

A MEDITATION ON JULIAN'S 'REVELATIONS OF  
DIVINE LOVE'

by Martin Israel

The present age is one in which disregard for authority and intellectual arrogance dominate the seats of learning. Conventional morality is investigated analytically and only that which can be proved by experiment or confirmed by experience is acceptable to many people, especially the young. Despite the prevailing scientific agnosticism about the existence of any realm of being outside the material world in which we live and work, there are intimations of a greater reality deeply implanted in the consciousness of many people. From this arises the paradox of a scientifically ordered community deeply concerned with occult practices and techniques of self-development, of a religiously seeking people who have little to do with the organised church, of a self-centred, assertive youth passionately caring about social justice. The stark divide that separates personal self-indulgence from intellectual and moral ideal is only too apparent.

The linking practice of discipline is absent: it is this alone that makes the ideal a reality. It is the long experience of discipline endured in every situation that the person encounters, that is the external meaning of this life. To go on through all difficulties knowing that all is well in God, is that gift of faith that the world strives for yet does not know. Without this spiritual gift of faith that is consummated in love, life is meaningless, moving from one position to another with its inevitable close which signifies total annihilation to the unseeing.

The capacity to discern the future and divine meaning is deeply imprinted in the human psyche, and it forms the basis of the religious impulse that is an undeniable part of the human personality. Religion links the natural intellect to the source of its being, a source of love, light, and power, manifest as wisdom and known in a relationship of the separated with the totality of being. There is a restlessness in each one of us which can only be assuaged by a return to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. This God is no intellectual hypothesis or figure drawn by the imagination. It is far beyond description — indeed can only be

described in terms of our ignorance, or “unknowing” as the writer of the treatise “The Cloud of Unknowing” puts it — but is made manifest to us by a heightened vision that is given to us so that we may see the whole creation in a new light.

In our present discontents we can be illuminated by the uncreated light of eternity, and every particle of life, every step in our own lives, disreputable as they may appear to us in “normal” consciousness, is known to be invested with transcendental meaning, and all things to work together for good to those who love God. It is thus that the barren conclusions of intellectual sight, invaluable as this is for us in day-to-day living, are subsumed in a reality, and are seen to be merely episodes in our spiritual journey towards completion when we will have returned to God in the measure of his Son.

It is this light that all the world is seeking, and the only sure way is by self-giving love to God and to his creatures, our fellow humans. This is the path that the great contemplative saints have traversed. They are our guides, and their testimony rings true not only through the unanimity of the vision, but by the splendour of the manifestation and the radiance of the love that flows from it. It is a measure of the failure of contemporary Christianity that so little of this vision is imparted in the liturgy and sacraments of the Church. Many people move away to other religious traditions or to esoteric groups in search of the pearl of great price that lies within them. Few find it until they resist the temptation to move outwards for external knowledge, and turn inwards instead, guided by the loving discipline that is the treasured wisdom of the contemplative saints of all ages. Such a one is Julian of Norwich.

What has the Revelation of Julian to say to us 600 years later? Despite the intellectual revolution and the great understanding of psychology that has occurred during that period, the path towards the Divine Reality is as clear and virginal as it was in her day. It is in fact more secluded than ever, because it is less frequently trodden than it was in the Middle Ages. A dialogue with the text brings many valuable illuminations. Julian, when the revelations were given her, was a robust, well-integrated woman. Though she describes herself as unlettered, it is clear from her vigorous style and penetrating insight that she was well schooled in the spiritual life as would befit an anchoress. But she was no intellectually-based theologian.

Of all the mystics of that period she is probably the most attractive: asceticism and masochism play no part in her teaching, and throughout the whole work there is a joyful spirit that proclaims the goodness of God. In the history of mysticism there

has been much stress on attitudes of self-mortification, so that the mystic has often appeared to be a psychiatric case rather than an illuminated person. With Julian the normality, indeed the integration, of the personality, stands out conspicuously; she is a happy mystic, and her path towards God is open, being largely unclouded by deep inner suffering and dereliction. Admittedly the visions were received during the space of a mere few hours while she lay dangerously ill, but the greater part of the revelations came to her over the course of many years.

The teaching she received is shown in three ways: by physical sight, by words formed in her intellect, and by spiritual intuition. The normality of Dame Julian is an important quality to comprehend; the mystical life is at least compatible with a joyful, strong personality. Indeed, the vision of God is the integrating point of the personality. Only when this vision has been attained and held can we speak with some authority of salvation, or healing.

When the divine illumination pierced Julian's heart, she was given a marvellous intimation of the nature of God. Being a punctiliously orthodox Christian she was determined to marry this super-sensual knowledge with the teaching of Holy Church, as indeed she did at least to her own satisfaction. But the broad, loving God who revealed himself to her was a great extension of the God preached in the Church. This is the true intimation of the mystic. God shows himself to us — who can scarcely bear his radiance — as love. He is not an agent of punishment or coercion. He made us for himself, and he wants us to come to him of our own free will and accord. He is in all things yet superordinate to his creation. Everything is dear to him because he made it and he sustains it.

The fifth chapter of Julian's Revelation strikes to the heart of the divine nature so perfectly that it demands close scrutiny. She saw the whole of creation, symbolised as a frail hazelnut, on the palm of her hand. This is indeed the relationship between the whole universe and God, who is transcendent over the magnitude of all that is made. And yet it continues to exist and not fall into disintegration because God loves and sustains it. Our happiness depends on our union with him. Creation, which absorbs the awe of the mortal man as they penetrate its secrets, is little indeed when compared with the uncreated God. The way to God is the way of detachment from the created world. This way is one of intense spiritual discipline, so that we might find our true rest in God. "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee", said St. Augustine. This is the spiritual quest to rest in perfect activity in God, who is the way, the truth, and the life. This active rest is called contemplation.

It should be noted that, though creation is as a hazelnut in the eyes of the mystic, it is nevertheless of immeasurable importance, because God makes it, loves it, and sustains it. Thus the created world is far from being merely an illusion. It has substance in its own right, but depends on God for its being. We remember the aphorism of the Quaker mystic Isaac Pennington, 'Every truth is shadow except the last. Yet every truth is substance in its own place, though it be but shadow in another place. And every shadow is true shadow, as every substance is true substance'.

In the eleventh chapter she saw God in a point, learning thereby that he is in all things. He is indeed immanent in all his creation though transcendent above all created things. "God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere", said St. Augustine.

Thus is God's infinity known. He is the negation of negations, the endless One, that to which nothing can be added. Whatever one says of him limits him, for in him all contradictions are resolved and all opposites coincide. He showed Julian that he was in all, doing everything, and never ceasing to uphold his works. He guides everything towards the end he ordained for it from the beginning, by the same might, wisdom and love with which he made it.

Thus there is no error in God's work. There is no sin in God's work. It is because God is immanent in all his creation that he knows and loves every single individual. We are all members one of another through this Divine immanence, and when we have returned in full consciousness, informed by the will, to God, the mystical Body of Christ will have been realised on a universal level.

God revealed himself to Julian, not as a jealous, wrathful potentate, but as a gentle lover. She speaks continually of our Lord's great courtesy and consideration. He longs to receive our love, but he does not demand it. He is our friend, and he looks forward to our friendship, but there is no coercion. The full agony of his passion and crucifixion were not shielded from Julian, but it was the glory and the forgiveness that our Lord impressed on her mind. Adam's sin was the worst thing that could have happened to the world, she was told, yet this was a small event compared with the glorious reparation that was to be made by Christ's passion. The love of God is such that, if he could possibly have suffered more, he would have done so. Thus the joy of the Resurrection wipes away the suffering of the crucifixion, just as the blood of Christ annuls the power of our sin seen personified as the devil or the fiend as Julian calls him.

This leads us to the most difficult part, not only of any revelation of divine love, but also of our own life on earth. I refer to the nature of evil, the fact of sin in a God-created world, and its working out in eternity. Julian, being a deeply compassionate woman could see beyond the exultant glory of our Lord's passion and the defeat in perpetuity of the fiend, to the sad state of mankind generally. She knew that these special revelations were not given to her on account of any spiritual superiority, and like all true mystics, was consumed with the desire of sharing this gift of grace with all her fellows.

This is an important difference between mystical knowledge and occult teaching; whereas the latter is private and tends to boost the personality of the occultist, the former is open and universal, and humbles the mystic in that over-flowing love that levels all individuals in the unity of God. In the famous twenty-seventh chapter Julian realises that it was only sin that prevented her from receiving God earlier. Why did not God prevent sin in the beginning? She was told that sin was necessary, but in the end all would be well. She saw that sin had no substance or real existence, and was known by its effects, by the pain it produced. Indeed the nature of sin is self-edification at the expense of the other.

The wages of sin are that separation from the greater world which is true death. It is evident that sin is an inevitable part of the separated personality that comes of human individuality. It is in growing into the greater community of humanity, and eventually into all created things, that separated humanity, personified as the fallen Adam, loses his concern for self and transcends sinful thought and action. Sin and its fruits are the price we pay for the gift of free will bestowed by God. As Julian saw, he wants our freely dedicated love as a friend, not our coerced support as a puppet. Thus is God always courteous and considerate to his creatures.

But this is not the whole answer. Julian was only temporarily satisfied by the assurance that all would be well. Her compassion for all God's creatures led her to contemplate their possible total damnation, as taught by Holy Church. In chapter thirty-two she trembled at the future of those who were destined to be damned, according to the Church's teaching, for example the fallen angels, those who had not received the Christian faith, and those Christians who had lived bad lives. How could all be well in the face of so much eternal damnation? She was told that what was impossible for her was not impossible for God, who would honour his word in every respect and cause everything to turn out for the best.

She was to stand steadfast to her faith, and desist from asking ultimate questions, the secret of which could only be understood when she had attained heavenly

stature. The busier we are about discovering God's secrets, the further we shall be from their understanding. In chapter thirty-seven she was told that she too would sin once more, but in every soul to be saved there is a godly will that has never consented to sin in the past or in the future.

Here we come to the scheme of the redemption in Christ. It is very difficult for a mystic, imbued with the spirit of love that is of God, to envisage a final annihilation of any of his creatures. He loves them even when they repudiate him. This is the final, and highest, quality of love (see 1 Cor. 13.7-8). In other words a mystic is inevitably drawn towards a universalistic scheme of salvation. No one is condemned in eternity, and all are brought into the larger body of Christ. This is not, as Julian knew full well, the orthodox teaching of the Church, and there is an unresolved tension between her natural reason illuminated by mystical understanding and her theological training and background.

In her teaching about the godly will present in all those to be saved, she approaches the Spark, or Apex, of the soul, called the Spirit, which was described by the great Rhineland school of mystics, especially Meister Eckhart, the greatest of them all. He says of it, "there is a principle in the soul altogether spiritual. I used to call it a spiritual light or a spark. But now I say that it is free of all names, void of all forms. It is one and simple as God is one and simple. God is nearer to me than I am to myself". This is the fundamental insight of all mystics, of whatever religious background: God is immanent in people as the highest (or deepest) part of the true self, or soul.

The most mystical denomination in Christianity, the Society of Friends, speaks of "that of God in every man". But is this spark implanted only in the souls of those whom God has predestined to be saved? Julian hints at this, but the possibility is really already repudiated by her insight into the humility, the courtesy, the consideration, the uncomplaining love of our Lord. He wants all his creation to turn to him by an act of unimpaired free will. It is evident from Julian's revelations that the godly will is a treasured possession of all people, but we all fall short of it from time to time. If sin is seen as a falling short of our true nature as revealed in the humanity of our Lord, we can understand how redemption is freely given when we confess our sins and offer our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice to his greater glory. Then, as Julian so beautifully puts it, "our wounds are seen before God not as wounds but as worships".

A noteworthy feature is Julian's insight into the Divine nature. She could see only love in the Divine nature, and refused to ponder on the Divine wrath. She saw "no wrath but on man's part, and that forgiveth he us". The sunny nature of Dame Julian is clearly reflected in her understanding of God. Although she speaks of periods of barrenness in which prayer is difficult, and had indeed to bear two onslaughts by the fiend while she lay dangerously ill, there is little mention of the dark side of existence in her revelations. She seems to have undergone nothing comparable with the dark night of the spirit described in such detail by the Spanish mystics, especially St John of the Cross.

The way to God depends a great deal on the natural temperament of the contemplative. There are some who have to traverse an unconscious path beset with archetypal imagery and many have to meet the 'devils' which reside within them which collectively form the 'shadow' that has been defined by C G Jung in our own time. Indeed, the path to God is also the path to self-knowledge, with the divine spark as a centre point. This does not imply all the evil that we encounter during our life on earth, but simply the darkness of our own animal nature. This darkness is only a personal concentration of the darkness that is an integral part of the created universe.

That we live in a 'fallen' world is undoubted. By this, I do not necessarily imply that once all was well, and that we have merely inherited the results of the Adamic fall from grace. I think the incomplete nature of things is a necessary part of God's design. Only in a plane of time—space limitation with all the suffering that is inherent in this limitation could God's creatures grown in full maturity. When he created us, he did not want blind obedience — typified by the attitude of the Prodigal Son's elder brother who stayed at home and expected everything — but a willed response of a free, loving agent. It is the force of the Christian revelation that the Prodigal Son is preferred above the dutiful elder brother (Luke 15.11-32), and the tax collector above the self-righteous Pharisee (Luke 18.9-14).

It is in such situations that we begin to understand that sin is 'behovable' (necessary), for without it and the pain that it causes there would be no growth into Christ. Sin becomes diabolical when it lacks understanding and becomes unrepentant. Without sin we would never know of God's forgiveness which reaches us as pure love, by which I mean love without reservations or limitations. It is this love that teaches us of the Divine nature, as Julian demonstrates. But not everyone who sins is open to the undemanding love of God. And here we come to a great difficulty, not adequately dealt with in Julian's Revelations.

Whence comes the fiend who attacks Julian, and who in the form of demonic possession has animated the destructive nature of all the Hitlers down the ages? God showed her that in his passion Christ overcomes the fiend, who is as evilly disposed now as he was before the Incarnation. Furthermore, the devil's brood are also reproved by God and condemned eternally, no matter how they present themselves in life, even if christened. Yet the power of evil is as strong today as it has ever been. Indeed, the malice that nations, races and classes bear each other is such that the complete annihilation of the world is now possible in view of the tremendous potential for destruction in human grasp. Many mystics, prominent among whom was Jakob Boehme, have stressed the dark, wrathful side of God, and Carl Jung has added his testimony to the darkness of God in his "Answer to Job".

The Old Testament does not minimize the wrath of God, and Jesus himself is no meek and mild prophet, as his denunciation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the cupidity of the money-changers in the Temple shows. And yet in the ecstasy of mystical union all disharmony is resolved in that love that Julian saw so clearly. The wrath of God is a necessary part of the world of separation; where there is individuality and separation each will strive for their own, and the darkness of self-seeking will prevail over the love of self-giving. This is the animal, chthonic (underworld) inheritance of mankind, but what is natural, being unconscious, in an animal, becomes demonic in a conscious, scheming, cruel person.

The evil that we commit lives on and forms part of the psychic residue from which we gain our first impressions and in which we live our psychic life. Indeed, Julian is right in seeing that sin has no substantive existence, no matter how real it may appear to us. The devil, or fiend, is a personalised form of collective sin throughout the ages; it both attacks us and can be drawn on by evil people. Hitler is perhaps the most terrible example that the world has yet known. But how do such evil people arise? It is here that our modern understanding of psychology and sociology is of value. We are all products of our economic, racial, religious, political, and genetic background.

No one is entirely to blame for their dereliction, nor is anyone in the world completely innocent of the crimes committed by others. This does not deny the fact of personal responsibility, but it does stress what St Paul said long ago, that we are all members of one another (Ephesians 4.4-6), and John Donne's insight about no man being an island entire of itself.

This is why any scheme of isolated, personal salvation is illusory; indeed, salvation is to be seen in the greater context of healing. This is a slow, progressive process in which the whole personality is integrated, and the person begins to partake of the Divine nature by moving steadily in the direction of the perfect humanity of Christ. No one can be completely healed while their fellow is sick. No one can be at ease while the currents of psychic evil waft around them. The redemption effected by Christ's passion has now to work out progressively in the world of time and space so that all God's children may approach him in wholeness of personality. This is the salvation that Christ came to bestow on mankind.

This, I believe, is the true meaning of God's assurance to Julian that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. But this working out will take time. Fortunately the Christian affirms his belief in the life of the world to come. Whatever may be the origin or nature of the soul — and these are deep questions which will not be touched on here — we have faith that it is working towards its fulfillment in Christ, by whom and in whom it is to return to the Father, and in union with all other souls.

But this working towards fulfilment is accomplished in the darkness of suffering. All Christian philosophies that evade the Cross are to be repudiated. The spiritual life is one of constant sacrifice — he who would save his life (psyche) shall lose it. And this life is no longer merely 'physical', it is spiritual (pneuma). Thus suffering and sacrifice are consummated in liberation and joy, just as the Crucifixion inevitably leads on to the Resurrection and the Ascension.

"The cause of sin is blindness for man sees not God", says Julian in the forty-seventh chapter. This is the basis of our pain, a failure of vision, not the experience of God's wrath. Conversely, she says in the fifty-fifth chapter, that our faith is nothing else but a right understanding that with regard to our essential being we are in God, and God in us, though we do not see him. It is his gift to the mystic, the grace of the contemplative way, that he makes himself visible to us. This yearning for God is the basis of prayer. In the forty-first chapter God tells her that he is the ground of her beseeching — the foundation of her praying.

This understanding of the relationship between God and prayer is the key to the proper practice of prayer. It is by prayer that God can effect a deep contact with the soul and the personality of the individual. Just as he wants our freely-given love, so he wants our prayers. His prompting is the origin of our prayer life. The aim of prayer is the ascent of the mind to God. Even when we fall on fallow times and

prayer seems a mechanical act devoid of any inner conviction. we are to go on praying. It is during this discipline that God achieves more in us than we could possibly know. The aim of prayer is not the granting of personal petition but the union of the soul with God.

This vital teaching about prayer can be extended to our actions in everyday life. No matter how jaded we feel, or how menial and uninspiring the work at hand seems, we must go on and perform it as perfectly as possible to God's greater glory. It is very often in our weakness, when we are at our wits' end, that God reveals himself to us in that love that is all-embracing. The spirit of prayer should not be reserved only for times of silent worship, but should be with us even when we are fully engaged in the world's work. De Caussade speaks about 'the sacrament of the present moment' when we abandon ourselves to the Divine providence, and Brother Lawrence was aware of the presence of God as clearly in his noisy kitchen as at the Blessed Sacrament. This part of the practice of prayer is particularly important in a search for a contemporary spirituality, when we are all fully engaged about our Father's business.

What is the conclusion of Julian's revelations? It is a happy, optimistic conclusion. All shall be well with the world. After her first assault by the fiend, she was told she would never be overcome. In chapter sixty-eight she receives the important insight that though we will not escape hardships, strain, and discomfort we will nevertheless never be overcome. This is the life of the spirit, typified in the ministry, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of our Lord. In the great chapters devoted to the relationship of God to the soul, she sees that Christ, our Mother who cares for us and gives up his life for us as a mother does for her child, has his seat in the soul.

In the wonderful description in chapter sixty-seven she sees her soul as large as if it were an eternal world, and a blessed kingdom as well. In the midst of it sits our Lord Jesus, God and Man, beautiful in person and great in stature. The Blessed Trinity rejoices forever in the making of the human soul. The greatest light that shines most brightly in that city is the glorious love of our Lord. She is one of a great line of mystics that looks for a general and universal restoration. She says in chapter sixty-two, that every kind of nature that he has made to flow out of himself to fulfil his purpose will be brought back and restored to himself when the human is saved by the working of grace.

This vision of the greater hope that is the true understanding of universal salvation is glimpsed by St Paul in 1 Cor 15.28 and Col.1.20. It was the cherished hope of

Origen and St Gregory of Nyssa. It forms a most important part of Julian's Revelations of Divine Love, and was the final vision of another great English mystic, William Law, who lived four centuries after Julian. He prayed that not only the whole human race, but even the fallen angels might be delivered out of their misery, but not until the Last Judgement Day.

We, armed with the greater understanding of mankind culled from the findings of the depth-psychologists, the sociologists, the economists and the geneticists, can take a more merciful view of human nature. Today the operative word is 'conditioning', and the dominant school of psychologists, the behaviourists, believe that all human reactions can be correlated with a past stimulus pattern. But despite the great contribution that the above-mentioned specialists have made to our understanding of human nature, there is still the realm of meaning to be investigated. This will to meaning is at least as strong as the will to power or the sexual impulse.

It is the will to meaning that marks the human apart from the lower animals, and this is the preserve of the great religions of the world. Here the mystic holds sway, and no consideration of the human situation is complete that ignores the human spiritual dimension and the aspirations that accrue from it. The Revelations of Divine Love that Julian received are as great a contribution to human understanding as are any of the discoveries of modern science, psychology or sociology. They impart meaning to the human situation, and are a perpetual blessing to the human soul. They are a light that lightens the darkness of human travail. a travail that is not much alleviated by the purely materialistic philosophies and panaceas of our time.

Heraclitus said, "You can never find out the boundaries of the soul, so deep are they". Julian was taught that it is easier to know God than to know our own soul. Once he has shown himself to us enthroned in its most sacred chamber, the true identity of the person, which is the soul, lies revealed, and the whole personality is integrated around this centre of reality. Of all the mystics, Julian shows the way to this glorious manifestation with the greatest joy, for love is the beginning, the middle; and the end of the path to God, who is known to us as love, and who dwelt among us as self-giving love. What was the meaning of Julian's revelations? Love was his meaning, as she writes in the final chapter. This is the love that sets us free from fear, so that we may become fully human as our Lord was perfect man. There is no other path to perfection than this.