

## SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON JULIAN OF NORWICH

By Rev. Ken Silva, Southern Baptist Pastor, 2010



*For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ([2 Timothy 4:3-4, ESV](#))*

### Using Medieval Mystics To Tells Us Myths

[Apprising Ministries](#) brings to your attention a “church” holiday yesterday, which you may not have been aware of concerning the “celebration” of a relatively unknown apostate (at best) Roman Catholic mystic called Julian of Norwich. If you didn’t know about her, or the foolish idea of celebrating her, then good for you. That said, yesterday [Red Letter Christian](#) and progressive/liberal church historian [Diana Butler Bass](#)—another purveyor of the new big tent form of [Progressive Christianity](#) as pushed by [Emerging Church](#) guru [Brian McLaren](#)—released her latest post at the interspiritual website [Beliefnet](#).

In [Julian of Norwich: All Shall Be Well](#) Bass begins by telling us that yesterday was the day to celebrate Julian of Norwich, whom Bass tells us was the “author of the first English-language book written by a woman.” Bass is correct when she says that Julian of Norwich “was a shadowy figure” and even “her real name and the facts of her life largely unknown.” Bass also informs us:

On May 8, 1373, Julian was struck by a devastating illness from which she nearly died. During the sickness, she received fifteen visions of God's love. For the next twenty years, she reflected on these visions, recording her insights in a book called [Showings, or The Revelations of Divine Love](#). ([Online source](#))

As far back at the late 1950s mainstream "Protestantism" was already at work creating its revisionist history and romanticizing these Roman Catholic mystics in order to make their ascetic pietism acceptable to our capricious culture. And so now squishy evanjellyfish has embraced its offspring, the neo-liberal cult of the [Emergent Church](#) with its core doctrine of corrupt [Contemplative Spirituality/Mysticism](#) (CSM), which is perpetrated as so-called [Spiritual Formation](#) (SF) by [Living Spiritual Teacher](#) and [Quaker](#) mystic [Richard Foster](#) along with his spiritual twin and SBC minister [Dallas Willard](#).

So for the past few years I've had the unenviable task of tracing down the actual facts known concerning the various Golden Buddha's of CSM; in this case Julian of Norwich, whom I talked a bit about previously in [Scott Hodge Shares His Love For Julian Of Norwich](#). To give you an idea of just how far into the mainstream this mystic lunacy of CSM has infiltrated, consider that Hodge is not part of [Emergence Christianity](#); rather, he is one of the fast rising stars of the Druckerite Purpose Driven/Seeker Driven movement ala [Perry Noble](#) and his disciple [Steven Furtick](#).

Lord willing, I'll have more on his sermon another time; but for our purposes here, I point you back to Bass telling us that she believes "Julian's visions are remarkably contemporary." Indeed they actually are, as Bass further shares her opinion that Julian's visions [read: delusions] were supposedly "from a broadly inclusive understanding of God's love for all to humanity to a profound theology of God as feminine." Bass quotes Julian as she writes:

"The deep Wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother," Julian wrote, "in whom we are enclosed." She continued: *The mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest. It is nearest because it is more natural; readiest because it is most loving; and surest because it is truest. . . Our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life. So he carries us within him in love and travail.*

Of all the insights in her book, however, none is better remembered than a single remark. In the midst of doubt, she commented, “All shall be well. All shall be well. All manner of thing shall be well.” ([Online source](#))

As pleasant as that all sounds, nowhere in Scripture are we taught “the Trinity is our Mother,” or that Jesus—the unique Son of God—is our “true Mother,” and we’re certainly not taught, “All shall be well.” The late Dr. Walter Martin, a very well respected evangelical apologist, was correct when he said: The vast majority of mankind; will not make it [to salvation], because they simply will not repent. And if you don’t think these people are lost; then why in the world are you even bothering to call yourself a Christian. Study mysticism, as I have, and you’ll see a common thread of universalism within it.

In closing this subject, for now, Julian of Norwich falls right in lock-step with classic mysticism of all stripes with its pantheism (all in God), plagiarism (true self, which is sinless), “a spark of the divine” where, in contradistinction to Scripture, God already dwells within all of mankind and concluding with Julian’s belief in a universal salvation. Here I’ll remind you that I have a background as a former Roman Catholic, as well as some 22+ years now in the ministry fields of apologetics and Comparative Religion, so I’m very well aware of the strain of universalism that does run within long apostate [Roman Catholicism](#).

For years now I’ve also been studying mysticism using primary sources from various religious traditions as well. As it concerns Julian of Norwich, the online Roman Catholic encyclopedia [New Advent](#), tells us that she was the “author or recipient of the vision contained in the book known as the ‘Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love’”. It’s also important to note that these visions came to her in a one-time period of five hours when she was under extreme duress. Further Julian of Norwich “was probably a Benedictine nun, living as a recluse in an anchorage,” which I’ll come back to explain in a moment.

But first, it’s important to know the Roman Catholic encyclopedia then adds:

Her statement, that “for twenty years after the time of this shewing [showing], save three months, I had teaching inwardly”, proves that the

book was not written before 1393... Whatever be their precise date, these “Revelations”, or “Shewings”, are the most perfect fruit of later medieval mysticism in England.” ([Online source](#))

What should immediately arrest your attention is this “teaching” she allegedly received “inwardly” being “the perfect fruit of later medieval mysticism.” Especially so when Julian tells us that part of this teaching, which we’ve seen is right in line with classic mysticism, includes “one passage, concerning the place in Christ’s side for all mankind that shall be saved.” As we learn more about an anchorage, which was a cell attached to a Roman Catholic Church, and the recluse who lived within known as “anchorites,” I point you to [ask the priest](#), who is “is maintained by priests of the [Episcopal \(Anglican\)](#) tradition.”

The following comes from [Feast Day of Julian of Norwich](#) by Rev. David Simmons, the Rector of [St. Matthias Episcopal Church](#), Waukesha, WI of the [Order of Julian of Norwich](#):

All we know for certain about Saint Julian of Norwich is that she spent a significant portion of her life as an anchorite, a recluse, at Saint Julian’s Church in England’s Norwich, that she was granted by God a series of sixteen visions or “showings” (as she called them) of the Crucified Christ, and that she was the first woman to write a book in English – her Revelations of Divine Love – which recounts her visions and her own twenty-year process of coming to understand their meaning... ([Online source](#))

Simmons is correct when he tells us that an anchorite (to withdraw) was “a recluse who was literally sealed in one closed room,” in her case, “adjacent to” the Roman Catholic “church in Norwich.” The aforementioned *New Advent* also tells us that anchorites were people, mostly men, “who have sought to triumph over the two unavoidable enemies of human salvation, the flesh and the devil, by depriving them of the assistance of their ally, the world.” And of these ascetics we’re further told that, “the earliest of these fugitives from human society were the vast deserts of Egypt and Syria.” [1]

Concerning Julian of Norwich, Simmons goes on to explain that “the anchoritic life of seclusion” was actually “highly revered” in the superstitious and pietistic Roman Catholic community of her day. As a

matter of fact, Simmons rightly informs us that, “parishes vied with each other to have ‘a saint’ living in a cell attached to their church.” However what’s important to understand from actual history, as opposed to the revisionist romanticizing of these mystics today, is the “life of an anchorite was considered the most holy, most ascetic, and most pious life possible in late medieval England.”

What’s been forgotten that these cells were often very small and sometimes the enclosed could barely even turn around. Another historian recounting the life of Julian of Norwich tells us:

There was only one door to the cell, and at the ceremony of enclosure, the door would have been locked and sealed permanently with the bishop’s wax seal. An anchorite was not free to change their mind... [2]

Because of the tragic self-righteousness at the core of this lifestyle, these are not people to be emulated; but rather, they are to be pitied for wasting their lives by abusing themselves and refusing basic creature comforts thinking this was somehow pleasing to God and would bring them closer to Him. Though he is obviously sympathetic to Julian of Norwich, which is why I chose to feature his piece, Simmons actually confirms what I just told you as he shares that “often the truly devout soul” wanted a “personal avenue of asceticism” because it was considered the deepest “solitary anchoritic life.”

### **Revelations That Keep People Enslaved In Pietistic Religious Bondage Aren’t From God**

Then Simmons gives us the background for Julian’s visions:

In early May in her thirty-first year (confusion in surviving manuscripts makes it uncertain whether it was May 8 or May 13), Julian was struck with an apparently terminal illness. When she was expected to die, her parish priest was sent for and he placed a crucifix before her, telling her to cast her eyes upon her Savior.

When Julian did so, the crucifix came alive for her and she began to receive the fifteen showings in which she experienced being present at the Crucifixion of Christ, and then listening to and speaking with Christ afterwards. She apparently wrote an account of her revelations shortly

afterwards, and then twenty years later she expanded that short account to include the conclusions of her two-decade-long study and meditation on the meaning of her visions. ([Online source](#))

The above is confirmed in [The Shewings Of Julian Of Norwich: Introduction](#), edited by Georgia Ronan Crampton, where we're told that these revelations—or “shewings” (means showings) as she called them—of Julian of Norwich came in “an intense experience that took place within a few days and nights of May, 1373, in Norwich.” And further, the book *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*:

is a first-person account of a young woman's visions. They came, she tells us, when she was thirty and a half years old, after seven days and nights of illness. At the very point of death – her curate holds a crucifix before her eyes to comfort her, and she is aware that her mother, thinking her dead, has moved to close her eyes – she received fifteen “shewings,” to be confirmed the next day in a sixteenth. Health restored, she lived on into old age, almost certainly as an anchorite.

Two accounts of the showings, or revelations, as Julian also calls them, one much longer than the other, survive. She apparently wrote a first, short narrative soon after the 1373 illness, and a second, six-fold longer, twenty years later: “For twenty yeres after the tyme of the shewing, save three monethis [months], I had techyng inwardly” (lines 1865-66). Much of the short text reads as if it were immediately, spontaneously, recounted. An authorial consciousness as well as a bolder and a more elaborated theology mark the long text. ([Online Source](#))

It's important to note a couple of things here: 1) As with most mystics, Julian had these visions while in ill health; and 2) often their visions/experiences were only received over a brief period of time. By the way, the reason the Roman Catholic has a crucifix—where Jesus is depicted upon the cross—is because of the heresy called the Mass in Roman Catholicism where Christ is sacrificed, albeit in an “unbloody” mystical way, each time the empty ritual of the Mass is performed. Returning to *The Shewings Of Julian Of Norwich: Introduction* we're also told even more about these ascetic anchorites.

“[A]nchoritism's most flourishing century” happened to be the one in which Julian lived; in other words, it was at the height of this spiritual

endeavor that she chose this wasteful lifestyle. And to desire to “be an anchorite was to choose a more severe and idiosyncratic” lifestyle; a “solitary” one, which included “a more deeply contemplative” approach to God. For one who became an anchorite:

After enclosure they remained, normally for life, in the same restricted quarters, most attached to a church or convent... The prescribed size for a solitary’s cell was twelve square feet... An anchorhold found at Compton in Surrey allowed barely room to turn around,... Cells were to have three windows, the first opening to the church to allow the recluse to hear Mass, receive the Sacrament, and speak with a confessor; the second for delivery of necessities; the third, for light, was to be covered so as to be translucent, but not distracting...

Enclosure rituals for the neophyte recluse included a mass with prayers for the dead; the anchorite was henceforth to be one dead to the world...the center and reason for being of reclusive life was contemplative prayer. ([Online source](#))

Notice above how the emphasis was upon “contemplative prayer,” which is also know as centering prayer. And you need to realize that this [Contemplative/Centering Prayer](#), a form of meditation in an altered state of consciousness, is the primary vehicle of the very same CSM ala Foster and Willard. This is the backdrop against which to listen to Hodge’s aforementioned sermon lauding this apostate (at best) Roman Catholic mystic Julian of Norwich, who’s faith rested not in Christ, but in the pietistic non-gospel of the Church of Rome. Jesus says to His Church — “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*” ([John 20:21](#)).

Quite obviously Jesus didn’t live in a secluded cell abusing Himself physically; nor did His Apostles, or their immediate disciples. And no less an authority on than the late Roman Catholic monk [Thomas Merton](#), whom you’ll also hear Hodge mention positively in his sermon, has said these ascetics didn’t come along until the hermits of the desert in the early third century. While speaking of the origin of “spiritual directors” in contemplative orders within the Roman Catholic Church Merton, a recognized expert on CSM within monastic orders, informs us:

original, primitive meaning of spiritual direction suggests a particular need connected with a special ascetic task, a peculiar vocation for which a professional formation is required. In other words, **spiritual direction is a monastic concept**. It is a practice, which **was unnecessary until men withdrew from the Christian community** in order to live as solitaries in the desert.

For the ordinary member in the primitive Christian community there **was no particular need of personal direction** in the professional sense. The bishop, the living and visible representative of the apostle who had founded the local Church, spoke for Christ and the apostles, and, helped by the presbyters, took care of all the spiritual needs of his flock. [3]

This is the truth concerning where the spurious strain of mysticism entered the Christian world, and why messed up mystics like Julian of Norwich are ultimately traced back to the heretical hermits known as “the desert fathers and mothers.” Far from lauding such divisive people within the church visible, rather, we need to snap their followers today out of their hypnotic spell of attempting existential encounters with God outside of His prescribed means of grace. For no doubt they did have, and are having, spiritual encounters; however, because they contradict Scripture, it’s not with the one true and living God.

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Endnotes:

1. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01462b.htm>, accessed 5/09/10.
2. Father John-Julian, *The Complete Julian* [Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2009], 39.
3. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation* [Collegeville: The Liturgical Press], 11, emphasis mine.