

Chapter 1

Julian in Context

The contemporary rediscovery of the fourteenth-century anchoress, Julian of Norwich, as an important mystical writer, theological thinker, and spiritual teacher has inevitably led to a great deal of speculation about her origins and life. Whatever the long-term value of Julian's teachings, no mystical or theological writing exists on some ideal plane removed from the historical circumstances in which it arose.¹

Julian's possible background and her historical context affect our contemporary interpretation of what she wrote. Without some awareness of her context, it is all too easy to make Julian an honorary member of our own times or to pick and choose the aspects of her writings that appeal to us or to make overall judgments about her without seeking to honor what she herself intended to communicate in her writings.

Who was Julian?

Who Julian was, her social background, her education, her life experience prior to becoming an anchoress, when she became an anchoress – even where she was born – are all matters of speculation. The name “Julian” by which she is known is also likely to have been an adopted one. It was quite common for medieval anchorites and anchoresses to assume the name of the church to which their anchorhold (or cell) was physically attached. In the case of Julian of Norwich, her anchorhold was next to the parish church of St Julian Timberhill in Norwich which survives in reconstructed form to this day. The church has been known by that name since the tenth century but it is not absolutely clear to which St Julian it is dedicated. There are several saints of that name. One suggestion is St Julian the Hospitaller because he was the patron saint of ferrymen and the local ferry ran across the River Wensum very close to the church.

However, another suggestion is that the title of St Julian's Church somehow touched Julian of Norwich's own personal and painful

experience. A growing consensus, not least in Julian's own city of Norwich and in the parish of St Julian, is that the underlying echoes in the Long Text may point to a woman who was a widow and had lost a child at a young age. The text has the flavor of someone who suffered the darkness of such a loss. For example, chapter 61 briefly and poignantly notes that an "earthly mother may suffer her child to perish." If so, it is speculated that a likely date was the plague of 1362 because that particular outbreak did not simply lead to the death of twenty per cent of the city's population but, unusually, the majority of deaths were of children. In this environment, devotion to St Julian of Le Mans would have attracted people, perhaps Julian of Norwich among them, because the saint was famous for miracles of curing children and even of raising them from the dead. St Julian's Church was the responsibility of the nuns of Carrow Priory (popularly referred to as Carrow Abbey). Interestingly, the manuscript of the Carrow Abbey Psalter still survives in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, MD. In it the usual liturgical calendar is supplemented by a special feast day dedicated to St Julian of Le Mans. Whether the parish church was technically dedicated to this St Julian or not, it would seem that St Julian of Le Mans was well known to the people of Norwich.²

Having said this, all attempts at reconstructing Julian of Norwich's life must be treated with caution. The only evidence we have about her identity consists of what is present in her two texts, a mention of bequests made to her in several surviving wills, and the record of a visit to her (probably around 1413) by another of the late medieval English mystics, Margery Kempe. This is described in Margery's dictated autobiographical work, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Julian says very little about her own life and circumstances in the texts that she herself wrote, apart from the bare details of her original visionary experiences and references to further interior enlightenment some years later. In the second chapter of what is typically known as her Long Text, or *A Revelation of Love*, Julian writes of a "revelation" made to her in "the year of our Lord one thousand, three hundred and seventy-three [1373] on the thirteenth day of May."³ As the third chapter makes clear, this occurred when she was "thirty and a half years old" during a "bodily sickness in which I lay for three days and three nights." On that basis we can presume she was born around 1342 or 1343. The only other biographical details offered in Julian's texts occur in a short, probably scribal, preface to her so-called Short Text, or "A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman," in its one surviving manuscript. This records that "her name is Julian, who is a recluse at Norwich and still alive, anno domini 1413." There are oblique hints about two other dates within the Long Text and these will be referred to in my discussion of the relationship between this text and the Short Text.

As we have seen, there have been speculations that Julian was born and grew up in the North of England rather than in Norwich and that she must have arrived there later. As we saw briefly in the Introduction, these speculations arise from some supposed evidence of Northern dialect in Julian's two texts although as we saw this is highly ambiguous. In terms of my own interpretation, while necessarily remaining tentative, I can see no overwhelming reason to move away from the conventional assumption that, whatever the history of her texts, Julian herself was indeed a "woman of Norwich" (or somewhere nearby), from an affluent background. This view is explicitly reinforced by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins in their relatively recent scholarly edition of Julian's writings.⁴ Barry Windeatt's most recent edition does not seem to contradict this.

Evidence from Wills

The Jesuit scholar Norman Tanner can be credited with a systematic search for references to Julian in various bequests in surviving late medieval wills.⁵ These are also laid out in Appendix B of the scholarly edition of Julian by Watson and Jenkins.⁶ Four wills survive that bequeath money to Julian, one in Anglo-Norman and three in Latin. The Anglo-Norman will is by Isabel Ufford, Countess of Suffolk and the daughter of the Earl of Warwick. This was "proved" (that is, established as authentic) in 1416. Twenty shillings were left to "Julian, recluse at Norwich." Of the Latin wills, the earliest bequest – and, indeed, the earliest evidence of Julian's status as an anchoress – dates from 1393 or 1394. This is the will of Roger Reed, the Rector of St Michael's Church, Coslany, in Norwich. Although the will was damaged by fire in recent years, we know from a prior reference in the scholarly edition of Colledge and Walsh (pp 33–34) that it left two shillings to "Julian anchorite." A further will of the chantry priest Thomas Emund, dated 1404, left "twelve pence to Julian, anchoress at the church of St Julian in Norwich" and also "eight pence to Sarah, living with her." It is not clear whether Sarah was also an anchoress or was Julian's maid. This is the only direct reference to Julian by name that links her to an anchorhold at St Julian's Church. Finally, the will of John Plumpton of the city of Norwich in November 1415 states "Item: I bequeath forty pence to the anchoress in the Church of St Julian's, Conesford, in Norwich and twelve pence to her maid. Item: I bequeath her former maid, Alice, twelve pence." Assuming that "the anchoress" is Julian, and even if she did not live beyond 1415, it means that Julian reached the age of at least 74.

It is worth noting the motivation for such bequests. The contemporary concerns with death, God's judgment, and the possibility of eternal

punishment explains a great deal about why people left bequests to people like Julian. It was seen as vitally important to have spiritual people to pray for benefactors and especially for their speedy release from purgatory and for their eternal well-being. In that sense, an anchoress such as Julian of Norwich became a kind of servant or employee of the benefactor but one who looked after the spiritual rather than material needs of the employer.

Apart from offering a sense of Julian's own life, the tradition of bequests to men and women anchorites in Norwich raises some further questions. Bequests in the mid-thirteenth century suggest that there were anchorites in the city at that point. However, there seems to be a gap between 1312 and the presence of Julian towards the end of the fourteenth century. Apart from the instability of the times there is no obvious explanation for this. However, what it does suggest is that Julian does not seem to have been the product of a continuous stream of recluses in the city. This makes her stand out even more. However, during her life as an anchoress the numbers of recluses in the city increased to around ten. This does not prove that Julian gathered a circle or school of solitaries around her but it seems likely that she was responsible for the increase by way of inspiration.

The Visit of Margery Kempe

The only other external evidence for the life and work of Julian lies in the text of another late medieval English woman visionary, Margery Kempe (c.1373 to later than 1438), daughter of John Brunham, a wealthy merchant, Mayor of Bishop's Lynn (now King's Lynn) in Norfolk, and Member of Parliament. Married at the age of 20 to John Kempe and mother of some fourteen children over 20 years, Margery had visionary experiences and eventually went through a profound spiritual conversion. This led her to reach an agreement with her husband to lead a life of celibacy and then to go on an extensive series of pilgrimages before returning to Lynn. It seems she first began to dictate her spiritual autobiography in the early 1430s and it was eventually completed in 1438. The complete manuscript of her work was only rediscovered in 1934.⁷

The relevance of Margery Kempe to the study of Julian of Norwich lies in her description of a visit and extensive conversation with Julian (c.1413) at a relatively early stage in her spiritual journey. In Book 1, chapter 18 of her autobiography (the second of two chapters about a visit to Norwich), she notes that after a visit to a Carmelite friar in Norwich, William Southfield, she was "commanded by our Lord" to "go to an anchoress in the same city who was called Dame Julian." The main focus

of their conversation seems to have been Margery Kempe's desire to test out whether her visions and revelations and resulting spiritual sentiments were authentic or whether she was being deceived. She notes that Julian "was expert in such things and could give good advice." After listening to Margery Kempe, Julian's response was to thank God and to advise her to be obedient to God's will and to fulfil whatever God "put into her soul" if it was not obviously contrary to "worship of God" and was to the "profit of her fellow Christians." Once again, Julian seems to have a strong sense of the pastoral purpose of all authentic spiritual experiences. Kempe cites Julian as saying:

The Holy Ghost never urges a thing against charity, and if he did he would be contrary to his own self, for he is all charity. Also he moves a soul to all chasteness, for chaste livers are called the temple of the Holy Ghost and the Holy Ghost makes a soul stable and steadfast in the right faith and the right belief.

The conversation between them "for many days that they were together" was essentially a lesson in "testing the spirits," or discernment, to see whether one's spiritual experiences or desires are of God or not. Special revelations, once tested, must be trusted. It would seem from this evidence that Julian was seen as an authority on the Christian tradition of discernment. More broadly, Margery Kempe's account also provides evidence that Julian received visitors who came to talk about their spiritual journeys. Interestingly, although Margery Kempe had a liking for devotional texts in English, she makes no mention of Julian's writings as opposed to her spiritual reputation. Yet by 1413 Julian would have long since completed her Short Text and very likely also the Long Text. There do seem to be a few interesting similarities between Margery Kempe and Julian's texts. For example the image of the soul as the seat of God echoes the Long Text, chapter 68. The concern for the faith of Holy Church echoes the Long Text, chapter 9. There is also the use of such terms as "fellow Christians" or "evenchristen."

Margery Kempe's account of her meeting with Julian also has Julian refer to a number of biblical texts as well as to St Jerome and St Bernard on the gift of tears. This brings us briefly to the debates about Julian's previous background and education. As already noted, the first evidence we have for Julian as an anchoress is in a will dated 1393 or 1394. This is roughly the same time when contemporary scholars suggest that Julian began to write the Long Text. Without suggesting that Julian's motive for entering the anchorhold was to become a theological-spiritual writer, it is nevertheless the case that the solitary life would have offered her the space to think about and to meditate upon her experiences and then to

gather together her insights in a focused way. The more contentious, and ultimately insoluble, question is what kind of education Julian had, and what life she led, before entering the anchorhold and what connection this had to her initial visionary experience.

Julian's Education and Previous Life

Julian claims to be "simple" and "unlettered" – or, as in the Sloane manuscripts, "a simple creature that cowde no letter." However, the internal evidence of her writings suggests otherwise and that Julian was a person of profound intellect. For example, her Long Text is meticulously organized and manifests literary skills that rank her as a pioneer of English prose, quite apart from the substantial theology. This would make her own self-judgment perhaps an exercise in humility, or self-protection against any accusation of female impropriety in claiming theological-teaching authority, or a way of underlining that what was of value was God-given rather than the product of her own capacities, or a combination of all of these.

Over 50 years ago, the Dominican writer Conrad Pepler suggested that Julian was familiar with Thomas Aquinas.⁸ In their 1978 scholarly edition of Julian's texts, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, as we shall see in the next chapter, promoted Julian as someone with an extensive knowledge of theological sources who could therefore be seen as on a par with medieval male theologians. First of all, they offer a massive list of scriptural citations or scriptural echoes and more generally evidence of Julian's own translations from the Latin Vulgate which suggests that she had a good grounding in Latin. They also suggest that Julian was aware of classical rhetoric. Beyond that they suggest that she had read widely in the spiritual classics, both in the vernacular and in Latin. Finally, they argue that Julian shows a good knowledge of the theology of Augustine and Gregory the Great and seems to have been influenced by The Golden Epistle of the Cistercian William of St Thierry and more generally by Cistercian monastic writings.⁹ More recent scholars, including me, while acknowledging Julian's scriptural and theological capacities, mainly consider Colledge's and Walsh's extensive list of works that she had read to be over-exaggerated. I have already suggested that they felt the need to justify the notion that a medieval woman could be considered to be a serious theologian.

To summarize, in my judgment, Julian was certainly literate, able to read and write in Middle English, and maybe with some capacity to read Latin. Before considering how she accessed whatever theological texts she did read, the more immediate question is how she was educated and where.

Some commentators conclude that Julian was a member of the lesser gentry or even of the aristocracy. This would have made for easier access to education and have provided Julian with the means to support herself financially as an anchoress. Specifically, one local Norwich historian in the 1950s detected from available records that there was a prominent woman named “Julian” whose dates seem consistent with what we know or can surmise about Julian of Norwich. This is someone called Lady Julian Erpingham, sister of Sir Thomas Erpingham who, among other things, fought at Agincourt and was a close friend of Henry V. The Erpinghams were a notably devout family with close connections to the Dominicans, St Julian’s Church, and Carrow Priory. Lady Julian married Roger Hauteyn who was killed in 1373 (the year of the “showings”), leaving her childless. It would seem likely that she moved back to her family home close to St Julian’s Church. If she was indeed our “Julian of Norwich” this may be where she had her near-fatal illness surrounded by her family. However, according to further researches by Fr John-Julian, a recent writer on Julian of Norwich, it seems that Julian Erpingham subsequently remarried someone called Sir John Phelip and had three children, the last of whom was born in 1389 when her second husband also died. In my view, these details make Lady Erpingham’s identification with Julian of Norwich less likely. However, Fr John-Julian also points out that in the late Middle Ages the children of the gentry were often sent away to be raised and educated elsewhere. On this basis, Julian would have been free to become an anchoress around 1393. However, an additional problem with this theory is that if Julian of Norwich is to be identified with Lady Erpingham she would have died in 1414. Unfortunately, this does not fit with the evidence provided by the surviving wills, already mentioned, one of which is dated 1416. In addition, Norman Tanner suggests that Julian was probably still alive in 1429 because bequests to an anchoress of St Julian’s Church, admittedly unnamed, continue to that date.¹⁰ However, there are also problems with Tanner’s suggestion because if Julian was still living in 1429 she would then have been 86 years of age – remarkable at that time.

Even if, for practical reasons, we reject the identification of Julian of Norwich with Lady Julian Erpingham, some other scholars who speculate about her social background favor the gentry or a lower aristocratic milieu. For example, Alexandra Barratt draws attention to Julian’s prominent preoccupation with the themes of lordship and service.¹¹ Other writers note that East Anglia in Julian’s time was a populous and prosperous region that was home to numerous gentry families.¹² The term “gentry” meant people who owned land, controlled villages, or held public office such as being a Justice of the Peace or a Member of Parliament. This is not necessarily the same as ennobled or

aristocratic. Such people were preoccupied with courtesy and gentility. However, even if Julian was previously married and was a mother, the traditional gentry “consort” category and preoccupations do not appear to fit. There is no strong indication in her writings of the normal concerns of a consort.¹³ Another author suggests that the inclusion and naming of Julian’s maids in two of the surviving wills is unusual. It may imply that these maids gained a degree of status by association with a gentrified Julian. The same author notes that an anchoress was *de facto* the head of a small household. Interestingly, Julian’s theodicy revolves around the rhetorical example of a servant (chapter 51) where the servant’s eagerness to fulfil the lord’s desire is both his undoing and yet the making of him. This, it is suggested, fits with the nature of late medieval social relations where “service” was no longer considered demeaning but was part of a “nexus of obligation, honour, service, love and reward.”¹⁴

Julian’s literacy, whether as a child of Norfolk gentry or a child of the wealthy Norwich merchant class, could have come from being one of the girls educated by the nuns of Carrow Priory. While one or two commentators seem to believe that Carrow did not educate ordinary children but only aspiring nuns, Norman Tanner in his scholarly study of religion in late medieval Norwich is fairly clear that the convent did take in girls as boarders to be educated.¹⁵

The more contentious issue concerns how and where Julian acquired her theology. The short answer is that we do not know. It was unusual, but not unprecedented, for a medieval woman to compose theology. Some commentators have assumed that this necessarily points to Julian having been a nun, presumably of Carrow, before she entered the anchorhold. In this context, Julian’s three wishes and God thanking her “for your service and your labour in your youth” (chapter 14) have been interpreted as a reference to her earlier life as a nun. The problem with this is that it involves a prior assumption that in Julian’s time only nuns would be seen as involved in spiritual service and labor. However, this is highly questionable. By the fourteenth century the growing availability and valuation of lay spiritual resources and new spiritual movements, plus a sense that lay Christians could lead an intentional spiritual life through the medium of pious confraternities, undermines any assumption that Julian’s three spiritual desires, as well as God’s “thanks” for her spiritual work, necessarily points to a prior monastic lifestyle. To return to the question of Julian’s theological education, it would also be naïve to assume that being a nun at Carrow guaranteed access to theological books or to theological training. Many medieval nuns were not theologically well-educated and their grasp of Latin was largely by rote through the regular recitation of the monastic Offices.

As is typical among medieval women mystical writers, Julian does not cite any sources other than the Bible. This has led to all kinds of speculation. It is true that she seems to know the Bible well but the generous list of biblical parallels in Part Two of the scholarly edition of Colledge and Walsh (pp 779–788) is judged by contemporary scholars to be far too extensive. Equally, Colledge and Walsh over-estimate a belief in Julian’s theological sources, whether patristic or medieval. Modern commentators judge that most of Julian’s apparently direct sources are more likely to be general parallels to themes found throughout the mystical tradition rather than anything more explicit.

Rather than assume that, as a putative nun, Julian had access to library resources at Carrow, it is more likely that her theological knowledge, manifested in the Long Text, came via priest advisors while she was an anchoress. This, of course, assumes that she did not complete her Long Text – indeed, perhaps did not even begin writing it – until she had entered the anchorhold. Such advisors, or theological conversation partners, may have helped obtain books from the important religious libraries in the city. The library of the Benedictine community at the cathedral was one of the best theological collections in the country and this, along with the library of the Augustinian friary close to Julian’s anchorhold at St Julian’s Church, became well-known centers of learning in the late Middle Ages.

So, had Julian been a nun before she entered the anchorhold? The short answer is that we cannot possibly know. The supposed evidence is circumstantial and based on certain assumptions. What do the various commentators suggest? Colledge and Walsh in their 1970s scholarly edition of Julian’s writings believe she was a nun. Perhaps more surprisingly, the more recent scholarly edition by Watson and Jenkins also suggest that there is “a strong possibility” that she was a nun of Carrow. Joan Nuth in *Wisdom’s Daughter*, her study of Julian’s theology, also suggests that Julian was probably a nun but in her later volume on the English mystics, *God’s Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The English Mystics*, she is less sure. In her respected study of Julian, Grace Jantzen is inconclusive: saying “yes” to connections to Carrow but admitting that there is “no evidence” that she was a nun. She rightly notes that Julian’s writings do not have a nun-like feel, target all her “fellow Christians” rather than a narrow monastic audience, and make no overt reference to monastic spirituality or to the monastic approach to biblical meditative exegesis known as *lectio divina*. Insofar as there are echoes of *lectio*, these are just as likely to have originated in the late medieval “laicization” of the tradition in devotional practices and meditation manuals.

The most compelling presentation of an alternative view that Julian of Norwich had been married and widowed and also had had a child or

children is paradoxically from Sister Benedicta Ward, a member of a women's monastic community, who is also an Oxford University medieval scholar and Church historian.¹⁶ As we have already seen, this viewpoint also corresponds to the contemporary local consensus in the city of Norwich. Although some of the assumptions in Sister Benedicta's 1988 essay have necessarily been overtaken by more recent scholarship, this does not detract from her other insights. Benedicta Ward rightly questions assumptions that educated and deeply spiritual writers were naturally nurtured in the monastic tradition. She also notes that there had always been a tradition of non-monastics becoming solitaries. For example, the famous early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* text was aimed at three lay women. Benedicta Ward points out that the scribal note at the beginning of the Short Text simply refers to a "devout woman" who is a recluse at Norwich in 1413. This, the relevant wills, and the testimony of Margery Kempe make no reference to Julian being, or having been, a nun. There is no reference to Julian in the surviving records of Carrow Priory and, like Grace Jantzen, Benedicta Ward correctly notes that there is absolutely no reference in Julian to monastic formation or practices. Julian's writings do not bear the mark of "the cloister." Rather, her desire for three gifts (Short Text, chapter i) are fully in line with the devout aspirations of lay people in her times. The descriptions of Julian's initial illness fit better with a household of family and friends where she was visited by "the parson, my curate" with "a little boy" and a cross (Short Text, chapter ii). So Benedicta Ward suggests that Julian was a young widow living in her own household with servants and her mother. The Long Text, chapters 60 and 61 appear more natural and coherent if we relate them to the actual experience of motherhood – suckling a child at the breast, guarding a child tenderly yet, when it is older, permitting it to be punished for its faults and also allowing it to fall "for its own benefit" – that is, to learn from the experience of getting hurt. Finally, Benedicta Ward hazards a guess that the powerful and poignant image in Long Text, chapter 64, of "a body lying on the earth...without shape and form," compared to a "pit of stinking mud," that produces a "most beautiful creature, a little child" who then glides up to heaven, may echo her own experience of a child who had died. However, it must be noted that this is only a guess and it may be argued that this imagery of death was conventional at the time.¹⁷

In passing, it is notable that there is no evidence of any posthumous cult of Julian of Norwich despite the reputation for both holiness and spiritual wisdom that she must have enjoyed judging by the bequests made to her and the references to her in Margery Kempe's spiritual autobiography.

Julian's Texts

The precise dates when the two versions of Julian's writings, the Short Text and the Long Text, were written is not made explicitly clear by her. As a consequence this remains a matter of scholarly debate. However, Julian does note that she did not immediately understand the parable of a Lord and a Servant which is the heart of chapter 51 of the Long Text and which was part of her original visionary experience. It is probably for this reason that the parable does not appear at all in the Short Text. Equally probably, Julian's reflections on Jesus as Mother and, more broadly, on God as Mother depend in some way on her eventual understanding of this parable and therefore also do not appear in the Short Text. Chapter 51 itself notes that it was "twenty years after the time of the revelation except for three months" that she received a further "inward instruction" which helped to clarify matters regarding the parable. That would date the new insight to around 1393, presumably after the Short Text had been written. Also, in the final chapter 86 of the Long Text, Julian refers to her continuous desire after her initial visionary revelations "to know in what was our Lord's meaning." She notes that she received a further spiritual revelation that answered her questioning "fifteen years after and more" – that is, around 1388. There have been speculations that the Short Text may have been a later abridged version of the Long Text but this viewpoint is not the scholarly consensus. Whatever the dating of the two texts, it seems more likely that the Short Text precedes the Long Text.¹⁸

Based on this internal evidence, it also seems likely that Julian did not begin the Long Text until at least 1388 and perhaps later. It has been noted that chapter 1, which summarizes the sixteen showings or revelations, makes no mention of the parable of a Lord and a Servant. This suggests that the writing of the Long Text may have been an extended process with a first draft being written somewhere between 1388 and 1393 with further revision taking place after that date in the light of the further "inward instruction."

Fundamentally, the move from an earlier Short Text to a later Long Text represents a shift from a more experience-based narrative by Julian as participant to a teaching-centered presentation by Julian as interpreter, informed by extensive reflection and also, apparently, by further divine revelation. Equally, in this regard it has been noted that the language of the Long Text is much more plural than the Short Text; it uses "we" rather than the more subjective "I." The Short Text is basically a scene-by-scene account of her visionary experience in twenty-five chapters and roughly eleven thousand words. In contrast, the eighty six chapters of the Long Text, which at around sixty-three thousand words is roughly six times

longer, offers a revisionist teaching aimed at a wide readership about the “meaning” of God, the nature of creation, human identity and destiny, and their interrelationship. Nicholas Watson, one of the editors of a relatively recent scholarly edition of Julian’s writings, argues in an earlier article that the Short Text was not simply written from notes fairly soon after the visions; that is, shortly after 1373. In the form in which we have it, Watson suggests that it may not have been finished until up to 15 years later; that is, in the mid to late 1380s. He argues, therefore, that the Long Text may not have been started until the 1390s and could well have gone through several revisions until Julian’s death in the second decade of the fifteenth century.¹⁹

Julian’s World: Society and Country

The fourteenth century and early fifteenth century, both specifically in England and in wider Europe, have been described as an “age of adversity”: one of the bleakest periods in medieval history characterized by the diversity and magnitude of human suffering.²⁰

In fourteenth-century England, government suffered from two ineffectual monarchs, Edward II (1307–1327) and Richard II (1377–1399). They were separated by the longer reign of a much stronger king, Edward III (1327–1377). However, his attention was deflected from domestic concerns by his preoccupation with war – with Scotland and with France. In the latter case, this developed into what became known as the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). War no longer pretended to operate according to chivalrous ideals but was ruthless, brutal, and destructive. This not only led to an increased death toll among the men of England (resulting in many widows) but also to marauding mercenaries wandering the English countryside, plundering and making travel dangerous for ordinary people.

The various wars had a serious knock-on effect at home. There was heavy taxation to fund the wars which impacted on the local clergy and on the poor. As a result government and knights were seen as responsible for a massive waste of resources. In particular, the notorious third poll tax of 1381 provoked the outbreak of what became known as the Peasants’ Revolt. This began in South-east England and sought the reduction of taxation and the end to serfdom. Eventually a group from Kent led by Wat Tyler and inspired by the sermons of a priest, John Ball, marched on London. Because there were so few royal troops available, they were joined by local city folk and pillaged and burnt property associated with government. The young king, Richard II, was initially forced to give in to many demands but eventually Wat Tyler was killed, the rebels dispersed,

and the concessions rescinded. In East Anglia, to which the rebellion had spread, the Bishop of Norwich Hugh Despenser defeated the rebels. Eventually troubles in the North and West Country were also confronted and order restored.

As if war, government incompetence, and social injustice were not enough, the fourteenth century also saw serious famine throughout Europe. This was followed by plague, known as the Black Death, which hit England in 1348 and again in 1361–1362, 1368–1369, and during the 1370s: all during Julian of Norwich's lifetime. Indeed, as we have seen, the speculation about Julian as widow points either to the wars or to the plague as the likely cause of the possible loss of a husband and children.

Julian's World: Religion and Church

The plagues and famines led to some superstitious reactions. The devil was seen to be at work, as is hinted in Julian's texts (for example, Short Text, chapter xxi or Long Text, chapter 13). Or, in the face of the loss of half the population of Europe in the Black Death, the Jews (collectively blamed for the death of Jesus) were treated as scapegoats and accused of deliberately spreading the disease by, for example, poisoning water wells. Of course, the city of Norwich was already associated with the supposed twelfth-century martyrdom of William of Norwich, a 12-year-old boy, who was killed and was believed to have been murdered by Jews. He subsequently became the object of a religious cult. The situation of Jews in Norwich had particular complications in that they were French-speaking. They were therefore closely associated in people's minds with the relatively recently established, and resented, Norman ruling class. The boy William's family were Anglo-Saxon.

More generally, the plague was seen as God's punishment for sin, for example in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. This fitted into a widespread emphasis in fourteenth-century religion on eternal punishment, fear of which was fuelled by much of the preaching to which lay people were exposed. Catechesis was predominantly about sin and salvation and the bishops were rigorous in their promotion of individual confession to a priest. Not surprisingly, fear of God's wrath was a determining feature in many people's relationship with the divine. The notion of love and mercy (except in the narrow sense of forgiveness of sin if people repented) was in short supply. Apart from other considerations, this is what makes Julian's theology and spiritual message so radical.

On a broader front, the Western Church was in chaos during Julian's lifetime. Between 1309 and 1377 the Frenchman Pope Clement V and then a succession of seven Popes left Rome and lived in Avignon in

France. This so-called “Babylonian Captivity” was also associated with scandalous luxury and the marketing of Church jobs. In 1377, the last of the Avignon popes, Gregory XI, returned to Rome, supposedly inspired by the words of the woman mystic, Catherine of Siena. He died the following year and an Italian reformer, Urban VI, was elected to succeed him. This provoked a revolt among the Cardinals who elected another Frenchman who returned to Avignon. This led to the so-called Great Schism which split the Western Church and lasted until 1418 when it was ended by the Council of Constance.

England seems not to have been strongly influenced by the Continental heretical religious movements such as the so-called heresy of the Free Spirit. However, in the later fourteenth century John Wycliffe, priest, Oxford theologian, and in 1361 Master of Balliol College, indirectly inspired a religious rebellion in England known as Lollardy. Slowly he became disenchanted with the state of the Church and eventually advocated its complete overhaul, structurally and doctrinally. He opposed hierarchical styles of authority, clerical models of priesthood, and certain popular devotions associated with indulgences and money, such as veneration of images. He promoted the vernacular bible, came to see scripture as the sole authority in doctrine and morals, and eventually adopted the doctrine of predestination, promoted a reformed sacramental theology as well as a reformed liturgy, attacked monasticism, and eventually advocated the end of the papacy. However, even though condemned and forced to leave Oxford, he paradoxically retained the parish living of Lutterworth in Lincolnshire where he lived until his death in 1384. His followers, known as Lollards, were not academics but proceeded by way of popular preaching and the promotion of the English bible. They became associated with social reform and the priest, John Ball, who inspired the 1381 Peasants Revolt preached Lollardy even though Wycliffe himself opposed the rebellion. Lollardy survived into the fifteenth century when it eventually became an underground movement which arguably blended into English Protestantism at the time of the Reformation.

The Bishop of Norwich from 1370 until 1406, and thus during Julian’s adulthood, was Henry Despenser. He became a leading figure in the persecution of the Lollards and in advocating the death penalty for convicted heretics. This was enforced after the accession of Henry IV in 1399. The so-called “Lollard Pit” in Norwich, where Lollards were burnt at the stake, was very close to Julian’s anchorhold. While Julian’s texts were written before executions began she would surely have been well aware of the developing Lollard controversy while writing the Long Text. This may partly explain Julian’s concern to indicate that she believed “as Holy Church teaches.”

On a more upbeat note, the period of Julian's lifetime was also one of the increasing "laicization" of spirituality and access by lay people to spiritual texts, the bible, and other religious material. As we shall see in Chapter 2, Julian's writings can be characterized as "vernacular theology." In broad terms, as noted in the Introduction, this is symptomatic of a growing "age of the vernacular" in which Julian sits alongside the literary giants Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland. The concept of the "age of the vernacular" has several dimensions. At its most basic, it implied the gradual shift from writing literature in Latin or Norman-French to writing in English. Since the Norman Conquest of England in the eleventh century, "English" in its original Anglo-Saxon and then Middle English forms had ceased to be an acceptable literary language and became effectively the spoken language of the common people. The move back to literary English also implied social and cultural changes whereby a descendent of the language of the defeated Anglo-Saxons gradually became the language of the crown and the administration. Finally, the "age of the vernacular" also implied a growing democratization of ideas and the availability of, for example, religious literature to an increasingly educated and literate laity.

Middle English was known for its alternate spellings and pronunciation depending on the dialect used in different parts of the country. Because English was formed of many languages, standardization has been an on-going issue. Modern English came into being as standardized Middle English – that is, the preferred dialect of the crown, the court, and the civil administration. The key dialect was from East Midlands which eventually spread to London. This contained Danish forms not often used in the North or the South of the country because the Danes settled heavily in the Midlands. Examples are the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament, and William Caxton, the first printer. French ceased to be the official legal language of England in 1362. A few decades later, King Henry IV (1399–1413) did not speak in Norman-French.

However, from roughly 1200 onwards there was a growing use of various vernacular languages across Europe and not merely in England. This speaks of other developments in Church and wider society. These include the growing accessibility of written material to lay people, the increasing role of women as writers and the expansion of the notion of "theology" beyond formally structured expositions of abstract ideas to embrace personal experience, for example via visionary literature or poetry. There was also the availability of manuals of instruction (or catechisms) in English aimed at enhancing lay people's grasp of the Christian faith. One example is the text known as the *Lay Folks Catechism*, sponsored by Archbishop Thoresby of York in the middle of the fourteenth century.

This became a religious best-seller during the latter part of the century and on into the fifteenth century.

Julian's Norwich

Throughout the late Middle Ages, Norwich was one of the half dozen leading English cities. There are suggestions that its population may have been as large as twenty five thousand in the 1330s but that it was reduced to about eight thousand after the Black Death.²¹ By about 1500 Norwich was the second city after London, with around ten thousand inhabitants. The city was also the regional capital of one of the most prosperous, and also artistically sophisticated, parts of England. The port of Norwich was connected by the River Wensum to the sea and there were vibrant trade links between the city and both the Low Countries and the Rhineland. It is notable that the port of Norwich expanded during the Hundred Years' War because the South coast ports were more exposed. Thus Norwich became one of the main gateways to England, served by roads and waterways to London and to the North of England. There was a significant expansion of the wool and the cloth trade during this period with Norwich as a major export center. Interestingly, Julian of Norwich seems particularly aware of the textures of cloth and of colours which she describes with precision. It has even been suggested that Julian's image "I saw God in a pointe" (chapter 11) may refer to needle-point (or lace-point), with "a pointe" representing a stitch.²² This is highly speculative, as is the reaction of some people that Julian's family may have been involved in the cloth trade or that it reflects the fact that stitching or lace-making were common activities of anchoresses.

Apart from regular trading connections between the port of Norwich, Flanders, and the Netherlands, there was increasing immigration into Norwich by Flemish cloth workers and merchants. It seems that a small community of Flemish and Dutch merchants with families may have lived in Norwich during Julian's time. References to a Netherlandish community in the city and in wider Norfolk in the late Middle Ages also appear in the records of Norwich, Lynn, Great Yarmouth, and in the Norfolk Records Office. For example, a certain John Asger, "once a merchant of Bruges" according to the memorial in St Lawrence's Church Norwich, was sheriff in 1416 and became Mayor of Norwich in 1426. His son, also called John, apparently born in the Netherlands, seems to have owned the tenement in which one of the quasi-Beguine groups in Norwich lived from the early 1430s. It seems that both father and son died in 1436. Another Asger (or Asgar) called Robert seems to have been city treasurer in 1415–1416. Asgars appear in documents as late as 1475.

This may indicate that generations of the same Flemish family not only resided in the city but also held civic office.

These North Sea connections link with questions about the possible influences of Flemish and Rhineland spirituality. Opinions about this differ. In general terms, the Church was institutionally strong and varied in late medieval Norwich. There were some fifty parishes, a large cathedral run by a community of Benedictine monks, a Benedictine convent at Carrow just outside the city, several colleges of secular clergy living together, several hospitals run by brethren who led a conventual life, four friaries representing the major Orders (Franciscan, Augustinian, Dominican, and Carmelite), and possibly one or two other smaller mendicant groups, plus a significant number of anchorites and anchoresses at different points. Interestingly, the Benedictine-run cathedral had one of the best libraries in England and was reported to be a center of lively theological debate. Additionally, the house of Augustinian (or Austin) Friars across the lane from Julian's anchorhold also had a significant library and was a *studium* or house of studies for the order. There is some evidence that outsiders such as Julian could borrow books from such libraries.²³

From the 1430s there were also up to three small groups of women who resembled Continental Beguines. This would seem to postdate Julian. However, more recently it has been suggested that a group of such women lived in a house in the churchyard of St Peter Hungate at a time before Julian disappears from the records. The medieval building survives as a restaurant, "The Briton's Arms," on Elm Hill. It is possible that these groups were sponsored by the local Flemish and Dutch merchant community. Norwich seems to have been the only English city where such groups existed. What is not so clear is whether, and to what degree, the spirituality associated with Flanders and the Netherlands played a role in late medieval Norwich. More generally, there was a widespread development of lay spirituality as well as new spiritual movements in the late medieval Church. These particularly flourished in cities like Norwich. Thus, apart from the clerical, monastic, mendicant, and quasi-Beguine groups, Norwich boasted a number of lay confraternities and spiritually imbued craft guilds as well as a range of other activities that offered a significant spiritual ethos to the newly wealthy and educated city laity. In that sense the lay Christians of late medieval Norwich had a wide range of spiritual and religious resources.²⁴

As an appendix to the growing importance during the late Middle Ages of Norwich as a port and international trading center, it is interesting to note the power of Julian's imagery of the sea in chapter 10. This chapter is what is described as the second showing or revelation in which Julian is taught about God's desire that we should see the divine presence, albeit

partially, in this life. However, on the face of it, it seems to be a rather strange move from the opening of the chapter where Julian contemplates Jesus on the cross, his face covered in blood, to having her understanding “let down into the bottom of the sea.” Apparently this experience happened once. Beyond the question of what this taught Julian about God, it is interesting to ask what ordinary experiences it may reflect. It may refer to Julian’s experience of living in Norwich where the River Wensum, which is relatively close to St Julian’s Church, was periodically beset by storms from the North Sea when waves flooded the marshes and houses close to the river. Julian may also have heard about the dangers of the North Sea from stories told by fishermen in the port. Such an awareness may connect to Julian’s imagery of herring scales in reference to the drops of blood on Jesus’ face in chapter 7. Herrings were one of the basic foods in medieval Norwich. In their notes on this chapter Watkins and Jenkins suggest that the image of the sea may instead echo Julian’s awareness of Psalm 139, verses 9–10: “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast” (NRSV Bible).

The Position of Women

The overall social position of women in England at the time of Julian of Norwich can only be described in terms of patriarchy.²⁵ That said, the status and role of women obviously varied according to certain factors including where they lived, whether they were unmarried, married, or widowed, and what social class they belonged to. It is also the case that the position of women inevitably altered in the aftermath of the Black Death, which left many of them as widows and also reduced the male workforce. Wealthy widows were sometimes able to live as powerful members of their communities. Equally, others in cities such as Norwich were able to work in a limited range of occupations including lace-making and even ale brewing.

Women were often seen as inherently weak and defective. What power they had, not least sexual power, was seen as negative and a source of danger: particularly to men. This is reflected in some of the spiritual and anchoritic literature available to Julian. Thus the *Ancrene Wisse* or *Ancrene Riwe* in its second part, “The Outer Senses,” in reference to the story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, in the Book of Genesis, chapter 34, comments “The Holy Spirit caused all such things to be written in the book to warn women of their foolish eyes.” Equally, women must not show themselves to men because it brings out the “animal” in them! Yet, later on in the same section the *Ancrene Wisse* also offers an image of

God's positive response, even obedience, to a woman. God becomes human because of what Mary says to the Archangel Gabriel. John the Baptist exults in his mother's womb when Mary greets her cousin Elizabeth. Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana when his mother Mary presses him to do this. And in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, the child Jesus once found by his mother in the Temple becomes obedient to his mother once again.²⁶

Within Julian's own writings there is a fascinating contrast between the Short Text and the Long Text. In the Short Text, Julian seems uncomfortably aware of a woman's presumption in writing, especially in ways that were meant to teach other Christians. However, she is persuaded that her visions are not for her personal benefit and that therefore she must record them. This does not sit easily with her and she appears to worry that it may not sit easily with her readers. There is a very interesting contrast within the Short Text, chapter vi. "But God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never was my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail." While Julian may not have been aware of the theological writings of Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris from 1395, his negative attitude to the idea of women teaching would have been symptomatic of Julian's time. Gerson remarks that "the female sex is forbidden by apostolic authority to teach in public, that is either by word or by writing.... All women's teaching, particularly formal teaching by word and by writing, is to be held suspect unless it is diligently examined, and much more fully than men's."²⁷ However, Julian then goes on to say that she cannot be silent, or be silenced. "But because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at that same time that it is his will that it be known?" Fundamentally the Short Text self-justifies with several "buts." In contrast, in the equivalent passage in the Long Text, chapter 9, Julian drops her apologies for being such a daring woman, asserts her orthodoxy, and substitutes a profound reflection on the value of such special revelations, even to a woman. "I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better..." "But in everything I believe as Holy Church preaches and teaches." "And to this end and with this intention I contemplated the revelation with all diligence, for throughout this blessed revelation I contemplated it as God intended." Scholarly feminist readings of Julian suggest that she refused to be silenced in the face of contemporary suspicions and that, particularly by the time of the Long Text, she had found her own confident voice. Importantly, Julian does not restrict her message to her fellow women but addresses her teaching to all her fellow Christians, men and women.²⁸

Spirituality in England

While Julian was a product of her particular time and place, she was also the inheritor of the long-standing tradition of spirituality in England. Importantly, while there were some specific native characteristics, the overall approach to spirituality in England was not totally insular but was connected to broader spiritual streams from continental Europe. Apart from Benedictine and Franciscan spiritual writings, mentioned below, in particular we may note the Augustinian spiritual ethos as developed by the French Victorines, Hugh of St Victor and Richard of St Victor. Their spiritual writings also made accessible the mystical theology of the anonymous sixth-century writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius who certainly influenced the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the 1380s. What is less clear is to what degree the important thirteenth-century Rhineland mystical tradition, associated especially with the Dominicans Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Henry Suso, had an impact in England.

It is reasonable to suggest that the intensely visual character of Julian's "showings" is likely to have been influenced in part by certain external spiritual stimuli and was not simply a matter of unprovoked visionary experiences. This has two important elements. The first strong possibility is that Julian was exposed to the tradition of late medieval paintings and sculptures of Jesus' Passion and cross. In particular, some commentators draw specific connections with the notable school of East Anglian art which was at its height during the fourteenth century. From the surviving art of Julian's period we can see that the artists of the East Anglian School excelled in portraying Christ's Passion with both significant physical detail and also emotional pathos. Indeed there is an explicit reference in Julian's Short Text, chapter i, to "paintings of the Crucifixion, which are made by God's grace, according to Holy Church's teaching, to resemble Christ's Passion, so far as human understanding can attain." The second likely influence was the tradition of meditative visualization in relation to scripture and in particular to contemplation of Jesus' humanity. This was present in Cistercian writers, not least the twelfth-century Englishman Aelred of Rievaulx in his *Rule of Life for a Recluse* (of which, more in a moment), as well as in the Franciscan meditative tradition, not least the anonymous spiritual text, *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, once thought to be written by Bonaventure and dating from the mid-fourteenth century. This work was particularly influential in introducing scriptural meditation to educated lay people. It also became available in an English translation around the end of the fourteenth century or beginning of the fifteenth century as *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* by the Carthusian monk Nicholas Love at Mount Grace Priory, Yorkshire.²⁹

Another possible influence on Julian may have been the writings of continental women visionaries, many of whom, like Julian, suffered serious illnesses and integrated these into a way of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Because of the close connections that I have already noted between Norwich and the Low Countries, it is quite possible that such texts were known to Julian even though, as we have seen, quasi-Beguine groups may not have settled in the city until the 1430s.³⁰ Rather more controversial are links between Julian and the tradition of the so-called *Brautmystik*, or “bridal mysticism,” influential among the Rhineland mystics Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso as well as among the Beguines, with its idea of union with God as a “mystical marriage” often expressed through erotic imagery. There are undoubtedly some similarities in the themes. For example, Julian briefly refers to “God’s son” as the “spouse” of the soul towards the end of the Long Text, chapter 51. She uses the image of God as spouse at the start of chapter 52, “and God rejoices that he is our true spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife.” Finally, in chapter 58 the spousal imagery is explicitly linked to Julian’s major theme of God’s meaning as love. Thus, “. . .he is our very true spouse and we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased; for he says: I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two.” That said, any direct links between Julian and the “bridal mysticism” tradition are inconclusive.³¹

Otherwise, English spirituality as inherited by Julian of Norwich had several notable characteristics. First of all it was deeply biblical. This was often mediated through the monastic tradition of meditative biblical interpretation, known as *lectio divina*, which across time was “translated” for the benefit of non-monastics such as clergy or laypeople. Anglo-Saxon England had originally been evangelized by the arrival of Benedictine monks from Rome, and monastic culture subsequently dominated English religion far more than Continental Europe. For example, half of the English cathedrals (for example, Norwich) during the Middle Ages were run by monastic personnel. There were no parallels on the Continent.

Second, the English spiritual tradition was strongly grounded in affective piety, especially devotion to the humanity of Christ, not least to Jesus’ Passion. A notable example is the Benedictine Anselm of Canterbury’s *Prayers and Meditations*. This affective strain also resulted in countless meditations, poems, hymns, and prayers that sought to inspire intense and intimate love. One particular theme that is closely associated with Julian of Norwich is Jesus as Mother. However, it is important to note that while Julian employs the theme in original ways, devotion to Jesus as Mother is not original to her. Nor, indeed, is it limited to women writers. For example it appears in Anselm of Canterbury

and among Cistercian writers.³² The originality of Julian's approach to the image will be outlined in Chapter 4.

Third, there was a preference for the solitary life. A separate section on this follows. In general terms, the solitary life was ascetic and penitential in that it explicitly confronted worldly dangers and temptations, not least the solitary's own frailties. The link between holiness and heroism led to a strong emphasis on spiritual warfare and the quest for singleness and purity of heart. Finally, within the solitary life the practice of virginity especially among women became linked particularly to the notion of being brides of Christ. Various forms of the solitary life seem to have been more popular and idiosyncratic in Celtic Christianity and later in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England than in the rest of Europe. Aelred of Rievaulx's *Rule of Life for a Recluse*, already mentioned, has relatively little on external rules of life and mostly concerns interior dispositions. The aim was to inspire single-hearted devotion.

Fourth, medieval English spirituality developed an emphasis on the "mixed life," *vita mixta*, which not only sought to combine contemplation and action but was also increasingly aimed at both secular clergy and laypeople outside the monastic cloister. A notable example is Walter Hilton's *The Scale [or Ladder] of Perfection* which appeared during Julian's lifetime. Book 2 of *The Scale* suggests that spiritual transformation is inherent to the life of all the baptised as opposed merely to the monastic or the solitary life. This echoes Julian's emphasis on her message being addressed to all her "fellow Christians."

Finally, the English spiritual tradition placed a strong emphasis on the importance of "balance" – between affectivity and the speculative, between divinely given insights and loyalty to the Church, in terms of ascetical moderation, a preference for the grounded as opposed to the abstract and with a pastoral emphasis.³³

The Anchoritic Life

The strong presence of the solitary life within English spirituality, and Julian's own existence as an anchoress, needs some further explanation. The solitary life in various forms seems to have characterized four of the five major English fourteenth-century mystical writers, leaving aside Margery Kempe. Richard Rolle (c.1300–1349) pursued the solitary life after studying at Oxford. He was never ordained and ended up at Hampole in Yorkshire next to a monastery of Cistercian nuns. Rolle is the most prolific of the English mystics, writing in both Latin and English, and producing treatises, spiritual meditations and poetry.³⁴ Walter Hilton (died 1395/1396) ended as an Augustinian Canon of Thurgaton

Priory in Nottinghamshire. However, apart from his studies at Cambridge, he lived for some time as a solitary before entering the Augustinians. In a sense, therefore, his spiritual life was a mixed one and this is perhaps reflected in his most famous work, *The Scale of Perfection* mentioned above.³⁵ Finally, the anonymous author of the famous and still influential book, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (1380s), and related works, was probably a Carthusian monk who therefore led a partly solitary life.³⁶

Originally the terms “anchorite” and “hermit” were synonymous and referred to the quest to be solitary or to withdraw to the *eremos*, the desert. This could imply total seclusion and stability or allow freedom of movement and social interaction. Early desert solitaries, for example in Egypt, while geographically distant from towns and while emphasizing withdrawal, had a degree of interchange with visitors. They saw charity and hospitality as virtues – even providing food and clothes to villagers in times of famine. They also visited towns to sell their work in the markets.

Only in the Western European Middle Ages did the terms “hermit” and “anchorite” or “ anchoress” become more distinct. The “hermit” was more general, indicating “the one alone.” Hermits were not necessarily secluded. Many lived in towns or villages. Thus, for example, Richard Rolle called at local houses to eat and drink. The point was that the true hermit lived alone and vowed obedience to God alone, not to a monastic rule or to an abbot or abbess. Some solitaries engaged in external works. They might be guides to travellers or offer their cells as overnight hostels. Others acted as bridge or toll keepers. In England, some looked after coastal beacons, as evidenced by the remains of a medieval hermitage and chapel linked to the beacon on St Aldhelm’s Head in Dorset.

The title of “anchorite” or “ anchoress” was restricted to those who were recluses, enclosed and stable. Some of those who felt called to this life were already members of religious communities. Thus, quite a number of monasteries in England, whether of men or women, had responsibility for one or more recluses. Some of these lived close to the main community but others such as the Benedictines of Durham Cathedral Priory maintained a hermitage on the islands of Farne off the Northumberland coast. Also, on the edge of the moors above the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace in Yorkshire are the remains of an isolated hermitage where it is thought that a monk from the Priory below could retire.

However, and importantly in the context of Julian of Norwich, in England there were many recluses with no previous connections to a monastery. Thus, famous figures such as Godric of Finchdale, Wulfric of Haselbury, and Christina of Markyate had not previously been monastics. The best-known English rule for the anchoritic life, the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (*A Guide for Anchoresses*), was written

explicitly for three women living outside traditional monastic structures.³⁷ This text tells us something about the way of life of an anchoress. The solitary life was considered the highest form of the Christian life because it combined asceticism and contemplation. The way of life was particularly popular with women and gave them a status and role aside from clerical life.

Anchorholds were familiar features of late medieval life, often attached to parish churches, as at St Julian's in Norwich. They could be single rooms or larger complexes with courtyard and garden. In the case of the latter, a secluded area was set aside for the anchoress and a reception area housed a maid who organized the food and protected the privacy of the solitary. Here guests might also sit and speak to the anchoress. The maid also has certain rules because she too was to lead a life of dedicated devotion with some austerity. The anchoress probably had access to three windows: one onto the church, one into the reception area and one directly onto the street. In the case of the latter, there should be a curtain so that the anchoress could neither see, nor be seen by, any visitor. It is not certain what style of anchorhold Julian occupied. It is noted in the book by Fr John-Julian that during the post-war reconstruction of St Julian's Church in 1953 the foundations of an anchorhold destroyed by the bombing were discovered and the space was tiny: some nine and a half feet by eleven and a half feet. This does not seem consistent with the multiple occupancy of the anchorhold in Julian's time implied in a surviving will of 1404, noted above. However, in the Introduction to their translation of Julian's texts, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh indicate that the "cell" destroyed during the Second World War was actually a reconstruction. Further, in the Introduction to their scholarly edition of Julian's texts, they cite a comment by the eighteenth-century Norfolk antiquarian, Francis Blomefield, in the second volume of his 1745 text, *Norfolk*, that the original anchorhold had been demolished at the dissolution of the monasteries.³⁸

Leaving aside questions of lifestyle, it is instructive to compare the radically different spiritual ethos of the *Ancrene Wisse* with Julian's writings and their essentially positive vision and also concern for all her fellow Christians. The two visions of life are not very compatible. Thus the *Ancrene Wisse* does not portray a romantic vision of the solitary life although it does see the anchoress as a kind of spiritual "aristocrat." It emphasizes the anger of God set against the spiritual dangers of the world. It portrays solitude as the medium for saving one's soul. Indeed, the initial ceremony of enclosure strongly symbolized death to the world. The anchorhold was a kind of tomb and anchoresses were to meditate frequently upon death. There is to be a round of prayer from waking to sleeping in order to ward off evil. Plus, a devotional routine keeps the

solitary's attention away from other things that might encourage idleness. The day is largely silent. The emphasis is on the weakness of an anchoress – essentially sinful and thus committed to the solitary life as if it were imprisonment. There is no sense of an anchoress being able to offer spiritual insight to others; rather, such people are unworthy of fellowship. Self-disgust is a spiritual value. There should be meditation on the vileness of the body. This approach contrasts strongly with Julian's positive imagery of embodiment in Long Text, chapter 6, where the process of defecation underlines God's loving providence! The text of the *Ancrene Wisse* manifests a strain of deep anxiety and its language is that of frailty plus the just anger of God.³⁹

Conclusion: Context and Julian's Teachings

Julian makes no direct reference to any of the social, political, or religious problems of her troubled times. However, there seem to be echoes of these problems in both the tone and the content of her teachings. In the context of such a difficult world, Julian's assertion that "all shall be well" must have raised as many questions as it offered comfort. Indeed, Julian's visions focus on the bleeding, suffering Christ on the cross as God's response to sin and suffering. Thus Julian's own human instinct is to ask how all shall end up well when such harm is done by human sin. In that sense, her eventual acceptance of God's message is born of deep interior struggle. "All shall be well" is not offered as a cheap and easy response to the troubles of the world and of her fellow Christians. To ask her fellow Christians to believe that, as the final chapter of the Long Text affirms, love was God's meaning would have been deeply challenging.

The first sentence of the chapter suggests that "this boke" was begun by God's grace but is not yet "performed"; that is, fully perfected. Perhaps this does refer in part to the imperfection of Julian's own understanding of God's revelations, and therefore to the incompleteness of her teaching in the written text. However, Julian adds: "For charity, let us all join with God's working in prayer, thanking, trusting, rejoicing." In the end what has been taught on the basis of what was revealed to Julian must be performed by all her fellow Christians in some way in the midst of the imperfections of everyday living in a fractured world. Humans are called to participate as best they can in God's working and "performance" and not simply be passive recipients.

There are some hints about what is demanded by this human sharing in God's "performing." In at least one way, it seems to me that this speaks radically to the conditions of Julian's times, characterized by war, human enmity, rebellion, accusations of heresy, and rejections of "otherness," for

example, attitudes to the Jews. As a footnote, in her one reference to the Jews (chapter 33), Julian is ambiguous. She admits to seeing nothing “specified” about them in her visions but “nonetheless” follows the conventional assumption that that they were collectively responsible for Jesus’ death and therefore were condemned, unless “converted by grace.” Returning to the notion of humanity sharing in God’s “performing,” in the Short Text, chapter vi, Julian affirms the vital importance of the practice of love among Christians. This would, at the very least, have directly countered the schism in the Church and other expressions of mutual condemnation.

It is in this unity of love that the life consists of all men who will be saved. For God is everything that is good, and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything that he has made, and if any man or woman withdraws his love from any of his fellow Christians, he does not love at all, because he had not love towards all. And so in such times he is in danger, because he is not at peace; and anyone who has general love for his fellow Christians has love towards everything which is. For in mankind which will be saved is comprehended all, that is, all that is made and the maker of all; for God is in man, and so in man is all. And he who thus generally loves all his fellow Christians loves all, and he who loves thus is safe.

Notes

- 1 For an overall study of context and interpretation in relation to the history of Christian spirituality and classic texts, see Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, Revised edition, London: SPCK/Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, especially Chapters 3 and 7.
- 2 I am grateful to Fr Christopher Wood, the current parish priest of St Julian’s Church, for informing me about the contemporary consensus in Norwich about Julian as a widow and bereaved mother as well as for information about the Carrow Psalter and devotion to St Julian of Le Mans.
- 3 Both the Colledge & Walsh and the Watson & Jenkins scholarly editions agree on 13 (xiii) May whereas the recent edition by Windeatt reads it as 8 (viii) May. This remains unclear and depends on which manuscript you read.
- 4 See the comments in Nicholas Watson & Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, Introduction, p 4.
- 5 See Norman Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies: Studies & Texts 66, 1984.

- 6 See Watson & Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, Appendix B, pp 431–435.
- 7 For the most commonly used modern translation from the Middle English, see B.A. Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, London: Penguin Classics, 1985.
- 8 See Conrad Pepler, *The English Religious Heritage*, London: Blackfriars, 1958, p 306.
- 9 See Edmund Colledge & James Walsh, eds., *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978. For the list of scriptural citations and allusions, see Part Two, pp 779ff. For a more general overview of Julian's supposed scriptural and theological sources, see Part One, pp 43–59.
- 10 For these speculations and their justification, see the extensive book by the founder of the Episcopalian monastic Order of Julian, Fr John-Julian OJN, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009, especially pp 21–27. For Tanner's comments about bequests continuing until 1429, see his *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532*, Appendix 7, p 200, note 29.
- 11 See A. Barratt, "Lordship, Service and Worship in Julian of Norwich" in E.A. James, ed., *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, Exeter Symposium VII, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, pp 177–188.
- 12 See, for example, Kim Phillips, "Femininities and the Gentry in Late Medieval East Anglia: Ways of Being," in Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008, pp 19–31.
- 13 See Phillips, p 27.
- 14 See E. A. Jones, "Anchoritic Aspects of Julian of Norwich," in McAvoy, ed., *Companion to Julian of Norwich*, pp 75–87, especially p 78.
- 15 Tanner, p 27.
- 16 See Benedicta Ward, "Julian the Solitary," in Kenneth Leech & Sister Benedicta Ward, *Julian Reconsidered*, Oxford: SLG Press, 1988, pp 11–29.
- 17 I am grateful to Nicholas Watson for pointing out to me the conventional nature of this image.
- 18 On this point see, for example, Barry Windeatt, "Julian's Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition," in Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008, pp 101–115.
- 19 See Nicholas Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Love," in *Speculum* 68, 1993, pp 637–683. See also the Introduction to Watson & Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, pp 1–4.
- 20 For general historical overviews, see A.R. Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages*, London: Penguin Books, 1981; Rosemary Horrox & W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England 1200–1500*, Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 2006; W. Mark Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England 1300–1450*, London: Macmillan, 1995; Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages*, London: Penguin Books, 2005; Gerard Harris, *Shaping the Nation: England 1360–1461*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005. For specific connections between this period and the English mystics, including Julian, see Joan M. Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd/Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001, Chapter 1 “The Historical Framework,” pp 13–33.
- 21 See Barry Windeatt, ed., *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p xvi.
 - 22 See Ritamary Bradley, *Julian's Way: A Practical Commentary on Julian of Norwich*, London: Harper Collins, 1992, p 95.
 - 23 See Windeatt, *Julian of Norwich*, pp xvii–xviii.
 - 24 For an extensive overview of religion in medieval Norwich, see the thorough and reliable book by the English Jesuit medieval historian, Norman Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984. For a more general overview, see Cariole Rawcliffe & Richard Wilson, eds., *Medieval Norwich*, London/New York: Hambledon (Palgrave Macmillan), 2004. For specific details of the monastic and other religious houses in Norwich, see David Knowles & R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England & Wales*, Harlow: Longman, 1971.
 - 25 See Mavis Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. See also Judith M. Bennett & Ruth Mazo Karras, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
 - 26 See Anne Savage & Nicholas Watson, eds., *Anchoretic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991, especially pages 68–69 and 77.
 - 27 For this quotation from Gerson's *De examinatione doctrinam*, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982, pp 135–136.
 - 28 See, for example, Frances Beer, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations; Motherhood of God*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998, Interpretive Essay, pp 71–80; also her *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1992, Introduction pp 1–13; also Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 2nd edition, London: SPCK, 2000, pp xi–xiv.
 - 29 For details of both of these possible influences on Julian see Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, Chapter 2 “From Visualisation to Vision: Meditation and the Bodily Showings,” pp 40–62.

- 30 On this point, see Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety: The Medieval English Mystics*, p 101. For a broad study of continental women visionaries, see Elizabeth A. Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- 31 For some positive but tentative comments, see Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, pp 61–70.
- 32 See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, Chapter IV “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some themes of Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing,” pp 110–169.
- 33 On English spirituality, see Nuth, *God's Lovers in an Age of Anxiety*, pp 15–23 & Gordon Mursell, *English Spirituality: From Earliest Times to 1700*, London: SPCK/Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, especially Chapter 4 “The Quest for the Suffering Jesus: Late Medieval Spirituality (1300–1500).”
- 34 For a modern translation of Rolle's English writings, see Rosamund S.Allen, ed., *Richard Rolle – The English Writings*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989.
- 35 For a modern translation, see John P.H. Clark & Rosemary Dorward, eds., *Walter Hilton – The Scale of Perfection*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991.
- 36 For a modern translation of these works, see James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Mahwah: NJ: Paulist Press, 1981 and James Walsh, ed., *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988.
- 37 For a modern translation, see Savage & Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality – Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*.
- 38 On the post-war reconstruction, see John-Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, p 38. On the demolition of the original anchorhold, see also Colledge & Walsh, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Introduction p 18, and for a full reference to the work of Francis Blomefield, see their *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, volume 1, pp 11–12.
- 39 For an overview of the anchoritic life, see Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, Chapter 3, “The Life of an anchoress.”