

Amy Laura Hall, *Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World with Julian of Norwich*
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Amy Laura Hall has written a short book about Julian of Norwich and ethics that is both a laugh-out-loud read and an entirely serious reflection on living in the safety of the cross. Hall's reflections made this medieval English visionary come alive for me, and she also helped me enable Julian to seem relevant – even someone to celebrate – for undergraduates living in a time of pandemic, political division, and fear.

The book's Preface introduces us to the questions at hand in reading Julian of Norwich: in the face of the Devil, of fear, of evil, what does it mean to laugh? And not just any laugh, Hall says, but full-on laughter, like Nicki Minaj? She explains that this volume's invitation to see the world differently in light of God's 'familiar love' (Short Text: 4) came out of teaching demands. Hall realized that as she came to teach an ethics class at Duke Divinity School, she did not have a single female author on the syllabus. What was a hurried and incredulous first reading of Julian turned into a discovery: 'Julian became my lodestar' (p. xvi).

The book's first chapter deals with time, 'what it means that Julian says God is willing to do everything, present tense' (p. 3). Hall explores how Julian can say what she does through her famous image of the hazelnut: that the tiny hazelnut Julian holds in her hand is everything that is made, and that it exists forever because God loves it. Julian, says Hall, sees everything in a *poynthe* or an instant. Against notions of progress that call us to get on the side of God's efforts to bring in the kingdom, reasoning that even tragic happenings make sense in terms of where they lead, or notions of progress that call us to get with the right political program, Julian has a different approach. For her, all time holds together in the *poynthe* that is the cross, in God's love and in Jesus' abundant blood. Everything will be taken up and redeemed. Hall explains this through one of the many endearing stories she includes here, the story of her daughter thinking about her dog who chases squirrels and suffers from incontinence. Squirrels, dogs, and poop will all be redeemed, Hall tells us. 'God's providence', says Hall, 'must be enfolded within God's love' (p. 38).

The second chapter is about truth, 'what it means that Christians know a truth that makes us odd' (p. 3). Hall focuses on the truth about who human beings are and how we are brought into atonement. Instead of notions that humanity is saved because Christ has satisfied God's justice or because Christ has defeated Satan, Hall says that Julian puts forward our being at-oned or made one with Christ. That happens when Christ becomes kin with us by becoming human. Christ thus makes us all into kin, into family that cuts across differences. For Hall, this truth stands against the divisions of Julian's time, the sumptuary laws that required everyone to dress according to their standing in society, the repression of peasant revolts, and the banning of translating and owning portions of the Bible. For Hall, the truth of kinship also stands against efforts to regain control after 9/11 through stronger male/female roles. Hall writes that 'Julian saw that God had kinned everyone and had become a servant so that we could know another as one blood, drenched and saturated and fed by Jesus' (p. 53). And Hall says that the truth is that the world is not ultimately about competition and scarcity but about peace and surprise.

The first thing that struck me reading Julian was the sheer bloodiness of her visions, and Hall's chapter takes up this topic, blood: 'what difference it makes for us that Jesus was bloody and comes to us in the blood of Holy Communion' (p. 3). Hall writes that Julian wrote in a

time when much blood was spilled. Many who died from the plague were ‘unshriven’, buried without the benefit of the last rites. The Western church underwent the Great Schism during Julian’s lifetime, leaving the church ‘bloody and verifiably broken’ (p. 67). Hall acknowledges that there remain good reasons to stay far away from the church in a time of division, abuse, and little space left for doubting. And Hall did not see it when she wrote, but the connections between the plagues of Julian’s time and our time are clear: what do we do with the grief of so many dead, often without even room to gather for a funeral? For Hall, Julian’s answer to the plagues and pandemics of her time is the abundant blood of Jesus. Jesus’ blood is so abundant that it can soak into the ground and make safe even those who did not receive the assurance of the church’s sacraments before dying. And in the midst of the Papal Schism, Julian is convinced that in Jesus’ blood, Holy Church is one. For Julian, Jesus’ wounds are open to receive and heal us, and the church, our mother, is ready to take care of us. In the ‘crazy’ truth of Jesus’ blood borne by the church, we are all made safe (p. 79).

The fourth chapter is about bodies, ‘how you and I are a blood-and-bone miracle held by God’ (p. 3). Hall asks how it might be that for Julian we might come before God in confession that we come ‘nakedly and truly’ (Short Text: 17). For Hall, the cross did not have to happen nor does it need to be repeated. It is ‘nonproductiv[e]’ (p. 82). But those who join in the cross and participate in Christ’s sufferings find it a great place of safety. This runs counter to fears, fears in Julian’s time made manifest in King Henry IV’s 1401 statute against heretics and fears of outsiders in the port city of Norwich. This also runs counter to fears in our time, Hall writes, fears after 9/11, fears of outsiders, and fears that winter and domination will reign in *Game of Thrones*. Hall’s exploration of fears around sexuality connect to her profound writing in *Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction* (Eerdmans, 2008): we are not made safe through efforts to control and dominate but in God’s ‘omniamity’. Julian answers fears not primarily with God’s omniscience and omnipotence but by making plain that God is all loving (pp. 1-2, 9, 105).

Julian of Norwich may seem distant and just too bloody. But read alongside Amy Laura Hall, Julian’s visions speak presciently in today’s world of fear, pandemic, and unrest. I see Hall’s text as an exercise in just what she says Julian is doing, ‘a speculative vernacular theology’ in the words of Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Hall, pp. xvii, 42). In tying God’s time to the restoration of her family’s incontinent dog, in announcing safety in the cross against fears of ‘aliens ... whether those aliens speak Arabic or Spanish or come in on a spaceship’ (p. 95), in linking Christ’s becoming our kin to the upending of hierarchies in church and politics, Hall speculates while writing in the vernacular. This book is a book about mashed potatoes and the pro-life movement as much as it is about medieval sumptuary laws and the unshriven dead. And that vernacular is personal: Hall makes plain her own experiences of mothering, teaching, and domestic abuse. Read a couple of years after its release, the book’s meditations on Jesus’ overflowing blood amid plague speaks a compelling word to Covid-19 fears.

As I read the book, there were points where I wanted to hear more about Julian’s theology. More specificity on Julian’s understanding of Jesus as taking on our ‘kind’ and making us ‘kin’ would have convinced me further on Hall’s central claims that Julian’s response to societal divisions is to say that we are all kin in Jesus. Spelling out Julian’s understanding of the atonement in more detail would have helped me decide whether Julian provides an alternative to satisfaction and Christus Victor doctrines of the atonement like Hall thinks she does. (I wondered if Julian’s focus on our being held in Christ’s suffering and in his love is a helpful image of the atonement that does not have to compete with images of satisfaction and victory.) But to ask for more in these areas could be to keep Hall’s book from doing what it does so well, offering an endearing, accessible, and weighty articulation of Julian of Norwich’s witness for

our living today. I can read the likes of Janet Soskice and Denys Turner to answer my questions about kindness and the atonement (Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: University Press, 2008), 125–56; Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011)).

What I cannot find most anywhere else is the kind of theological writing Hall offers about Julian of Norwich. In a style that is disarming yet informed by careful scholarship, Hall brings alive the words of a long-dead visionary, connecting Julian with our cultural and political moment in ways that are in turn hilarious and moving. In so doing, she presents a profound picture of safety and love in Jesus' blood, a picture that many of my students found attractive and compelling whether they had a faith background or none. I recommend this book highly for scholars, for students, and for anyone wanting to understand Julian of Norwich and reflect on the cross in a fresh and invigorating way.