

## Mystics, Faith and Authority

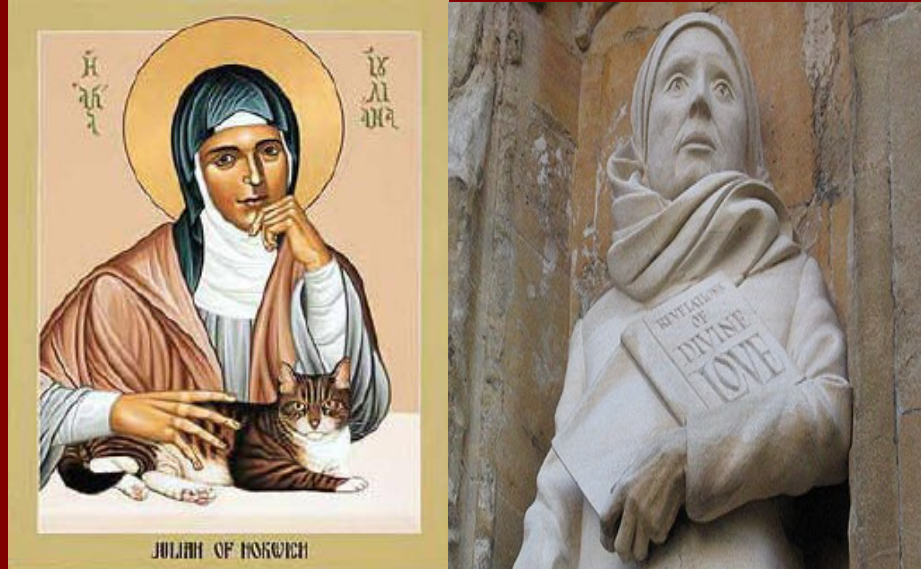
The Writings of Julian of Norwich  
and Margery Kempe

## Dissent in the Church

The latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. and the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. witnessed skepticism and dissatisfaction with the Church. The issues stemmed not from a crisis of faith, but rather from a series of events that brought to the foreground questions of authority:

- Great Schism: 1378 - 1417
- Lollards and John Wyclif

## Julian of Norwich



## Creation as a hazelnut

“And in this he showed a little thing, the quantity of an hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. . . . I looked thereon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: Why may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marvelled how it might last, for me thought it might suddenly have fallen to nought for littleness” (374-75).

Julian’s language is reminiscent, in my opinion, of the Sermon on the Mount in the sixth chapter of Matthew:

28. “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; 29 and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

Like the images used in Matthew, Julian's hazelnut is a small and ordinary object that leads her to a better understanding of God's relationship with humankind.

She continues: "In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second that God loveth it, the third that God keepth it. But that beheld I therein? Verily, the maker, the keeper, the lover" (375).

Julian's meditations lead her to see that in the object made, one can discover a reflection of the maker. And like Matthew's lilies of the valley, if God made, loves, and keeps the hazelnut in spite of its "littleness" (or perhaps because of it?) how much more might he care for humankind?

## Jesus as mother

Julian uses the word "homely" throughout the selections of the text. The OED glosses the word as "Become as one of the household; familiar; intimate; at home with. Plainly, simply, unpretentiously."

Her portrayal of Jesus as a mother-figure works to illustrate the perfect "homely" relationship between God and his creations. In this imagery, we see God as a loving, all-providing being.

Julian image works on multiple levels. She uses the premise of our physical needs to demonstrate how Jesus meets those needs on a spiritual level:

- Through the sacrament feeds Jesus nourishes us: "The mother may give her child sucken her milk, but our precious mother Jesu, he may feed us with himself" (380).
- He clothes us: "He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us and windeth us" (374).

On a more profound level, Julian presents Jesus as the ultimate giver of life: “We [know] that all our mothers bear us to pain and to dying. Ah, what is that? But our very Mother Jesu, he alone beareth us to joy and to endless living” (373).

Jesus, like an earthly mother, is able to transform the manifestations of his love to fit the growth of the individual: “The kind loving mother that woot and knoweth the need of her child, she keepeth it full tenderly as the kind and condition of motherhood will. And ever as it waxeth in age and in stature, she changeth her works but not her love. And when it is waxed of more age, she suffereth it that it be chastised in breaking down of vices to make the child receive virtues” (380).

## Purpose of sin

Julian’s image of Jesus as a loving mother also helps to understand her meditations on the purpose of sin.

“I saw nothing letted me but sin, and so I beheld generally in us all, and me thought that if sin had not been, we should all have been clean and like to our Lord as he made us. And thus in my folly before this time often I wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not letted.”

Julian is grappling with one of the most fundamental issues in Christianity. If God is all-knowing, all-seeing, and perfect, why did he allow sin to come into the world?

The answer Julian receives is meant to both provide comfort and emphasize the importance of faith: “Jesu that in this vision informed me of all that me needed answered by this word and said: ‘Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’”

The editor glosses *behoveful* as *fitting*. The OED offers some additional definitions that are particularly useful in Julian’s context. *Behoveful* means not merely *fitting*, but *necessary*, *seemly*, *appropriate*, and *suitable*.

How do these definitions shape our understanding of Julian’s message about sin?

## Sin as necessary

“For we shall verily see in heaven without end that we have grievously sinned in this life; and notwithstanding this we shall verily see that we were never hurt in his love, nor we were never the less of price in his sight. . . . [W]e shall have a hight and marvelous knowing of love in God without an end. For hard and marvelous is that love which may not nor will be broken for trespass” (381).

Julian is working with the idea of the fortunate fall. It was necessary for the fall to occur in order for humankind to understand the unfathomable depths of God’s love.

## The role of faith

Ultimately (in my opinion), Julian's showings and mediations about sin, the nature of Jesus, and the relationship between God and his creations are really contemplations about faith and grace.

Her message, which elevates the importance of the personal relationship between God and the individual, is both highly, even ultra, orthodox, and also potentially challenging in the face of a Church that has become highly hierarchical and cleric-centric.

## Margery Kempe



## Reading Julian and Margery

Although the works of these two women are often read together, their experiences and texts are markedly different:

Julian has one series of “showings” that she spends decades meditating upon. Margery is involved in on-going communication with God.

Julian is a recluse living “out of the world” in Norwich. Margery is a “notoriously nomadic” woman of the world, complete with a husband and children.

One interesting difference in the texts lies in the voices that address the reader.

Julian addresses her readers directly. The reader is given her experiences and meditations in the first person.

Margery, on the other hand, comes to us in a mediated form. We know she was “illiterate” and that her book was dictated, but that doesn’t necessarily fully explain this choice.

What purpose might it serve to present Margery’s Book in this manner?

A couple of possible theories:

It allows Margery to mitigate the threat of the “female voice.” In a period where women were banned from preaching and women’s speech was seen as a source of disorder, working in the third-person enables her to circumvent those difficulties to some degree.

In employing scribes, one of whom was a priest, Margery can present her experiences as “sanctioned” and “acceptable.” This sanctioning is promoted in the detailed account of the writing of the book.

Both possibilities raise questions about authority and who has the right to speak.

What differences do you notice in the sickbed scenes?

Julian: “My curate was sent for to be at my ending. . . .He set the cross before my face and said: ‘I have brought the image of thy savior; look thereupon and comfort thee therewith.’ Me thought I was well for my eyen was set upright into heaven. . . but nevertheless I assented to set my eyen in the face of the crucifix” (373).

Margery: “Wherefore after that her child was born, she, not trusting her life, sent for her ghostly father. . . .And, when she came to the point for to say that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and gan sharply to undernim her ere that she had fully her intent, and so she would no more say for nought he might do” (384).



Throughout Margery's text, we encounter tensions between earthly and spiritual authorities.

For example, when Margery's husband tries to persuade her to "commune kindly" with him and to break her fast, she refuses until she receives direction through prayer. We discover that her fasting is directed by Jesu to enable her to bargain with her husband for chastity.

## Margery's trial

Heresy: The definition is fluid, but in this period those who are accused of heresy often see their actions as an attempt to correct problems within the Church, as opposed to an attempt to destroy or undermine it.

Issues of authority come to a climax when Margery is brought before religious authorities and questioned about her travels and speaking.

“On the next day she was brought into the Archbishop’s Chapel, and there came many of the Archbishop’s meinie, despising her, calling her ‘loller’ and ‘heretic,’ and swore many an horrible oath that she should be burnt.”

“At the last the said Archbishop came into the Chapel with his clerks. . .He commanded his men to fetch a pair of fetters and said she should be fettered, for she was a false heretic. And then she said, ‘I am none heretic, nor ye shall none prove me.’”

Margery continually refuses the charges of heresy and lollardy. She manages to affirm the importance of the Church as an institution, while still asserting the authority of her direct relationship with Christ.

“Then the Archbishop said unto her, ‘I am evil informed of thee; I hear say thou art a right wicked woman.’ And she said again, ‘Sir, so I hear say that ye are a wicked man.’”

This encounter with her accusers, and others that appear during the course of Margery’s travels and experiences, demonstrates the tensions in the text between earthly and spiritual authority. We see her taking issue not with the Church itself, but with the potentially corrupt individuals within in. Indeed, she even manages to win over some of her detractors.

## Weeping

Readers of Margery's text are often struck by the her frequent bouts of crying:

"When she came in the church yard of Saint Stephen, she cried, she roared, she wept, she fell down to the ground, so fervently the fire of love burnt in her heart" (393).

"And through the beholding of the Pieta her mind was all wholly occupied in the Passion of our Lord Jesu Christ and in the compassion of our Lady, Saint Mary, by which she was compelled to cry full loud and weep full sore, as though she should have died" (393).

At trial: "When her crying was passed, she came before the Archbishop and fell down on her knees, the Archbishop saying full [coarsely] unto her, 'Why weepest thou so, woman?' She answering said, 'Sir, ye shall will some day that ye had wept as sore as I.'"

While working on her book: "Also, while the foresaid creature was occupied about the writing of this treatise, she had many holy tears and weeping. . . and also he who was her writer could not sometimes keep himself from weeping."

What purpose do Margery's tears serve for her, for the people she encounters, and/or for us as readers?