



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Loosening Our Grip
(*Mysticism*, pp. 29-36)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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Loosening Our Grip

Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Response to the Scripture†

I, God, am in your midst. Whoever knows me can never fall, not in the heights, nor in the depths, nor in the breadths, for I am love, which the vast expanses of evil can never still.

Reflection

In an era so filled with war, disease, and religious splintering that it was every bit as calamitous as our own, a remarkable woman known as “Julian of Norwich” reflected on fourteen visions. Most involved the crucifix 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,” explains Fred Bauerschmidt. The visions were comforting, but also disturbing to Julian for “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.” Yet she writes, “I saw him and sought him; I had him and wanted him.”

If we examine our lives and the world through the eyes of Julian of Norwich, we gain new insight into

- ▶ *Trusting God's goodness.* Behind our desire to control the world through techniques, or “means,” that secure health and prosperity, Julian sees a fundamental distrust of God. “For Julian, the chief problem that we have is...that we do not believe that God loves us sufficiently to will our good,” Bauerschmidt notes. “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.”

The misunderstanding of God against which Julian reacts may be seen today in our approach to science and technology, he suggests. “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.”

- ▶ *Focusing on the Crucified.* In the midst of terrorism, AIDS, and environmental devastation, how can we believe that God has our best interests at heart, or that we are not simply left to “work” a natural system that God has left to run on its own?



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Is it not irresponsible to say with Julian, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well"?

In her vision of the crucified Jesus, Julian grasps that "God repairs the world's pain...by entering into that pain and healing our sad history from within through an act of love," says Bauerschmidt. "The cross...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 also 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. The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate."

- ▶ *Acting in the world.* Our action "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," Bauerschmidt concludes. Julian asks us to "embrace the mystery of suffering, and it is only from within that embrace that action can grow that truly accords with God's love."

Study Questions

1. What events today make it difficult for people to believe that God is wholly good? How might Julian respond?
2. "All shall be well" runs counter to our self-image. In what ways do we have a "death grip on the reins of history"?
3. Describe Julian's critique of efforts to manipulate God with devotion, or "religious techniques." Is it still relevant?
4. Julian says a Christ-like life is filled with compassion or suffering-with. How is this different from appeals to compassion to support physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia of disabled newborns, stem cell research, or deposing a dictator?

Departing Hymn: "Be Still, My Soul" (verses 1, 2, and 4)

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.
Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future, as he has the past;
your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.
Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Katharina A. von Schlegel (1752); trans. J. L. Borthwick (1855), alt.
Tune: FINLANDIA

†Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Loosening Our Grip

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to the Scripture	Response to the Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how Julian of Norwich came to understand God's goodness and work in the world through her visions of the crucified Jesus.
2. To understand why Julian claims that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."
3. To consider her insights about how we fail to trust in God's goodness.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Still, My Soul," locate the tune FINLANDIA in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

As Frederick Bauerschmidt notes, the writings of the fifteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich "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...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" (*Mysticism*, pp. 29-30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would draw us in love to trust his goodness more, even when we do not understand how he is working for our good.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:15-20 from a modern translation.

Response to Scripture

Read the response to Scripture aloud or invite the group to read it with you in unison.

Reflection

What can mystics teach us about the life of discipleship? Frederick Bauerschmidt thinks that Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1416) can help us to understand and trust more in God's goodness, which in turn would allow us to approach problems in a less controlling and destructive way.

Study Questions

1. For events that make it difficult for people to believe that God is wholly good, members might mention harm to human beings, other creatures, or the environment through *natural catastrophes* such as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts, and so on; *human wrongdoing* in crimes, wars, acts of business or political malfeasance, abuse of the environment, and so on; or severe *individual or family suffering* through disability, chronic disease, epidemics, relational discord, sexual or emotional abuse, and so on.

Julian rejects the idea that the universe works in a cold way by inexorable laws of nature or the will to power. We are not “on our own” and the outcome does not depend entirely on our efforts. Furthermore, for Julian, “the order of things in our world is not simply the result of God’s absolute, unconstrained choice,” Bauerschmidt explains. “Rather, it is the outworking of love and is always in accord with love.” Thus magic, techniques of spiritual devotion, and scientific technology cannot manipulate or ‘work’ the world as a self-contained system.

The form of God’s power to make all things well is seen in the crucifixion of Jesus: “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....” This does not satisfy our desire to ‘know how it works’ and to master God’s power. “The final repair of fallen creation is a work of God that we hope for but cannot anticipate.”

2. “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well,” writes Julian. 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.” We lack such faith in divine providence, Bauerschmidt notes, for “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.”

Our “taking in hand the reins of history” has tragic results. Consider how we’ve abused military power to bring peace, technology to make the earth more habitable, and political systems to bring freedom and order. “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.”

3. “Julian calls these [religious] 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,” Bauerschmidt writes. “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. Rather, she locates our activity within the prior act of God.”

What devotional practices or rituals do we think will curry God’s favor, guarantee health and prosperity, fix our relationships, bring the government we want, and so on? It’s easy to think of practices that “those other Christians” abuse. Encourage members to identify misused devotional practices in their own tradition.

4. Bauerschmidt says the other appeals to 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.... 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.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.