

The Julian Lecture 2007

Inspired by Julian

Seeking a feminine mystical way for the 21st Century



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^[1] ***Inspired by Julian***
Seeking a Feminine Mystical Way for the 21st Century

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[2] It is a great honour and special privilege to give the annual Julian Lecture here in the Church of St Julian where Julian of Norwich (1342-c.1423) lived as an anchoress so many centuries ago. There is something about the spirit of this place that connects us with Julian as one of the great Christian mystics of the Middle Ages, a woman who is an inspiration for so many of our contemporaries, and also for us here today, celebrating the memory and life of so great a woman. I felt a similar sense of connection and awe, of special joy and affirmation, when my husband and I last month had the unexpected opportunity of visiting the Benedictine Abbey of St Hildegard of Bingen high above the Rhine valley near Eibingen, where Hildegard (1098-1179) had been an abbess so many centuries ago. That is another woman mystic from another country who lived over 200 years before Julian but who has exercised a similar attraction and influence during her and our time.

This is not the place to retell Julian's story or rather, the little known for certain, when she lived the simple life of a recluse, here in her cell at Norwich. She is best known by the writing she left, the *Showings* or *Revelations of Divine Love*, the first book written by a woman in English and a classic in mystical theology. It is said to contain one of the clearest yet most complex records of the life of a contemplative, mystical soul. Many have commented on Julian's visions, her mystical experiences, contemplation, prayer and theology. My approach will follow another route by asking the question: Can there be a feminine mystical way for the 21st century? In what I have to say, three different strands of reflection come together:

1. making connections between mysticism and feminism;
2. exploring a *via feminina* for contemporary women and men;
3. [3] the great significance of love and wisdom for a feminine mystical way.

1. Making connections between mysticism and feminism

Mysticism is difficult, if not impossible, to define. Many attempts have been made to understand this extraordinary religious phenomenon. Although human reason remains ultimately unable to penetrate the mystery at the heart of mysticism, mystical experiences cannot be entirely opaque to reason and explanation either. The human spirit longs to reach out to something greater, more exalted and transcendent, to meet with and be transformed by the divine Spirit.

Mystics of many ages and faith communities bear supreme witness to the heights and depths of mystical experience. These mystics speak with many voices, they use a wealth of metaphors and images, and have left us a bewildering range of narratives about their inner life and vision. Because of the great variety of mystical experiences, it seems misleading to speak of mysticism in the singular. There are obviously so many mysticisms, and numerous explanations have been offered by both mystics and scholars to account for what mysticism is all about. At one level the term 'mysticism' seems rather artificial and undifferentiated; it seems more a word created by people studying, comparing or talking about particular experiences which individual mystics themselves do not define as such. Mystics always speak about particular experiences, a particular faith or practice, a particular way or path, rather than about mysticism in general. Thus being a mystic is very different from trying to understand what mysticism is, since it is about some of ^[4]the most intimate and transformative spiritual experiences known to humankind.

More than twenty years ago I gave a lecture on "Mysticism and Feminism or Why Look at Women Mystics?"¹ at a time when this was

a relatively unheard-of topic. Some of my listeners on that occasion strongly objected that mystical experience was beyond any feminist concerns. How can contemporary feminism as a social and political movement, but also a radical change in consciousness, be related to the age-old spiritual quest for liberation, freedom, enlightenment and transcendence? Even with the more advanced, inclusive gender thinking of today, many people are unwilling to see that there is a deep connection between mysticism and feminism, beyond the obvious one that there have been many women mystics.

The literature on mysticism is vast and so is that on feminism. But comparatively few feminist theologians have written on mysticism, at least in comparison with all the other topics they have explored. Moreover, the leading authors on mysticism are still predominantly male and rarely use feminist insights or gender perspectives in their discussions of the subject. This has largely been left to a few women writers.

To most people who are not themselves mystics, mystical experience is only accessible through reading mystical literature, including Julian's work. Such literature is found worldwide, across the different faiths and also outside them in a wide range ^[5]of secular texts, consisting of the poetry and literature of many languages. When we examine their descriptions of spiritual experiences cross-culturally, certain common traits emerge. Central to them seems the insistence on a fundamental unity or oneness that transcends all the diversity, fragmentation and superficiality of daily life. Thus mysticism has often been defined as a fundamentally unitive experience. In Christianity and other theistic religions this is understood as the deepest love and communion with God, whereas non-theistic religions conceive of it as a deeply contemplative approach to

Ultimate Reality. Union, contemplation, love and bliss all feature in the description of mystical experiences.

Some people consider mysticism primarily as an *historical* phenomenon - something that mainly happened to religious people in the past, but is now largely irrelevant to contemporary scientific and rationalistic ways of thinking. People of faith can never share such a narrow, exclusive approach but are convinced that mysticism is also an important contemporary phenomenon. Not only can mysticism be seen as the experiential matrix of religion, but it is also at the heart of spirituality, whether this is pursued inside or outside religious institutions. Mystical spirituality seems especially important for the transformation of religious awareness and spiritual practice in the contemporary global world.

It may come as a surprise to realise that the comparative study of mysticism - as distinct from the existence of mystics of many faiths - dates only from the beginning of the twentieth century, whether we think of William James's famous *Varieties of Religious Experience* from 1902 or Evelyn Underhill's equally famous study on *Mysticism. The Nature and Development of* ^[6] *Spiritual Consciousness* of 1911. Many other authors and titles could be listed here. The rediscovery of the life and work of many women mystics of the past has also mainly occurred during the twentieth century. This recovery has by no means been the exclusive achievement of women, yet it is striking how many women scholars have made important contributions to the modern study of mysticism.

Contemporary historical, theological and comparative studies on mysticism still pay relatively scant attention to wider gender issues. Nor do they always give sufficient space to women mystics. However, this does now happen more frequently since the works of many

women mystics in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and other religions have been discovered or rediscovered in the last century or less. Many women scholars have done significant work on the historical, textual and descriptive study of mysticism, without necessarily being attentive to gender issues either. To mention some names besides Evelyn Underhill, there are Margaret Smith, Grace Warrack, Geraldine Hodgson, Phyllis Hodgson, Hope Emily Allen, Emily Herman, Hilda Graef, Annemarie Schimmel. These and many others have written extensively on mysticism, and sometimes on specific women mystics.

The relationship between mysticism and feminism is ambivalent and rather difficult to unpack. From a critical feminist perspective, many questions can be asked. What have been women's own religious experiences in the past as distinct from those of men? How far have women articulated their experiences differently? Have they used different metaphors, concepts and images of their own? To what extent are their accounts more personal and autobiographical? The mystical writings of women ^[7]were often not acknowledged in the official historiographies of religious institutions, nor did they contribute to the systematic articulations of faith created in theological and philosophical schools of learning. Thus many works by women mystics have long remained invisible and marginalized, as is true of Julian of Norwich's important *Showings*.

Much has been written on medieval women mystics, yet relatively few writers combine the insights of the mystical tradition with the critical insights of contemporary feminism. Although "women of spirit" of earlier ages have sometimes been called 'proto-feminists', many aspects of their life and thinking relate very little to ours. Medieval women mystics were certainly not feminists in any contemporary sense. Their work therefore has to be approached with caution. Much of it remains imprisoned in the patriarchal framework

of past hierarchical structures and thinking. This is as true of Julian as it is of Hildegard of Bingen and other women mystics.

Every religion knows of female saints and mystics - extraordinary women who have provided much spiritual counsel, guidance and largely non-institutionalised spiritual leadership, just as Julian did from her cell here in Norwich. It comes as no surprise that such 'women of spirit', women who possessed spiritual power or what Eleanor McLaughlin has called 'power out of holiness, greatly appeal to people today who are seeking ^[8]spiritual guidance and inspiration. Religious women of medieval and early modern times provide strong role models in terms of female identity, autonomous agency and inner strength in face of much social and religious opposition. The comparative study of the writings of female and male mystics from a perspective of gender differences is only in its infancy, but it raises searching questions, not least for contemporary religious practice and the development of an appropriate, viable spirituality for both genders in our globalised society.

A surprising development worldwide is the growing realisation of the global spiritual heritage of women across different religions and cultures. So many spiritual 'foremothers', female saints, mystics and female religious communities are being discovered today, offering us many unexpected surprises. Yet a comparative historical enquiry provides plenty of evidence that most religions have validated women's lives primarily in terms of domestic observances and family duties. Religions have been less inclined to encourage women's search for religious experience and enlightenment, or inspired them to follow exceptional paths of spiritual devotion and perfection. Imprisoned by the daily tasks and recurrent demands of immediacy that the maintenance and nurture of personal and community life have always required, women have been so much equated with

immanence that the realms of *transcendence* have remained largely out of their reach, forbidden to their desire.

[9] In spite of the existence of what the German theologian Elisabeth Gössmann calls 'women's counter-tradition' to official Christianity,³ pursuing the life of the spirit always remained an exceptional path open mainly to individual women from an advantaged social background. We therefore have to ask how far women have really had access to a spiritual space of their own? How far were they really encouraged to pursue, or were ever admitted to the pursuit of, similar spiritual ideals and disciplines than men? How far could women provide spiritual advice and leadership for both women and men? It is only in our postmodern era that women *as a group*, and not simply as individuals, have been able to respond in greater numbers to the invitation, challenge and gift of *transcendence*. That raises questions about modern women mystics and the possibility of developing a feminine mystical way in the 21st century.

2. Exploring a *via feminina* for contemporary women and men

It is not my task here to review the critical feminist literature on women mystics or on the feminine in Christian mysticism. However, I want to mention Grace M. Jantzen's book *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (1995)⁴ which has attracted much attention. Here in Norwich, Grace Jantzen is probably better known for her fine study on *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (1987).⁵ Equally helpful is Barbara Newman's ^[10]excellent analysis *Sister of Wisdom* (1987)⁶ which examines the feminine motifs and the theology of the feminine in Hildegard of Bingen. An earlier, pioneering feminist study on Teresa of Avila and the western mystical tradition is Deirdre

Green's book *Gold in the Crucible* (1989),⁷ still worth reading, especially for its concluding reflections on 'Teresa and the Issue of Women's Spirituality'. Far more theoretically nuanced, but quite difficult, is Amy Hollywood's more recent study on *Sensible Ecstasy* (2002).⁸ It draws on the psychological theories of Luce Irigaray and Jacques Lacan in its discussion of medieval mystics and of mysticism and gender. Amy Hollywood also highlights the distinction between affective or erotic forms of mysticism, usually associated with women, and the more speculative, intellectual forms of mysticism, usually associated with men. Another way of saying this is to link *apophatic* mysticism and negative theology to male intellectual speculations whereas *kataphatic* forms of mysticism associated with imagery, symbolism and affirmative forms of theology are more frequently found among women mystics.

I have been particularly inspired by the approach of an American writer, Beverly J. Lanzetta, who has published a daring, innovative book entitled *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*,⁹ and another study, *Emerging Heart: Global Spirituality and the Sacred*.¹⁰ In seeking a feminine mystical way^[11] for the 21st century, it is worth listening to Lanzetta's ideas, some of which I want to share with you.

Beverly Lanzetta is convinced of the importance of gender implications for the spiritual life. She invites us to a re-reading of mystical theology from a feminist angle in order to discover new spiritual lineages and revelatory traditions. Just as Sara Maitland argued over twenty years ago that we need women map makers of the interior country,¹¹ so Lanzetta too speaks of women standing on the borders of a new country as mapmakers of uncharted spiritual territory. She asks: 'What metaphors, symbols, images of God do women see, unite with, and reveal if they travel by the way of the feminine? What wisdom can be gleaned from medieval women

mystics on the geography of the soul?' (p.8) She deliberately speaks of the *via feminina*, a feminine way not restricted to women but open to both women and men, although it expresses itself differently in females than in males. She means by this feminine way a quality of religious consciousness and a mystical path that tread new ground. Thus she redefines the spiritual journey from the perspective of women, but not in an exclusive sense. Instead of seeking union with God through either the *via positiva* or the *via negativa*, she sees the *via feminina*, the feminine mystical way, as a 'third way', unveiling to us 'the feminine heart of divinity and the spiritual equality of women' (p.13). She presents the *via feminina* as a 'radical mysticism' which seeks new forms of expression and engagement, while recognizing at the same time that some ^[12]features of traditional mysticism reveal themselves as products of patriarchy. These have to be dismantled and replaced by something new for the present world.

Lanzetta writes that 'If mysticism traces the journey to freedom, then women cannot achieve their full spiritual potential without confronting the injustice and violence within which the terms *female-feminine-woman* have been inscribed throughout recorded history' (p.16). She addresses the historical subservience of women in theological and spiritual circles, and critiques the still-prevalent prohibition against women in the highest spheres of spiritual authority and the still-rampant oppression of women in religious institutions (p. 18). However, beyond this critique or the 'un-saying' of 'woman' as traditionally understood - 'deconstructing and un-saying all that falsely defines "woman" and "feminine" (p.24) - and the elimination of all forms of oppression, the *via feminina* moves on as a path of spiritual liberation. This includes a dynamic relationship between embodiment and transcendence. It pays particular attention to the multiple wisdom of body, psyche and soul in order to name and heal what diminishes or violates women. Its most distinguishing

feature is that as a spiritual path this new 'feminine way' does not transcend differences - whether of gender, culture, race, or sex - but enters into them directly to experience a deeper unity capable of transforming the underlying causes of soul suffering...[It] is vigilant about the ways in which the categories that name and define the spiritual life - redemption, salvation, soul, self, God, virtue - as well as the processes or stages of mystical ascent - purgation, dark night, union - repeat subtle forms of gender, racial, or social violence. (p.22)

[13] Lanzetta's reflections emerge out of her experience as a spiritual director as well as her role as a scholar. The depth and richness of her work invite numerous re-readings, much critical reflection and engaging debate. If I understand Lanzetta correctly, she seeks to dismantle 'the great lie about the feminine' (p.17) in her trenchant critique of some of the oppressive aspects of traditional mysticism and spirituality. This is especially so when she speaks with much sensitivity and wisdom about women's spiritual oppression and wounding, and their great need for healing. She understands so intimately what it means 'to experience the wound of being female in this world' (p.135). Yet unfortunately she ignores in this context the important issues of power and authority, so carefully analysed by Grace Jantzen in her book *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*.

On the constructive side, Lanzetta suggests a wholesome, integral, embodied and undivided spirituality that is desirable, helpful and healing for both women and men. She characterizes the feminine mystical way (*via feminina*) as 'a socially-engaged and bodily contemplative practice' that will assist 'in the expansion and refinement of a spirituality that is truly representative of our global, changing, and plural world.' (P.24)

It is particularly exciting to see how in charting the *via feminina* as a partly new way, Lanzetta draws support from the experiences of medieval women mystics, especially Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila. Both are presented as 'cartographers of the soul' and 'sisters in spirit' who stand out through their wise and mature guidance. Both women share spiritual lives and theologies that resonate remarkably with each other. Both travelled from female subordination to dignity and freedom:

[14] As marginalized females in predominately-male-dominated cultures, it was through their contemplative experiences and prayerful dialogues with God that they worked out their personal wounding and social concerns. In their struggles toward spiritual equality they mapped out an inner feminism - the territory of the soul by which mysticism becomes the site of women's empowerment and dignity. (p.83)

Lanzetta describes Julian's mystical experience as 'graphic and raw', especially when Julian contemplates the thirsting face and crucified body of Jesus on the cross. She recognizes Julian's distinctive theology of the feminine, 'in which the meaning of sin and suffering is transformed and her worth as a woman is affirmed. Conceptualizing this journey through the image of the motherhood of God, Julian works out her equality and dignity of personhood, and the sinlessness of her fellow Christians.' (p.84) Lanzetta affirms our need for a feminine Divine, our longing to experience God as mother, as Julian does so movingly when she speaks about God and Jesus as our mother and praises God's all- embracing motherly love for the whole of creation again and again.

It is impossible to follow the intricate arguments of Lanzetta's study which includes many quotations from the *Long Text* of Julian's

Showings. But I want to mention the typology she discerns as common to both Julian and Teresa in relation to 'the inner life of suffering and sin, and the contemplative processes that take them from oppression to freedom and from human love to divine love' (p.86). These are then the five qualities especially noted by Lanzetta in both Julian's and Teresa's mysticism:

1. ^[15]longing to love, the extended passion and desire for God which is a mutuality of passion flowing between God and the human person. This passion inspires the mystical journey, but also heals and restores the human person;
2. great determination, surrender and courage;
3. the inner monastic heart, which Lanzetta considers as perhaps the most revolutionary element. This is the transposition of the physical monastery from a material reality to a state of consciousness, a state of the heart that involves a daily commitment to maintain an inner aloneness - an inner monastery as a place where God and soul dwell alone, in intimacy, providing a unitary perspective from where all reality and all experiences can be evaluated;
4. spiritual detachment consisting of spiritual love, detachment and humility that find expression in the essential work of compassion for others, and in the daily round of activities and responsibilities;
5. the annihilated self, the self that must surrender itself in order to find the mystic's true self inflamed by love. (pp. 86-98)

Much more could be said on all of these, but I want to move on in order to reflect on the place of love and wisdom that figure so centrally in Julian's visions. These are so much needed for healing our

deep spiritual wounds of today. They form a distinctive part of a feminine mystical way that can help to renew contemporary spirituality.

[16] **3. Love, wisdom and the feminine mystical way**

Counsellors, pastors, even some politicians and many ordinary people are all too aware of the great spiritual hunger that reveals itself in so many contemporary phenomena. What can be done to bring about more justice, harmony, peace and happiness in a world so torn apart, where so many people suffer great material, emotional and spiritual deprivation?

Countless individuals, groups of activists and institutions wrestle with these questions. Numerous suggestions and plans have been developed; some religious thinkers have proposed a global ethic, other speak of the need for global meditation, but also global action, to change the world together for the better. Beverly Lanzetta comes up with the excellent idea of recognizing distinctive *spiritual rights* that build upon international human rights. This brings a new perspective to global suffering, including women's suffering, since spiritual rights ask us to see each other and all creation from a divine perspective', with God's eyes, so to speak. She writes:

Because the highest calling of the person is to have fullness of being, spiritual rights address what prevents or violates this pursuit.

As the common element in all human cultures and traditions, the spiritual dimension of life is intertwined with and underlies

all other rights... It recognizes that spirituality is life itself, thus, a life of dignity is inconceivable without spiritual integrity and freedom... Derived from 'a belief that recognizes within other people the presence of the divine through which a person attains full humanity,' spiritual rights place the expressly spiritual as a recognized right interdependent with and interrelated ^[17] to civil and political rights, and economic and social rights (p.183).

I find the notion of 'spiritual rights' a very helpful one, although it needs further elaboration. The inclusion of spiritual rights into the vocabulary of rights enables us to think about human dignity from a different perspective. It also reminds us that mental and spiritual violence as well as physical violence can destroy not only the body, but also the human spirit. In Lanzetta's words, spiritual rights are 'attentive to a certain quality of consciousness and a certain depth of heart that heal and transform. An indivisible relationship exists between the attainment of planetary responsibility and the necessity for spiritual practices, prayer, and meditative solitude". (p.184)

The distinctiveness of spiritual rights leads Lanzetta to an ethic of ultimate concern', an embodied engagement that moves out of contemplation into action in the human sphere and into love for the world. She calls this a 'mystical ethic' which she describes as 'in essence, a mothering one; it embraces the world as a mother's body surrounds and nurtures life within her womb. Metaphors of pregnancy and birth help convey how each day we bear - lay our bodies down for - the spiritual renewal of life.' (p.201)

As human beings we are not only responsible for attention to our own selfhood, or for what happens to our family, friends and neighbours. As a morally and spiritually evolving species we also

carry a common responsibility for the human family around the globe. For this we need to nurture much more the qualities of love and wisdom. We need to be attentive to spiritual energy resources as well as material ones. We need to ^[18]foster the zest and love for life, values that are much affirmed in Julian's visions.

In reflecting on the nature of a mystical ethic, Lanzetta draws partly on Julian who, she writes, 'enshrines this mystical love for the world in her reflection on the motherhood of Jesus... By associating the qualities of unconditional love and mercy with the mother figure, Julian conveys a more embodied, physical sense of the healing of sins and the unity of creation.' (p.202)

For Julian, 'love was our Lord's meaning'. All her revelations are summed up in these terse words of the last chapter of the *Long Text* of her *Showings*:

What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same.

She also says that God revealed this 'because he wants to have it better known than it is'.¹² Thus we have to learn to recognize God's love in our lives and respond to it by accepting ourselves and loving others. It also means that we have much work to do to transform ourselves and our materialist culture that is so 'blinded to the unseen'. (Lanzetta p. 173) To quote a more recent ^[19]Christian mystic, according to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the day will come when humanity, after harnessing the energies of space, winds, water, and gravity, will harness the energies of love for God- and on that day

humans, for the second time, will have discovered fire!¹³ Like Julian, Teilhard affirms that without the all-transforming power of love and the zest for life, human development at an individual and social level cannot be sustained.

It is remarkable how many similar ideas about the spiritual energy resources of love and wisdom are emerging among different individuals and groups around the globe. Contemporary thought in the sciences and arts, in religion and psychology, in psychotherapy and counselling, in human development and social thinking, provide many examples of this convergence of similarly conceived ideals for the human community. It is not only mystics, theologians or novelists who wrestle with love. Today whole research groups and projects are devoted to this theme. They are looking to find out what difference personal and altruistic love can make to the life of human beings in terms of health, happiness, joy and contentment.

A striking instance of such convergent, although entirely independent, thinking about the transformative power of love is found in the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and in the magisterial study on *The Ways and Power of Love* by [20] Russian-American sociologist, Pitirim A. Sorokin (1889-1968),¹⁴ founding professor of sociology at Harvard University. Both consider altruistic love as the highest human energy resource for the transformation of human society. Both also agree that humans at present know less about 'love energy' than about the different forms of physical energy such as light, heat and electricity. The transformative energies of love must be studied in all their different dimensions, whether cosmic, physical, biological, psychological, social, religious, or ethical. Sorokin speaks of love as one of the highest energies known to human beings. Like Teilhard, he thinks that the production and distribution of love has until now been given

little systematic thought in practically all societies. This shows an astounding lack of organized effort on the part of humanity - or one might say, a lack of spiritual focus and depth- and this lack now threatens humanity's very future. Throughout history, the family has been one of the most efficient agencies in producing altruistic love, and so have small religious communities, saints and mystics, but altruistic love must now be extended beyond these small groups to 'the human "world market" according to Sorokin (p.39). He paints a bold picture of the transformative power of love and the systematic possibility of developing, accumulating, and storing its energy for the benefit of individuals and communities. The great geniuses, ^[21]heroes, or apostles of love throughout history, including the mystics, are like 'great power stations producing love for generations of human beings.' (p.40) But their example alone is not enough. What is needed now is an increase of love production by ordinary people and groups, in fact, by the whole culture, so that 'love, radiated by culture and by social institutions, would form a permanent atmosphere that would pervade all human beings from the cradle to the grave.' (p.45)

Is this a utopian dream? Is it possible to work for such change?

For this to occur, a global *spiritual awakening* has to occur. This requires *spiritual education* at all levels, not only for children and young people, not only in homes, schools and colleges, but spiritual education as an integral part of life-long adult learning. Only then can we achieve what I call *spiritual literacy*, a literacy that goes beyond learning to read and write, beyond professional training and skills, beyond emotional and ethical literacy, to a much deeper dimension of insight and wisdom which grows from the heart, and fosters compassion and love. These are the deepest energy resources human beings possess. Yet the global community is still far from

drawing on the transformative power of these resources in its present situation of greatest need.

The figure of wisdom - *sapientia* or *sophia* - has played a central role in the theologies of the feminine in different historical periods. This is true of medieval times where Hildegard ^[22] of Bingen has been called 'sister of wisdom'¹⁵ and Julian has been described as 'wisdom's daughter'.¹⁶ Julian herself says that 'God all wisdom is our loving Mother'.¹⁷ There has been a modern revival of sapiential theology, from the Romantics to Eastern Orthodox thinkers like Soloviev, Bulgakov or Florensky, but also in Teilhard de Chardin, with his poem on "The Eternal Feminine". Over the centuries, both men and women have been attracted to such theologies of the feminine. In Barbara Newman's view, 'these systems of thought cannot be explained solely by women's alleged need to identify with powerful feminine symbols, or by men's purported need to project these symbols as images of desire. Such motives may indeed be operative in the cases of individual writers, St Hildegard included.'¹⁸

Symbols of the feminine, of the figure of Wisdom, and indeed of a feminine Divine, may be addressing the psychological needs of both women and men. Yet explanations of how they came about, and what may be the meaning of these symbols for people's lives today vary enormously, from psycholinguistic theories to social and political explanations, and to a variety of philosophical and theological perspectives. Wisdom as *Sophia* plays an important role in feminist spirituality and theology. Yet ^[23]it is not only Wisdom as female representation of the Divine, but women's own wisdom which has found new recognition today.

The American ecological thinker Thomas Berry describes the wisdom of women as one of the essential resources for contemporary cultural

and spiritual renewal. He sees 'the great work' of building a viable future for people and planet as a human project that belongs to both women and men. However, it demands the transformation of all our institutions, from global politics, governance, education and financial arrangements to all aspects of culture, including religion. Berry thinks that humankind will not be able to achieve this radical transformation if we do not draw on all available resources. Most important among these are four kinds of wisdom: that of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, that of the classical philosophical and religious traditions of the world, and the new wisdom of science, still in its beginning phase, but advancing with amazing speed and success. The wisdom of women is very ancient, but it is now reasserting itself in new forms, transforming western and other civilizations. Berry says, 'The wisdom of women is to join the knowing of the body to that of mind, to join soul to spirit, intuition to reasoning, feeling consciousness to intellectual analysis, intimacy to detachment, subjective presence to objective distance.'¹⁹ This can be read as a description of some of the qualities associated with a feminine mystical way that is now open to both women and men and is prefigured in the lives of earlier women mystics.

[²⁴]The American Dominican, Father Richard Woods, has explored the similarity between the experiences of medieval and modern women mystics, perceiving their liberating, even revolutionary, force and prophetic function. He also recognizes with much discernment:

that women today are accomplishing what women in the Middle Ages sought to achieve in their own time - they are redefining the sense of God as a supportive presence not only favourable toward women (as well as men), but as a spirit of liberation from the fear, disdain, prejudice, stereotypes, and active discrimination that has characterised men's attitudes

towards women throughout much of the modern era and in many, perhaps most areas of the world... with regard to their position in the Christian church in particular, women are protesting against their disenfranchisement as children to one God, co-heirs with Christ, full members of the Body of Christ, and adult citizens of the Reign of God, the heavenly City. They are doing so not only by pressing for full incorporation into ministry, but, as happened with Augustinian canonesses, Hildegard, the Cistercian nuns, the beguines, and even Julian of Norwich, establishing havens or sanctuaries where they are free to express their spirituality and... to mature personally and collectively.

Emancipation and liberation are not themselves the goal of mystical experience. And yet, paradoxically, it is for that reason that it attains them.²⁰

[²⁵] Julian's work is now attracting ever more attention and advanced scholarship. The most recent study I have read is by a Dutch woman, Petra Galama, on "The Theology and Mystagogy of Julian of Norwich's *Showing of Love*, entitled *Behold How I Love You*".²¹ Her analysis of Julian's Showings wants to contribute 'to the recognition of the theological and spiritual strength of women who speak and write about God'.²² She argues persuasively that Julian's deep probing of her visionary experience of God's love and compassion can be a source of renewal for contemporary theology. Furthermore, it has significant implications for the contemporary practice of spiritual direction and can help to advance the development of spirituality. It is worth quoting Galama's loving summing up of Julian's work:

The Showing of Love is like a many faceted jewel reflecting

different aspects of the divine-human relationship. From whichever perspective a Christian looks at the jewel, its radiance is permeated by the qualities of God's profound love for the creation as it exists in God's image, and God's compassion with suffering. The core of the jewel is Christ saying: "Lo how I love thee". The jewel is evolved around its core of God's love, which is subsequently reflected in each aspect of human life: human body and deepest desires, pain and compassion, destiny and eternity. Contemplation on the [26] facets of God's love as it manifests in human life engenders in Christians a transformative guidance through the encounter between self-awareness and awareness of God.²³

Conclusion

Some theologians, like Karl Rahner or William Johnston for example, only see a future for Christianity, the church or even religion, if mysticism and mystical spirituality will take the lead in people's lives. As Beverly Lanzetta writes in her latest book: '... it is the mystical quest that underlies and informs global spirituality today'.²⁴ The contribution of women mystics, and the further emergence of a feminine mystical way that embraces the powers of love and wisdom, are indispensable for this.

It is not yet all that long ago that the great contemporary interest in Julian's *Showing of Love*²⁵ first took off. In earlier centuries, Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle and *The Cloud of Unknowing* were much better known than Julian of Norwich. It was those men who were then considered as the typical 'English mystics', whereas Julian seems to be the best known of all the English medieval mystics now. Maybe

we are now moving into the age of the feminine in two different senses. ^[27]First, in spite of continuing oppression and violence towards women, and continuing gender disparity, we have to recognise that in our time women in the West, but also globally, have achieved much material advancement in the social, economic, legal and educational sphere. But it is also part of women's calling to gain full equality and authority in the spiritual sphere and develop a new '*spiritual literacy*', whereby women define religion and spirituality for themselves rather than being passively defined by them. This is happening in all the religions, but it is not necessarily widely known, so that it has been described as a 'silent revolution' going on around the world.

Second, given the global rise in women's general and spiritual literacy, it comes as no surprise that women are developing new approaches to spirituality, combining the insights of faith and feminism. And that includes various attempts to develop a more inclusive feminine mystical way, a new 'radical wisdom' that embraces an embodied and actively engaged contemplation nurtured by a mystical ethic 'enfolded in love', as suggested by Beverly Lanzetta and others.

Spiritual work is demanding, not light work whose benefits can be gained without effort. To lead women and men of today to spiritual awakening, to a deeper awareness, to a new spiritual consciousness and actively engaged spiritual practice, is the great calling of our time. It demands many spiritual resources. It requires great integrity, deep honesty and truthfulness, and a passionate commitment to the life of the Spirit, to become ^[28]'attuned to the rivers of longing that flow between the divine and human heart' (Lanzetta 2005 p.87).

Julian's visions of love, especially of God's all-embracing motherly love, are a great inspiration for this task. Anchored in a passionate and compassionate spirituality, Julian can guide us on a new feminine mystical way that, through love and wisdom, can help us heal the wounds of our world.

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