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Julian of Norwich, Theologian by Denys Turner (review)

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(Review)

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terrifying, given that the wilderness in this quartet represents the place where we human beings can make choices and work out our destinies. Willis' fantasy quartet makes the argument that we need people of both sexes who will do the work women have done over the centuries—to defend the weak and to protect what grows naturally.

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Julian of Norwich, Theologian. By Denys Turner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0300163919. Pp. xxvi + 262. \$40.00.

When St. John of the Cross wrote a commentary on St. Teresa of Avila's account of her prayer, Teresa concluded her unenthusiastic response with the words, "Nonetheless, we are grateful to him for having explained so well what we did not ask." I could imagine Julian of Norwich saying something similar about Denys Turner's systematic analysis of her *Revelation of Love*. The key to appreciating Turner's book is to keep continually in mind his intent: "This is less a book about Julian's *Revelation* and more a set of reflections occasioned by it, a set of variations on a theme of Julian" (xiii). Viewed through this lens, the book becomes engaging and presents much for consideration. Indeed, as Turner notes, "It is not easy to write about Julian's theology in the accepted styles of the academic theologian" (216), and he is at his best when he shifts to the more meditative style of the book's later chapters. His aptly chosen epigraph is Julian's postscript: "This boke is begonne by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight." Julian continues, "For charite pray we alle togeder, with Goddes wurking: thanking, trusting, enjoyeng." It is Turner's performance of the text, his learned, yet deeply personal thanking, trusting, and enjoying, that make this work the valuable contribution it is.

Denys Turner began his distinguished career as a philosopher of Marxism, gradually shifted his attention to systematic theology, and retires this year as professor of historical theology at Yale. His book on Julian reflects this intellectual trajectory: its initial approach to the text is more characteristic of the methodology of analytic philosophy and systematic theology than of the interdisciplinary, contextualizing approach used by medievalist scholars of Julian. The book has two parts, entitled "Providence and Sin" and "Sin and Salvation." Part 1 will be especially interesting to philosophers and theologians—and especially troubling to medievalists. As Turner acknowledges in the preface, his purpose is to determine "whether Julian's theology meets a minimum condition for qualifying as systematic, the minimum condition

for which being that it is at least not formally inconsistent" (xvi). While the question of whether Julian's text conforms to requirements determined by twentieth-century philosophical methods may be a fascinating one for their practitioners to ponder, medievalists may place it in the category of "what we [and Julian] did not ask."

Turner's imagined audience is his students who "have made their way through the Long Text [of Julian] at least once and are strongly drawn to Julian's sympathetic mind, but are as puzzled by her theologically as they are attracted to her spiritually" (xix). He seems to presume that these students have taken Systematic Theology I and can follow discussions of logical formalism, but the uncritical contextualizing historical background he provides will not serve them well. We are told (without documentation) that Julian professed vows "as nuns, monks and friars do" (13), and that she lived according to a rule "insofar as the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* may be called a rule" (13). There is in fact no evidence that Julian ever made a religious profession or followed the *Ancrene Wisse* or any rule. She is said to be "consecrated by the ritual of the burial service" that designates her anchorhold as a tomb (15). Again, there is no evidence that Julian was ritually consecrated as an anchoress, and if she was, recent studies show that most such rituals did not mention burial or speak of the cell as a tomb.

Some of the questions Turner takes up seem to be non-issues. He states repeatedly that Julian is no mystic, "at least not in the Jamesian sense" (28, 29, 75, etc.). Whether Julian's experience conforms to James's definition is debatable, but that is really beside the point. It might be more helpful to examine Julian's own use of the word ("oure curteyse lorde answered in shewing, full *mistely*") and explore what mysticism meant to her and her contemporaries. The repeated references to James might be balanced by at least a mention of another great modern theorist of religious experience, Evelyn Underhill. Turner asserts that Julian is not a visionary—according to his definition of the term. But the opening words of Julian's Short Text are "Here is a *vision*..." Again, an investigation of what she means by this would be more helpful than Turner's rather aggressive rebuttal of Kevin Magill's *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary?* (28-30 and n. 76).

The concern of part 1 is to explore "tensions internal to Julian's theology" and "to confront formally the objection that rather than being theologically constructive inducements to deeper reflections, they amount to obstructive inconsistencies and incoherent dead ends such as would subvert any possible case for the systematic character of her theology, or even any value to her work on an terms at all" (68). Throughout, Turner takes up "objections" and "claims" against Julian, but never suggests who might be raising them; sometimes this comes across as setting up straw men. He identifies Julian's use of the Middle English word "behovely" ("sinne is behovely") as the crux of the matter of formal consistency, and his extensive discussion of it is enlightening. He hypothesizes that by "behovely," Julian means what Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure meant by *conveniens*. It is easy to concur with this, but Turner does not consider what the

connecting link between these high Medieval Latin authors and Julian's fourteenth-century vernacular might be. A quick dip into the *Middle English Dictionary* would have led him to Julian's contemporary John Gower, who wrote, "As seint Gregoire it wrot and sayde, / Al was *behovely* to the man: / For that wherof his wo began / Was after cause of al his welthe" (John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell Peck, 2000, 5:56-59). This would in turn have led him to Gregory's commentary on 1 Kings, where *oporteret* is the corresponding Latin term. It may well add up to the same thing, but it presents for investigation an author and a term closer in time and space to Julian.

Julian's Parable of the Lord and the Servant is the centerpiece of her Long Text, and by discussing it at the beginning of part 2, Turner likewise makes it the centerpiece of his study. He begins by quoting from Julian's own version of the story, in which a servant is so eager to do his lord's will that "sodenly he sterteth and runneth in gret hast for love to do his lordes will. And anon he falleth into a slade [ditch], and taketh ful gret sore. ... But he may not rise nor help himselfe by no manner of weye." Turner goes on to comment that "Such is the bare outline of the parable's narrative—or, as Julian puts it, the 'bodely liknesse' in which its spiritual significance is contained" (115). Her parable in fact ends with the lord's exclamation, "Lo, my beloved servant, what harme and disses he hath had and taken in my servis for my love—yea, and for his good wille! Is it not skille [reasonable] that I reward him his frey and his drede, his hurt and his maim, and alle his wo? And not only this, but falleth it not to me to geve him a gifte that be better to him and more wurshipful than his owne hele shuld have bene?" Surely this is the key to any interpretation of the parable. To say the narrative ends with the servant's fall is like saying that the parable of the prodigal son ends with the son standing alone in a pigsty. Turner notes that Julian's parable is intended to gloss the parable of the prodigal son, and then abandons Julian to interpret the gospel parable: "Its point ... is that all the father needs is that his son should openly admit to his transgression of the trust placed in him" (127). This leads him away from what is most interesting about Julian's, that the servant falls through eager service, not by a decision to leave the lord; the lord's instantaneous response to the fall is to reward the servant—for his zeal, not for any admission of transgression. Turner makes much of Julian's identification of the servant/Adam/"God's son"/"all men," and consequently Creation, Fall, Incarnation, Cross, and Redemption: he avoids old-fashioned words like *typology* and *recapitulation*, but they could serve well here.

The final two chapters are on "Prayer and Providence" and "Substance and Sensuality." The chapter on prayer is to my mind the best in the book. Its ties to Julian are tenuous, but it is replete with the wisdom of Turner's own experience. I found his comment on Julian's parable here more enlightening than anything in the chapter devoted to it: "Prayer is the form in which that vision of the eternal divine providence [i.e. in the collapsed timelessness of contemplative vision] intersects subjectively with our temporal experience so as to become a narrative through

which we are inserted into that eternity" (156).

The last chapter contains a long excursus on the possibility that Julian is guilty of the heresy of asserting a "formal identity" between the soul and God. This is another straw man: of course she is not. She clearly says so herself, and no one says she is. For the interested student there is a summary of the Council of Vienne and the condemnations of Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete, but it does not belong in this book. What is helpful is Turner's explanation of how Julian does understand the relationship of creature to Creator: the distinction is impossible to see, but not because it does not exist. It is too absolute for our minds to grasp, because there is no common background against which it can be measured.

The chapter ends with a reflection on Julian's ambiguous references to the "godly wille" and the "bestely [beastly] wille." After a discussion that owes as much to his thought on Augustine as to his thought on Julian, he comments that "much of the difficulty ... would appear to derive from anachronistic interpretations of her Middle English word 'wille'" (183). A bit more on this would have been welcome. The *Middle English Dictionary* could have told him that the word meant simply "a disposition, an inclination, an urge," and would have led to an analogue in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "Will is a power by means of which we choose the good. ... Through the will we love God, we desire God, and finally come to rest in God. ... Before man sinned, will could never be deceived in its choice, in its loving or in any of its works. ... But now it can do this only if it is strengthened by grace; for very often, because of the infection of original sin, it accepts a thing as good when it has only the appearance of good, and is really evil" (James J. Walsh, ed. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 1981; 245).

Turner concludes that Julian's theology does not "[conform] to some stereotype of the systematic," but that its coherence, despite its lack of concern for formal consistency, can "play some role in revising and expanding our current notions of the systematic" (217). I find this book at its best when Turner leaves all questions of "the systematic" aside and instead elegantly performs for us his own variations on a theme of Julian.

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