes walde schewe *generalye* this visyonn in *comforthe* of vs alle." [of his courteous love and of his endless goodness wanted to show this vision generally for the comfort of us all.]²⁵²

Julian received reassurance that God loves and protects his people in happiness and in despair, "and in alle this I was mekylle styrrede in charyte to myne evy^m cristene, that thaye myght alle see and knawe pe same that I sawe, for I walde that it ware *comforthe* to thame / alle as it es to me." [and in all this I was stirred in charity towards my fellow Christians, that they might all see and know the same that I saw, for I would that it were a comfort to them all as it is to me]²⁵³

This chapter has elucidated the progressive form of Julian's questions and the systematic unfolding of her existential satisfaction. It was important to dwell on the

²⁵⁰ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 250.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 242.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 1: 219.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1: 224.

fullness of her thought in this way for two reasons: expounding at length on the ideas in the Short Text lays the foundation for the full fruition of Julian's theoretical theodicy which follows in the Long Text, and shows how the theological ideas in the Long Text would not have been possible without the existential theodicy achieved in the Short Text.

A review of the literature reveals that little has been done in the area of theodicy in Julian studies. What has been done concentrates on Julian's ultimate theological achievement. Despite the ample evidence that she is deeply troubled by the suffering and despair she witnessed, many writers portray her otherwise. John Julian Swanson, for example, writes that, despite the calamitous time, Julian "does not despair in the face of suffering and secondly, she does not claim it is a punishment from God."²⁵⁴ Others assert that "all readers will have been impressed by the optimism of Julian."²⁵⁵ Although it is agreed that Julian eventually writes a book of comfort and theological optimism, it is believed that her optimism was hard won and was born, not of theological certitude, but of doubt and despair. Because Julian's writing was, in the end, a text of theological optimism asserting the fullness of God's love, the genesis of the work is overlooked.

Most scholars are absorbed by Julian's later theology because of its depth and layers of meaning. This concentration, however, leads to a weakness in Julian studies to date because the pre-vision woman is often ignored. Julian's visionary experience represented only twenty-four hours in her life and occurred when she was thirty years old. Her world-view would already have been shaped by then, as a result of her life

²⁵⁴ John Julian Swanson, OJN, *Julian-Ten Years Later* (The Order of Julian of Norwich, 1998),

experience and religious ethos. The pre-vision Julian was anything but optimistic. She says that before her vision she had often prayed for death because “ofte tymes I behelds the waa that is here.”²⁵⁶ [often times I beheld the woe that is here]. There is no question that Julian’s words convey personal anxiety. In fact, anything other than anxiety and despair would have been an anomaly, considering the facts of the socio-religious period we just examined.

A scholar whose most recent work credits the relevance in Julian studies of the chaotic historical period during which Julian lived, is Joan Nuth in her book *God’s Lovers In An Age Of Anxiety*. As she sets up her discussion of fourteenth century mystics, she begins with an historical framework, acknowledging the profound affect the age had on its people. She writes, “The preoccupation with sin, confession, penance, and fear of eternal damnation, already prevalent for over a century, was exacerbated by the Black Death. Some turned to asceticism to appease a wrathful deity.”²⁵⁷ Nuth even approaches the issue of theodicy when she says, “Others succumbed to scepticism: how could one trust religious teachings about a good, just and powerful God, when a disaster of such magnitude could happen for no apparent reason?”²⁵⁸ Although Nuth raises the theodical question here, she does not pursue it as an idea, nor does she apply it to Julian’s work. Rather, she uses it to set the mystics apart from the

²⁵⁵ David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 129.

²⁵⁶ Colledge and Walsh, 1: 263.

²⁵⁷ Joan Nuth, *God’s Lovers In An Age Of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 29.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

general public by adding the caveat, "Some members of this century turned to God as an antidote to anxiety and despair, finding there a place of comfort, peace, security, and, above all, love."²⁵⁹ Nuth puts Julian in this category. However, as consistently stated, it is the assertion of this thesis that Julian did not initially turn to God for comfort and peace, but rather for answers to hard questions. Julian addressed God with deep agitation and despair and her vision afforded her the opportunity to question him, to put him on the stand as it were. We agree with Nuth that Julian eventually claimed an optimistic theology, but we submit that it was only possible following a tumultuous journey through despair and scepticism. It is the change in Julian, the transformation, that is at issue because it provides a deeper understanding of the totality of her achievement. She despaired and cried out to God and questioned his motives. Her noteworthiness is in her ability to transcend her circumstances and steadfastly work at an existential and theoretical theodicy, *in the midst of, and despite, such calamitous times*. Julian's transcendence becomes clear when the Short Text and the Long Text are read as distinct and separate books.

There is no scholarship to date on Julian's quest for an existential theodicy which forms the foundation for her further study into the theoretical realm. Denise Baker addresses theodicy but, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Baker's focus is on putting Julian in the prevailing Augustinian context of her day by outlining the teleological approach taken by Julian as opposed to Augustine's etiological premise. Like

²⁵⁹ Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety*, 33.

this present study, Baker acknowledges the transformation in Julian from the Short Text to the Long Text, but she is referring to Julian's maturation from a visionary to theologian, rather than the process from existential to theoretical theodicy as this thesis does.

Judith Dale writes about the theodicy that can be discerned in the imagery used by Julian. She says that by using pictorial images of the devil, Christ and the Lord and the Servant, Julian is playing with binary opposites, "offering a theodicy that never reaches a solution but continually points towards one by forever reopening the binary opposition of good and evil, soul and body, heaven and hell, God and humankind, forever deferring the closure that would finally settle the account."²⁶⁰ Dale concludes that Julian's so-called use of binary opposites puts the text in the category of theodicy. We, however, depart from Dale on this point in our contention that theodicy must have some kind of satisfactory reconciliation, not merely pose the question or raise the issue.

The writer who comes closest to looking at the potential for an existential theodicy in Julian's work is Elaine Heath, although she never refers to it as a theodicy, existential or otherwise. She says "in the field of pastoral theology, Julian's doctrine of the healing, transforming mercy of God is unsurpassed in holding forth hope to broken people....She communicates a truth that is almost too good to be true—God's love is

²⁶⁰ Judith Dale, "Sin is Behovely, Art And Theodicy In The Julian Text," *Mystics Quarterly* 25 (1999), 142.

deeper than sin, deeper than death itself. And because God's love is that deep, any wound can heal."²⁶¹

Heath points out that Julian's work amounts to a healing salve of great pastoral significance but she does not discuss the significance of that healing on Julian's own ability to move from one form of theodicy to another.

By accepting the visionary words formed in her understanding, Julian was able to achieve the existential theodicy she craved. Her faith in a loving God was restored. Her hope for the world was resolved. The first part of the theodical equation was thus satisfied. She was able to find solace and conviction in a loving God despite the deplorable conditions of her life experience. On the suffering side of the equation, she learned that suffering had a limit and that she would not be overcome by it. She was advised to have patience and trust in God and to share the revelation of love and hope with her despairing fellow Christians. Julian's hope replaced her despair, and her renewed faith replaced her doubt. She was able to reclaim her ease and comfort within the boundaries of her faith. This gave her the impetus to move forward towards a theoretical theodicy and to tackle the remaining question she had of why God would have created sin in the first place, knowing the suffering it would cause.

Julian ascertained a partial insight on the question through a spiritual vision near the end of her experience, but she did not immediately understand it. She says that although she was able to describe the bodily sights as she saw them, and repeat the words

²⁶¹ Elaine Heath, "Judgement Without Wrath: Christor Victor in the Servant Parable," *Ashland Theological Journal* 30 (1998), p 45.

formed in her understanding practically verbatim, she says, “for the gastely sight, I hafe sayde som dele, bot I maye neuer fully telle it; and perfore of this gastely sight I am stirred to say more, as god wille gyfe me grace.” [about the spiritual vision I have told a part, but I can never tell it in full; and therefore I am moved to say more about this spiritual vision as God will give me grace] ²⁶² Julian indicates that she will contemplate and study the meaning of the spiritual vision and will tell more when she more fully comprehends its meaning.

Julian’s statement is a harbinger of the next stage of her theodical development in which she establishes a theological treatise on the subject of sin. In the meantime she fulfills her duty by disseminating the comforting words of her vision. She writes the Short Text as a revelation of love, then devotes the next twenty years examining her spiritual vision to more deeply cull its meaning. This leads to a synthesis of her longing and to the achievement of a theodical transformation from an existential pursuit to a theoretical resolution with which she could be satisfied.

Chapter Five

Julian's Theoretical Resolution

In this chapter we will examine the ways and means of Julian's journey from existential to theoretical theodicy. In chapter four we discovered how Julian's visionary experience had re-affirmed her shaken faith, hope and charity and given her the consolation for which she had longed and prayed. She was also given the assurance that God was indeed all-loving (an aspect of faith which had been confusing during the fourteenth century for reasons we have already discussed), as well as all-powerful and all-knowing. She perceived that sin was necessary and that God held no wrath towards his people nor did he assign blame for their shortcomings. On the contrary, Julian was assured that all things are working towards the good, that "all shall be well," and the final glorious synthesis will be unfolded in heaven where wounds of sin would be turned into badges of glory. But although Julian was soothed, she was not completely satisfied. She *believed* that all would be well, she wrote a very optimistic book about her experience and there is evidence that she counseled people on the principles of her new found spiritual convictions.²⁶³ Yet Julian still wanted more elucidation. She accepted that all shall be well and was soothed by it on an *emotional* level, but she needed a way to

²⁶² Colledge and Walsh, 1: 273.

²⁶³ Margery Kempe reports seeking spiritual guidance from "Dame Ielyan for pe ankres was expert in sweth thyngys & good counsel cowd zeuyn" [for the anchoress was expert in such things and could give good advice] See reference chapter one, page 2.

support the idea *theologically* and she had to be able to reconcile the concept with her experience of life. She still did not understand why God would permit sin or create it in the first place, knowing the suffering it would cause. She was also confused about God's wrath. Surely the heinous plague and the ensuing fear and suffering, were sent by a (justifiably) angry God to punish his wicked and wretched creatures, but during her discourse with God she was told that he did not blame his creatures and that he held no wrath towards them. Instead, God had pity and compassion and unending love for them. Although she was comforted and absolutely convicted of the truth of her visionary exposition, she still wanted to know *how* it all worked. Julian's account of her vision demonstrates that she was an intelligent and compassionate woman who, besides needing spiritual consolation and hope, longed for a rational, intelligible explanation. As Grace Jantzen points out "not even the most overwhelming experience could shake her from seeking answers to hard questions or make her content to bask in emotional glow."²⁶⁴

By seeking an intellectual explanation to support her emotional assurance, we see the beginnings of her transformation. Prior to her vision, while steeped in the affective piety of her day, she had asked for three wounds (see chapter one) and great suffering. After deriving her existential certitude she no longer prayed for wounds, pleading instead for understanding. This is the first sign of the transformation that was about to begin in Julian's theodicy. Not content to 'bask in the emotional glow' she continued to live within her questions, albeit with much less anxiety about them. She asked, "I know truly

²⁶⁴ Jantzen, 190.

þat we syn greuously all day and be moch blame wurthy, and I may neyther leue the knowyng of this sooth, nor I se nott the shewyng to vs no manner of blame. How may this be?" [I truly know that we sin grievously all day and are very blameworthy; and I can neither reject my knowledge of this truth, nor see that any kind of blame is show to us. How can this be?] ²⁶⁵ She goes on: "And yf it be tru that we be synners and blame wurthy, good Lorde, how may it than be that I can notte see this truth in the, whych arte my god, my maker in whom I desyer to se alle truth?" [If it be true that we are sinners and blameworthy, good Lord, how can it be that I cannot see this truth in you?] ²⁶⁶ Not content with platitudes or facile answers, she pleads for an explanation which will satisfy. "A, lord Jhesu, kyng of blyssee, how shall I be esyde, who shall tell me and tech me that menedyth to wytt, if I may nott at this tyme se it in the?" [Who will tell me and teach me what I need to know, if I cannot at this time see it in you?] ²⁶⁷

The answers to her troubling questions are given in the mysterious example of the parable of the Lord and the Servant, which Julian saw during her vision. Julian was shown two figures who were perceived both spiritually and in bodily likeness. The Lord is looking upon his servant with great love and mild countenance. The servant stands before the Lord, ready to do his will. The Lord sends the servant off on a task. The servant joyfully and speedily runs to do his master's will but in his haste he slips and falls into a ditch. He cannot get out of the ditch and he loses sight of his Lord. He is distressed

²⁶⁵ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 511.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2: 512.

and focuses only on his aches and pains. Julian saw that the fall produced seven painful results in the servant; bruising, physical clumsiness, weakness, blindness in his reason and a perplexing of his mind, an inability to rise out of the ditch, loneliness, and isolation in a desolate place. "And of all this the most myschefe that I saw hym in was feylyng of comfort, for he culde notte turne his face to loke vppe on his lovyng lorde, whych was to hym full nere, in whom is full comfort." [The greatest hurt which I saw in him was lack of consolation, for he could not turn his face to look on his loving Lord, who was very close to him, in whom is all consolation.] ²⁶⁸ The servant, who just moments ago, stood eagerly waiting to please the Lord, now is unaware of the Lord's continuous loving gaze.

Julian turned to look at the countenance of the Lord and saw that he looked upon the servant, not with disdain or blame, but with great compassion and pity. The Lord did not blame the servant for the fall because he knew it was occasioned by the servant's great will to do his bidding. Julian says she looked very carefully, "to wytt yf I culde perceyve in hym any defauzte, or yf the lorde sguld assigne in hym any maner of blame; and verely there was none seen, for oonly hys good wyll and his grett desyer was cause of his fallyng. And he was as vnlothfull and as good inwardly as he was when he strode before his lorde, redy to do his wyllle." [to know if I could detect any fault in him, or if the Lord would impute to him any kind of blame; and truly none was seen, for the only

²⁶⁷ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 512.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2: 515.

cause of his falling was his good will and his great desire. And inwardly he was as prompt and as good as he was when he stood before his lord, ready to do his will]²⁶⁹

Julian did not write about the example in the Short Text because she did not immediately understand its significance. But despite her lack of discernment she says in the Long Text that “the marveylyng of pe example went nevyr fro me; for me thocht it was gevyn me for answey to my desyer.” [the wonder of the example never left me, for it seemed to me that it had been given as an answer to my petition.]²⁷⁰ About the parable, she says “For twenty yere after the tyme of the shewyng saue thre monthys I had techyng inwardly”. [For twenty years after the time of the revelation except for three months I received an inward instruction.]²⁷¹ That she bothered to study the parable for so many years when she could have been content, like so many, to bask in the assurance of God’s love, bespeaks her determined intellectual will and her tenacity. It also illustrates the importance to which Julian ascribed the use of natural reason. She says “ By thre thynges man stondyth in this lyfe, by whych iij god is wurschyppyd and we be sped, kepte, and savyd. The furst is vse of mannes kyndly reson.” [man endures in this life by three things, by which God is honoured and we are furthered, protected, and saved. The first is the use of man’s natural reason.]²⁷² She further states that God wants his creatures to use all their human characteristics to know him, asserting that “oure reson is groundyd in god”. [God

²⁶⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 516.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 519.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 520.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 2: 707.

is the foundation of our natural reason.]²⁷³ Her need to achieve a rational explanation for the incredible optimism she perceived, demonstrates her commitment to reality and her compassion for the suffering people she sees around her. The ambiguity between her vision and her world is not lost on her. “If God is all goodness and is immanent in all things and events as we saw, logic compels the admission that all things must be well, in flat contradiction to human experience.”²⁷⁴ Julian’s use of reason was an attempt to find the meaning and significance in sin and suffering. She wanted comfort but also something that would satisfy her intellectually and theologically. The use of reason had been somewhat submerged by the popular piety that took hold during the fourteenth century. There was little room for armchair reflection or theological formulations, given the fears and anxiety that permeated the society. However, reason had always been a strong tradition in Christian theology. Anselm of Canterbury’s axiom “*Fides quaerens intellectum*”, “faith in search of understanding”, rang out within the corridors of Christianity. While Julian’s *revelation* had immediately re-affirmed her faith, hope and charity, her application of reasoned study over time gave her the intellectual understanding for which she craved.

It is the contention of this thesis that Julian’s theoretical theodicy could not have been consummated without this process. It was essential that Julian establish an existential theodicy before she could begin the journey toward theoretical synthesis.

²⁷³ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 574.

²⁷⁴ Jantzen, 167.

Existential theodicy must be a precursor to theoretical theodicy, otherwise there is no reason to probe the question; indeed, there is no question. "Without faith we have no link to God...from faith we proceed to the use of reason and from reason to contemplation, but faith comes first."²⁷⁵ It is with this contention that this paper contributes to the study of Julian's theodicy and builds on the work of other scholars who have examined Julian's texts. By showing the process from Julian's request for three wounds, to her vision, to her existential theodicy to her request for spiritual insight, to the reasoned study of the vision, to the ultimate resolution in a theoretical theodicy, this thesis documents the transformation that occurred within Julian, from an anxiety-ridden, spiritually-anguished young woman to an assured theoretician. The process took place over a twenty-year period and is reflected in the division of the two texts that she wrote. The transformation was afforded not only by her vision, but also by the intellectual work and time she was willing to devote to her questions after her faith had been reassured.

In the next section we will look at Julian's analysis of the parable, to discover how its exposition on sin and the wrath of God, the two great impediments to Julian's intellectual understanding, led to her transformation. We will draw on the works of three scholars who have addressed Julian's ideas on sin and redemption and demonstrate how this thesis builds on their work.

In her vision Julian was told that sin was no thing, that it had no substance. She was also informed that "sin was behovely." These conflicting notions, as well as the teachings of the Church on sin as we saw above, left Julian confused and intellectually

disillusioned. However, her willingness to analyze her vision and to continually examine its meaning led to a discourse on sin that was both novel and illuminating, beginning with the dual nature of humanity.

As Julian examined the parable in more detail, she came to the realization that the servant who was Adam was possessed of two dimensions of his nature and represented all of humanity. The double nature of the servant gave Julian the ground from which to probe more deeply into the mystery of the parable, a mystery that was "seen by Julian in the traditional theological sense as a deep well from which, no matter how much one draws, there is always more and more, springing up to eternal life."²⁷⁶ As she peers into the mystery of the example the double nature is clarified.

She defines the two portions of the servant as his sensuality and his substance. One's sensuality is one's outer life; one's consciousness, will, personality, ego, senses, thought and so on. Resting within the same person is the inner substance of the soul. One's substance is held in continuous and everlasting love and unity with God and has been from the very moment of creation. Julian says, "the outwarde party is our dedely flessh, whych is now in payne and now/ in woo, and shalle be in this lyfe, where of I felte moch in thys tyme, and that party was that I repentyd. The inward party is a hygh and a blessydfulle lyfe, whych is alle in peece and in love and this is more pryvely felte." [The exterior part is our mortal flesh, which is sometimes in pain, sometimes in sorrow, and will be so during this life, and I felt it very much at this time; and it was in that part of me

²⁷⁵ Bell, *Many Mansions*, 104.

²⁷⁶ Jantzen, 175.

that I felt regret. The interior part is an exalted and blessed life which is all peace and love and this is more secretly experienced.]²⁷⁷ According to Julian, the servant's fall into the ditch fractured his being into these two parts, setting the outward part in opposition to the inward part which is, mostly unbeknownst to the sensual part, eternally united to God. The pain and suffering in life result from the fracture. The fracture itself is the so-called sin because all pain, evil and suffering flow from it. If the fracture had never taken place and the servant had not fallen there would be no sensual self, dislodged from its proper home in its substance, and therefore, there would be no sin and suffering.

However, the servant cannot be blamed for the fall because it happened as a result of the servant's love of his lord and his eagerness to do his will. Julian sees that the servant is more to be pitied because the fall alienated him and blinded him from God and his own true self. As well, the substantial nature of the soul is still intact after the fall. It is the unsullied part that remains one-ed with God. Julian uses the term 'knitted' to describe this deep union. The servant's exterior self, or his sensuality, suffers because he can not see this. "Although he still had a godly will and intended to serve his lord, the servant's blindness about himself prevented him from recognizing this and thus kept him at odds with himself."²⁷⁸ Julian says that the Lord looks upon his servant with compassion and has no wrath. "God does not blame us for our sins, he sees the frailty of our nature and our fractured contrariness, and recognizes that sin is both a consequence and an

²⁷⁷ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 372.

²⁷⁸ Jantzen, 206.

augmentation of our brokenness. He longs to help and heal us; he is not angry with us nor does he wish to punish us.¹²⁷⁹

By delving into the mystery of the parable, Julian discovered that the fall was not a deliberate act of disobedience by the servant (Adam/humanity) but an accidental happenstance that thwarted his good intentions. As the servant suffers the despair and pains brought on by the fall and subsequent spiritual blindness, God looks upon him with pity and compassion. The fracture becomes the grievance/sin because it causes the servant to turn away from and to be blinded to God, and the wrongdoings and suffering that ensue are the wounds resulting from the fall and the consequences of separation from God. The wrongdoings and suffering emanate from the sensual part but the whole person is not involved because of that portion that exists within the Godly will that has never assented to sin and is eternally united to God, despite the outward, sensual markings.

That is all well and good because it gets people off the hook for their sins, but what about God? Surely an all-knowing God would have known beforehand that the servant was going to fall into the ditch and suffer. Surely an all-powerful God could have prevented it and surely an all-loving God could have saved the servant from all his suffering. The question of theodicy remains. Why would God allow the suffering to take place; why did he permit the fall in the first place?

As Julian digs deeper into the parable she receives more inward instruction and is answered with the astonishing perception that when Adam fell into the ditch, Christ also fell. So "the lord had indeed foreseen the fall into the ditch but he had also foreseen the

rescue.”²⁸⁰ Julian had already seen two portions in the servant, the substance and the sensuality. Now Julian sees that within the sensuality portion Christ also exists. The sensuality also is double natured. She says “in oure fader almyghty we haue oure kepyng and oure blesse, and a nemptys oure kyndely substance whych is to vs by oure makyng fro *without* begynnyng; and in the seconde person in wytt and wysdom we haue oure k(e)pyng, and anemptys oure senseallyte, oure restoryng and oure savyng.” [In our almighty Father we have our protection and our bliss, as regards our natural substance, which is ours by our creation from without beginning; and in the second person, in knowledge and wisdom we have our perfection, as regards our sensuality, our restoration and our salvation.]²⁸¹ Humanity is thus joined to God the whole trinity in its substance and is united to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, in its sensuality.

“When Adame felle godes sonne fell; for the ryght onyng whych was made in hevyn, goddys sonne myght nott be seperath from Adam, for by Adam I vnderstond alle man. Adam fell fro lyfe to deth, in to the slade of this wrechyd worlde, and aftyr that in to hell. Goddys/ son fell *with* Adam in to the slade of the meydens wombe, wych was the feyerest doughter of Adam, and that for to excuse Adam from blame in hevyn and in erth; amnd myghtely he fechyd hym out of hell. For in all this oure good lorde shewed his owne son and Adam but one man.” [When Adam fell, God’s son fell because of the true union which was made in heaven. God’s son could not be separated from Adam, for by

²⁷⁹ Jantzen, 179.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁸¹ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 584.

Adam I understand all mankind. Adam fell from life into death, into the valley of the wretched world, and after that into hell. God's son fell with Adam, into the valley of the womb of the maiden who was the fairest daughter of Adam, and that was to excuse Adam from blame in heaven and on earth, and powerfully he brought him out of hell. For in all of this our good Lord showed his own son and Adam as one man.] ²⁸²

For Julian, Christ is so united to humanity that he is the conduit who brings humanity back to itself and to God. Christ's solidarity with and love for humanity is also doubly shown. First, when Christ is so united within humanity that he is one-ed with Adam, and second, when he too suffers the physical wounds of the fall when he is crucified. The fall then, was a *felix culpa*,²⁸³ a dreadful event that reaps such positive rewards that it is deemed to be literally, a *happy fault*. The Augustinian theme "resulted in the coming of Christ, and thus was of greater honour and delight both to ourselves and to the Father than there would have been had there never been a fall."²⁸⁴ Julian established that God held the servant blameless for the fall and held no wrath towards him, and that it was the servants's own blindness and fractured self that was responsible for his woe. She discovered that the servant was in constant union with God in his substance, and that Christ was present in the substance *and* sensuality of the servant, as a redemptive presence, in effect pulling the sensual portion back to its substance. Jantzen agrees that the parable of the Lord and the Servant is the crux of Julian's thought, saying

²⁸² Colledge and Walsh, 2: 534.

²⁸³ Jantzen, 196.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

its exposition in the Long Text is “a discussion which might with justification be considered the key to her whole teaching.”²⁸⁵ Jantzen uses the disintegration of the human soul, and the process of spiritual integration, as her area of concentration. As cited above, Jantzen brings Julian’s work forward, into a timeless prescription for spiritual growth and healing. She asserts that the parable is a key dissertation on the problem of sin and suffering as we do, but she does not address it as a theodicy. This is where we build on her work. We recognize that the re-integration of the self towards wholeness is a key solution to Julian’s questions. We agree that the fractured self gives Julian a methodology to remove blame from humanity, and its ongoing process of re-integration establishes a teleology supporting Julian’s premise that “all shall be well.” However, we submit that this portion of Julian’s thought is a corollary of her much earlier thinking and is dependent on the success of her existential position as mentioned above. So far we have seen how the parable answers for Julian; “Ah, good lorde howe myght alle be wele for the grete harme that is comown by synne to thy creatures?” The key words in the question are ‘by sin’ which imputes blame and unworthiness. As we have seen the parable dispels the notion of a vile creature, describing instead, a creature who is misled and blind and in his blindness is unaware of how much God loves him and how worthy he is of that love. Such a creature deserves pity and compassion, not blame or wrath. Julian’s twenty-year study paid off with an intellectual basis to her existential supposition that ‘all shall be well.’ In the next section we will examine Julian’s question, “what is

²⁸⁵ Jantzen, 193.

synne?" to discover how the answer in the parable further cements Julian's theoretical theodicy.

While Jantzen brings Julian's work forward and applies to it timeless pastoral concerns of spiritual growth and healing, the work of Denise Nowakowski Baker keeps Julian firmly rooted in the fourteenth century by analyzing Julian's exposition on sin to see how it fits within the context of the prevailing doctrine. Baker approaches Julian's work as a work of *theodicy* and she studies Julian in the context of the fourteenth century, bringing her within temporal range of this thesis, but she differs in her methodology. While Baker is concerned with sources and religious context, and attempts to situate Julian in a theological world, we are engaged in the opposite endeavor by attempting to situate the world within Julian. Baker conducts a comparative analysis between Julian's theodicy and the Augustinian theodicy which dominated medieval Christianity. This is useful because it provides a point of departure for Julian's theodicy and further supports our supposition that Julian had a deep desire, both emotionally and intellectually, to affirm the optimism of her visionary revelations despite fourteenth century pessimistic religiosity and influence.

Baker highlights the differences in the two perspectives by asserting that the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and free will sets up a juridical paradigm whereby sinful creatures are punished for their sins by a just God. The doctrine represents a theodicy because "by attributing the eruption of evil in creation to the free acts of rational

creatures, angelic and human, who chose to disobey divine injunctions, Augustine and his medieval successors exonerate the all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful Creator.”²⁸⁶

As we saw above, this doctrine of sin and punishment permeated fourteenth century Christianity and was clearly believed by Julian and was a major source of her anxiety. We have already seen how Julian came to refute this position by expressing that she saw no wrath in God and no blameworthiness in his creatures. Baker contends that, “instead of looking back to the causes of evil, as Augustinian theodicy does, Julian looks forward to its ultimate consequences. Regarding sin from an eschatological perspective, she consoles rather than condemns.”²⁸⁷

This is what makes sin ‘behovely.’ Baker uses the terms teleological and pedagogical to describe Julian’s attitude towards sin. “She (Julian) argues that sin is necessary because it serves a beneficial function: sin is a means of achieving self-knowledge and knowledge of God.”²⁸⁸ Sin serves the same function as Christ does in the continuous process of reconciling the fractured self. While Christ works within the human being, sin works outwardly to effect contrition, compassion, and a turning to God. Julian describes these three things as spiritual medicines that heal the broken spirit, moving it ever closer to its own substantial self and to God. God allows sin and suffering for this reason. Julian says “For yf he see that it be for profyte to vs to morne and to wepe, he sufferyth *with* ruth and pytte in to pe best tyme for loue. And he wylle then *pat*

²⁸⁶ Baker, 86.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

we vse the *properte* of a chylde, that evyr/ more kyndly trustyth to the loue of pe moder in wele and in woo.” [For if he sees that it is profitable to us to mourn and to weep, with compassion and pity he suffers that until the right time has come, out of his love. And then he wants us to show a child’s characteristics, which always naturally trusts in its mother’s love in well-being and in woe.]²⁸⁹

Baker’s analysis of Julian’s work as theodicy is seminal in the discipline. She is solitary in her approach and provides a well-developed and structured account of Julian’s solution to the problem of evil. We agree with her analysis that Julian’s theology was teleological and represented an incredibly optimistic approach to the problem of sin and suffering, given the Augustinian doctrine of her day. But we build on Baker’s work by giving much more significance to the social world in which Julian developed her thought. We believe it is crucial to an understanding of Julian’s work and give it the substantial weight that is missing in Baker. By not addressing this aspect in an adequate way, Baker skips to the theodical *solutions* rather than the theodical *process* which we assert is central to Julian’s work. As we explained above, Julian could not have developed her optimistic theoretical theodicy without first having her faith and hope restored through her achievement of an existential theodicy. Baker’s work seems to indicate that Julian’s main purpose was theological, in that she set out to develop an intellectual position on theodicy. Although we agree with Baker that Julian’s work reaches a rich and complex theological depth, and that her discourse on sin is essentially teleological, we contend that Julian did not set out initially to accomplish this task. Julian’s purpose was much more

personal and immediate, as stated above. In this way our work builds on Baker's excellent analysis by adding the dimension of the existential and the personal. More recent scholarship by Christopher Abbott addresses the personal anxiety in Julian and credits it with precipitating her theology.²⁹⁰ Abbott focuses on Julian's lack of faith and anxiety as this thesis does. However, we differ in what we believe to be the genesis of the anxiety. Where we have attributed Julian's anxiety and lack of faith to the social conditions Julian experienced in the fourteenth century, Abbott attributes her anxiety to the fact that, as a woman, she dares to write. And he says that her lack of faith was in her initial reaction to her vision as raving, rather than a source of divine revelation.

The disparate interpretations and foci in the ever-increasing scholarship on Julian's work, points to the multi-valent nature of Julian's theological accomplishment. Whatever academic approach is taken, most scholars agree that Julian's theology was an optimistic message of love during a most difficult period in social and ecclesial history.

Julian concludes that there is a marvellous mixture within humanity that produces a dialectic between sorrow and joy, despair and hope, pain and wellness. And when one is in woe and despair, Julian accepts that it is necessary and profitable. She says "for it nedyth vs to falle, and it nedyth vs to see it; for yf we felle nott, we shulde notte knowe how febyll and how wrechyd we be of oure selfe, nor also we shulde not so fulsomly know pe mervelous loue of oure maker" [for we need to fall, and we need to see it; for if we did not fall, we should not know how feeble and wretched we are in ourselves, nor

²⁸⁹ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 607.

²⁹⁰ Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer) 1999.

too, should we know so completely the wonderful love of God.]²⁹¹ Again sin is a *felix culpa* because it allows the suffering servant to attain a much deeper joy within his Lord than he would have been able to achieve without the fall. Julian says, “And neverthelesse god sufferyd hym to falle, hym mercifully keeping that he perysschyd nott ne lost no tyme; and afterward god reysed hym to manyfolde more grace, and by the contrycion and the mekenesse that he had in hys lyuyng, god hath gebyn hym in hevyn manyfolde joyes, over passyng that he shud haue had yf he had nott synnyd or fallen.” [And nevertheless God allowed him to fall, mercifully protecting him so that he did not perish or lose any time; and afterwards God raised him to many times more grace, and for the contrition and the meekness that he had as he lived, God has given him in heaven manifold joys, exceeding what he would have had if he had not sinned or fallen].²⁹²

So Julian’s question to God, about why, through his great prescient wisdom, sin was not prevented, is answered to her satisfaction. She understands the pedagogical purpose of sin as a conduit that will lead the servant back to his essential nature and to God. Julian has also been assured that suffering on earth will be rewarded and turned into great badges of glory in heaven. The Lord said to Julian, “Lo my belouyd servant, what harme and dysses he hath had and takyn in my servys for my loue, yea, and for his good wylle. Is it nott reson that I reward hym his frey and his drede, his hurt and his mayme all alle his woo?” [see my beloved servant, what harm and injuries he had and accepted in my service, for my love, yes, and for his good will. Is it not reasonable that I should

²⁹¹ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 603.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

reward him for his fright and his fear, his hurt and his injuries and all his woe?]²⁹³ This furthered Julian's journey to theodicy because not only did she see no blame, which astonished her, she also discerned that the sin was somehow attached to the reward. She says, "And in this nott only oure good lorde shewde our excusing, but also the wurschypfulle noblyte that he shall breng vs to, tornyng all our blame into endless wurschyppe." [And in this our good Lord showed not only that we are excused, but also the honourable nobility to which he will bring us, turning all our blame into endless honour.]²⁹⁴

The blame Julian is referring to is that which humans put upon themselves; we have already seen that blame does not come from God. "For he seyeth: Accuse not thy selfe that thy trybulation and thy woo is alle thy defawght; for I wylle not *pat* thou be hevy ne sorrowfulle vndiscretly. For I telle thee, how so evyr thou do, thou shalle haue woo. And therefore I wylle that thou wysely know thy pennance whych thou arte in continually, and that thou mekely take it for thy pennance. And than schalt *pou* truly se that alle th(y) lyvyng is pennance profytable." [For he says: Do not accuse yourself that your tribulation and your woe is all your fault; for I do not want you to be immoderately depressed or sorrowful. For I tell you that whatever you do, you will have woe. And therefore I want you wisely to understand the penance that you are continually in, and to accept that meekly for your penance. And then you will truly see that your life is

²⁹³ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 517.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 553.

profitable penance]²⁹⁵ Julian ascertains that redemption has already begun and the sin and suffering itself will birth the joyful reward. "All the joys of heaven cannot justify previous pain and suffering unless these joys are in some way a direct result of the suffering, not just as compensating rewards, but as intrinsically impossible without the pain."²⁹⁶

Julian's interrogation of the parable of the Lord and the Servant, and her willingness to stay with it for such a long time reaped a great reward for her. She was able to find a way *theologically* and *theoretically* to support the existential theodicy immediately achieved by her vision. Although she was assured of God's love on an emotional and spiritual level and she had her shaky faith, hope, and charity restored, she was unable to rest until she was able to reconcile the unusually optimistic revelation with her experience of fourteenth century life. With the application of her reason, and the commitment to her questions, she aspired to a more rational answer to her fundamental question of how all things could be well given the woe that she saw in her world. That she herself was aware of her transformative, theodical achievement is evident when she says at the end of the Long Text, "Lord, blessyd mott thou be, for it is thus, it is wele; and now we see verely that alle thyng is done as it was thyn ordynawnce or ony thyng was made." [Lord, blessed may you be, because it is so, it is well; and now we see truly that everything is done as it was ordained by you before anything was made.]²⁹⁷ This

²⁹⁵ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 693.

²⁹⁶ Jantzen, 204.

²⁹⁷ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 730.

acknowledgement was not made in the Short Text, further demonstrating the crucial theodical development in Julian's thought in the evolution from the Short Text to the Long Text.

Because the parable of the Lord and the Servant required so much of her, much to her was given. As she studied the parable she received more inward spiritual sight and understanding, and over the years her inward instruction increased. As we saw in the previous chapter, Julian said that although people felt that God was all-powerful and all-knowing, they did not conceive of him as all-loving. At the end of the Long Text, Julian says that the meaning of the entire vision was made clear to her, fifteen years after its occurrence. She was finally answered with these words. "What, woldest thou wytt thy lords menyng in this thyng? Wytt it wele, loue was his menyng. Who shewyth it the? Loue. (What shewid he the? Loue. Wherefore shewyth he it the. For loue." [What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love.]²⁹⁸

Julian's theodicy is complete. She has overcome the final obstacle to her theodical certitude by affirming that, besides being all-powerful and all-knowing which was never in question, God was indeed all-loving.

Chapter Six

Summation and Conclusion

Julian of Norwich's work is multi-valent and complex, and as we discussed above, scholars have taken many different approaches to it. Some have chosen to probe her work from a feminist perspective, others from a strictly theological viewpoint. Still others examine the literary significance of her books because it is believed that Julian was the first woman ever to have written a book in the English language. As such, she was free to cull the language to create new theological meaning and extraordinary imagery. Because there are so many interesting themes to explore in Julian's work, it is an inexhaustible well from which to draw.

I chose to take a cross-disciplinary approach by looking at the historical and religious context in which Julian's book was written. I believe truer insights into a work can be obtained by examining its milieu. Julian was a deeply troubled woman and when one holds her despair against the light, one sees a reflection of a much larger world. The subtext of this thesis has always insisted that Julian remain a woman of her day.

As we saw, religious behaviour during the fourteenth century was highly emotional and often fanatical, predicated on a preoccupation with and fear of death. The incursion of the plague reinforced the ethos of death and damnation and cemented the sense that time was running out and a new sense of religious urgency and potency developed. "Driven by fear and a sense of guilt, people felt something had gone

²⁹⁸ Colledge and Walsh, 2: 733.

disastrously wrong and that the Black Death, like the Biblical plagues of old, must have been sent by an angry God to chastise mankind and turn him from his wicked ways."²⁹⁹ This thinking was encouraged from the pulpit and had biblical precedence, as we saw above. Religiosity was increasingly characterized by cults, veneration of relics, mysticism, and pilgrimage to shrines, all aimed at trying to secure a positive position in the afterlife. As a woman of her day Julian would not have escaped this ethos. We have seen that there is ample evidence in her work of the fear, despair and urgency that characterized her time.

When examined against themes explored in the philosophy of religion, we see that Julian's mission is theodicy. She repeatedly asks why God, with all his prescience, did not create a different world, and why he created sin, knowing the suffering and evil it would cause. Evil and suffering only become problems when they are at odds with one's beliefs, and Christian dogma held that God was not only all-knowing and all-powerful, but he was also all-loving. This was the most pressing issue for Julian. Was the God responsible for her horrific world really an all-loving God? The idea that a *loving* God would send such unspeakable suffering, and cause such fear and anxiety among the people was in conflict with her religious perspective of the world. The question of a loving God was the existential religious question that was of prime importance to Julian and, as we saw in chapter three, once settled by her vision, it became the most urgent message in the Short Text. Existential theodicies are essential components in the development of religious theories on the rationality of the world. Without an existential

²⁹⁹ Fleming, 149.

theodicy in place, Julian would not have had the foundation for a theoretical examination of the issue. As we discussed above, faith must come first and must precede the theoretical resolution. Julian's fortitude in staying with the theodical issue after her existential problem had been resolved is a testament to her commitment to the question. This led to the exceptional theoretical analysis she was able to finally achieve, as we saw in chapter four. Julian's process of transformation further demonstrates that the mind is naturally absorbed by its most pressing concern, in that she had to be reconnected to her faith before she could use her reason to more deeply explore God's meaning. This further supports the idea put forth in this paper, that Julian's existential resolution was a prerequisite to the optimistic theology she eventually established and for which she has become so esteemed.

The value of Julian's work is not limited to the theological significance of the process from existential to theoretical theodicy. Julian gives her readers insight into the consciousness of her age. She was ruled by religion like all other medieval Christians. She was a fourteenth-century woman trying to cope with her world and the religious ideas that shaped it. Her work is extremely valuable in portraying the consciousness of an historical age. Her work contributes to an understanding of the broader human characteristic of needing to ascribe meaning to a seemingly chaotic and irrational world. Julian's immediate triumph was her ability to interpret her visionary experience into a rational story of God's love which provided comfort for her and her fellow Christians during such a devastating time. When her work is put into historical context, one woman's quest for a theodicy translates into a psychological perspective on the

consciousness of the entire period. What is astounding about Julian's life is the way she was able to transcend her personal anxiety and the fear and despair of her world and create a work of existential comfort and theoretical significance in the midst of such emotional and psychological chaos. She achieved this remarkable synthesis by honouring the experiential evidence of her vision, and combining it with the illuminative authority of her own reason.

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