


# The God of Julian of Norwich: A Christological reading in a follow-up key

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This article presents some of the results of the research on the God that Julian of Norwich makes known to us through her Christological revelations. This woman left a writing about her revelations, in which Jesus Christ is the centre of her theology. In this document, the motherhood of God is manifested as the foundation of human nature. In this research, we wanted to answer the question about what the keys to the theological reading are that we find in Julian of Norwich, which are able to contribute to rethinking current Christology. We turn to hermeneutics as the method that offers an understanding that the theological exercise of interpreting is an art, a practice and a science, a reading and a rewriting based on the existing sources. The results allow us to rethink Christology from a mystical point of view and following Jesus, with an understandable, questioning, propositional and narrative language.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article contributes to research regarding women and their theological production. It highlights the Christological reading that Juliana of Norwich made and that becomes a point of reference for analysing and interpreting the action of God from a vision of Verbo incarnation as our mother. The novelty that this research offers is in the identification and deepening of three important categories for theology: a Christology that re-signifies sin and suffering; a Christology of trust, supplication and petition; and a Christology of Jesus' motherhood.

**Keywords:** Juliana of Norwich; Christology; Motherhood of God; following; faith; mystic; revelations.

## Introduction

Julian of Norwich, a 14th-century English mystic, presents us a particular understanding of God's revelation through an important event in her life. Sixteen visions or revelations that she had during a day were enough material to analyse and interpret for more than 20 years the theological message that frames them. The time it took her to discover with certainty the message of God that appears there, matured her understanding of the following of Jesus, through some contemplative relationships and ethics in daily life. Julian of Norwich wrote a first version of her visions, but as she returned to meditate and reflect on them, her understanding became greater and richer in theology, as we can see in the longer version she wrote, which has been translated into several languages. We have taken the *Book of Visions and Revelations* translated by Maria Tabuyo (De Norwich 2002) as reference for this research. These revelations allow us to inquire about what keys of theological reading we find in Julian of Norwich that can contribute to rethinking today's Christology.

The study sought to deepen the understanding of this mystique on Christology and her contributions to the theological work in a following-up key. With this horizon, we wanted to expand the epistemological tools that are used whenever questions arise about the theology that medieval women built in order to bring their valid, suggestive and motivating thinking to the present.

The hermeneutic method was used because it allowed us to make the language used in the revelation more intelligible and meaningful for the people today, by going deep into an issue that questions our theological work. The Christology we set out to investigate led us by an unfinished road, with approaches and small steps towards a greater truth.

On this journey, the results necessary to rethink a Christology from the perspective of a 14th century woman have been achieved. Three important reading keys in her Christology is presented:

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(1) a Christology that re-signifies sin and suffering; (2) a Christology of trust, supplication and petition; and (3) a Christology of Jesus' motherhood.

## A Christology that re-signifies sin and suffering

Julian of Norwich was a visionary woman who gives clues to the construction of a 21st century theology. She describes her revelations about the passion of Christ, and she understands that from Him it is possible to read the passion of the world. As a recluse or anchoress-hermit, she understands that her life is turned towards herself in order to contemplate Jesus assiduously and to reflect on:

[T]he short duration of life, the uncertainty about where the soul will end, the need to respond about what one has wasted (whether things or time) and the great joy and bliss of those who persevere. (Ward-Simon 2013)

With a choice of life, Julian of Norwich embarks on a path of following Jesus that passes through kenosis or freeing oneself as the fulfilment of God's will. Her life in complete solitude, confined in a closed space that is typical of the cells, and which is a 'symbol of the space of solitude of the soul to which Christ arrives as guest' (Cafferata 2021:2), prepares her to experience, on the one hand, that everything human is not alien to God and, on the other hand, that his true knowledge is revealed in love. Therefore, the relationship that men and women establish with their creator must be loving. In her first vision, she gives the key to understand that her Christology is trinitarian: 'Where Jesus appears, we must understand the Trinity' (De Norwich 2013:45). This topic is recurrent especially in medieval women, who make a reading of the Trinitarian God in the 'dynamics of the dialogue with the Creator' (González-Bernal 2017:26).

With the premise of a Trinitarian God, Julian shows us that God is love and that only He can love the human being, regardless of the sin that he might commit. In her dialogue with Jesus she asks:

Why did the great wisdom of God not prevent the beginning of sin? Well, then, I thought that everything would have been fine [...]. Jesus replied: Sin is necessary, but everything will end well, and whatever it is, it will end well. (De Norwich 2013:94)

In the same sense, Eckhart (1983) referred to the human condition to say:

The weaker man is and the more he has sinned, the more reason he has to link himself to God through an undivided love in which there is no sin or imperfection. (p. 79)

Julian gives a key that re-signifies the understanding of sin; it is not seen, but it effects that causes pain and sufferings are known. Yet, sin is not an impediment to follow Jesus. God himself, who is pure love, does not condemn man. Then, she seeks a way to tell us that there are two judgements: that of God and that of the Church. The superior judgement

[C]omes from His infinite love, which is kind and soft and that was shown to me in that beautiful revelation in which I saw that He does not impute any kind of guilt to us. (De Norwich 2013:133)

On the other hand, the lower judgement, that of the church, leads man to recognise himself as a sinner and, therefore, worthy of punishment. However, she states: 'I could see none of it in God' (De Norwich 2013:133).

She safeguards the teaching of the Church and tries to reconcile the two judgements for the glory of God. On the one hand, she understands that heavenly and earthly things are contained in God. On the other hand, she understands that as human beings we are limited to understand the logic of God, which is not limited to rewards or punishments, but to the overflowing and boundless love. God shows Julian that:

[S]in will not be a dishonor but an honor for the human being because just as there is indeed a pain that corresponds to each sin, so love gives the soul a joy for each sin. (De Norwich 2013:116)

Julian considers that this does not mean that one should sin or live in sin. Then, God comes to remind us that sin has no total dominion over human life, and that there is a knowledge and an authority that we can obtain from suffering as soon as we learn from the vicissitudes of life because:

[T]hose who have ever immersed themselves in the mystery of suffering are able to give to those who experience it a suitable word, an encouraging company or a silence pregnant with life. (Angulo 2023:13)

For Julian, suffering is interpreted based on the passion of Christ, which reveals the mystery of God's hidden, infinite and boundless love, and it is not presented as abandonment or as a test that God puts us to strengthen us. Human beings grope and they often feel in darkness, but in the passion 'I saw a great unity between Christ and us. For when He suffered, we suffered with Him' (De Norwich 2013:78). In this sense, she points out that suffering is validated by God on the cross and there we all meet, there we all suffer and we suffer the same fate as Jesus. This is the passion and suffering of the world of which Sobrino also speaks:

Whoever defends the life of the poor, with mercy, and with truth and prophecy, with solidarity and responsibility, with dedication and hope is historically speaking redoubling the mercy and tenderness of God, the truth and the love of God, the self-giving of God to the end on the cross of Jesus. (Sobrino 1985:139)

Suffering therefore constitutes a path of obedience to God's will to the end. God does not want the death of Jesus, but through it, he shows fidelity as a symbol of a stronger love and the ambiguous structure of the evil that causes death (Boff 1978:98–99). Suffering for Julian of Norwich encloses a knowledge and an authority, and it invites the human being not to ignore his dignity because sin, pain and anguish do not reach God. The key is that suffering is overcoming sin and, in turn, it is the inner knowledge that leads us to review life,

and to discover that the source of love and peace is within us because we must drink from our own well, as Gutiérrez (1978) argues, 'because spirituality is like the living water that arises from the very bottom of the experience of faith' (p. 52).

## A Christology of trust, supplication and petition

The second key that Julian of Norwich makes us to know is the trust that derives from a life of supplication and prayer, in which we ask God to do his will. All her revelations express a permanent dialogue with Jesus, an extended prayer throughout life as a spiritual journey: 'Knowledge about God arises from a journey of loving engagement rather than from purely intellectual enquiry' (Sheldrake 2022:90). Julian puts the trust that Jesus himself gives her at the centre of her Christology when He constantly repeats to her that 'everything will end well' (Ward-Simon 2013):

[A]nd you yourself will see that everything will end well, as saying accept it now in faith and trust, and in the end you will really see it in the fullness of joy. (Ward-Simon 2013:103)

Our mystical writer is based on prayer, confident supplication and rectitude. She recognises our scant confidence that God hears us because we do not immediately get what we ask for or we do not feel anything happening within us. In her vision, the Lord reveals to her:

I am the foundation of your supplication. First, it is my will to make you this gift and then I make you to desire it, and then I make you to beg for it. If you beg, how could it happen that you would not get what you ask? (Sheldrake 2022:123–124)

This is the experience of grace that leads to prayer, to the assurance and confidence that 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts' (Rm 5:5).

Likewise, the trusting prayer is revealed by Jesus when he tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge of Luke 18:1–8, 'with the intention that his followers will persevere in prayer and struggle against injustice while the Kingdom of God came. Whenever this parable is told, reference is made to the importance of praying without ceasing and, when finishing it, Jesus assures that God will do justice' (Támez 2020:64). It is the supplication that the believer raises every day to his Creator, 'from which the human being, by virtue of the Father, is called to participate in Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit' (Méndez 2023:17). One can also remember the mothers of the desert who went there to precisely pray and to seek the union with God in order to reveal the wisdom that comes from his great Love and, in turn, beget spiritual children. 'The Spirit drew them into the wilderness, kindling in them a living consciousness of intercession, sacrifice, purification and worship' (Carrasquer & De la Red 2000:43).

Julian gives special consideration to supplication and constant petition. She helps herself with the images of the

passion of Christ in order to move us to compassion and mercy. To start a life of piety in the Middle Ages, it was very typical to use the images of the bleeding and helpless Christ so that through 'the suffering humanity of Christ', 'a new effective form that we know as compassion' would be generated (Cirlot 2019:39). The desire to see God makes our writer faint and, in the presence of the crucified Christ, she sees that 'Jesus Christ himself turns his face from the cross to see his own wounded heart and contemplates the wound of the lacerated love' (Quelas 2010:160). It is Jesus himself who introduces her to the experience of the wound in order to contemplate the mystery of salvation from there.

Mercy and compassion are two keys to the theological reading in Julian of Norwich. The God she presents is merciful and, to the extent that our supplication is presented to him as an attitude of dependence:

[W]e feel the need and urgency to pray because we perceive our lack and our inability with regard to Jesus [...]. When we feel the need to pray, our Lord God comes to the aid of our desire. (De Norwich 2013:130)

Therefore, 'everything must be through the love of God' (De Norwich 2013:47). Her understanding is that 'God as the Creator is the one who calls us into existence out of nothing, He is the lover who surrounds us with his love and the protector who cares for us and keeps us alive' (Marchisio 2016:6). This reveals to us that following Jesus is an option of a trusting life in the hands of God who assists and sustains us.

## A Christology of the Motherhood of Jesus

This is a God who is moved in the bowels by what he has created and, therefore, he manifests himself with signs of love and mercy. In her concern to show us the closeness of God to the human being, she gives Jesus the name of *mother* to imply 'the union of our Lord with men [...] just as the love that a little one professes to his mother and that he extends to all his brothers and sisters' (De Norwich 1959:21). The image of Jesus as mother is perhaps the central and most novel message in her theology. She discovers that there are three ways to contemplate the motherhood of God:

[T]he first one is the foundation of our nature in creation; the second one is his assumption of our nature, in which the motherhood of grace begins; the third one is motherhood in action. And in this, everything is penetrated in width and length, in height and depth; and everything is one love by the same grace. (De Norwich 2013:175)

It is not a gender issue with which Julian seeks to attribute feminine traits to God. Even when speaking of the Trinity, she does not assign gender to God, but relies on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus, to affirm that He is our mother and that He leads us to the knowledge of God's love. However, some believe that there is 'an apparent equivalence between the image of the mother and that of the father that contrasts with many of her contemporaries' (Byron-Davies

2020:20). Johnson (2003) states that, in Christian tradition, Julian of Norwich 'presents a Jesus as our mother who feeds us with her own body' (p. 119) in order to show us the value and importance we have for God, just as for a mother a child who was born from her womb is important and valuable.

Julian of Norwich's interest lies in the fact that Jesus is 'the kind and generous mother who knows and sees the needs of her son and protects him very tenderly, as required by the nature and the condition of motherhood'. Therefore, as the son grows in stature and age, he acts differently, but her love does not change. And even when the 'son grows up, God allows him to be punished in order to master his faults and to make [...] him prosper in virtues and grace. This work, with all that is beautiful and good, is accomplished by our Lord in those who carry it out' (De Norwich 2013:177). She unites this key of Christological reading with the mercy of a God who creates, loves and protects all his children just as a loving mother does. She also bases her Christology on trust and not on fear because Jesus himself gives certainty: 'I surely protect you [...], with more love and more security of protection for my soul than I can or know how to explain' (De Norwich 2013:115). From the hand of God, we come to discover that the divine presence dwells within us and we can also experience that mysterious relationship with God through a pedagogy of love (Mafla, González-Bernal & Torres-Muñoz 2020).

The maternal image that Julian of Norwich presents, brings us closer to an understanding of divinity as an overflowing and unlimited love in a Trinitarian sense. Then, her novelty lies in that:

[O]ur substance is in our Father, Almighty God; our substance is in our Mother, God all wisdom; and, our substance is in God, our Lord, the Holy Spirit, all goodness. (De Norwich 2013:175)

Now, if Jesus is our mother, He nourishes us with what He is and, therefore, we will have to look like Him. If we want this to happen, we must choose to follow Him through a spirituality and the commitment to the struggle for a new society, just as Jesus sets the tone for contextualising the divine presence in the oppressed and painful realities of the world (Bingemer 1988:87). Our Christology must highlight that maternal face of God that other religions have also taken care of by representing the divinity under the paternal-maternal symbolism (Boff 1979:104), which helps us to understand the action of God under understandable figures, which represent authority, wisdom, love, safe haven, teaching, special care, service and dedication.

## Conclusions

Thus, her Christology assumes a following of Jesus through a life of reconciliation, petition and supplication: A life of prayer and absolute trust in Him as our mother. In this way, Julian of Norwich presents Jesus as the maternal paradigm that treats humanity with tenderness and mercy. And in this sense, one can affirm that not only the care of the human being, but also the care of the earth lead us to 'propose a

new paradigm, a new worldview in harmony with the ecosystems of the planet and with the forces of the universe' (Ress 2010:112).

In the face of these situations, the message of Julian of Norwich focuses on sin and suffering as the great pains that afflict humanity. At the same time, she strives for us to understand that we have been created in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, humanity with its characteristics and powers is a reflection of the divine integrity, of the Trinitarian integrity itself. Hence, the person is a reflection of the Trinity, and love is the way to describe all the attributes and activities of God.

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The author declares that what is written in this article does not infringe on the right, ideologies and religious confession. Nor does it compromise the policies of this magazine and the publisher.

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