
Loosening Our Grip

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Julian of Norwich offers an alternative to our desire to control the world: What if the cross and resurrection of Jesus really define the pattern of divine action in human history? What if compassion, understood as the embrace of suffering, is the soil from which human action should grow? Then, perhaps, we could begin to loosen our death grip on the reins of history.

The twenty-first century is off to an inauspicious start. Since September 11, 2001, the world seems to have shifted into crisis mode. But anxiety and uncertainty are nothing new for the human race. In the late 1970s, Barbara Tuchman wrote a book entitled *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* with the thesis that we could find in the upheavals of the fourteenth century a “mirror” of our own calamitous era. Certainly the fourteenth century, which saw a decades-long war between France and England, a fracturing of the church into two and then three parts under rival Popes, and a plague that killed as many as half of Europe’s population, can lay as much claim as our own to being an “age of anxiety.” And if we can see in the mirror of the fourteenth century a reflection of our anxiety and uncertainty, perhaps we can also discern in that mirror the resources for hope to sustain us in anxious times.

The writings of Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416), collected in a single book known today as *Showings* or *Revelations of Divine Love*, might not seem at first glance a particularly promising resource. Her writings take a form that will strike many modern readers as bizarre: commentary on a visionary experience that occurred during a serious illness, in which she sees a

crucifix bleed and speak and undergo various other transformations. Further, these writings come from a context that seems alien to our own: Julian's book was composed during the latter half of her life, when she lived in a small two-room structure built into the side of a church in Norwich, the door to which was sealed, with only a window allowing contact to the outside world. In our secularized world of instantaneous communication, Julian might seem quaint at best and delusional at worst, locked away from reality in a kind of spiritual autism. But, to invoke Tuchman's image, the past is important not only because it is a "mirror" of the present, but also because it is "distant," and its very difference from us it can give us a sort of critical distance on our own age, in which we are so immersed that we cannot even notice its pathologies.

SEEING VISIONS

Save for the book she left behind (in two versions, an earlier short account and a later long account), Julian is one of the many medieval people who are in a sense lost to history. We know almost none of the facts of her life except that she had a visionary experience that led her, at some later point in her life, to become an anchoress—a kind of recluse living in the midst of a city who devoted herself to prayer and contemplation and occasionally acting as a spiritual guide. We do not know if she was ever married or had children, whether she was a nun, or what theological training, if any, she might have had. We do not even know her real name; she is known as "Julian" because she lived in a structure attached to St. Julian's church. What we do know, on the basis of her book, is that she was an extraordinary woman, who dared to write theology in a time and place when women's opinions on the things of God were not held in much account.

Julian divides her revelatory experience into fourteen visions or "shewings," as she called them in her Middle English. Most of these have as their focal point the crucifix that had been placed before her as part of the medieval rites for the dying. In this crucifix, an image that seems to sum up all of the pain and violence of the world, Julian sees an image of immense comfort because she sees in it an image of divine love so all-encompassing that even human sin cannot mar its perfection. The visions manifest God's love in various ways: she sees a small object in her hand that represents all of creation in its littleness in comparison with God; she enters into the wound in Christ's side to discover "a fair, delectable place, large enough for all humanity that shall be saved to rest in peace and in love"; she sees the discoloration of Christ's face at the moment of his dying; she sees Christ reigning in her soul, like a king in his kingdom. She also comes, after years of reflection on the visions, to certain insights that she feels are inspired by the Holy Spirit—a kind of extension of the initial revelation throughout her life: there is no wrath in God, but only in us; our "substance" (what a more technically trained theologian might call the *imago*

Dei) is held unfallen within the humanity of Christ; God will work a great deed at the final Judgment that will reconcile God's universal will to save with the reality of human sin. Perhaps most famous today is her insight that "our savior is our true mother in whom we are endlessly borne." Christ is like a mother, who carries us within himself and feeds us with his own body.

Julian finds her revelations comforting, because they speak of divine love, but also troubling, because they conflict with the image she had of God previously as wrathful and punitive. She had been taught that God hated sinners and punished them, but her visions seemed to speak of a God who loved sinners and sought to heal the damage that sin inflicted upon them. This conflict is simply an aspect of a more encompassing tension between what we can know of God now, in our fallen state, and what we will know in the vision of God in eternity. This tension defines the condition of our life in this world, even the life of one who has been granted an extraordinary revelation. Julian writes, "I saw him and sought him; I had him and wanted him."

TRUSTING GOD'S PROVIDENCE

After years of reflecting on her visions, Julian derives a seemingly simple, even puerile, message: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." At one point she expands on this: "And I saw truly that nothing is done by happenstance nor by chance, but all things by the foreseeing wisdom of God: if it be happenstance or chance in the sight of human beings, this is because of our blindness and our lack of foresight." Seeming to speak from within an unquestioning faith in divine providence, this seems hardly adequate to address the complex anxieties and uncertainties of the twenty-first century, which demand some evidence that such providence is in fact exercised. Even if we are convinced that God is on our side, we live in an era in which we believe that we must take in hand the reins of our own historical destiny in order to make things turn out according to God's will. Julian, in contrast, seems to prescribe inactivity in the face of life's calamities. When she considers the great act by which God will make all things well, she writes, "Our Lord God revealed that a deed shall be done, and he himself shall do it, and I shall do nothing but sin, and my sin shall not hinder his goodness working."

We might think that people in the fourteenth century relied on prayer and providence because they did not have sufficient technological means to determine their own destinies. But the matter is more complex than this. Julian was well acquainted with techniques that, even if they could not secure peace or health in this life, were seen as a way of securing the grace needed to attain salvation after this life. She calls such techniques "means," that is, the various ways in which grace is mediated to us through the common devotions of the late medieval Church: prayers to the precious blood

or the holy cross, requests for the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the other saints, and piety focused on Christ's humanity. She does not reject the use of such devotional techniques, but she says that they must be seen fundamentally as gifts given by God to help us and, therefore, as signs of God's gracious goodness: "it pleases him that we seek him and worship through means, understanding that he is the goodness of them all." In

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other words, Julian does not reject human activity in the realm of devotion—what we might call the "technology of prayer"—but rejects the view that these devotions give us any measure of control over our salvation. Instead, she locates our activity within the prior act of God.

This is significant for Julian because she sees our desire to have control through "technique" as revealing a fundamental distrust in God's goodness. For Julian, the chief problem that we have is not that we do not believe that God is sufficiently powerful or wise to bring about what is best for us. Rather, it is that we do not believe that God loves us sufficiently to will our good. "Some of us believe that God is almighty and may do all, and that he is all wisdom and can do all; but that he is all love and will do all, there we stop short. And this unknowing is what most hinders God's lovers, as to my sight." In other words, if we understood God correctly, we would be freed both from our desire for control and from the unbearable anxiety from which that desire springs.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S GOODNESS

The misunderstanding of God against which Julian reacts is one that seems particularly characteristic of the modern world. Already in the late Middle Ages certain theological currents had begun to understand divine power as the absolute capacity to bring things about, a capacity unconstrained by anything except God's own willing. God's will is no longer constrained by God's nature; rather, God's nature is unconstrained will. This tendency of thought reaches its most extreme formulation in early modern thinkers like Descartes, who seem to exempt God even from the laws of logic. If God had wanted to make $2+2=5$, he could have done so.

Of course, thinkers like Descartes believe that God has ordained a certain order of things, an order in which $2+2=4$, in which objects fall down rather than up, and in which gluttony is a vice rather than a virtue. Furthermore, this order operates with law-like regularity—a regularity that

we can discover through the scientific method. Indeed, scientific, empirical investigation is the *only* way in which we can discover the nature of the order of things, since that order is the result of an entirely arbitrary divine choice. The system of cause and effect that science can investigate offers us a kind of “shelter” from absolute divine omnipotence, a realm from within which we can exercise a sovereign control; through technology we can, as it were, “work the system” that God has put in place. The great irony in all of this is that the radicalization of divine power tends to make God irrelevant to human inquiry. Our task as humans is to investigate a system that God has created, but its origins in God’s arbitrary choice we cannot investigate. Indeed, for the most part, modern science proceeds on this assumption of the irrelevance of God.

Julian’s remarks about our failure to recognize that God is all-love can be seen as a criticism of all views that exalt divine power to the detriment of divine love. While it is true that God is all-powerful and all-wise, it is no less true that this divine power and wisdom operate within the limits of God’s all-loving nature. The order of things in our world is not simply the result of God’s absolute, unconstrained choice. Rather, it is the outworking of love and is always in accord with love. To see the world as a self-contained system that we must “work” through scientific investigation and technological manipulation is not primarily a philosophical mistake, but a spiritual one. It is a lack of trust that God wills good for us; it is the view that we are in some sense left on our own to eke out of nature whatever good we can. Of course, in a calamitous time like the fourteenth century, such lack of trust is certainly understandable. Can we really believe that a God who allows war and plague and schism has our best interests at heart? Isn’t such a God rather some sort of tyrant, who offers only slim hope of shelter from his wrath through the ecclesiastical system of the intercession of the saints and the grace of the sacraments?

Today we might ask whether or not we can really believe that a God who allows terrorism and AIDS and environmental devastation has our best interests at heart. Are we not, in fact, left on our own to work a system that God has left to run on its own? Today, of course, that system is not the sacramental system of the Church, but the inexorable system of the laws of nature and the will to power. Is it not incumbent upon us to throw ourselves into the various technologies through which power is channeled and, we hope, contained? Given the problems that the human race faces today, is it not irresponsible simply to sit back and say, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”? What evidence do we have that this is true?

FOCUSING ON THE CRUCIFIED

For Julian, it is the image of the crucified Jesus that is the focal point of her visions, is her primary “evidence.” This, of course, is a peculiar sort of

evidence, as Julian herself realized. Her initial reaction is to presume that she had lost her mind and had been “raving.” Even once she had realized that these were genuine revelations, their meaning remained dark and obscure to her. It is only with time and prayer that she could begin to discern that the cross itself is evidence of the divine love that pervades all times, places, and events. It is only when she begins to see that God is not only all-powerful and all-wise, but also all-loving, that the form of the crucified Jesus can be perceived as the form of God’s power to make all things well. God repairs the world’s pain, not by standing apart and commanding all things to be well, but by entering into that pain and healing our sad history from within through an act of love. The cross shows the paradox of God’s defeat of evil through submission to it out of love, and as such is the antidote to our desire to fix things through our mastery of them.

Julian devotes her life to letting this antidote work its way into her soul. But she realizes that in this life we can never fully be healed of the blindness to God’s love that is the source of our desire to control events. Put differently, exactly how the love shown on the cross will make well all that is not well will remain God’s secret until the final consummation of things. It is only then, Julian says, “when the judgement is given and we all are brought up above,” that “we will see clearly in God the secrets that now are hidden from us.” It is only then that “none of us will be moved in any way to say ‘Lord, if it had been thus, then it would have been completely well’; but we shall all say with one voice, ‘Lord, blessed may you be! For it is thus, and it is well.’” The realization of our present blindness to the solution of evil and pain, our inability now to say “it is thus and it is well,” is itself the beginning of the healing of our blindness, for it relieves us of the illusion that we have insight sufficient to master events and make them, by our own power, turn out right. The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate.

This is not, however, a counsel of inaction. Rather, it says that our action ought to conform to what we *do* see of God’s work of reparation. And what we do see is the cross. All that we do should be modeled on the paradox of the cross: action shot through with passion, mastery expressed in taking on the form of a slave, and the fulfillment of human life found in the laying down of that life. Julian speaks of this cruciform life as one of “compassion” or of suffering-with, and it is this life which testifies to the presence of Christ within us. When we act in such a way as to enter into the suffering of others, understood as a participation in the suffering of Christ, we act in accordance with what we see of God’s great deed of reparation.

ACTING IN THE WORLD

We hear a lot about compassion today, at least in selected spheres. We hear about compassion manifested in physician-assisted suicide or the euthanasia of severely disabled newborns. We have our compassion appealed

to in order to elicit our support for embryonic stem cell research and to justify military intervention to depose foreign governments that oppress their people. Whatever one may think of the various moral issues raised in these cases, it is clear that this is not what Julian means by compassion. For all of these supposed acts of compassion are really cases where we wish to master suffering rather than entering into it. We want solutions that will fix the evil that we see, whether this is the evil of incurable illness, a broken spinal cord, or an evil dictatorship. What Julian proposes instead is that we embrace the mystery of suffering, and it is only from within that embrace that action can grow that truly accords with God's love.

This is a difficult lesson for us to learn today. Our technological mastery has grown to such an extent that it really does seem to offer us a kind of secular salvation. The pains of life can be taken away; the end of life can be deferred and perhaps even eliminated. These hopes seem more realistic than the pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by offered by religion. Science makes advances every day. Of course, we have no real "evidence" that suffering and death can be definitively conquered by technical means. It is something that we take on faith, because the alternative seems unbearable to contemplate. But is this faith in worldly salvation really any more believable than Julian's faith in a salvation beyond this world? In a way, her faith seems far more realistic in its assessment of our existence here and now, because it accepts the inevitability of suffering and death but sees within them the seeds of a redemptive possibility that goes beyond our capacity to imagine.

Of course the desire to master and control does not belong exclusively to those with a secular worldview. The desire to seize the reins of history and make things turn out right is no less a temptation to those who claim to believe that the world's fate rests in the hands of God. We see religious fundamentalists who are willing to fly planes into buildings in the

execution of a holy war against the godless West. We see the world's sole remaining superpower fight a devastating war in the name of its divinely sanctioned mission to spread freedom and democracy. At every turn, it seems, we encounter the swaggering, phony certainty that anxiety and uncertainty often engender. We act in God's name, resolutely and even brutally, to insure that the world conforms to *our* idea of God's will.

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Julian offers us an alternative. What if the cross and resurrection of Jesus really do define the pattern of divine action in human history? What if compassion, understood as the embrace of suffering, is the soil from which our human action should grow? Julian realizes that here and now, from within the suffering of human history, we cannot yet say “it is thus, and it is well.” But if we shape our lives around the hope that we one day shall be able to see God’s will in all things, then perhaps even here, even now, we can begin to loosen our death grip on the reins of history, so that with open hands we can receive what God wills to give us.



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