

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

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IN THE FOREWORD to her book *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, the late Grace Jantzen asked a rhetorical question: ‘What does it mean to be an anchoress in postmodernity?’<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this question up here by exploring the life and works of Annie Dillard who, as a literary writer, appears actively to try to emulate Julian on a number of spiritual, theological and existential levels.<sup>2</sup> This is made explicit in her first major publication, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, where she recounts her experiences and observations of nature, and her subsequent reflections on what they tell her about God. She describes the simple dwelling where she lived during her sojourn by Tinker Creek, in Virginia’s Blue Ridge, in terms of being ‘clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchorhold’.<sup>3</sup>

In her later work *Holy the Firm* Dillard extends this analogy by deliberately drawing parallels between her own vocation—described using the tripartite model of nun, artist and thinker—and that of Julian.<sup>4</sup> While her Catholicism and her approach to Christian spirituality are somewhat eccentric, Dillard’s encounters and reflections on nature are reminiscent of Julian’s ability to gather impressions from the tangible world and to convey theological ideas through the construction of poignant and meaningful metaphorical language. Like Julian, who prayed earnestly to receive ‘three wounds’,<sup>5</sup> Dillard actively

<sup>1</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (London: SPCK, 2000), vii.

<sup>2</sup> I explore this more fully in my book *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity: Transcending Theological Boundaries in the Writings of Iris Murdoch, Denise Levertov and Annie Dillard* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 1998), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper, 1988), 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, edited by Edmund Colledge, Jean Leclercq and James Walsh (London: SPCK, 1976), short text, 125.

and persistently longs for experience of God through her repeated forays into the natural world: she describes herself as ‘stalking the sacred’.<sup>6</sup>

Julian’s *Showings* have attracted considerable theological interest from a range of scholars, typically exploring contemporary spirituality and feminist theology and focusing largely on her ideas concerning the maternal qualities of God and of Christ. But Grace Jantzen, more usefully I think, identifies Julian as espousing an integrated theology embracing all aspects of human life—body, mind and soul. I wish to consider how this theology can be seen to link Julian to the idea of the postmodern anchoress.

### ***The Anchoress in Postmodernity***

On a broad level I see the work of Annie Dillard, and the symbol of the anchoress as articulated by Jantzen, as examples of how the Christian spiritual tradition fosters both change and continuity within its central beliefs and texts. While there is continuity with the Bible, with inspirational mystics such as Julian, and with core theological themes, an anchoress in postmodernity has to operate within a cultural milieu very different from that of an anchoress in the fourteenth century. A crucial quality of the postmodern anchoress, Jantzen argues, is an attitude ‘standing at an angle to the certainties and preoccupations of the world [with] ... an openness to the divine in a world that has given itself to the mundane’.<sup>7</sup> This means that she must be able to step back at times in order to contemplate the sacred realities, but she must also be prepared to immerse herself in the suffering and messiness of the world around her. In practical terms, this attitude is likely to require the time and space to withdraw from the world for contemplation and engaged thought; in theoretical terms, it suggests a critique of those modern Enlightenment ideals of autonomy, of the elevation of reason, and of economic progress that are premised upon a belief in ‘certainties’.

#### *Mysticism and Postmodernity*

The German-born theologian Dorothee Soelle develops one such critique through a reconfiguration of the classical *via negativa*,

<sup>6</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 186–187.

<sup>7</sup> Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, vii.

describing the mystical quest in terms of 'being apart' and 'letting go of possessions, violence and ego', alongside more traditional ways of understanding it such as 'missing God' and the 'dark night'.<sup>8</sup> In the postmodern world of Western capitalism and consumerism, Soelle explores a political dimension additional to the classical mystical notion of a God perennially beyond any human grasp. This involves resistance to the contemporary world: the renunciation of its cultural norms and a willingness to estrange oneself from prevailing ideologies, especially from notions of the autonomous, individual self. She uses the idea of 'unforming' to capture her belief that we need to let go of our false desires and our dependence on consumerism.<sup>9</sup> Such resistance requires radical self-questioning, and looks for ways of developing an ego that is unattached to the cultural norms and values that centre on material possessions and promote violence.

Annie Dillard is, by her own definition, 'shockingly uncommitted—appallingly isolated from political, social, and economic affairs',<sup>10</sup> but she moves the reader, through her careful and consistent observations of nature, radically to subvert accepted notions of humans and of God, destabilising the precious human ego. Like that of Soelle, her work exemplifies the perhaps surprising way in which postmodernity offers the potential for mysticism to flourish.

Melvyn Matthews argues that modern presuppositions regarding the self and its possessions led Christians to engage inappropriately with medieval mystics.<sup>11</sup> For mystics such as Julian there was no sense of the self as the moderns understood it. But the postmodern decentring of the self, a consequence of the 'death of the subject' announced by structuralism, is, according to Matthews, 'a way of bringing the over-inflated view of the self into the light of reality, a way of deconstruction so that a proper humility about the place of the self is restored'.<sup>12</sup> In short, although in our time this move has overtones of indifferent agnosticism, there is a link between the philosophical deconstruction of the self in postmodernity and a medieval awareness of its seductive nature which we would do well to rediscover.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 92.

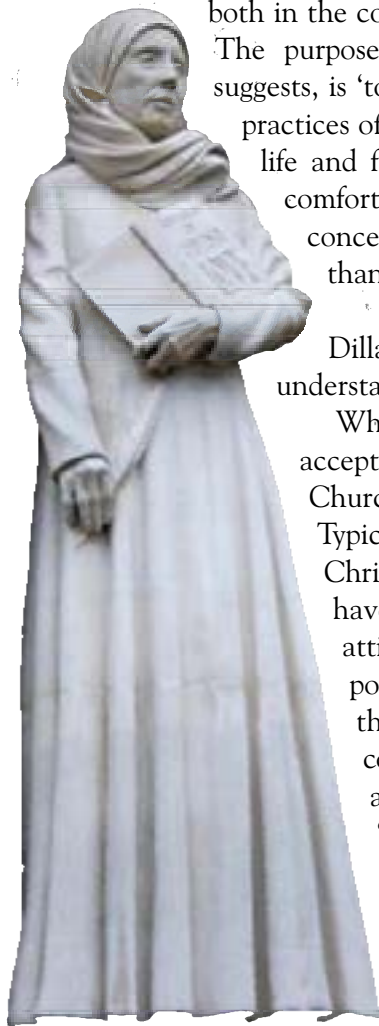
<sup>10</sup> Philip Yancey, 'A Face Aflame', interview with Annie Dillard, *Christianity Today*, 22 (1978), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Melvyn Matthews, *Both Alike to Thee: The Retrieval of the Mystic Way* (London: SPCK, 2000), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Matthews, *Both Alike to Thee*, 91.

*The Possibility of the Sacred*

Julian lived in a time of plague, and an important part of her role as an anchoress was to provide comfort to those who sought her help. Suffering has not gone away in postmodernity, and Annie Dillard also tries to make sense of the seemingly pointless pain that people endure, both in the course of nature and at the hands of others. The purpose of the postmodern anchoress, Jantzen suggests, is 'to discern the death-dealing structures and practices of modernity and to be open to ways of new life and flourishing'.<sup>13</sup> Like Julian, Dillard seeks to comfort and guide her readers, but she is more concerned to energize them at a spiritual level than to anaesthetize them.<sup>14</sup> In order to awaken her readers to the possibility of the sacred Dillard aims to reinvent and embody understandings of the Christian faith in new forms.



While Julian's readers were likely simply to accept the tenets of faith as transmitted by the Church, Dillard's readership is more complex. Typically, some will come from a traditional Christian perspective, but many others will have a more agnostic or even atheistic attitude. Dillard describes her own religious position as 'shoddy Christianity'.<sup>15</sup> She says that her primary audience is not the committed Christian, but 'the sceptic, the agnostic', whom she aims to get to 'acknowledge the supernatural'.<sup>16</sup> However, she believes that *even Christians* (a deliberate reference to Julian's *Showings*) are partly unaware of this realm, and says:

<sup>13</sup> Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, xxii.

<sup>14</sup> I am not suggesting that Julian did this, but rather that postmodern readings of the mystics have a tendency to escapism or to romantic, sentimental views of their lives.

<sup>15</sup> Annie Dillard, 'Singing with the Fundamentalists', *Yale Review*, 74 (1985), 315.

<sup>16</sup> Yancey, 'A Face Aflame', 14.

On the whole, I do not find Christians—outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?<sup>17</sup>

Fundamentally, Dillard sees the world as desacralised and in need of spiritual renewal, and in order to enact this renewal she adopts an almost surreal form of writing that often resorts to magical realism. The unsuspecting reader is forced into noticing unexpected ‘incursions’ of the sacred through a continual blurring of the boundaries of the real and the unreal. The metaphor of the anchoress, as someone who exists between the sacred and ordinary world, seems apt.

### ***Julian of Norwich***

The word ‘anchoress’ derives from the Greek word *anachōreō*, which means ‘to withdraw’. Such religious solitaries appear to be mostly a British phenomenon, and although there were male anchorites, this way of life was more likely to be taken up by women. The author of the early thirteenth-century text *Ancrene Wisse*, or ‘Guide for Anchoresses’, played on the word ‘anchor’, emphasizing the sense of being anchored to something—in this case to the church building. Medieval anchoresses were ‘anchored’ to a completely enclosed living space which they would enter with a solemn ceremony. Once inside, they would only emerge in their coffins.

We do not know for sure why Julian became an anchoress. Apart from her own writings, the only surviving records that mention her are the wills of benefactors who left her money and a brief mention by Margery Kempe.<sup>18</sup> In England during the fourteenth century the only route to an education was through the Church. It would have been extremely rare for a woman to penetrate this privileged male world. It would have been rarer still for her to produce writings, as Julian did, that contain theological teachings and sophisticated arguments. Moreover, Julian is especially important because she wrote in vernacular English—the language of the people—rather than Latin—the language of the Church. Julian believed in exposing people to religion, not excluding them from it.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper, 1992), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 14.

As a woman, she would certainly have put herself in an exceptionally precarious position by daring to offer spiritual counselling and theological education through her writing. Perhaps this is why she refers to herself as 'the wretched worm, the sinful creature to whom it was shown'.<sup>20</sup> She also places great emphasis on the fact that she does not intend any reward or recognition for herself when she writes: 'it was not revealed to me because God loves me better than the humblest soul who is in a state of grace'.<sup>21</sup> The injunction in Timothy 2:11–14 against women teaching was accepted as binding in the fourteenth century and, in line with that injunction, she stresses her own humility before God and her community: 'but God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not and never will be my intention; for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail'.<sup>22</sup>

Julian's caution reflects the attitudes towards women, and the power of the Church, at the time. It was necessary for her writing to be received seriously, and also reflects her sensitivity to the outrage that a woman could cause if she were too outspoken. The Church would certainly have dismissed anything that opposed its teaching as heretical. Notwithstanding this need for care, Julian's confidence shows a marked increase between the 'short text' (written relatively soon after her visions) and the 'long text' (completed about twenty years afterwards). It was the norm for a male scribe to help write down the texts of female mystics, so we cannot be sure if there are other voices in Julian's *Showings*, and scholars continue to speculate about the extent to which the manuscripts remained her own words.<sup>23</sup> But there would seem to be a tone of protest against the patriarchal Church when she asks whether it would be right for her to keep silent and 'not tell you of the goodness of God' just because she is a woman.<sup>24</sup> Despite the gaps in our knowledge about her life, she has become a role model for women who seek to transcend their gender roles in the Church. For female mystics

<sup>20</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 6, 133.

<sup>21</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 6, 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 6, 135.

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Johnson argues that Julian maintained a good deal of authority. See 'The Trophe of the Scribe and the Questions of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian and Margery Kempe', *Speculum*, 66/4 (1991) 820–838. For the view that Julian had limited control over her texts, see *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, edited by Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman (Mahwah: Paulist, 2001), 229–246.

<sup>24</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 6, 135.

such as Julian, and for numerous other female writers such as the Brontës, George Eliot and Jane Austen, writing has been a means to escape the limitations of an enclosed existence, whether it be the cloister or the home.

The equivalent of an anchoress in postmodernity has more freedom, and circumstances dictate that she must anchor herself in the world. But Frederick Bauerschmidt argues that Julian, like us, lived at the edge of modernity, and that therefore, as a 'fellow boundary dweller', she can offer an invaluable resource for coping with the shift between modernity and postmodernity.

Julian found herself in an uncertain space between the passing world of the premodern cosmos and the emerging modern world of radical individual freedom of will; therefore, she was able to think in a way that was, to a certain extent, freed from the order of the past but not yet enslaved to the freedom of the future. And similarly, we, on the other side of modernity, find ourselves also in an uncertain space where we can perhaps think in a new, or at least a different, way.<sup>25</sup>

In many respects, our predicament in postmodernity is the reverse of that experienced by Julian: we are 'enslaved in the freedom' of the present and nostalgic for the sort of order that religious certainties offered. Inasmuch as she was, as far as we know, the first woman to write a book in the vernacular in England, it also seems appropriate to take her work as a starting point in exploring the writings of a woman who consciously follows in her footsteps along the *via mystica* in postmodernity.

### ***Mysticism and Imagination***

There is for me a clear parallel between the attempts of many literary writers and of mystics to understand how the universe functions, and the longing for spiritual perfection. This is not to assert that all literary writers are mystics. There are, I suggest, three key discernable characteristics of mystic-writers. First, their lives are typified by dedication, and by immersion in religious traditions, in the lives and works of mystics and in sacred texts. Secondly, they work in a tension

<sup>25</sup> Frederick Bauerschmidt, 'Order, Freedom and "Kindness": Julian of Norwich on the Edge of Modernity', *Theology Today*, 60 (2003), 63.

between pragmatism and mystery, between concrete and social realities and an imaginative attempt to grasp the unseen, transcendent realm. Thirdly, writers with a mystical orientation, past and present, have become renowned for the forceful ways they inspire people to become more spiritually and ethically aware.

Moreover, a wondering appreciation of beauty in art or in the natural world parallels, and overlaps with, religious faith and spiritual fulfilment. Thus, it seems natural that mysticism and the sense of beauty should find expression through the arts, and especially through writing. As Don Cupitt notes, a mystical sensibility, significantly and almost without exception, appears to lead to the act of writing.<sup>26</sup> Although language ultimately fails to express the sacred adequately, this does not mean that the effort should be abandoned. The imagination is the

faculty that links creative artists and mystics, and it is through language that the creative writer conveys mystical perceptions for the rest of us, no matter how insufficient literary forms may be to carry out the task. Noel D. O'Donoghue writes about mysticism as an extension of the imagination, which may produce visions such as those recorded in Julian's *Showings*, but may also be manifested as poetic, artistic, symbolic, philosophical or theological visualisations and insights.<sup>27</sup> Creative writing and mystical language have the potential to go further than the more

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<sup>26</sup> See Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 74.

<sup>27</sup> Noel D. O'Donoghue, 'Mystical Imagination', in James P. Mackey, *Religious Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1986), 187–188.



restricted language of philosophy and theology, because they have a freedom denied to rational thought. In many ways, the mystical imagination also remains part of subjective experience and therefore beyond the grasp of other people. Yet this freedom does not come without a need for commitment, moral responsibility and self-giving.<sup>28</sup>

It is, in particular, the use of metaphoric language that links the mystic, the poet and the theologian. Metaphors act as a bridge between what can be observed in the real world and that which lies beyond. In a famous passage, Julian wrote:

Our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love ... in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand. And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.<sup>29</sup>

The object that Julian holds in the palm of her hand is in reality something else that escapes human perception; metaphor both reveals and conceals at the same time. It is only by conjuring up an image based on her perceptions that Julian can express an understanding of the unseen mystery she calls God. Moreover, although Julian's statement is essentially mystical, in that it derives from her direct experience of God's presence, it is also theological, since it grapples with the doctrine of Creation. The small thing in her palm is a metaphorical image of the world held safe in the loving hand of God, and it is at the same time representative of the unitive nature of the relationship between the Creator and the created world as she sees it.

On a subjective or microcosmic level, the metaphor is the connection between Julian's experience and her understanding. The image also becomes a link between the microcosm of personal spirituality and the macrocosm of communal theology, since her writings were intended as, and have indeed become, popular reading. As Grace Jantzen has argued, mystics such as Julian have historically been those who engage in 'creative

<sup>28</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Mystical Imagination', 190–192.

<sup>29</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 4, 130.

and courageous efforts at pushing back the boundaries of thought and action so that liberation could be achieved'.<sup>30</sup> The liberation that Julian sought for her readers was freedom from the burden of sin. In postmodernity liberation is more likely to be focused on rekindling the possibility of God while accepting the impossibility of understanding.

### **Body and Soul**

Julian of Norwich lived in an era of atrocious, undeserved suffering as plague rampaged throughout Europe. In reflecting on human pain in the light of God's truth and mercy, she proffered no 'quick fix' or shallow legitimization. Instead she admitted that beyond the suffering that serves a cautionary or corrective purpose there is colossal suffering that appears random and arbitrary, pointless and inexplicable. At the same time she insisted that no future reward or blessing or delight at God's hand, however protracted or intense, can ever compensate for such suffering so as to 'outweigh' it. Rather, in God's economy there will be reward or blessing that is seen to be intrinsic to our suffering and impossible without it; on the great Day our capacity for suffering will be seen to be essential to that human creature whom God has finally rendered 'the apple of his eye' and who can now enjoy God forever.

An overriding vocational aim that Julian expresses in *Showings* is her desire to help people become whole by healing the fragmented nature of the human self. Her response to what she saw as a universal human longing is an image of humanity's relationship with the Creator:

I saw that we have, naturally from our fullness, to desire wisely and truly to know our own soul, through which we are taught to seek it where it is, and that is in God. And so by leading through grace of the Holy Spirit we shall know them both in one; whether we are moved to know God or our soul, either motion is good and true.<sup>31</sup>

The increasing attention to the humanity of Christ and awareness that human beings are made 'in the image and likeness' of God in the late medieval period led to a sense that people are 'inextricably joined

<sup>30</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapter 56, 288.

with divinity'.<sup>32</sup> So Julian assures us that 'our substance is in God ... and God is in our sensuality':<sup>33</sup> that it is as sensual bodily creatures we perceive God. Our 'substance' or essential self remains united with God but, through sin, our 'sensuality', or 'consciousness and behaviour', loses touch with God.<sup>34</sup> Jantzen notes that the way 'bodily reality is integrated into ... [her] spirituality' differentiates the ideas of Julian and other female mystics from many male expressions of mysticism.<sup>35</sup> Rather than there being a flight from the material realm to the spiritual, the spiritual is realised within the material.

Because the human and divine souls were conjoined and because God is the ground of our being, to Julian's mind it followed that to know ourselves at a deep level is to know God:

And so I saw most surely that it is quicker for us and easier to come to the knowledge of God than it is to know our own soul. For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united.<sup>36</sup>

Julian appears to suggest that it is only by embracing the human condition and striving for a unified consciousness that people can overcome the false separation between the body and the soul. This is not to say that we are totally pure. As Julian recognised, the human potential for sin blocks our ability to receive God's grace. She thought that life's spiritual task should be to 'know and see, truly and clearly, what our self is, then we shall truly and clearly see and know our Lord God in the fullness of joy'.<sup>37</sup>

Behind Julian's revelations, and her years of pondering them, are the reality of God and the unfathomable mystery of love. The only way to transcend sin is through the power of love. Love is what binds the creature to the Creator. Indeed, Julian concludes that the meaning of her revelations was precisely 'love':

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1982) 129–130.

<sup>33</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapter 56, 288.

<sup>34</sup> Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 148–149.

<sup>35</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 147.

<sup>36</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapter 56, 288.

<sup>37</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapter 46, 258.

So I was taught that love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw very certainly in this and in everything that before God made us he loved us, which love was never abated and never will be .... In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning. In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.<sup>38</sup>

To what extent then does a mystic in postmodernity, such as Annie Dillard, agree with or challenge Julian's conclusions?

### **Annie Dillard**

Bruce Ronda explicitly describes Dillard as 'a mystic for our time',<sup>39</sup> and, in fact, Dillard consciously locates herself within the Christian mystical tradition. Her childhood was spent in Pittsburgh, where she attended a Presbyterian church with her family. From a very early age, she became a keen observer of the natural world around her. She also became a voracious reader, making full use of the local library that she recalls with nostalgia in *An American Childhood*. Among her favourite books was *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams*, which became a starting-point for her long sojourns in the wilderness.<sup>40</sup> She rebelled against the Christianity of her childhood, but converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1990s.

Her first major publication, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, was written following a serious bout of pneumonia, after which she left for the wilderness to study nature for clues about God. Nancy Parrish alerts us to two important facts concerning the narrator of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. First, Dillard has created a narrator who is partly a fictional character and partly based on real autobiographical experience.<sup>41</sup> To some extent, she invents an imaginary voice enabling her to write a spiritual autobiography that is subjective, but also able to transcend her own experience. Secondly, Dillard delights in stretching boundaries in her writing praxis—the same narrative strategies appear in *Holy the Firm*. The fact that her work continues to defy conventional literary definitions is testimony to her innovative and radical approach to writing about things that matter in the contemporary world.

<sup>38</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapters 85–86, 342–343.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce A. Ronda, 'Annie Dillard and the Fire of God', *Christian Century*, 100/16 (1983), 483.

<sup>40</sup> Ronda, 'Annie Dillard and the Fire of God', 81–85. She refers to Ann Haven Morgan, *The Field Book of Ponds and Streams* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1934).

<sup>41</sup> Ronda, 'Annie Dillard and the Fire of God', 146–147.



*Puget Sound*

In *Holy the Firm*, an account of her experience of living an isolated existence on an island in Puget Sound, Washington, USA, Dillard describes the room where she lived as ‘plain as a skull, a firm setting for windows’.<sup>42</sup> One wall of her room was glass, providing her with a frame through which to view the world, both literally and figuratively. Her room mirrored Julian’s anchorhold, which had three windows. But whereas Julian was connected to the church through her window, Dillard connected to the landscape through hers, a landscape which she interprets symbolically as ‘an illuminated manuscript whose leaves the wind takes, one by one, whose painted illuminations and halting words draw me’.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Julian was steeped in the teachings of the Church, Dillard presents herself as a ‘hollow’ person intent upon ‘reading’ or ‘seeing’ the sacred in the landscape of her remote habitat. The landscape is her sacred text, within which the word becomes incarnated.

*Suffering and the Existence of God*

In both *Holy the Firm* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the reader is fully aware of Annie Dillard’s anger at human suffering, and also at the violence and waste in nature. Like Julian, Dillard wants to go through the intense experience of suffering in order to understand it, and it is

<sup>42</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 24.



Self-portrait when Young, by Annie Dillard

clear that she experienced a 'dark night of the soul' on her forays into the wilderness. She went through a distinct stage during which she suffered greatly in her observations of nature, concluding that 'evolution loves death more than it loves you or me'.<sup>44</sup> For Dillard, the natural world is in this diametrically opposed to the human world: we 'value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit'.<sup>45</sup> The despair she endured came about because of sensory experiences of real suffering.

This suffering intensifies in *Holy the Firm* which contains an explicit link to Julian of Norwich in the form of a character called Julie Norwich, a little girl who is horrifically burnt in an aeroplane accident. Dillard apparently kept a newspaper cutting about a burns victim by her mirror for two years to remind her of the pain that others experience. The story of Julie leads Dillard to grapple with the notion of a God who can allow such extremes of suffering. Rather than focusing on the sufferings of Christ as Julian does, Dillard turns towards human suffering, and sometimes it seems in what she writes as though the human situation is hopeless:

... knowledge is impossible. We are precisely nowhere, sinking on an imaginary ice floe, into entirely imaginary seas themselves adrift.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 178.

<sup>45</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 46.

... the universe is neither contingent upon nor participant in the holy .... and we are not only its victims, falling always into or smashed by a planet slung by its sun—but also captives, bound by the mineral-made ropes of our senses.<sup>47</sup>

But in a dramatic shift she then writes a few pages later, 'I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means at hand'.<sup>48</sup> The only response to the world, even including its numerous brutalities, is one of awe and worship; and so she sets off to the local parish church with a bottle of communion wine tucked under her arm.<sup>49</sup>

Although the reader finds it challenging to keep up with Dillard's shifting patterns of thoughts and insights at times, what is certain is that *Holy the Firm* is a book of trinities, echoing the underlying theme of the Holy Trinity in Julian's *Showings*. The book is divided into three chapters, and various theories have been offered as to what this structure represents: the three days of Christ's passion; the three days of sickness during which Julian of Norwich received her revelations; the Creation, the Fall and Redemption;<sup>50</sup> 'the tripartite pattern of faith, doubt and faith renewed';<sup>51</sup> 'the three stages of the mystic way—illumination, purgation, and union'.<sup>52</sup> It seems likely that any of these suggestions could be true, or a synthesis of all of them.

Anyone familiar with Julian's description of her vision of Christ, moreover, will recognise similar use of graphic descriptive language in Dillard's vision of Christ being baptized in the Sound—though Dillard's version is more cosmic in scope than Julian's personal encounter.

He lifts from the water. Water beads on his shoulders. I see the water in balls as heavy as planets, a billion beads of water as weighty as worlds, and he lifts them up on his back as he rises. He stands wet in the water. Each one bead is transparent, and each has a world, or the same world, light and alive and apparent inside the drop: it is all there ever could be, moving at once, past and future, and all the people. I can look into

<sup>47</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 63–64. It is on her journey to the church that she experiences the vision of Christ being baptized. See chapter 2.

<sup>50</sup> James I. McClintock, 'Annie Dillard: Ritualist', in *Nature's Kindred Spirits* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin P, 1994), 91.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy Lucas, 'Annie Dillard', *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook 1980* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981), 187.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Paul Dunn, 'The Artist as Nun: Theme, Tone and Vision in the Writings of Annie Dillard', *Studia Mystica*, 1/4 (1978), 18.

any sphere and see people stream past me, and cool my eyes with colours and the sight of the world in spectacle perishing ever, and ever renewed. I do; I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds and all the earth's contents, every landscape and room, everything living or made or fashioned, all past and future stars, and especially faces, faces like the cells of everything, faces pouring past me talking, and going and gone. And I am gone.<sup>53</sup>

A comparison to Julian's vision of Christ's suffering on the cross reveals the same attention to detail:

I saw the bodily vision of the copious bleeding of the head persist. The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets, looking as if they came from the veins, as they issue they were a brownish red, for the blood was very thick, and as they spread they turned bright red. And as they reached the brows they vanished; and even so the bleeding continued until I had seen and understood many things. Nevertheless, the beauty and the vivacity persisted, beautiful and vivid without diminution. The copiousness resembles the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain, falling so thick that no human ingenuity can count them. And in their roundness as they spread over the forehead they were like a herring's scales.<sup>54</sup>

Dillard sees the whole world in a drop of water, as Julian is shown it in a small round thing the size of a hazelnut. For both these women, Christ is immanent in the world. Julian's imagery employs language that would have been familiar to her from the medieval town of Norwich: houses would have had overhanging thatched roofs and herrings were a local staple at that time. Dillard draws hers from the deserted landscape. Both Julian in her context, and Dillard in hers, are exemplars of a creative tension between the individual and the cosmos; between settling for mundanity and aiming at spiritual and moral excellence.

#### *Towards a Better World*

What is important to note about both Julian's and Dillard's mystical visions is that these revelations are not just for their own personal benefit. They are interpreted as being intended for the whole community. For

<sup>53</sup> Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 66–68.

<sup>54</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, chapter 7, 187–88.



Julian, this means making her insights accessible to other people by writing down and reflecting on her experiences. Convinced that they should be ‘for the profit of many others’,<sup>55</sup> Julian went to great lengths to make her readers understand that her revelations were meant for all her fellow Christians. It is in much the same attitude that ‘ordinary people’ populate Dillard’s vision. Both women understood themselves to be a vehicle for revealing the truth about the nature of God.

Dillard’s perceptions of God range from a *deus absconditus*—a God who is out of the loop—to the ecstatic experience of one who ‘spins like a fireball through our skulls’.<sup>56</sup> Her dialectical way of describing encounters with the sacred in terms of presence and absence, devotion and despair, is typical of those with a mystical outlook. Ultimately, despite her consciousness of the darker side of existence, Dillard retains a sense of wonder in creation and an acceptance of her own smallness within it. Dillard recounts one particular experience that prompted this insight in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

I was dead, I guess, in a deep black space high up among many white stars. My own consciousness had been disclosed to me, and I was happy. Then I saw far below me a long, curved band of colour. As I came closer, I saw that it stretched endlessly in either direction, and I understood that I was seeing all the time of the planet where I had lived. It looked like a woman’s tweed scarf; the longer I studied any one spot, the more dots of colour I saw. There was no end to the deepness and variety of the dots.<sup>57</sup>

Dillard imagines the mystery of creation through the simple symbolism of a scarf. This is a comforting image and, near to the end of the dream, Dillard recalls seeing ‘the earth as a globe in space’ and ‘being filled with deep affection of nostalgia’ just before she opens her eyes. This closely resembles Julian’s vision of the small thing held in her palm. Dillard suggests that ‘we all ought to be able to conjure up sights like this’ in order to go ever deeper into the very fabric of life.<sup>58</sup> The complex nature of symbolism, the creative imagination and the ability of the mind to transcend the body all offer us the possibility of mystical insight.

<sup>55</sup> *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 6, 134.

<sup>56</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 139–140.

<sup>57</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 142.

<sup>58</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 143.

No doubt, this vision of creation reflects her belief that there is a sacred power behind it that remains eternally elusive. For me the Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* (which she refers to simply as *tikkun*)<sup>59</sup> provides Dillard with the best clue to understanding the mysteries that she has scrutinised over the years. She uses it in *For the Time Being* in relation to the creation of the world in the beginning, and the creation of a future world. She quotes an account by Rabbi Isaac Luria of how God withdrew from the world to leave room for creation, with the intention that divine light was to filter through ten holy vessels to humans. But something went cataclysmically wrong:

The holy light burst the vessels. The vessels splintered and scattered. Sparks of holiness fell to the depths, and the opaque shards of the broken vessels (*quelippot*) imprisoned them. This is our bleak world. We see only the demonic shells of things. It is literally sensible to deny that God exists. In fact God is hidden, exiled, in the sparks of divine light the shells entrap. So evil can exist, continue to live: The spark of goodness within things, the Gnostic-like spark that even the most evil tendency encloses, lends evil its being.<sup>60</sup>

Although to the sceptical reader this is purely an aetiological myth to account for moral evil and natural disasters, it also offers a mystical understanding of creation that parallels Julian's. It provides, through metaphorical language, a means to understand mystery. Certainly, the notion of the divine trapped in matter or 'exiled' fits into Dillard's understanding of the Creator. Embedded in the notion of *tikkun olam* is the belief that the world is broken and needs to be repaired. Moreover, there are theological links to Jewish ideas about social justice. Each small act contributes towards this reparation. It is the human task to release the divine sparks,

... and return them to God. This is the human task: to direct and channel the sparks' return. This task is *tikkun*, restoration.

Yours is a holy work on earth right now, they say whatever that work is, if you tie your love and desire to God. You do not deny or flee the world, but redeem it, all of it—just as it is.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Literally, 'repairing the world'. *Tikkun olam* is a central concept in the Zohar, the most important book in Kabbalah.

<sup>60</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 50–51.

<sup>61</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 141.

After the tsunami in Asia on 26 December 2005 Dillard was asked by a US news agency to write an essay. The title she chose was 'Dots in Blue Water', recollecting her seven-year-old daughter's reaction to an earlier disaster:

My daughter was then seven years old. I said that it was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning.

'No, it's easy', my daughter said. 'Lots and lots of dots in blue water.'<sup>62</sup>

From the time of this catastrophe, Dillard cites a newspaper headline: 'Head-Spinning Numbers Cause Minds To Go Slack'. But, she insists:

... we agree that our minds must not go slack, neither must our hands. We the living now enter the surf to form a human boom like a log boom. We try to encircle and enclose and bring in and burn or save the dots, all the dots, those Indian and Indonesian dots, those dots dropping everywhere in Iraq right now, the starving dots. We do not go slack. We secure the boom. We hold tight to other hands in the water. We save and rescue as many dots as we can whether we can see the people flail in front of us or not.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the fact that there is little point in trying to reconcile God's goodness to the reality of human suffering, there is still reason to remain optimistic. Even though there is no concrete evidence of a personal God who is present in the multiplicity of human existence, human optimism refuses to stop caring. Instead of wrestling with pointless questions, we need to be working towards a better world by using our energies on those things where we can make an impact.

#### *All Will Be Well*

Annie Dillard's deliberate emulation of Julian of Norwich allows us to imagine what an anchoress in postmodernity might look like. Partly this vocation calls for someone with an extraordinary desire to know God. But mostly it requires someone who is prepared to exist on boundaries between the seen and unseen world and live through the existential

<sup>62</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 46.

<sup>63</sup> Annie Dillard, 'Tsunami Commentary: Dots in Blue Water', original radio broadcast available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4270641>.

tensions that being human entails. Finally then, I offer Dillard's account of a Hasidic girl, Suri Feldman, who had been missing but was found alive and well, as an example of Julian's sense that 'all will be well'.<sup>64</sup> The girl is welcomed with joyous rapture by her community. Dillard writes,

On May 7 1995 they found the Hasid girl Suri Feldman ... when the vehicle drove into the Berkeley parking lot, it could scarcely move. Hasids filled the lot. Hasids in black coats from the eighteenth century and black beards and black hats. A local volunteer said 'I've never seen so many people dance in a circle'.<sup>65</sup>

I imagine that Dillard rather liked the image of the sombre-looking Hasids jumping for joy, and saw it as an apt metaphor for life's ups and downs. This story invokes feelings concerning the loss and return of a loved one with which everyone can empathize. In the context of Dillard's accounts of suffering and genocide, which proliferate in *For the Time Being*, it functions as a parable of hope. It also echoes earlier parables, such as Julian's 'Parable of the Lord and the Servant' as well as the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son in the gospel narratives, that speak of God's extravagant generosity and the unfathomable mystery of love. These parables allow us to imagine that the extraordinary is possible within the context of the ordinary, and they remind us that the sacred can rupture the façade of the ordinary when we least expect it.

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<sup>64</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 199. And see *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, short text, chapter 13, 149.

<sup>65</sup> Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 199.