

P R E F A C E

Devil: Zero

I also saw our Lord scorn [the Devil's] wickedness and set him at nought, and he wants us to do the same. At this revelation I laughed heartily and that made those who were around me laugh too, and their laughter pleased me. I wished that my fellow Christians had seen what I saw, and then they would all have laughed with me. But I did not see Christ laughing. Nevertheless, it pleases him that we should laugh to cheer ourselves, and rejoice in God because the Fiend has been conquered.

—JULIAN OF NORWICH, *Revelations of Divine Love*

Rejoice?

But I did not see Christ laughing.

The Fiend has been conquered?

The Lord has made the Devil into nought, into a no-thing?

What does it mean to laugh at the Devil? To believe that “the Fiend has been conquered”?

What does it mean to live not governed by fear?

Julian of Norwich is the medieval anchorite who taught me the courage to look evil in the eye. Here are the fundamentals a new reader needs to know about her: Julian of Norwich wrote two books

that, when bound together, fit in a coat pocket. As far as we can ascertain, Julian is the first woman to write a book in English. She was born in 1342. She received a series of visions from God in 1373, while she was on what she and others around her thought would be her deathbed. It took Julian two decades to sort out what she first saw when God granted her visions of love and truth. This is the reason we have a Short Text (ST) and a Long Text (LT) describing what she saw.¹ She wrote down her visions soon after she received them (the Short Text), and then took her time to think about how to write what is referred to as the Long Text. It took her years and years to think about the ramifications of what she had seen. We know Julian became an anchoress at St. Julian's Church in Norwich by 1393. This means that, by the time she was around fifty years old, she had dedicated herself to living the rest of her life in rooms attached to this busy church, centrally located in a port city. Her rooms faced a busy road. The fact that Julian eventually committed to live in a local church strikes some contemporary readers as remarkable. I am fascinated most by her extraordinarily unconfined visions, as she testified to a God uncontrolled by the strictures of her time and my own. Also Julian of Norwich laughed at the Devil.

I have come to hear Julian's laughter as a call to holy audacity. She received her delighted and defiant laugh while incapacitated with what could have been yet another recurrence of the Great Plague that had devastated England in her childhood. There was ample evidence of evil in her time, and there is ample evidence of "the Fiend" in my own time—miseries and evil machinations over which to weep and to rage. Julian received the courage to resist, to defy, and to laugh.

This book is about Julian's defiant laughter, in her own words and from her own time, and my teaching these words in historical context

1. I use the Penguin edition of *Revelations of Divine Love* (1998), which provides a translation from Julian's Middle English into everyday modern English by Elizabeth Spearing. I will note first whether the quote is from the ST (Short Text) or LT (Long Text), followed by chapter number (which will allow you to locate a reference if you are using a different edition) and page number in the Penguin volume.

to other people confounded by life. Like many women I know, I find it almost impossible to laugh while in full awareness of evil. As part of my vocation, I teach and write about war, torture, drone strikes, sexual domination, and racial terror. Evil makes me angry, scared, and sad. I laugh from my centered, most courageous part of my soul, a part of myself that I can access only when in the presence of people whom I trust with my full, vulnerable truth and hope. Then, and only then, I sometimes laugh so loudly that strangers turn around and stare. I snort and spontaneously clap, sometimes with my hands in the air praising God for whatever truth I have just heard. I have come to experience this full-on laughter as a miracle—as a dose of sanity to help me move on to another day, to face more of the bloody truths of my own time.

Nicki Minaj is a musician to whose music my daughters and I dance in the car. Her songs feature a laugh that is all-out courageous and joyful, rebellious and delighted. She turns around and looks squarely at the punishing music industry and laughs, with a snort. When I first heard the laughter in Nicki Minaj's music, it struck me that her combination of courage and elation was like the laugh Julian laughed in the face of the Devil. Her lyrics mock the ways a male-dominated and racist music industry measures women's bodies, and she plays with caricatures of sexuality, making them powerfully her own. With defiant indecorum, she laughs. Julian also faced full-on many bloody truths about power and cruelty, and she refused to flinch.

Sometime around 1373, when Julian was about thirty years old, she received a series of visions as an answer to prayer. She asks for "vivid perception of Christ's Passion," meaning Jesus's death on a cross. By "Passion," Julian means a particular kind of passion. She asks to be infused with a full sense of Jesus when, by her theology, Jesus was bringing all of the world into God. That is, Julian asks to be one with Jesus on the cross. (I will explain this more below.) She also asks for "bodily sickness." And she asks for "three wounds" (ST: I, 3). Today this may sound bizarre. At first reading it sounded masochistic to me. But it was not odd during the Middle Ages for fervent Christians to ask God for Jesus to become one with their own body. It was not strange

for people seeking holiness to feel in their bones a union with Jesus on the cross. Julian interprets her time of sickness as a gift of vision from God. In her room, focusing on a simple household crucifix on the wall, she sees everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be held safe by God in love.

When I say Julian laughed at evil, I mean she asked God to be with her while she kept looking the Fiend in the eye, knowing that, as she puts it, she had been given “strength to resist all the fiends of hell and all spiritual enemies” (ST: 3, 7). Rather than viewing the world around her as filled to the brim with misery, she saw simple miracles and resilient safety. She did not deny that there was a fiend to be conquered. She did not pretend the world was simple. The Devil is no-thing, but that does not mean Julian denied the evil around her. Because of this her laughter is all the more powerful an antidote to a religion of fear.

Julian received suffering as a kind of inoculation against dread. A reasonable response to the manifold traumas around her—recurring plague, famine, a brutal aristocracy—would have been precisely to catch a contagion of terror. Instead she changed the whole scene. In her vision God gave her the blood of Jesus, straight from Jesus’s own body, in a way that changed how she saw the entire universe, including God. Seeing God’s “familiar love,” she knew God as “hanging about us in tender love,” like “our clothing” (ST: 3, 7). Hers is not the only way to understand and live the Christian faith, but she has helped to shape my life and the lives of many other people seeking truth. I am still trying to follow her lead—dancing, laughing, seeing, crying, and thinking, thinking, thinking, and, again . . . praying and remembering how to trust enough to laugh from the most centered part of my body and soul.



I teach Ethics (capital E) at a prestigious secular university, where an ethicist worth her salt cannot offer dressed-up academic platitudes about what is ethically wholesome or what is ethically legal or what

is considered moral to some universal judge of clean living. I cannot evade the hardest questions about the world around me or about Jesus. If I do not ask a bewildering question about ethics and God, students will call me out as giving too simple an account of their world. I am also a mother. Both of my daughters live with the stigma of a “broken home,” a phrase that is still used in North Carolina by both older and young adults who grew up with a simple vision of wholeness. The brokenness my daughters knew before our home was publicly, officially “broken” has left me with recurrent questions about the possibility of love. Julian’s writings have helped me not to give up on either the most unbearable sorts of truths or on Jesus as truth. Julian has helped me listen to the hardest questions coming at me and the most painful questions coming from within me. During times that have seemed to me and to many other people around me to be nothing short of apocalyptic, Julian has helped me resist running away from reality.

I came to Julian by accident. You may be reading this book because you already love Julian of Norwich. I first read her *Revelations of Divine Love* in a hurry, and with impatience. It was 1999, and I had just started my position as a new teacher. I was teaching a large Introduction to Christian Ethics class at Duke Divinity School, and I did not have a single woman on the list of readings from “the classics.” A colleague suggested Julian of Norwich. When I looked puzzled, he said something like, “You know her. She wrote ‘All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well?’” No. I’d never heard of her, and she sounded stupid.

“All shall be well”? I had heard too many Christians say some version of “All things work for good for those who endure misery” to people who needed a friend just to sit with them in silence. I had also seen “All is well” language used like a Jedi mind trick on people who were aggrieved and grieving. “All is well,” and God knows what is good, so what you are grieving or raging against is not worth all of those tears or all that rage. No, thank you. I had heard this language before. No more of that soporific crap for me. But Julian’s name kept coming up as a crucial theologian to read and to teach.

I read *Revelations of Divine Love* while trying hard to perform open-

ness and grace for those around me at work and in my new hometown. This, while I was trying to convey a message of joy in the midst of chaos. That chaos was, in fact, a recurrence of abuse in my own home. In this state of intimidation, scrutiny, and almost unbearable fragility, Julian became my lodestar. She was my focal point as I tried to twirl with a semblance of grace on the stage of my life. This book is in part a testimony to how the visions of a courageous woman can transform a setting of dread into a call to courage. “All shall be well” became, for me, a refusal of intimidation, scrutiny, and shame. Julian helped me to look at even the most terrifying truth of my own personal life and trust in the love of God.



I have found that Julian’s visions resonate even with readers who have not grown up Christian. Her words about hope and love can speak to people who are privy to secular messages of despair, despondency, competition, and straight-up hate. Images in *Better Homes and Gardens* recommend ways to have, well, *better* homes and gardens. *Cosmopolitan* offers unique tricks to make sure a woman is not alone, or disappointing, on a Saturday night. *Men’s Health* shows men how to achieve a configuration on their abdominals known as a “six-pack” while also advising them how to choose the best craft beer. Television viewers in the United States view high-end fights for survival and fitness on *The Sopranos* or *Game of Thrones* and, even more popular, literal fights for scarce goods on *The Price Is Right* and “fight nights” promoted by Ultimate Fighting Championship. Julian has helped me to diagnose and counter such subtle and overt calls to see the world as a competition for scarce resources.

For some Christian readers, her visions powerfully counter a particular form of Christian faith that manipulates anxiety to quicken obedience and compliance. This medieval anchorite, writing with courage when Christianity and political hierarchy were intertwined to convince people to shut up and stay in their place, can speak across

centuries to embolden Christians who have been privy to a similarly toxic blend of religion and politics. Writers and speakers in the United States continue to use Christian language to intimidate and to shame. Julian's visions offer a hearty rebuttal of this use for Christians and for non-Christians who must navigate a political scene where Christian language is used to scare people. Preachers showcased by major media outlets too often speak a false gospel of obedience and order, an isolating message of individual responsibility, or some combination of the two. Commentators like the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reinforce these messages, diagnosing humanity as inherently narcissistic and prescribing selflessness for everyone, as if prescribing fluoride in water.

Julian saw visions of Jesus's blood coming to her and for her, with no intermediary, during the same decade when, customarily, only priests received the cup of blessing (the blood) and the bread (or body) was parceled out according to a strict division of who was above whom in an aristocratic, feudal system. Her resultant laughter is a testimony today against a summons to purifying humiliation and obedience. Julian's visions of God's familiarity and love counter messages of austerity and obeisance to hierarchical ordering. And she wrote with an intention of being read, by real people, from a position of kinship rather than superiority.

Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (2006) edited a volume on Julian that provides her original writings, in Middle English, and copious notes on the particular words and historical context of her writings. In their introduction to the volume they write, "A Revelation [meaning the Long Text] is a work with no real precedent: a speculative vernacular theology, not modeled on earlier texts but structured as a prolonged investigation into the divine, whose prophetic goal is to birth a new understanding of human living into the world and of the nature of God in his interactions with the world, not just for theologians but for everyone" (3). What they mean by "a speculative vernacular theology" is this: Julian was willing to ask questions that a woman was not supposed to ask. In fact only men trained in theology at Oxford or Cambridge University were considered qualified

to ask the questions she asked. Julian was “speculative” in that she speculated—she asked questions. And she wrote in the vernacular, meaning she wrote in English, the language people not trained at Oxford or Cambridge spoke to one another about everyday things. Julian was a churchwoman and a prophet who wanted people to catch sight of what she saw and to become curious about what it meant that God told her that God’s meaning is, always and for eternity, love. She wanted people to think, see, sorrow, and laugh at the Devil with her. This is my invitation, in my own vernacular, to join in this vision.