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# EDITOR'S NOTE

Volume 15 Number 2 comprises three articles (by Lawrenson, van Staden and Joubert) and two book reviews. The authors offer different perspectives on Christian spirituality.

Lawrenson seeks to connect the mystical insights of Julian of Norwich with the current expressions of spirituality, with the focus on Julian's relational understanding of the Trinity and the Motherhood of God as particularly pertinent in the work of spiritual direction. This article is based on a research paper that was submitted to St Augustine College in 2015 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Philosophy in Theology (specialisation in Christian Spirituality) and which received a distinction.

Van Staden offers a fresh take on contemplation (mysticism) as the acme of spirituality as he argues that any discussion on Merton, whether it has to do with his commitment to social justice or interreligious dialogue, should be approached on the basis of his monastic vocation as a contemplative. Van Staden's article is based on the paper which was presented at the Second Bi-annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality held at St Augustine College, Johannesburg, from 20<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2015.

The final article by Joubert aims to examine Irenaeus' famous phrase 'the glory of God is man fully alive' which is often used in feminist discourse on human dignity. The author queries the hermeneutical responsibility and sensitivity behind such uses which are often, as she argues, oblivious to the historical-critical reading of Irenaeus work and thereby fail to make a relevant contribution to the search for human dignity and human flourishing inherent in the feminist theological framework.



# The Relevance of Julian of Norwich for Spiritual Direction

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## ABSTRACT

This paper connects the *Revelations of Divine Love*, the work of fourteenth century mystic Julian of Norwich, with the current expressions of spiritual direction. The paper adopts a hermeneutic approach allowing history, context and informed interpretation to interconnect to further an understanding of the topic. Julian's work is significant and timely not only because its content offers a compassionate theology contrary to that of her time but because it is surprisingly relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. Her text and lifestyle bring wisdom to both spiritual directors and those whom they accompany with a hopeful balanced faith expression that rests on the love of God and God's particular care for each member of God's creation. Her relational understanding of the Trinity and the Motherhood of God are particularly pertinent in the work of spiritual direction.

## INTRODUCTION

How might an anchoress who lived in Medieval England six hundred years ago hold relevance for spiritual direction today? Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416) embodies a unique story of divine compulsion recorded with great reflection and contemplation over many years in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Her texts, in both their Long and Short forms, record little of her biography but encompass a narrative rich in theological reflection and apprehension that respects the church of her time but also addresses the transformational capacity of God to work within each soul to divine and loving effect.

Julian emerges as a trustworthy companion to the 21<sup>st</sup> century especially and yet as Jantzen points out “Julian could hardly have imagined our existence, let alone the material and discursive conditions of postmodernity.” It is important to understand that “Julian is writing for the people of her time, not for “us”; though some of us may listen in and find that her teaching resonates in ways that can be appropriated today” (2000:xv). This paper rests on this latter premise: respectful of history, intention and subjectivity but also confident in the “fusion of horizons” offered by this classic text. Perrin says that “the goal of interpreting texts is not merely to bring the text from the past into the present, but through understanding the text to give life today a more hope-filled future” (2007:206).

It is the intention of this account to consider the insight of Julian’s 16 revelations with particular reference to her understanding of Trinity, the Motherhood of God, Sin and her role as an anchoress. This expands into how her insights and lifestyle might inform contemporary spiritual direction. As Jantzen points out of Julian, “there is a combination of steadiness and venturesomeness in her thinking about God which could hearten her postmodern successor” (2000:xvi). The overriding premise of this work is that Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love* hold relevance to both directors and those with whom they journey with an abiding integrity that is significant beyond the catalyst of her visions and the context from which they emerge.

## **TRINITY AND THE GIFT OF RELATIONSHIP**

Julian’s understanding of Trinity provides containment for her visions as well as for the Trinitarian nature of Spiritual Direction. Julian’s work is united and compelled by her understanding of the Trinity. Her 16<sup>th</sup> vision, which occurred sometime after the first 15, provides a confirmation of the validity of her previous revelations, within the full extent of God’s Holy

and relational being. In chapter 1 in which Julian shares her intention and gives structure to her work she says,

The 16<sup>th</sup> showing is that the blessed Trinity, our Creator in Christ Jesus our Saviour, endlessly dwells in our soul, honourably governing and controlling all things, powerfully and wisely saving and protecting us for the sake of love; and that we shall not be overcome by our Enemy (RDL 1:67).<sup>1</sup>

She sees the Trinity as our Maker, Keeper and Lover (RDL 4:73, 5:77), Father, Mother and Lord (RDL 58:277). It is the source of “our endless Joy and Bliss” (RDL 4:73) and in the humanity of Jesus ever present “wherever Jesus appears, the blessed Trinity is understood” (RDL 4:75). With the vision of Christ as the central image of her Revelations, this is significant especially in the identification of his motherhood. Her explicit sense of each and all being an embodiment of the Trinity is what makes her work so relevant in spiritual direction. The essence of the Trinity exists in the essence of each of us too. She realises in chapter 58 (:281) that God is not an impersonal, omnipotent being, with Jesus seated at his right hand, relying on the distant whims of the holy habitation of the spirit in humanity. Rather, like Paul who says in Acts 17:28, “For in Him we live and move and have our being,” Julian says

Thus in our Father, God Almighty, we have our being. And in our Mother of mercy we have our redeeming and restoring in whom our parts are one-ed and all made complete man (sic): And by our rewards and gifts of grace from the Holy Spirit, we are fulfilled. And our essence is in our Father, God Almighty. And our essence is in our Mother, God all Wisdom. And our essence is in our Lord the Holy Spirit, God all Goodness, for our essence is total in each Person of the Trinity, which is One God (RDL 58:281).

She not only gives each person of the Trinity various names, she also gives them descriptive qualities and as much as she separates in an attempt to understand the multifaceted nature of Trinity, she constantly unites in the language of loving habitation. We are each the embodiment of not only the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), but also of God desiring and

Jesus' thirst. These three cannot be separated in the Incarnational gift of each life. Jantzen helps to express this when she says of Trinitarian indwelling, "God in Christ thirsts, and because of our union with God we also thirst. Just as Christ's spiritual thirst is God's painful longing for us, so the longing and yearning we feel is our unsatisfied desire for God or God's desiring in us" (2000:85).

For Julian, we diminish God's love if we find it less than imbued with every aspect that relational Trinity endows (RDL 6:81). Within this understanding of the Trinity we are able to make sense of the Incarnation, sin, grace, creation, providence, the Church, the sacraments and the human person in relation to self, others and God (Hunt 2010:105). Hunt explains "At the core from which all else radiates, is a profound insight into the divine and distinctly Trinitarian love, 'the endless love' in which God beholds and unites the human person in the God self in an indivisible 'one-ing' or unity" (:105).

Julian's prayer that she be present as a witness to Christ's suffering is granted in the Passion vision which dominates her Revelations. This exploration of her experience of the sacrificial and both woeful and wonderful event of the crucifixion and its embodiment of resurrection, direct the rest of her revelations. She situates the Paschal mystery at the centre of her understanding. For Julian, "the Trinity is a foundational reality within which the work of Christ's suffering and death is located" (:107). This understanding of Trinity she places at her readers' feet and implores a transforming understanding, "for resources of power, wisdom and goodness of God, the Trinity have bearing on each aspect of life, from our initial creation, through our purification, to our eventual perfection. (Jantzen 2000:115). Julian says, "For in these three is all our life" (RDL 59:283). Trinity sanctifies the gift of relationship. The father relates to the son who relates to his people as father, mother, brother, who are interconnected within as Spirit embodied in the possibility of sacred understanding and communication.

One of Julian's prime desires is to see reality through God's eyes. She "seeks to articulate not only something of what God is but also...something of how God sees" (Jantzen 2000:115). Spiritual direction is by its very nature Trinitarian: advice offered by one to another in the presence of God. In its interconnection it suggests an understanding that is the antithesis of rational compartmentalisation. No part can exist without the other, no part can be understood without an understanding of the other two and no part exists except by virtue of the other.

The qualities, identities and characteristics Julian ascribes to the Trinity provide a relational language for spiritual direction which allows desire, longing and insight to find particular appropriation. If a person struggles to relate to father love, Julian offers mother love, or brother love. If there is a concern with divine indwelling, Julian offers not only the vastness of the creative impulse of God from the beginning of time, but also an understanding of Mary's mother love for her son and his for her and us as we stand at the foot of the cross. With Julian as a guide we experience the paradox of dying and emerging into new life through this divine relational understanding. As Julian desires this insight for us, so too does a spiritual director desire this particular grace for those they meet as their personal narratives and life struggles emerge to be heard in God's presence. Julian's Trinitarian understanding allows for the indwelling three-fold God in each person present to communicate to divine communal effect. There is a certainty in Julian that professes "God's action in creation and transforming of human existence and identity is God's Trinitarian way of being" (Sheldrake 2010:89).

## **JULIAN'S RESPONSE TO COMMON THEMES IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:**

### **Prayer, Sin and the Unknowable**

While spiritual direction may include many particularities dependent on the personal nature of the relationship, there are common themes about which Julian has much to say.

The nature and torment of sin, communication with God through prayer, an understanding of the nature of Divine love and the mystery of faith are primary and perennial concerns in the work of spiritual direction. Julian considers all of these themes in her reflections on her visions, basing insights on these visionary moments where unity with the divine seemed granted. Julian's life of contemplative living in communication with God affords a voice in touch with common sights and gentle homely images. These are her experiences within her environment and the life of those with whom she communicated.

So, a hazelnut is a source of creative wonder in chapter 5 and the drops of Christ's blood are compared to "pellets," "drops of water that fall off leaves" and "the scales of herring as they spread over the forehead" in chapter 7(RDL:87). Her language is not embedded in Biblical and liturgical piety but warm homeliness. She knows the Bible and derives meaning from its expression but she does not share it or view it as a pious rule book or a damning vehicle (RDL 38:181).

## **Prayer**

Julian sees her revelations as a result of what she asked of God and her understanding of them is infused with years of contemplative understanding. What is desired and asked for reveals much about a person (Obbard 2000:2). We know from the introduction to her *Revelations of Divine Love* that even before her visions, Julian was a devout deep thinking woman, longing to increase her faith. She asks in prayer for 3 things. Firstly, she asks for a full experience of the Passion. She believes but she wants to deepen her understanding about this sacrificial life-giving death. Her second prayer is that she experience a "bodily sickness at the age of 30" and the final one, that she receive three wounds from God of contrition, compassion and longing (RDL 2:69). She writes of these requests with hindsight but sees them as they emerge in her understanding as gifts. She is spiritually prepared to receive these gifts and has a profound sense that "her own prayer as inspired and answered by God" determines her insight (Perrin 2001:112). Her own near death and recovery

is the vehicle through which she is able to gain access to Christ's death and resurrection. Julian believes in the power of prayer and in the interconnected relationship of this communication as augmenting constant conversions of the soul. Her "spiritual direction" emerges as the fulfilment of divine longing. Her faith is confident and hopeful.

The third gift she prays for - "the wound of true contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of wish-filled yearning for God" (RDL 2:69), is revealing. If spiritual direction is about determining desire and transforming this into prayer and action, then Julian's offering of these 3 "wounds" are worth considering in more detail. While the first 2 desires she says, "passed from memory...the third dwelled with me constantly" (RDL 2:73).

In 2012 Ruth Obbard presented a lecture on Julian entitled, "Julian of Norwich – Spiritual Guide." She uses the wounds of Julian's third request as pivotal qualities emerging within spiritual direction. Of the first, "true contrition" or "sorrow," she believes Julian to mean not "misplaced shamefaced guilt" but a "growing self-knowledge" of the imperfection of humanity and the endless possibility of God's redemption along each stage of the journey out of our contrite discoveries (:10). Contrition involves what Llewelyn refers to as the breakdown of the over-rigid ego which will always involve suffering but over time "moves into an area of greater freedom" (1994:40). Obbard sees the role of a spiritual director as being pivotal in this path to self-knowledge for the director is "able to mirror acceptance" as their companion "remembers and articulates their journey so far" (2012:12). This growth is not to be confused with psychological wholeness (:8) as it is not something that can be learned as a life changing technique. Rather it is about transformation occurring according to a "contrite" acknowledgement of "our basic poverty and need for God" (:8). Grafton echoes this when she says "techniques learned from the study of behaviour and unconscious dynamisms can teach us much. But, when spiritual guidance is being sought, psychological methods need to be complemented by a much more intuitive perception of how a particular person is living in relation to the larger Whole" (1997:11).

Of the second wound, Obbard says “it is only when we have dealt with some of our own woundedness and poverty in a realistic way that we are open to receive the wound of compassion” (2012:13). This implicates both directors and those with whom they journey. Compassion is an important quality in a spiritual director. Barry and Connolly speak of spiritual directors as being “developed persons” who have a gift for such work, and who are “relatively unafraid of life with all its light and darkness, all its mystery” (2009:130).

As contrition holds the gift of self-knowledge, so compassion’s gift is the “ability to move away from self-preoccupation and towards the other in love and understanding” (Obbard 2012:13). “Compassion,” says Obbard “involves forgiving, cherishing, carrying, feeling the pain of the other, and yet also wanting the other to grow and believe in themselves” (:15). It is the loving compassion of God that Julian experiences in her revelations that allows “an invisible bond between the God of compassion and her own ability to offer it” (:15). This impetus of compassion perpetuates the work of integration allowing “life to be received in its entirety as a mystery full of meaning, not split into parts that can be dealt with like a problem” (Grafton 1997:13). Spiritual direction holds the promise of this Whole (God) beyond disciplines such as psychology which addresses a problem, and considers how to solve it. It is not that psychological insights are not helpful; it is that they are insufficient. Moore echoes this strongly when he speaks of psychology as being inadequate in caring for the soul as “it is essentially modern, secular and ego-centred” (1992:xiv).

Ultimate healing, according to Julian, is through a loving relationship with God. Her third wound in which she desires this healing longing directs her to relook and reconsider the full and vivid extent of her revelations in order to be true in sharing their Divine meaning. This is the “wish-filled” longing that draws people into spiritual direction and it is the charism of the director to honour and explore this impulse that is “at the ground of thy praying” (or “beseeching” as some translations offer) (RDL 41:190-1). For Julian, the God we long for is a loving merciful all-encompassing God who is delighted by “a little thing the size of a hazelnut which continueth

and always shall, because God loveth it” (RDL 5:77). God is the point of this holy longing which keeps returning to Him, for, as Julian says “until I am in essence one-ed to Him, I can never have full rest and joy” (6:77). It is the impetus of this inward wish-filled longing for God that is turned outward in Julian in the counsel of her third window which echoes that of spiritual direction.<sup>2</sup>

Julian says, “Prayer is a right understanding of that fullness of joy that is to come, along with true yearning and certain trust” (RDL 41:191) . Trust is built in the understanding of the love of God. The common experience of prayers seeming to be unheard is, as Julian sees it “because our trust is not complete...because of our unworthiness and because we feel absolutely nothing” (RDL 41:191). And yet, as she is shown, God is the catalyst of our longing and our prayers. He delights in their impetus. As we long to communicate with him, so He does with us. Once we understand this, “the more we shall pray” (RDL 41:191).

In speaking of the common experience of prayer that seems futile and going nowhere, to an absent or displeased God she says:

Most glad and happy is our Lord about prayer, and he watches for it and He wishes to enjoy it, because with His grace it makes us like Himself in character as we are in nature. And this is His blessed will, for He says this: “Pray inwardly even though it seems to give thee no pleasure, for it is beneficial enough though thou perceive it not. Pray inwardly, though thou sensest nothing, yea, though thou thinkest thou canst achieve noting, for in dryness and barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then in thy prayer completely pleasing to me, though it seems to give thee but little pleasure. And thus all thy living is prayer in my eyes (RDL 41:193).

God is always longing for our company and conversation. He appreciates our persistence even when we feel “spiritually abandoned and alone” (Thibodeaux 2010:214). Julian’s words, ever hopeful, offer warmth and comfort so that even in times of desolation and spiritual darkness, when communication with God seems pointless, His loving persists. Our prayerful

communication honours this. Her explanation brings comfort, containment and encouragement which are qualities well used in spiritual direction.

As an anchoress, Julian would have spent much time in solitude and prayer. She certainly would have heard the formal liturgical prayers of the church, but also would have been immersed in contemplative prayer for many hours. As a solitary in an urban environment, part of Julian's role would have been prayers of "intercession for the town" (Jantzen 2000:29).

She would have had a profound understanding of the town in which she lived through the engagement of her third window, although this role as a spiritual mentor and counsellor would have been an "outgrowth of her life of prayer" (Jantzen 2000:29).

## **Sin**

The burden of sin remains a persistent concern for Christians in general and more particularly in spiritual direction. Shame, guilt, feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing persist as dominant issues dealt with in all helping professions. In spiritual direction this may manifest as a separation from God and His love which seems unable to encompass the perceived depths of sin and brokenness. Yet, Julian states quite confidently that "All shall be well" and "Sin shall be a glory" (RDL 27:149). She manages to combine an understanding of divine justice and mercy in what Rowan Williams refers to as an anti-theology (2014:3). Her desire is to share above all the redeeming love of God. It is the overriding message of all of her Revelations and yet the seeming simplicity of this unconditional love eludes people as they attempt to be worthy, perfect and immerse themselves in pious action. Julian's understanding of God's redeeming love in the face of sin is

...to spring us from the trap of imagining a God faced with some kind of conceptual impasse, and to force us to ask whether the conundrum we seek to solve theologically isn't in fact the result of our failing to grasp that the entire logic of salvation depends on the fact of unconditional and unconstrained love – the sheer desire of God for divine love to be shared with

what he has made and the sheer liberty to enter into the self-made void of human misery in order to change the human landscape (Williams 2014:3-4).

Julian considered sin as “no-thing” beyond the pain it causes. This pain she perceives as being less to God than to the sinner (RDL 27:149). Her visions showed her a God who felt nothing but compassion.

If we could understand that “we are brought very close to God in the darkness of our suffering” even when it is caused by sin, then it would not “mar the image of God in us, to create blindness to God’s presence in the world” (Tolley 2010:19).

Julian does mention characteristics that lead to sin. In chapter 73 she specifies the first as “impatience or sloth” and the other as “despair or doubt” (RDL 73:333). These are the qualities which prevent us from believing in God’s love and make us impatient with our pain and suffering so that we may direct the consequences inward as toxic self-absorption or outward as anger. For Julian it is important to recognise the part we play in holding on to the results of our sin and not accepting the redeeming love for we feel unworthy. Surface behaviour’s adherences to belief are inadequate in fulfilling Julian’s premise that “there is absolutely nothing separating God and man’s soul” (RDL 53:261). This is the mindful work of faith, contemplation and spiritual guidance.

In chapter 39 Julian speaks of sin in a manner more in keeping with the church of her time. Sin is seen as the “harshest scourge” that “chastises a man and woman terribly and damages him” and then she adds with her own insight, “in his own eyes to such an extent that sometimes he thinks himself as not worthy except to sink into hell” (RDL 39:183). By the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the sin is realised so that bitterness changes to hope in God’s mercy and once Confession and Absolution has occurred, forgiveness is assured. For Julian, sins, once we accept they are forgiven, are “badges of grace” (John Julian 2009:184). It is important to understand that “Our gracious Lord does not wish His servants to despair because of frequent or grievous falling, because our falling does not prevent Him from loving us” (RDL 39:185). By creation we are inhabited by God in the

form of the Holy Trinity so “peace and love are always in us, existing and working, but we are not always in peace and in love” (RDL 39:185). The separation we feel from God is of our own making. Julian recognises that it is inevitable that we will sin, but it is also vital that sin is a means of turning us to God and to acknowledging the absolution.

If God inhabits us then, even in our sin, He is with us and by His mercy and grace we are forgiven and enclosed in His love and the promise of heaven. In a strange paradox, sin, although it causes pain in the Passion and in each of us, is also, according to Julian, the way in which we are able to fully experience the depth of God’s love. Sin should not define our relationship with God, but rather the love and “the humility that we gain in these troubles” which “are raised very high in God’s sight, by His grace” (RDL 39:183).

What emerges in Julian is not a rule book of what to avoid and what to follow but rather a depth of understanding beyond pious pronouncements to a way of paying attention to and investing in what is life-giving and holy. This is as opposed to being weighed down by guilt, grief and regulation which detracts from the Holy love that is God’s umbrella gift to us.

## **The Unknowable**

Julian says in chapter 30 that God gave her understanding in 2 parts. The first part is “our Saviour and Salvation.” This part is clear to her, “to this we are bound by God and attracted and advised, and taught inwardly by Holy Spirit and outwardly by Holy Church in the same grace; in this our Lord wishes us to be engaged, rejoicing in Him because He rejoices in us...” (:155). The second part however is “hidden and sealed...for that is our Lord’s secret counsel.” God who possesses the ultimate “royal authority” is entitled to this privacy and as his servants we should respect this “out of obedience and reverence” (:155). Julian indicates the need to understand that as humans we cannot presume to know the mind of God who is so much more than we can imagine. Part of faith is the acceptance of the mystery of God which we, like the “saints that are in heaven wish to know nothing except what our Lord wishes to show them.” What is

invaluable in this, in the light of spiritual direction, is that it is not a place of questions that have absolute answers, but rather an exploration held in the presence of God who we can never presume to know completely but in whom we can trust. We live in a culture in which we are afraid of the unknown and intent on rational answers and easy options.

Julian says in chapter 68 of what God revealed to her: “He said not, ‘thou shalt not be tempted; thou shalt not be troubled; though shalt not be distressed,’ but he said, ‘thou shalt not be overcome’” (RDL 68:319). John MacMurray considers all religion to be concerned with overcoming fear. He contrasts what he refers to as “real and unreal religion” (in Tolley 2010:25). The maxim of illusory religion says, “Fear not, trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you,” whereas real religion as in that professed by Julian says rather, “Fear not; the things you are afraid are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of” (:25). Spiritual direction and wise counsel can never be about formulaic placatory answers to anxious questions wanting to be contained by the declared knowledge of an expert. Rather, is it about revealing our deepest desires, struggles and inadequacies as they present themselves and being encouraged to open our eyes to the “full promise of God’s grace” (:25). In doing this we keep company with the love that Julian reveals to be the point of all her Revelations. She says at the end of her book, “In this love He has done all His works, and in this love He has made all things beneficial to us, and in this love our life is everlasting” (RDL 86:373). She urges the love of God to be enough for us without needing to be “busy about His secrets” (RDL 30:155).

In chapter 34 Julian addresses the matter of Holy secrets again. What is interesting here is that Julian identifies secrets that will stay hidden “until the time that He will clearly show them to us” (:167). Some secrets are not revealed because of our “blindness and ignorance.” As we shift in our understanding and our “blindness” diminishes so God takes “pity” and “makes the secrets more open to us Himself, by which we can know Him and love Him and cleave to Him.” The “teaching and preaching of the Holy Church” are revelatory in diminishing our ignorance and blindness but so is

Julian's understanding that there is more "honour to God to understand all things in general than to delight in anything in particular" (RDL 35:169).

## **MATERNITY AND JESUS**

People's image of God is a complex matter based on a faith that may have emerged through childhood and then interacted with the ideation of authority figures like fathers, brothers, priests and other male role models. How, for instance, are we to see God as a loving figure if our experience of male authority has been quite contrary to this possibility? Julian's exploration of the feminine and motherly qualities of Jesus provides another image which enables a more complete and healing understanding of God.

Julian's account of the Motherhood of God is not unique. While it has been described as "the finest and most sophisticated treatment of that subject" (John Julian 2009:406), the idea is supported by theologians and mystics as varied as Anselm, Clement of Alexandria, Catherine of Siena, William Thierry and Julian's contemporary, Margery Kempe (:406, Jantzen 2000:117). As Julian's work has become increasingly known, it has been appropriated to represent a feminist view point that would have been beyond her meaning. While her text enables a woman's voice, to appropriate this as her prime intention holds the danger of diminishing the full, complex and holistic sense of her work. She is aware that what she shares may be in keeping with the theology of her time but she is at pains from the first chapter to ensure that her readers understand that God "wills that we keep the Faith and truth of Holy Church, not wishing to be aware of His secrets now, except as is proper for us in this life" (RDL65:1).

With that proviso, her understanding aligns with her intention in sharing her revelations: that is that they be an integrated and ongoing expression of God's love. The Motherhood of God is manifest in the Second person of the Trinity. In chapter 58 Julian says,

I saw that the second person, who is our Mother, in essence that same dear-worthy Person has become our Mother in flesh, because we are two fold in

creation: that is to say essential and fleshly. Our essence is the higher part, which we have in our Father, God Almighty; and the Second person of the Trinity is our Mother in human nature in our essential creation. In Him we are grounded and rooted, and he is our Mother in mercy by taking on our fleshliness (RDL 58:279, 281).

It is the qualities of motherhood imbued with gentleness that encapsulates the very personal love God holds for all of us. Julian doesn't feminise Jesus in her pronouns but she allows him to inhabit and share the best of mother love. In chapter 59 she understands that

All the fair deeds and all the sweet natural function of dear-worthy Motherhood is attached to the Second Person; for in Him we have this divine will whole and safe without end, both in nature and grace, from His own excellent goodness (RDL 58:285).

It is the Motherhood of the Trinity which is identified with love in action and "in that is a great spreading outward by the same grace, of length and breadth and of height and of depth without end" (RDL 58:285).

Julian uses the language of creation on a cosmic level as well as on a particular level. In chapter 60 Julian describes with tender intimacy and beauty how Jesus' mother-love is about sacrifice as expressed so vividly in the Passion. He keeps us safe in His womb as a creative impulse from the beginning of time, sharing wondrous love, sustenance, the sacraments, sweetness, tenderness and grace. Even as human mothers' parent, so they show the presence of the ultimate mother Christ within. As Jesus gives us spiritual birth on earth, so God receives us back by grace into heaven. It is an interwoven relational process rooted in love (:301).

Motherhood, Julian would say, is not a characteristic of womankind that Christ shares, but a characteristic of Christ that women share, and she declares that our natural responsibility to Fatherhood and Motherhood has its origins in the Fatherhood and Motherhood of God, and that responsibility is met by loving the Father/Mother God (John Julian:2009:407).

For Jesus to be just male confines both the nature of His love and the divinity He shares with us.

We are his children as those from a woman's womb and his love is as tender as that of a mother for her child. Julian observes Jesus' Passion and the pain this brought to Mary at the foot of the cross (RDL4:75) knowing that as He is the child of her womb, so she is of His. This goes back through the creative impulses of time to the beginning where our existence was contained within the womb of God and His plan for creation. Julian says of Mary, "I understood the reverent contemplation with which she beheld her God and maker, marvelling with great reverence that He wished to be born of her who was a simple creature of His own creation" (:75).

As the Trinity interconnects, so relationship is shared. As Jesus lived and walked and suffered in His earthly capacity, so he understands the love of living the worldly life on a daily basis with all its "well and woe" (RDL 55:265) and how he loves us through it with infinite gentleness and compassion.

The capacity to identify within God the qualities of a loving mother hold great redemption in healing the image of God in general and in this case, within the confines of spiritual direction. Jantzen says that Julian's ideas lend themselves to a Jungian interpretation in that

In Christ our Mother, those whose earthly mothering was all that it should have been we can find the archetype of that most beautiful relationship and those whose earthly mothering left deep wounds through lack of love and care; and who thereby feel diminished in their personhood, can find healing and comfort and fulfilment by finding in Christ the mother they have always longed for (2000:124).

Jesus embodies the best of mother-love. Lanzetta echoes this when she says of Julian that "she enshrines the 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”(in King 2007:18). Spiritual direction carries within it the capacity to make the shift within people from an undifferentiated corporate identity to an “authentic inner life and personhood” (:18) in Christ. Julian speaks directly into this space in her expression of the maternity of Jesus which is always personal and particular.

Schneiders notices of “experienced spiritual directors” that “when a person’s violent God-image begins to be healed, the healing is often effected by, and in, recognition in God of the qualities one has experienced in the women in one’s life – mother, sister, wife or lover” (in Guenther 1992:115-6).

With this in mind, what do women bring to the discipline of spiritual direction? Are they able to be proponents of the mother-love Julian speaks of? While generalising is dangerous, it is valuable to recognise that on the whole women are skilled in “maternal listening” and questioning (:113). Gender has made them more inclined to the personal and accustomed to consulting others. Guenther maintains that men are more accustomed to being experts and woman more inclined to be consultative within their knowledge. Men are inclined to transform experience into generalised views whereas women are interested in what can be learned from the particular. From this she deduces that “maternal conversation is an appropriate mode for spiritual direction” (:114). Although the formal structures of some churches are changing to include women priests, it is still a largely male dominated profession. For Guenther, this makes women working in the role of a spiritual director particularly valuable to other women and “those on the margins and in the cracks” (:115). The power of women in this ministry, and maybe this is part of Julian’s strength, is that mainly in the Catholic church “women’s ministry has never been anything other than the personal services of one human being to another” (Schneiders in Guenther:115).

It could be that Julian’s increased popularity is that she holds a hallowed theology, coming out of the communal, but invested in the personal and

generous desire to share her revelatory insight with all Christians, both men and women.

By identifying Christ with motherhood, she is able to provide an equalising voice in an institution, the Western Church as a whole, that remains more paternalistic in orientation although more maternal in membership. Mursell notes that “for Julian, the image of God as mother articulates more powerfully than any other image could, the crucial fact that the essence of the outgoing love of the Trinity is that of a mother for her children: costly, nurturing, self-giving and literally life-giving too” (2001:223).

## **THE WISDOM OF THE THIRD WINDOW**

One of the strengths of the communication of Julian’s third window for a spiritual director today is that it is unencumbered by a world view that excludes God. Psychology and its emergence in psychiatry, counselling and social work as disciplines apart from spiritual direction would have been alien to Julian. Today, for instance, Margery Kempe might have been diagnosed with a mental illness which, if medicated, might have diminished her extraordinary story and not found her making her way to Julian’s window. As Gerald May points out, “There are a great many souls walking among us who could be psychiatrically labelled as neurotic or psychotic and yet who manifest such deepness and clarity of faith they could well be our spiritual guides” (1992:23).

It is on God alone that Julian relies as her Lord, Father, Mother, Maker, servant and sibling, whom she believes “endlessly dwells in our soul, honourably governing and controlling all things” (RDL 1:67). It is the image of God and the image of self that confront us in the process of spiritual direction and if, as May suggests, these meet, then contained within this is our “hope for salvation,” and we know as Julian’s revelations teach her, that “our search for God is seeded, borne, supported, and accompanied by God’s search for us” (May 1992:69). Her parable of the Lord and servant supports this. If the human story is contained in the

servant as indicative of both the fall of Adam and redemption of Christ in the Crucifixion, then its conclusion holds the promise that “no longer does the Lord sit on the ground in wilderness, but now He sits on His noblest throne that He made in heaven most to His pleasure.”

In addition, “no longer stands the Son before the Father as a servant fearfully poorly clad ...but now He stands before the father...richly clad in ample blessedness.” Some lines later Julian qualifies further that “the Son does not stand before the father as a workman, but He sits on His Father’s right hand in endless repose and peace” (RDL 51:249). It is a parable about the extent of God’s love for us, the interconnection of the Trinity and its echo within each of our souls. This parable tells a communal story but also an individual tale of each person’s unique journey to which a spiritual director may be seen as a companion to God’s call along the way and “as a witness to God’s transforming grace” (Phillips 2008:241).

It is interesting that chapter 51, which records this parable, is Julian’s longest chapter of the Long Text. In the telling, it indicates the circuitous journey of the servant back to God after the fall. It is this convoluted experience with all its “well and woe” (RDL 55:265) that is the focus of spiritual direction. As Julian takes her readers through an understanding of the parable, so she acts as a spiritual director facilitating the ability to “evaluate sufferings and discomforts in terms of their graced potentials” (May 1992:61). If this parable and the example of Julian’s narrative in general, hold meaning for spiritual direction, it is perhaps that, “as we grow in wisdom, we also grow in the realisation of our utter dependence upon the Lord in all things. It seems... that in its purest form spiritual direction is a journey towards more freely choosing to surrender to God” (May 1992:63).

Julian’s wisdom counters the culture of accumulation characteristic of today. In practical terms, she lived simply and with profound stability (she lived in a single room for at least four decades), bound by the *Acrene Riwe*<sup>3</sup> and dedicated to a rhythm of prayer, contemplation and counsel. Her focus is on God as expressed in the complexity and completeness of

the Trinity. Her way of being provides an expression of relinquishment. Material accumulation and physical freedom is exchanged for spiritual growth and spiritual freedom.

Her extreme lifestyle choice does provide insight into how spiritual growth “threatens to loosen our cherished attachments, to change or even dissolve our frozen images of ourselves, and to reveal certain truths about ourselves that we are loath to admit” (May 1992:24). While little is known of Julian’s actual life, much is known of her inner spiritual life and her insights. These show her as a worthy spiritual director, acknowledging however, that “the true healer, nurturer, sustainer and liberator, is the Lord” (1992:18). Whereas psychology and its related disciplines may seek to provide a solution to a problem, spiritual direction “works to subvert... surrender to God, seeking a capitulation to darkness and wilfulness” (1992:25). Healing comes not from adding a possible solution to a problem but from “seeking liberation from attachments and a self-giving surrender to the discerned power and will of God.” As a result, at some point “spiritual direction will turn in opposition to many of the cultural standards and values that psychotherapy supports” (1992:17).

## **JULIAN’S EXPRESSION OF HOPE FOR THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY**

Postmodernism’s suspicion of absolutes means that the rational expression of theological meaning is increasingly called into question. Julian claims no intellectual authority. She has faith, respect for Holy Church, the gift of her visions and a profound understanding energised by the compulsion of love, that redemption and insight would come in sharing them. This she does with singular purpose and ongoing prayerful reflection. Medieval people had “an integrated world view rather than a differentiated one” (Sheldrake 2010:185) as we do today. The interdependence of people, nature and God was accepted as a given. Julian’s *Revelations* reflect this in the way she integrates the Cross, the Passion, Trinity, Creation and Sin with the essential relationships of Mother, Father, Son and Servant. They interconnect in her writing which also reveals emotions like fear, sadness,

wrath, love, joy, hope, forgiveness and a profound understanding into the nature of humanity and the indwelling God.

Does Julian's relational understanding of the Christian faith seeped in love that is both indwelling and cosmic offer a way of reintegrating the individual and communal nature of identity?

Dupre (1997:5) believes that on a personal level this is possible. He says, "Both the secularisation of the West and the revolution in communication have converted our society into an intrinsically pluralist one... But Christianity has always started with a personal conversion of the heart." He likens our times to those of Augustine "when culture had become shattered" and "rebuilding had to happen from within." Paradoxically what is promising is that in the "overwhelming sense of emptiness" of today there is a desperate "search for soul" and an "intense need for reintegration." Christianity's response might rest not on "an interiority that isolates the individual" but an "integral and all integrating Christian humanism" which derives "inspiration from within." As Julian understood so well, "even the contemplative is responsible for the civilization in which he or she lives" because "by its very nature spiritual life is transformative of all life" (Dupre 1997:5).

If spiritual guidance is part of this reintegration in the relational work of connection, then as a discipline, what should it know? Grafton suggests that "we need forms of spiritual guidance that are down-to-earth enough to take seriously the problems we encounter in work, in relationship, and in committed responsibility, while helping us to remember and savour the Mystery that connects all these" (Dupre 1997:2). She looks at the work of Fritjof Capra who sees a shift towards "more relational approaches to ecology, health, psychology and even economics" (1997:3). The growing awareness of "feminine intentionality" he views "as a sign of a more receptive, open-ended approach to reality" (1997:4).

There are echoes of Julian when Grafton says that "spiritual guidance today insists on connectedness" and "refuses any separation from the invisible cosmic whole that is the ultimate context of each life" (Dupre

1997:4). Spiritual masters and mystics of which Julian is one, understand that “the spiritual quest is about the relationship of the human person to what is not oneself – to what is ultimately, Other, to a Sacred Presence, to, if you will, a Divine someone else” (1997:4). For Julian this is the Trinitarian God.

Julian’s essential message rests on God’s love. This she identifies with infinite care and intimacy as in the image of the hazelnut resting in her hand in chapter 5. Tender longing, endless compassion, relational interconnection and interchange are revealed with humble reverence. From a literally enclosed space comes a universal theology dealing with the essence of faith and relationship. There is a sense in which, if we can meet her at her window, one-on-one, then steadily her wisdom will permeate and alter the faith we understand, share and live out in the presence of others. From an empty adherence, this faith might become a living expression so that there is “not only formation and reformation, but also divine transformation” (Dupre 1997:9).

Julian holds the possibility for fostering what Ursula King calls “spiritual literacy.” She describes this as a “literacy that goes beyond learning to read and write, beyond professional training skills, beyond ethical and emotional literacy, to a much deeper dimension of insight and wisdom which grows from the heart and fosters compassion and love” (King 2007:21). The development of this is not an easy task but definitely the focus of spiritual direction in which “we have to learn to recognise God’s love in our lives and respond to it by accepting ourselves and loving others” (2007:21). It also means we have much work to do in transforming ourselves and our materialist culture that is so “blinded to the unseen” (2007:18).

## **CONCLUSION**

One of the most common assessments of Julian’s theology is that it emanates hope. More than being optimistic, it is hopeful. In spite of the difficulties that plague both internal and external existence, in God there is hope. For Julian “God is all our experience, even our experience of His

absence” (Gatta 1988:76). Her understanding as revealed through her visions was not that God would alleviate our suffering but that He understood it and in the containment of His own suffering, is able through all the “well and woe” to assure that “All manner of things shall be well” (RDL 32:167).

Text and reader interact to significant yet subjective effect. By engaging with the classic text recognised in the *Revelations of Divine Love*, the 21<sup>st</sup> century psyche is brought into a conversation with the mind of a medieval mystic. This has significance in the formation of all who read Julian’s work. What is particularly significant here is how a close reading of her *Revelations* might provide relevance to spiritual direction. Don Cupitt says, “Mystical writing of any kind is therapeutic. It seeks to cure the deep feeling of alienation that is produced by perhaps every professional discipline and by institutionalisation” (in Mursell 2001:17). As a mystic, Julian shares “the discovery and experience of a God whose essence is not independence, power and domination so much as love and intimacy” (2001:18).

It is the assertion in this paper that Julian’s voice is significant in the spiritual formation of a director. Julian’s wrestle with meaning in relation to sin, prayer, suffering, the nature of Trinity and its relational capacity for indwelling are all revealed over time with implications for guidance “for Julian committed her visions in writing so they might serve as spiritual guidance and in so doing she submits to the direction of Christ himself” (Gatta 1988:58). Julian’s “exchanges with the Lord function as a model of direction itself: a relationship characterised by full and open expression of doubt and dilemma in which Julian feels free to ask searching questions of God” (1988:58).

The confidence that emerges from Julian’s work contains and directs in a repetitive pattern of meaning which constantly integrates the relationship of concepts, emotions and possibilities held together in her understanding of the Trinity as our Father, Mother and Keeper. Julian’s wisdom holds the possibility of stretching across time to access and interweave her wisdom

into both the interchange of spiritual direction and the openness to transcendence which always comes from God.

The act of seeking spiritual direction acknowledges a desire to grow in faith in a relational and personal capacity. Julian offers an authentic and life giving spirituality to this space. While this emerges from within the church of her day it is overwhelmingly, “the nature of God and not the church which interests Julian” (Parke 2011:139).

The honest, confident, compassionate voice which emerges from her text holds the possibility for today of “making people feel at home in a world of difference and multiplicity” which leads “to breath-taking possibilities that bring people to care genuinely for others and the world” (Perrin 2007:23). Julian ends her *Revelations of Divine Love* with this prayer about time, faith and love

In our creation we had a beginning, but the love in which He created us was in Him from without beginning, and in this we have our beginning. And all this we shall see in God without end, which may Jesus grant us. Amen (RDL 86:373).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references to Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love* (RDL) come from Father John Julian’s translation of the Long Text. The first number refers to the chapter and the second to the page.

<sup>2</sup> As an anchoress, Julian lived in a room with three windows. The first was on to the altar of St Julian’s church, the second was onto a servant to assist with her daily needs and the third was onto the street through which at certain times she offered counsel.

<sup>3</sup> The Acrene Riwle or Wisse was a set of rules according to which an anchoress or anchorite was required to live. It included both practical and spiritual guidelines (John Julian 2009: 38-9)

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# Contemplation, the Acme of Spirituality, in the Thought of Thomas Merton

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses contemplation in the thought of Thomas Merton. It starts off by offering succinct definitions for the terms *spirituality* and *mysticism*, with mysticism as the acme of spirituality. Against such a backdrop the contemplative spirituality of Merton is discussed. For Merton to *be* was to be a contemplative. Merton's life was marked by his monastic vocation; and contemplation was an integral part thereof. It was ultimately as a contemplative that he wrote on issues of social concern and, later in his life, engaged in interreligious dialogue. Any discussion on Merton therefore, should be approached on the basis of his vocation as a contemplative. The article also seeks to establish what contemplation is *not*. Furthermore the process of contemplation, as understood by Merton, is explained. This entails the overview of the various types of contemplation and the differences between contemplation and meditation. The study is concluded by looking at the relevance contemplation has in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the value it holds for contemporary living.

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is widely known as one of the most influential American Catholic authors and forward thinkers in the field of spirituality and interfaith-dialogue of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* sold millions of copies and motivated many young women and men to join religious life across the globe, thereby embarking on their own spiritual inner journeys. Merton wrote over 60

books in total, as well as hundreds of poems and articles on topics ranging from monastic spirituality to civil rights, non-violence, and social issues of his time. After a boisterous youth and adolescence, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism and entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, a community of monks belonging to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, one of the most austere Roman Catholic monastic orders. The 27 years he spent at Gethsemani brought about profound changes in his self-understanding. This ongoing conversion impelled him into the political arena, where he became, in many ways, the conscience of the peace movement of the 1960s. Referring to race and peace as the two most urgent issues of our time, Merton was a strong supporter of the non-violent civil rights movement.

For his social activism Merton endured severe criticism, from Catholics and non-Catholics alike, who assailed his political writings as unbecoming to a monk. During his last years, Merton became deeply interested in Asian religions, particularly Zen Buddhism, and in promoting East-West dialogue. After several meetings with Merton during the American monk's trip to the Far East in 1968, the Dalai Lama praised him as having a more profound understanding of Buddhism than any other Christian he had known. It was during this trip to a conference on East-West monastic dialogue that Merton died, in Bangkok, on December 10, 1968 – the victim of an accidental electrocution. Today, almost forty eight years after Merton's death, his spiritual legacy still lives on in the hearts and minds of many.

Merton introduced his multitude of readers to the contemplative dimension of Christianity which ultimately became a major element of Merton's spirituality and the major theme of his writing. This contemplative spirituality was fuelled by the fact that Merton firmly believed that the contemplative dimension leads to a deeper level of living. Merton's message is simple: it is possible to experience God, to awaken spiritually and to become aware of God's presence.

And in doing so, it is possible for one to become a fully integrated individual. This integration does not lock one into solitude and estrangement with the rest of the world; on the contrary it deepens one's empathy with other human beings and nature. Merton's mystical teaching enables women and men to learn the value of meditation and stillness which ultimately raises their awareness and develops their compassion.

## **WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?**

The term 'spirituality' (which includes the concept of being 'spiritual') has become something of a 'buzz'-word in the last few decades, and is used by people from all walks of life. The contemporary use of the term 'spirituality' is sometimes vague and difficult to define because it is: "...increasingly detached from the religious traditions and specifically from its roots in Christianity" (Sheldrake 2007:1). There seems to be no single, clear, unequivocal definition of the concept that is acceptable to all. Sheldrake comments that there is a distinct difference between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. He adds: "...yet, despite the fuzziness, it is possible to suggest that the word 'spirituality' refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live" (2007:1-2). In other words, spirituality has to do with a *destination* for the human spirit, and includes the *map* indicating how to get there. According to Sheldrake, the contemporary interest in spirituality tends to focus on *self-realisation* or some kind of 'inwardness'.

It is important to note that the term 'spirituality', in general, is not confined to an individual, but is also often used in other contexts, such as health care, education, urban life and even the workplace. In the context of religion, for example in the case of Christianity, spirituality refers to the fundamental: "...values, life styles and spiritual practices..." which reflect on "...particular understandings of God, human identity and the material world as the context for human transformation" (2007:2). The term 'spirituality' is derived from the Latin *spiritualitas*, associated with the adjective *spiritualis*. These words are derived in turn from the Greek noun

*pneuma* ('spirit') and the adjective *pneumatikos*, as they appear in Paul's letters in the New Testament. Kourie (2006:22) in *The 'turn' to spirituality*, makes a valuable contribution to the definition of spirituality, capturing the essence of the concept as an:

...umbrella term which covers a myriad of activities ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctively bizarre. It is noteworthy that 'spirit' and 'spiritual' are not the exact opposites of 'physical' or 'material'. The contrast therefore does not lie between body and soul, but between the attitudes to life (Sheldrake 2007:3).

The words 'spirit' and 'spiritual' have gained momentum in terms of their popularity and use over the last few decades; and there are clear indications that this tendency will continue in the years to come as the differences between 'spirituality' and 'religion' become more visible and clear. The emergence of 'spirituality' as the preferred word to describe studies of the Christian life became more pronounced after the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s; and it became the most widely used term by the 1970s. The term counters older distinctions between a supernatural, spiritual life and a purely natural, everyday life (Sheldrake 2007:4). The spiritual life is collective by nature, rather than individualistic; and it integrates all aspects of life. In our daily lives, as a rule, spirituality is latently present as a quiet force in the background – an inspiration and an orientation (Waaïjman 2002:1). Spirituality, indeed, is:

...unavoidably ambiguous, referring to (1) a fundamental dimension of the human being, (2) the lived experience which actualises that dimension, and (3) the academic discipline which studies that experience (Schneiders 1989:678).

## **MYSTICISM: ACME OF SPIRITUALITY**

'Mysticism' is another term that has so many definitions that the term itself no longer has a specific, clearly-defined meaning – a factor that often

causes confusion. And yet, as Borchert (1994:3) states: "...there is a certain phenomenon that has to have a name, and the only name we can give it is mysticism." Borchert defines mysticism as:

...the experimental knowledge that, in one way or another, everything is interconnected, that all things have a single source (1994:3).

Although the terms *spirituality* and *mysticism* are closely related, the two cannot be equated. In discussing mysticism and its closest cognates, Kruger (2006:10) explains that spirituality: "...has a wider and less determinate field of meanings, with mysticism the acme of spirituality." Kruger agrees with Kourie (2006) that spirituality should be seen, in a more general sense, to encompass the *ultimate values* to which a person subscribes, the *ultimate meaning* in a person's life. For Merton, such meaning would not have existed outside of contemplation: "but the summit of life, in man, is contemplation..." (Merton 1961c:9). Although Merton's spirituality also encompassed elements such as his love and devotion to the monastic life, his inter-religious dialogue with non-Christians, his sense of the aesthetic (which is evident in his love of nature, photography, poetry and the visual arts) and his activist approach to the ills of his time, his spirituality ultimately revolved around the mystical element of contemplation. It should be borne in mind however, that mysticism is always a process or a way of life. Although the essential goal of mysticism may be conceived of as a particular kind of encounter between God and the human being, everything that leads up to and prepares the way for such an encounter, as well as all that flows from it [or is supposed to flow from it for the life of the individual], is also mystical (McGinn 1991:xvi). On this point Sherman (2014:224) agrees with McGinn when he states that contemplation is "...something essentially human." At the root of mysticism, however, is the idea that all things are connected and do not exist independently of one another.

Mysticism, as pointed out above, is the pursuit of communion with and awareness of God, the Universe and the realities that exist beyond the

empirical senses, as a human experience. Merton pursued this *union* from a Christ-centred perspective. Borchert (1994:3-9) uses the concept of *being in love* as an analogy to explain mysticism and the experience thereof. “What takes place is an intimate encounter between the mystic and another world.” Borchert writes:

In order to explain this intimacy, mystics employ the imagery of sexual conjugation in marriage. They speak of union (*unio*; or *ichûd* as the Jews term it), of communion (*communio*), or fusion, of absorption in, of being completely taken up by, and so on... awareness of a separate ‘I’ disappears (1994:9).

Merton did not use the terms ‘mystic’ or ‘mysticism’ frequently, but preferred speaking of contemplation.<sup>1</sup> For Merton, *mystical life*, *mysticism*, *mystical contemplation* and *contemplation* were equivalent terms. In his later years he came to discern a distinctly existential aspect in mysticism: “not only in the sense that it experiences our own reality immersed in the reality of Him who IS, but also in the sense that is the participation in a concrete action of God in time, the climax of the divine irruption into human history...” (Merton 1961c:9). The ground of Merton’s mysticism, without any doubt, is love. For him, mysticism is not about visions, ecstasies, raptures, voices or any other kind of extraordinary phenomena; rather, it is about *love*, *transformation* and *union*, which is very much in keeping with the traditional teachings of Christian mystics. At the heart of Merton’s mysticism lies what Eastern Christianity calls *theosis*,<sup>2</sup> the process of entering into union with God.

*Darkness* was one of Merton’s favourite ways of describing contemplation or mysticism. This goes hand in hand with his interest in *apophatic theology*<sup>3</sup> as encountered in the writings of authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysus, the Victorines, Meister Eckhart, John Ruysbroeck, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and John of the Cross. In a certain sense it can be said that mysticism is “the knowledge of God through experience.” Merton sought to express such knowledge in terms of ‘unknowing’, which claims that God cannot be

understood by intellectual reasoning alone, but must be experienced directly in the ‘darkness’ and/or ‘emptiness’ where no images can contain God. It is the apophatic tradition in Christian mysticism, which is a “waiting upon God in darkness” that prepared the ground for Merton’s involvement with Zen Buddhism.

## **WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?**

In this paper the author seeks primarily to determine two things, firstly, whether one, simple, clear definition exists for contemplation, and secondly, how Merton defines it.<sup>4</sup> With roots in the Latin *contemplatio*, the lexical range of the English word ‘contemplation’ can be quite broad, ranging from the connotation of ‘beholding, or looking at with attention and thought,’ to that of ‘religious musing’ or ‘devout meditation’ (with the latter reflecting the earliest English meaning of the word) (Sherman 2014:209). The word ‘contemplation’ is the Latin rendering of the Greek *theoria*, an attempt to translate the Hebrew *da’at*, which refers to a loving knowledge of God. Merton himself defined contemplation more than a hundred times, but as King (1995:37) points out, the variety of his definitions, together with the difficulty of defining divine concepts, makes it impossible to state precisely what he meant.<sup>5</sup> In popular terms, to contemplate something is to think about it, considering it from a variety of angles. This does not tally with the classical authors’ understanding of spirituality at all – nor does it correspond to that of Merton. In classical terms, contemplation is a particular kind of experience, usually occurring in the context of prayer. It is a sheer experience of loving presence, which comes to the contemplative as a gift. The Latin roots of the word ‘contemplation’, namely *cum* (‘with’) and *templum* (‘temple’), connote the sacredness of this experience. In view of the above, a simple definition of contemplation could therefore be tentatively offered as follows: “a loving presence of what is.” For Merton, who believed that he had his being in God, this meant being present in God – finding God in all things, and all things in God.

One normally tends to associate contemplation with silence and withdrawal, even to the point of withdrawal from the world. In classical terms, however, contemplation refers to a complete openness to the immediate presence in the world; a perception of things directly as they are, not in order to judge them, but rather with a response of kindness and love. Thus, contemplation does not necessarily refer to a state of quietness and stillness. It may also occur in a highly active and ‘noisy’ context. In this sense, contemplation is an all-embracing quality of presence, including not only one’s own inner experience, but also a direct perception of and response to the situation and needs of the world around one. Rather than engaging in an attempt to balance contemplation and action, it is perhaps more useful to see contemplation *in* action, undergirding and embracing everything. In this way, all one’s thoughts and actions can be united in prayerful openness and loving responsiveness.

It is contemplation, or at least a contemplative attitude, that grounds our presence in the real world. Without this grounding in things, *as they are*, the spiritual way that entails knowing may lose itself in intellectual abstraction; the way that entails action may succumb to blind missionary zeal or burnout; and the way that involves feeling may easily give way to self-absorbed sentimentality. In psychological terms, contemplation is understood as being *immediate*, grounded in the here-and-now. Plans for the future and remembrance of the past can take place during contemplation, but they do not distract one’s attention from one’s desire for God or from the needs of the situation at hand. Plans and memories, like thoughts, feelings and sense perceptions, simply comprise part of what is happening in the present moment. In contemplation, awareness is *open*, not focused on one thing to the exclusion of others. Most people have been taught to concentrate (focus attention) on one thing at a time. The contemplative experience, however, indicates that one functions more lovingly, and in a manner that is more in touch with one’s desire for God’s guidance, through an openness to *what is*. Thus, many contemplatively orientated practices involve an ‘unlearning’ of old habits of focusing attention. In place thereof, a contemplative attitude, involving a simple

willingness to be open to God's movements, leadings and invitations, is to be nurtured.

On the basis of the above, the following questions arise: What exactly is contemplation? What are its characteristics? How can it best be described? Is it simply an experience that can be explained in psychological terms? Is it a technique that can be mastered with extensive practice? When Merton speaks of contemplation, he does so in line with the thinking of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross. Thus, instead of offering a technique as such, he focuses on some elementary aspects of contemplative prayer and offers some insights and guidance on how to avail oneself of the transforming effects of prayer and meditation. Merton's writings in this regard are relevant precisely because he belongs to our own time, and thus shares the concerns of the current age. Instead of dwelling on techniques of contemplative prayer, Merton facilitates an understanding of the nature of contemplation.

This subject is dealt with in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Merton 1961a:1), which comprises a cogent exposition of what should be understood as contemplation:

Contemplation is the highest expression of our intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is a spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realisation of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant source.

Merton goes on to remark that contemplation is, above all: "...awareness of the reality of that Source" (1961a:1). In other words, it is an intimate knowledge of the transcendent source of life and being, surpassing reason and faith. It is a knowing through unknowing, as well as a knowing beyond knowing. The contemplative experience seems to have something in common with the appreciation of beautiful poetry, music or art. But it also goes beyond the aesthetic intuition that is involved in the appreciation

of poetry, music and art (1961a:2). It even surpasses philosophy and exceeds the boundaries of human knowledge; it is beyond explanations and dialogue – and also beyond the ‘false self’. In order to enter into the realm of contemplation, one must, in a certain sense, ‘die to’ this false self, or allow it to die, in order to allow the ‘true self’ to awaken. Contemplation therefore supersedes every form of intuition and experience, whether in terms of art, philosophy, theology or liturgy, or whether in the context of ordinary levels of love and belief. In fact, contemplation is compatible with all these things, for it is their ‘highest fulfilment’ (1961a:2).

Contemplation reaches out towards the knowledge and experience of the transcendent and ineffable God. It entails a profound awareness of the existence of God, which cannot be expressed or explained. It is a gift of awareness of the *Real* within that which is real. According to Merton (1961a:4), contemplation is also a response to a call – a call from Him (sic) who has no voice, but who speaks in everything that is.

A life of contemplation, therefore, implies two levels of awareness: firstly, an awareness of the questions being asked, and secondly, an awareness of the answers (1961a:4). The question turns out to be the answer itself. All this is summed up in one awareness, which is not a proposition, but an experience: ‘I am’ (1961a:4). Contemplation is much more than a mere consideration of abstract truths about God; more than meditation on the things in which one believes. It entails being ‘awakened’, ‘enlightened’, and having a sense of belonging and of being loved. As Merton (1961a:243) states:

[It is a]...deep and simplified spiritual activity in which the mind and will rest in a unified and simple concentration upon God, turned to Him (sic), intent upon Him and absorbed in His own light, with a simple gaze which is perfect adoration because it silently tells God that we have left everything else and desire even to leave our own selves for His sake, and that He alone is important to us.

It is the summit of the Christian's life of prayer: "...for the Lord desires nothing of us so much as to become, Himself (sic), our "way," our "truth and life"" (Merton 1969:72). By dying to oneself and to all 'ways', one becomes one with the Father through Christ. Merton explained his own method of prayer to Abdul Aziz, with whom he was corresponding. The text is significant because it touches on many of the themes presented above and provides an indication of Merton's own experience of these.

He writes:

Now you ask me about my own method of meditation. Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centred entirely on attention to the presence of God and His (sic) will and His love...Yet it does not mean imagining anything or conceiving a precise image of God, for to my mind this would be a kind of idolatry. On the contrary, it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension and realising Him as all...If I am still present, myself, this I recognise as an obstacle about which I can do nothing unless He Himself removes the obstacle (1985:43-67).<sup>6</sup>

## **WHAT CONTEMPLATION IS *NOT***

Now that the question of what contemplation *is* has been touched upon, one can approach this question differently, with a view to arriving at a more comprehensive understanding of the concept, by asking: What does *not* comprise contemplation? Are certain elements excluded from contemplation? As already stated, the concept of 'contemplation' – like those of 'spirituality' and 'mysticism' – is almost impossible to explain. This is so, partly because contemplation does not naturally constitute a part of the 'false self' and is therefore not easily understood or explained on an intellectual level. Merton states that: "...there is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the

first person singular” (1961a:7). Contemplation does not ‘arrive’ at reality after a process of deduction, but rather by means of an intuitive awakening in which one’s free and personal reality becomes alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God (1961a:9). The contemplative is not merely one who chooses to devote most of his time to pondering, or who has a predilection for sitting around with a ‘vacant stare’ (1961a:9). Contemplation is also not mere prayerfulness, or a simple tendency to find peace and satisfaction in liturgical rites. Furthermore, contemplative intuition is not more commonly found in persons with a particular personality type or temperament. It can never be the object of calculated ambition, and is not an objective that one plans to attain by means of one’s practical reason. Rather, it is the “living water of the spirit that we thirst for, like a hunted deer thirsting after a river in the wilderness” (1961a:10).

There are those who believe that contemplation refers to some form of trance or ecstasy, or to hearing voices or seeing visions. This, too, is a misconception. Contemplation does not denote the emotional ‘fire’ or sweetness that comes with religious exaltation. It is not “enthusiasm, the sense of being ‘seized’ by an element of force and swept into liberation, by mystical frenzy” (1961a:10-11). Nor is it the gift of prophecy. “In the end,” says Merton, “the contemplative suffers the anguish of realising that he *no longer knows what God is*. He may or may not mercifully realise that, after all, this is a great gain, because God is not a *what*, not a *thing*” (1961a:13).

One of the essential characteristics of the contemplative experience lies precisely in this factor – the realisation that there is no ‘what’ that can be called God. There is ‘no such thing’ as God, because God is neither a ‘what’ nor a ‘thing’, but a pure ‘Who’. As Merton puts it: “He is the “They” before whom our inmost “I” springs into awareness” (1961a:13). Merton emphasises that contemplation is not a matter of simple quietism, where one simply sits passively and ceases to be active, with no thoughts and without doing anything at all. Merton (1969:70) states that on the contrary, this kind of quietism: “...leads one into a mere void without any

interior, spiritual life, in which distractions and emotional drives gradually assert themselves at the expense of all mature, balanced activity of the mind and heart.” He adds: “True contemplation is not a psychological trick but a theological grace” (1969:70). It is nothing other than a gift. One cannot become a contemplative merely by ‘blocking out’ realities and remaining alone with oneself in darkness. One who does so, on the basis of practical reasoning on the subject and without an interior vocation, simply enters into an artificial darkness of one’s own making. Such a person is not in the presence of the Transcendent One, but rather that of an idol, in the form of one’s own complacent identity. His (or her) life is ‘nothing’ – not in the dynamic, mysterious sense in which the ‘nothing’, *nada*, of the mystic is paradoxically also the ‘all’, the *todo*, of God, but merely in a sense that reflects the nothingness of a finite being left to himself and absorbed in his own triviality.

Merton (1969:69-71) discusses the danger of quietism (also pseudo-quietism) as a form of false spirituality, and warns those who have read books about mysticism without fully understanding them against this danger. He explains that the problem with quietism (in its various guises) is that it often leads to a negative spiritual life in which the individual’s practice amounts to nothing but a cessation of prayer. Such individuals imagine that by ceasing to pray, they enter into contemplation. This, according to Merton, merely leads one into a void without any interior, as pointed out above.

To persist in this blank state may prove to be very harmful spiritually, morally and mentally. By simply following ordinary ways of prayer, without any preconceptions or complications, one will be far better able to dispose oneself to receive the contemplative ‘gift’ when the appropriate time arrives. The contemplative way is therefore in no sense a deliberate ‘technique’ of self-emptying in order to produce an esoteric experience. Contemplation is not a static awareness of metaphysical essences apprehended as spiritual objects, in an unchanging and eternal manner. It is not meditation on abstract ideas, but rather a religious apprehension of God. In simple terms, the gift of contemplation is not something strange

and esoteric which is set aside for a select few. Rather, it is the deepest experience of the love that God has for all of His creation.<sup>7</sup> It is also not an end in itself, but a means to arrive at union with God.

## **TYPES OF CONTEMPLATION**

Thomas Merton discusses, inter alia, two kinds of contemplation: ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ contemplation. Natural contemplation, in general, is also referred to as ‘active contemplation’ (*theoria physika*), while supernatural contemplation is often termed ‘passive’ or infused contemplation (*theologia*). *Theologia*, according to Merton, can be regarded as contemplation in the strict sense of the word, and thus as *mysticism*. He explains that natural contemplation also has a sub-category, which he calls ‘metaphysical intuition’, and which occurs apart from any revealed text. In Merton’s view, this is the starting point of all philosophy, and does not correspond to the Cartesian *cogito*. In terms of this intuition: “...the basic reality is being itself, which is one in all concrete existents, which shares itself among them and manifests itself through them” (Merton 1989:89). Thus, according to Merton, there are three types of Christian contemplation: two natural and one infused.<sup>8</sup> “Strictly speaking, however, any kind of contemplation is an immediate and in some sense passive intuition of the inmost reality, of our spiritual self and of God present within us” (Merton 2003:57). In addition to this ‘passive’ meditation, however, there is also an active and mediate form of contemplation in which this perception is attained in some measure by our own efforts, although with the mysterious and invisible help of grace (2003:57).

‘Infused’ or ‘passive’ contemplation is, by nature, mostly theological. “That is to say...it refers to a reality which is not directly or empirically verifiable, but which is a datum of revelation” (2003:57). In passive contemplation, it is God Himself who ‘does the work’, and there is nothing that the contemplative can do to bring about its manifestation through any kind of effort. In fact, says Merton, there is very little the contemplative can do to prevent this manifestation from happening. The classical

expression used to describe this grace is that it is ‘effected in us and without us’: *In nobis et sine nobis* (2003:57).

Active or mediate contemplation, on the other hand, is effected in us, but with our active cooperation: *In nobis et non sine nobis*. Merton argues that a life of active contemplation prepares one for occasional passive contemplative experiences. The level of depth between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ contemplation varies, with ‘passive’ contemplation occurring at a level much deeper than ‘active’ contemplation. Active contemplation depends on a ‘systematic relaxation’ of the tensions of the exterior self. The main purpose of active contemplation is the discovery of the will of God, that is to say, the identification of the real direction which events are taking in one’s life. Active contemplation rests on an extensive foundation of liturgical, historical, and cultural tradition. In this regard, Merton asserts that the real contemplative tends to stay clear of ‘movements’ (experiences that ‘feel good’), not because these ‘movements’ confuse him, but because he does not need them and can go farther by himself (2003:58).

In active contemplation, one learns to be comfortable in one’s own skin – at ease with one’s own thoughts and less dependent on exterior supports. In this kind of contemplation, the mind is pacified, not by passive dependence on things on the outside, such as diversions, entertainment, conversions, business, etc., but by its own constructive activity (2003:59). In other words, the mind derives inner satisfaction from spiritual creativity by thinking its own thoughts, reaching its own conclusions, considering its own life and directing it in accordance with its own *inner truth*, discovered in meditation. The secret of life is hereby discovered in the creative energy of love – not romantic love, but love as a profound and self-oblivious expression of freedom.

Active contemplation is nourished by reading and meditating on what is read, but also by the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. But before the above-mentioned (meditative) practices can be turned into *contemplation*, they must merge into a *unified and intuitive* vision of reality (2003:59). “We meditate with our mind, which is ‘part of’ our being, but we

contemplate with our whole being and not just with one of its parts” (2003:59). Contemplation is not just a matter of observation, but also of realisation. “It is,” says Merton: “a personal grasp of the existential meaning and value of reality” (2003:60). Contemplative experience leads to an increase in the intensity and simplicity of one’s love for God and for others (2003:60). According to Merton, this is the ‘purpose’ of contemplation. However, he goes on to qualify this by pointing out: “...but in reality contemplation has no purpose outside itself for, properly understood, it is inseparably joined to love and identified with love. The love that is essential to contemplation is its ‘purpose’ as well as its source” (2003:60).

Merton further defines contemplation by drawing a distinction between religious and non-religious contemplation. “Contemplation, in the Christian context, necessarily implies a sacred ‘dread’ – ‘a holy awe’ (2003:61). The life of contemplation is one of great simplicity and inner liberty. The contemplative is not seeking anything ‘special’ or demanding any particular satisfaction, but is content with what is. Even the most basic of chores, such as sweeping the floor or washing the car, can be enriched through contemplation, as long as the contemplative has a sense of the presence of God while doing it. During the 1920’s and 1930’s a heated debate was waged between theologians with respect to ‘active’ (natural) versus ‘infused’ (supernatural) contemplation. The theologians were trying to determine the phenomenological limits of mystical prayer, in order to answer the question: When does a state of prayer cease to be ‘natural’ or ‘acquired’ and become ‘supernatural’ or ‘infused’? In other words, when does one cease to be the principal agent, and yield this primacy to the Spirit of God? (Merton 2003:66-67).<sup>9</sup>

Natural contemplation, which beholds the divine in and through nature, is what Merton regarded as the prototype for what he calls ‘active contemplation’ – a type of contemplation that one seeks and prepares for through one’s own initiative, but which, by a gift of God, is ‘completed in mystical intuition’ (2003:69). In natural contemplation, the soul of the contemplative is actively involved. It reasons, imagines, considers and makes sense of what it knows. It directs its ‘gaze’ upon God. In natural

contemplation, the contemplative is still self-aware as a subject having an experience of the divine Presence. But the contemplative soul yearns for more; and in order to obtain it, the soul has to pass beyond the 'all' that is created, and reach out to God Himself. It must pass from the *what* to the *who* (King 1995:46). With the foregoing in mind, it is now appropriate to list the essential elements of mystical contemplation according to Merton:

- (1) it is an intuition that transcends the senses;
- (2) it is characterised by a quality of light in darkness, and of 'knowing in unknowing';
- (3) there must be activity on both sides. On the part of the contemplative, there must be a withdrawal from attachment to sensory objects. The contemplative must also go beyond the intellect. Contemplation presupposes a generous and total effort of ascetic self-denial;
- (4) contemplation is a work of love, and the contemplative proves this love by leaving all things – even the most spiritual – in order to find God in nothingness, detachment and 'night';
- (5) this knowledge of God in unknowing is not intellectual. It is not the work of one faculty or another uniting the soul with an object outside itself. It is a work of interior union and of identification in divine charity. One knows God by becoming one with God;
- (6) contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused into the summit of the soul, giving it direct and experiential contact with God;
- (7) pure love is required – a deep love for God and others;
- (8) the soul is passive and under the guidance of God as it passes through the states of contemplation;
- (9) contemplation is the light of God playing directly upon the soul;

- (10) infused contemplation, sooner or later, brings with it transformation; and
- (11) the contemplative is called into a 'life in the Holy Spirit'
- (Merton 2003: 72-76).

## **CONTEMPLATION VERSUS MEDITATION**

As mentioned, in terms of its original meaning, contemplation is always a gift, and cannot be achieved by any method or practice. In a certain sense, it stands in contrast to meditation, which includes all the practices and disciplines that one may intentionally undertake in the course of one's spiritual life. Put simply, one can 'practice' meditation, but one cannot 'practice' supernatural contemplation, because it only happens as a gift. John of the Cross (as cited in Merton 1969:21) writes extensively about the 'night of the soul' (sometimes referred to as 'the dark night') and the opportunities it creates for the spiritual growth of the individual through the Holy Spirit and God's grace. According to John of the Cross, God brings such individuals into darkness:

...wherein he weans them from the breasts of these sweetnesses and pleasures, gives them pure aridities and inward darkness, takes from them all these superficialities and puerilities, and by very different means causes them to win the virtue (Dark Night I, vii,5 - cited in Merton 1969:21).

Important to note is that, for John of the Cross, this 'night' can by no means be equated to pure negation. "If it empties the mind and heart of the connatural satisfactions of knowledge and love on a simple human plane, it does so in order to fill them with a higher and purer light which is 'darkness' to sense and to reason" (1969:21). The darkening, paradoxically, is therefore also an enlightenment. The reason that the light of faith is darkness to the soul, according to John of the Cross, is that this is in reality an exceedingly bright light. At the moment of direct exposure

to supernatural light the individual is directed into the *dark night of faith* and passes from meditation to contemplation.

Along the same lines, Peter of Celles refers to the ‘Sabbath of contemplation’, in which the soul rests in God and God works in the soul; the quiet and transcendent activity in which purity of heart rewards the contemplative for the labour of asceticism.<sup>10</sup> Here, ‘labour’ refers to the active life, a life of discipline, penance and mortification. Without virtue, such as humility, observes Merton, there can be no real and lasting contemplation (1969:37). Commenting on Peter of Celles’ comparison of active and contemplative prayer, Merton (1969:38) points out that active and contemplative prayer are not so much in conflict as they are in harmony. The two are complementary. The *oratio laboriosa* of active prayer cleanses one of sin, while the *oratio devota* of contemplation is blessed by grace from heaven. In addition to being complementary, they are both also necessary.

According to the monastic fathers, all prayer, reading, meditation and all activities of the monastic life are aimed at ‘purity of heart’. This involves an unconditional and humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of who one is and of one’s own situation as willed by God (Merton 1969:46). It involves the renunciation of all delusional images of oneself, all exaggerated estimates of one’s own individual capacities. Purity of heart is therefore correlative to a new spiritual identity – the ‘true self’, an enlightened awareness of the ‘new man’, as opposed to the complex and disreputable fantasies of the ‘old man’ (1969:46).

In meditation, one does not seek to know God as an object, like other objects which are subject to scrutiny and can be defined and expressed in clear scientific ideas. One seeks to know Godself – beyond the level of all other created objects (Merton 1969:58). One has begun to know the meaning of contemplation when one intuitively and spontaneously seeks the dark and unknown path of aridity in preference to every other way. A contemplative is one who would rather *not know* than know; who does not seek proof of God’s love (1969:67). The contemplative accepts the love of

God on the basis of *faith*. Faith is necessary in order to experience the reality of God's presence and love.

Merton (1969:67) states that: "...only when we are able to *let go* of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionise our inner life."

In contrast to meditation, which *investigates*, contemplation *wonders*. Meditation is about technique, whereas contemplation pertains to attitude. Meditation involves 'dwelling' or 'focusing upon something' – an object, a sensation, an utterance, an issue, a mental state or activity. Thus, an effort or 'work' on the part of the meditator is required. In comparison, the contemplative does no 'work' as such; rather, God does all the work. All meditation exercises are aids aimed at focusing awareness on a single process, continually repeating the same action that has a direct influence on the human nervous system. When this is achieved, a common experience seems to be produced: awareness of the external environment diminishes or 'shuts down' for a period of time.

It is important to note that, as in the case of meditation, contemplation does not require a person to be a Christian, or even religious. There are also a-religious, temporal or secular contemplative traditions that offer methods and disciplines based on a particular kind of psychological knowledge (de Wit 1987:17). Merton's reference to contemplation, however, falls strictly within the Christian tradition.

In Merton's view, the contemplative way is mostly a process of 'letting go'. This leads to 'true wisdom' and, ultimately, compassion.

## **CONTEMPLATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Solitude and silence, essential to the contemplative life, have become luxuries that are often accessible only to the rich. Although available locations that are suitable for solitude are diminishing at a rapid rate, there

are still some mountains and deserts where one can retreat in order to spend time away from the hustle and bustle of life in the city.

Peace, another element required for the contemplative life, seems to exist only in the dreams of those who are contemplatives at heart, and the desire for it "...haunts the waking hours of those whose life is a despairing struggle for security" (Merton 2003:135). Not only is the world becoming more and more demanding, and people becoming increasingly busy and preoccupied, there also seems to be no escape from this situation. One of the great problems of contemplative life nowadays, in Merton's view, is the necessity to adapt to an unsatisfactory situation and make the best of it. Most people today would probably love to be able to escape from the pressures, anguish, insecurities and perils of secular life; but almost no-one would be able (or willing) to do so without the benefits that are inseparably connected with these pressures.

Merton lists two things that an individual wishing to live a contemplative life in today's world should do. Firstly, it is imperative that the contemplative should not form attachments to pleasure, comfort, recreation and especially prestige and success. Such an individual would be much better off embracing a life of "true spiritual poverty and detachment" (2003:136). Secondly, the contemplative would have to find a way of dealing with the inevitable conflicts that remain – agitation, crowding, lack of time and above all, the constant contact with a purely secular mentality. Achieving success in this endeavour will be no easy task for the contemplative living in the world (and the same applies to those living in monasteries). In fact, the magnitude of the challenge of being a contemplative in the secular world is such that, for most people, it is utterly unattainable. Most people would simply give up.

Merton proposes some solutions to overcome these challenges, however. Firstly, he suggests the formation of small groups of lay people who are interested in the spiritual life and who desire to lead a contemplative life, while also being willing to support one another. Another possibility,

although this is not always practically feasible, is for the contemplative to move to a small town where there is potentially more time to think.

Capitalising on those hours of the day that are quiet, because the world does not value them, constitutes yet another option, with a view to facilitating a contemplative life – for example, the early hours of the morning. The silence during these early hours will offer the contemplative a taste of the desired peace of solitude. Merton (2003:138) writes:

Besides, the dawn is by its very nature a peaceful, mysterious, and contemplative time of day – a time when one naturally pauses and looks with awe at the eastern sky. It is a time of new life...for the spiritual life is nothing else but a perpetual interior renewal.

Another possible avenue for reflection and solitude comprises the use of Sunday as a day of rest, restoration and contemplation. Honouring the ‘Lord’s day’ could assist the contemplative in realising, and remaining aware of, the relative meaninglessness of the secular business which fills the other six days of the week. In terms of this approach, Sunday is reminiscent of the peace that should filter through the whole week when one’s work is properly orientated (Merton 2003:138).

Merton warns that the discipline of living in the world as a ‘masked contemplative’ is, first of all, the discipline of fidelity to one’s duty – to one’s obligations as a parent, professional person and citizen. The contemplative life can indeed be deepened and also elevated by the depth of one’s understanding and by the fulfilment of one’s duties. Lastly, married life can also be lived and enjoyed in the spirit of a contemplative experience. Marriage should be a source of grace, overflowing into all other areas of life, such as work, leisure, etc. The conjugal life can be a kind of material and symbolic expression of “man’s desire for God’s desire for man” (2003:140). Two lovers in a committed marriage relationship may indeed catch a glimpse of the ‘union with God’ to which the contemplative is aspiring.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from Merton's writings that the 'inner journey' is often one of intense inner conflict. Contemplation requires the contemplative to see things 'as they are'.

But does this mean a rejection of all created things? The answer to this question is a resounding 'no'. In fact, Merton argues that through the acceptance of things as they are, the contemplative is enabled to enjoy them in a 'higher way', rising above the kind of contact with them that is merely sensory and superficial in nature (Merton 2003:111). Merton's main contribution to the body of contemplative literature is threefold:

- (1) he affirms that contemplation is a real phenomenon and not merely a psychological experience or disorder;
- (2) he stresses the simplicity of contemplation, describing it as a 'gift' – with no preliminary effort on the part of the contemplative – leading eventually to the realisation that no effort is needed; and
- (3) he highlights the sobriety and humility of such an experience (2003:116). Contemplation, as a phenomenon, occurs across most religions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, etc. The fact that this phenomenon is experienced as 'real' is probably the one common denominator between the different religions; and, as Merton discovered, it is also an excellent point of departure for dialogue between different religions. Merton suggests that we should relinquish our preconceived ideas of what contemplation is, or is not. He argues that one often 'stares oneself blind' with respect to these concepts, thereby missing the 'gift'. For Merton, difficult though being a contemplative may sometimes be, it is a way of 'being in the world'. Housewives, farmers and city men alike can all remain in their current professions and yet still live contemplative lives (Merton 2003:145). "The true contemplative is not less interested than others in normal life, not less concerned with what goes on in the world, but more interested, more concerned"

(Merton 2003:147). ‘Reality’ and ‘ultimate truth’ are actually inherent in the contemplative’s life. “The contemplative,” writes Merton, “is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who, being perfectly unified in himself and recollected in the centre of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object” (Merton 2003:151).

It is clear on the basis of the foregoing that Merton emphasises the importance of ‘wholeness’ – of being at peace with oneself and with the world.<sup>11</sup> The contemplative, in losing the ‘false self’ (by forgetting the self as an object of reflection), finds the ‘true self’ in relation to the ‘other’ and to the Divine. In order to reach this state one needs wisdom so as not to seek to possess anything; but rather to have a deep realisation that nothing is needed, even to begin with. In summary, therefore, the contemplative is one who has cultivated the ability to be content with the moment, *as it is*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, Merton’s use of the term *contemplation* is not confined to a form of prayer (which in itself can lead to mystical union) but should be seen in terms of the broader context of *mysticism* itself. Mystical traditions include many accounts of the mystic losing his/her ego-identity. Merton wanted to lose himself for Christ; and the particular ocean or mass in which he would do so was the community of the Trappists. A certain level of ‘selflessness’ is required of a Mystic (King 1995:4).

<sup>2</sup> In as much as some authors would extrapolate *theosis* into the process of divinisation, Merton would not have inferred that mystical union is equal to: “becoming divine.”

<sup>3</sup> Apophatic theology (from Ancient Greek: *ἀπόφασις*, from *ἀπόφημι* – *apophēmi*, ‘to deny’) – also known as negative theology, *via negativa* or *via negationis* (Latin for ‘negative way’ or ‘by way of denial’) – is a theology that attempts to describe God, the Divine Good, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God. It stands in contrast to cataphatic theology (Apophatic theology - Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia. 2014). Merton’s image of God relied heavily on the apophatic view that God is not a being among other beings, but is ‘nothing’, or as the Hindu would say, *neti neti* (‘not this, nor that’). Merton would certainly have agreed with his spiritual master, John of the Cross, that God’s presence is *todo y nada* (‘everything and nothing’).

<sup>4</sup> Merton rarely spoke of *mysticism*. He preferred to use the term *contemplation*.

<sup>5</sup> Merton explicitly warned against ‘pseudo-scientific’ attempts to define contemplation (1961a:6).

<sup>6</sup> This passage explains Merton’s ordinary way of prayer or meditation. It does not entail thinking about anything; rather, it is a direct seeking the presence of the Invisible.

<sup>7</sup> For Merton, “love is both the starting point of contemplation and its fruition” (Merton 1951:13).

<sup>8</sup> There is only one single text in which Merton speaks of the three types of contemplation. In this text, he states that the contemplative life:... "can be considered from three points of view..." (Merton 1947:95). The first and second views belong to the philosopher and artist; the third is that of the Christian trying to dispose the ‘self’ for union with God. Merton considered ‘metaphysical intuition’ to be the fundamental awareness that we should have as human beings. But, he argues, we have become so taken up with appearances that we no longer see the world as it is. The average person

today thinks only in terms of the concrete and particular. He/she sees signs and advertisements showing healthy folk consuming cold beer and driving shiny cars, and this rates as 'Being' or 'Goodness' (Merton 1951:196). However, when one frees oneself from this preoccupation with material things and one's natural capacities are restored, one begins to taste what properly belongs to the human soul: the metaphysical intuition, natural contemplation.

<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this study, and in line with Merton's thinking, I assume the existence of a supersensory intuition of the divine, which is a gift of grace for which one can to some extent prepare oneself through one's own efforts.

<sup>10</sup> Peter of Celles, a Benedictine 'witness of the twelfth century', a 'charming' monastic writer of the Middle Ages' (Merton 1969:36).

<sup>11</sup> Qualities Merton achieved later in life.

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# Re-reading Irenaeus for the Sake of Being Truly Human<sup>1</sup>

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LISEL JOUBERT

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine a specific text, taken out of the work of the second century church father Irenaeus, often used in feminist discourse on human dignity, with a view to querying the hermeneutical responsibility behind this use. My underlying conviction is that any form of feminist theology, with its inherent search for human dignity and human flourishing, should be rooted upon good hermeneutical and epistemological frameworks to enable it to make its important contribution. In order to evaluate the hermeneutical use of Irenaeus' words a historical-critical reading of his work will be offered and the use thereof in reception history will be discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Responsible Biblical scholars agree that working with Old and New Testament texts asks for some hermeneutical finesse. They insist that how the text is used or interpreted needs to be placed within a specific reading strategy which can be explained and justified. Merely citing parts of the Bible as proof texts for one's own agenda is the one thing that a serious scholar would view with concern. However, one can ask if this hermeneutical sensitivity is a prerequisite only for good Biblical scholarship. Does it end with the Biblical texts or do we need to carry it over when we use later Christian documents as sources for our own theology?

The early Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons is quoted regularly in discussions on human dignity. He is then quoted as saying: "The glory of God is man fully alive." This quotation – where "man" is usually

exchanged for “humanity” – is however rarely traced back to its original context. Did he mean what many in modern scholarship discussing human dignity and the flourishing of humanity, may want him to mean? In this article I will consider the wider historical and literary context of this statement taken from the work of Irenaeus to evaluate if this particular aspect of his theology can really help us in rethinking human flourishing in the context of gender orientated themes. I do this as a reformed feminist theologian who also wants to critically evaluate the sources I use in my own theological reflection. To evaluate Irenaeus as source for modern day theological themes I will look at his historical context as well as the bigger literary context of this quotation. Although historical critical readings have been frowned upon in the circles of contextual and some feminist theologies, I argue that maybe this type of reading will unearth a depth of possibility not necessary gleaned from mere reader responsive readings. In the process of placing him and his works in context, his wider theology and especially an understanding of anthropology and soteriology will be focused on, that will help us in dialoguing with this father of old within a feminist and reformed framework. I would like to honour Irenaeus firstly in his context before co-opting him for my agendas.

## **Introducing Irenaeus**

Irenaeus was born about 130 CE in Smyrna, modern day Turkey. He was a student of the well-known martyr Polycarp. He studied in Rome and later went to Lyons in France, or Gaul as it was then known. This was during the time of persecution under the reign of Aurelius from about 177 CE. While Irenaeus was away on a mission to Rome, with the aim of speaking against heresy, the bishop of Lyons, Pothinus, was killed. At his return Irenaeus was chosen as the new bishop, an office that he held till his death about 20 years later.

The life and times of Irenaeus were the fledgling years of the Christian Church where the Apologists tried to explain and defend their faith in the intellectual Greco-Roman environment and where the first decisions had to

be made regarding correct belief and authority. These early theologians had to defend their faith especially against the myriad of Gnostic beliefs of the day. This context made their theology very polemical as can be seen in the works of Irenaeus. A big part of Irenaeus' writings were then also against the Gnostic beliefs, where the God of the Old and New Testament were seen as different entities. The Gnostic tenets were not homogenous. One of the recurring beliefs was that all matter including flesh is evil and therefore threw doubt on the humanity or "fleshness" of Jesus. We find Irenaeus' arguments against the Gnostics in his well-known *Adversus Haereses* or *Against Heresies*. The longer title is: *On the Detection and the Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely so Called*. He also later wrote *Epideixis* or *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, which is only extant in an Armenian version.

Most sources describe Irenaeus as a theologian who took his pastoral duties seriously. For him his theological writings were a pastoral calling. Miles (2005:31) describes this equally important task, next to being a systematic theologian, as "to provide an evocative theology that provokes response, focuses energy, and organises life." He wanted to write plainly because Gnostics used flowery language: "I write to you out of love, plainly and simply and truly" (Miles 2005: 32).

Irenaeus who worked with people, and who realised the implications of Gnostic theology on human anthropology wrote to defend the incarnation and promote human aliveness.

### **Why Revisit Irenaeus in Debate on Gender and Human Flourishing?**

I was present in one or two contexts where the well-known axiom of Irenaeus was quoted: "The glory of God is man fully alive." The South African Feminist scholar Denise Ackermann regularly refers to Irenaeus in discussion of human dignity. John de Gruchy also revisits Irenaeus in his work on Christian humanism, as well as his book on John Calvin where he calls Calvin a Christian humanist. De Gruchy is sorrowful that the Reformed tradition focused more on Augustine than the incarnational

theology of Irenaeus. The fact of the matter is that if one does not know the work of Irenaeus and he is quoted without his context one cannot necessarily embrace the fuller implications of his statements. The contexts where I heard these words: “The glory of God is man fully alive” were mostly discussions on human dignity and social justice. For a specific reason I am not going to change Irenaeus’ reference from “man” to “humankind” in my quotations. Let’s first hear him out.

Taken as such, and with man changed to humankind, it is one of those statements that one wants to confirm with a hallelujah or two. Why? I think because I am at home in theologies that are incarnate and want to underline the dignity of humankind, and critique ideas, ideologies etc. that demean people and do not give them the space to live out their potential. In a sense I read a modern day liberationist-feminist conviction into this quotation, that I was at home with.

A while ago I was in a different setting and heard the whole quotation or rather the other half of the sentence for the first time and all of a sudden I wondered if I didn’t read into Irenaeus something that I wanted to, which fits into my theological convictions but is an interpretation that does not take the context of the text into account. The full sentence can be translated as follows: “For the glory of God is the living man; and the life of man is the vision of God.”(Grant 1997:153)(4.20.7), as well as: “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God,”<sup>2</sup> or even another translation:

For the glory of God is a living human being; And human life [consists in] the vision of God.”<sup>3</sup>

*(Gloria enim Dei vivens homo vita autem hominis visio Dei.)*<sup>4</sup>

The better known translation used more often is: “The glory of God is humankind/man fully alive.”

This quotation of Irenaeus comes from *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter 20, paragraph 7. I started to suspect that I cannot assume that I

know what Irenaeus meant or use him to promote my own theological agenda without looking at the bigger context of this document. Curious as I am, I wanted to go back to the source and read this reference in context within the framework of a historical critical reading.

Here, I would just like to make a small diversion. Using early Church Fathers in a feminist discourse is always a risky endeavour because in a sense you need to dilute (or reshape) their theological insight and meaning to fit a modern day conversation piece, for example feminism, which probably would have horrified them. Texts are received and translated and reader response theories have their place. I am concerned that some level of meaning that we can truly engage with theologically today, would be left behind by only doing reader response readings. But isn't that what we do in any case when we use the Bible as source? We need to wean the theology from the worldview or culture, be it the Old Testament world or second century Christian beliefs.

What I would like to do in the rest of the paper is to put this quotation back into its original context, look at the broader argument that Irenaeus was busy with and then come back to gender and human flourishing.

### **Irenaeus and *Against Heresies***

*Against Heresies* comprises five books. The first three are more in depth descriptions of the tenets of the different heretical groups. Book I summarises the doctrine of mostly the Valentinian Gnostics, in Book II he refutes them point by point and in the third Book he starts to present the Christian position over and against the Gnostic tenets. In the remaining books Irenaeus focuses on his understanding of revelation, but always with the Gnostic interpretation as his conversation partner. Just a quick scan of his work will show his frequent use and reference of Scripture. In his argumentation the authority of scripture was very important for him.

In this paper I will focus on Book IV, where our famous quotation is found in Chapter 20. The following is a part of his argument in Chapter 20.

Irenaeus starts out to write that we cannot know God in His (sic)<sup>5</sup> greatness but we can get to know Him in His love. God contains all things, ourselves and the world. It was not angels or other powers that made us. With God were always present the Word and the Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit by whom and in whom He **freely and spontaneously made us.**

In paragraph 2 he writes that all beings come into existence from one God but only the Lamb was able to behold Him. His paternal light rests upon the flesh of our Lord and thus man might attain immortality – because He is invested with paternal light.

In the next paragraphs Irenaeus goes on to repeat that God is known in His love in Christ “who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God.” (4.) He decided to become present to be seen in order that man, having embraced the Spirit of God, might pass into the glory of the Father. Even the prophets wrote that we will be able to see God. In paragraph 5 he writes: “For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendour. **But [His] splendour vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God, do receive life.**” Irenaeus argues that God rendered Himself visible and comprehensible so that He might vivify those who receive and behold Him through faith. God bestows life on those who see Him: “It is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God; but fellowship with God is to know God, and to enjoy His goodness.”

Already in light of the relationship between revelation and salvation Irenaeus understands “seeing” as something soteriological. In this line of argument he writes that the Word became the dispenser of paternal grace for the benefit of man. The Word revealed God to man, and presented man to God.

But the Word also preserved the invisibility of the Father, lest we become despisers of God because of familiarity and that man should always have something towards which he may advance. The Word revealed God through many dispensations lest man, falling away from God, ceases to exist.

Irenaeus then goes on to make his famous statement saying that the glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God. It is the revelation of the Father through the Word that gives life to those who see God.

In the rest of Chapter 20 Irenaeus refers to and quotes the prophets and Abraham to underline his argument of God revealing himself through His Word. Mary Anne Donovan recognises the theme of Chapter 20 as: “that the one God who has created all by His Word and His wisdom will vivify all who are open to the Spirit” (Donovan 1988:286).

The above makes it clear that Irenaeus brings life or vivification into dialogue with seeing God and becoming part of His splendour. But what type of life is Irenaeus talking about, and what does he mean with “visio/see/ behold”? Is it biological life as we know it or is he working with a theological or spiritual understanding of life? This is crucial if we want to know how he would have described a human being fully alive. Donovan (1988:189) writes “Evidently the life referred to is other than physical and is the true life of human.” This life according to Irenaeus has to do with participation. Participation then involves knowing God and enjoying His goodness. Donovan interprets Irenaeus to mean that life depends on a vision of God and to be fully alive a human being must look upon God or in other words: “the human person turned towards God in this seeing is the glory of God” (Donovan 1988:290). The fullness of this seeing and of life comes through the incarnate Word.

Donovan (1988:293) remarks and writes that this text is primarily about God and secondarily about us. She asks, and I think it is very important for the rest of the paper: How did Irenaeus understand the human person? What was his anthropology? As a reformed theologian this for me, is also a crucial question. Does Irenaeus have a different anthropology than the reformed anthropology and how do we enter into dialogue with a second century theologian on anthropological issues as modern theologians who are much more aware of how complicated human beings are?

In short, Irenaeus believed the human situation to be under the hand of God. We are the image of God. As with many other Church Fathers, Irenaeus distinguished between image and likeness when reading the creation account of Genesis, Chapter one. This distinction mostly led to complicated theological and philosophical arguments (I always thought it was just a typical Hebrew parallelism!). For Irenaeus the image of God in the person is in the flesh (this he said over and against the Gnostics who saw the image as a spiritual part). For him image understood as flesh retains its role as revealer of the archetype, namely Christ. The human as human in the flesh is revelatory of the divine and the archetype of the image in us is the incarnate Son (Donovan 1998:294).

This image is thus present in its proper form and calls forth works appropriate to it. For Irenaeus our image reveals our freedom. For him, to be human is to be free. Free to choose good or evil, belief or unbelief. Our freedom of choice can be translated as our similitude to God. (Donovan 1988:294) This anthropology opens up possibilities for feminist discourse because the starting point is participation in the life of Christ.

Recapitulation is also a strong theme in the work of Irenaeus, which I will come back to. Within this theme he writes that we all begin as children and, in his optimistic understanding of humanity, we learn with time not to choose disobedience. But we also don't just need the image - we need the likeness as well. The likeness is connected with the spirit, which sometimes is capital letter Spirit and sometimes not. It is the presence of the Spirit that brings true life to the flesh (Donovan 1988:295). For Irenaeus we are called to the fullness of life in the vision of God.

Two other quotations in Chapter 14 of Book IV will help us understand his way of thinking. He writes:

To follow the Saviour is to be a partaker of salvation and to follow the light is to receive the light. But those who are themselves in light do not themselves illumine the light but are illuminated and revealed by it.

And in Chapter 14/1 he writes:

For this is the glory of man, to continue and remain permanently in God's service.

For Irenaeus Christ's disciples did not glorify Him; they were glorified by Him. We were made to partake in His glory.

### **SOME THOUGHTS ON GLORY**

In the light of the last quotation, I understand that Irenaeus has a strong conviction that God does not need us and we do not owe Him. We are partakers of a glory that belongs to Him, merely by being created. Dialoguing with Irenaeus from a Reformed perspective opens up a world where glory has possible different meanings. Can Irenaeus be used in reformed feminist discussions in reference to possible different understandings of glory?

Suzanne Selinger (1984:57) writes that she understands Calvin's sense of the honour of God as accepting His sovereignty and bowing before His absolute transcendence. It is an honour as opposed to humankind's total abjectness. We are not allowed to detract anything from God's glory. It is a logical necessity then that we are nothing. Is this the view that Irenaeus took? I do not think so. Is there something inherent in being human that is already reflecting God's glory? Are there two different types of anthropology at work in the theology of Calvin and Irenaeus? In Irenaeus' thought, God's splendour shines through humankind. In Calvin, humankind must reflect or just be the opposite of God's glory. Still, Calvin was always open to misapprehension, as de Gruchy has shown in his work. On the other hand there are differences in anthropological understanding in Reformed and Catholic theologies, but both are being challenged by the sciences of the day.

The movement I detect in Irenaeus is the movement from revelation, to seeing, to living. Is living then synonymous with salvation? Irenaeus links

salvation to life and life to seeing God. Seeing God means to share in His glory and we are not made to glorify God but God lets His glory shine through us. One can ask, is this seeing with my eyes/my mind/my spirit? Death will then be not seeing, not accepting the revelation, not reflecting God's glory.

Irenaeus says that God showed himself in Christ so that we can see and live. For Calvin the incarnation was a necessity, for Irenaeus and a lot of older traditions, incarnation is salvation.

Maybe it is now a good time to refer to Irenaeus' concept of recapitulation in order to understand his anthropology and soteriology. The Latin word *recapitulatio* comes from Ephesians 1:10 (the Greek is *anakephalaiosis*), which can be translated as "summing up" or "heading up." Eph 1: 9-10 reads:

...He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth (NRSV).

Redemption becomes the completion of creation. The Fall can then be seen as a stage in the growth of humanity to maturity. We are called to grow to perfection and that the Incarnate Word summed up/recapitulated in Himself the long line of human beings, furnishing us with salvation in epitome, that we might recover what we have lost in Adam, that is, existence according to the image and likeness of God (Greer 1986:31). Greer (1986:31) writes: "The emphasis is not upon recovery, but upon summing up which takes us beyond recovery to the fulfilment of God's original intention at Creation."

For Irenaeus, according to Greer (1986:37), the Incarnation represents the culminating Economy of God. This must not be understood in the way that it sometimes is, as paradise lost and restored in Christ. Rather, the summing up is accomplished for the first time in Christ and the Incarnation

represents the attainment of human maturity in the New Man as opposed to the childlike character of the Old Adam.

Greer (1986:39) writes that for Irenaeus, creation and redemption are two different ways of talking of the same process. How then did Irenaeus bring about the understanding of redemption and resurrection and even experience? Irenaeus saw resurrection as incorruption (Greer 1986:40). He works with the idea of the mind vivifying the body: “It involves the perfection of the capacities of the soul or mind...and it means rendering our bodies incapable of deteriorating into death.” (Greer 1986:40) Irenaeus has a physical understanding of incorruption, namely that resurrection overcomes our tendency to change or to rot and die. It is possible for us to grow towards incorruption. The process begins with baptism although it ends beyond this age. It is growth where a new humanity is fashioned. This growth is a developing vision of God, a growth in clarity but the paternal vision is reserved for heaven. “In other words, the perfected vision marks the term of the soul’s growth and immediately involves rendering the body incorruptible. It is in this sense that ‘the vision of God is the life of humanity’” (Greer 1986:41).

Gonzales (1987:71) formulates Irenaeus in a different way. He writes that Irenaeus saw that God’s purpose is to be joined to the human creature and this has taken place in a unique way in Jesus Christ. He goes on to describe Irenaeus’ understanding that history is a process whereby God as divine shepherd leads creation to its final goal. Creation as being created free and responsible is increasingly conformed to divine will and nature thus enjoys a growing communion with the creator. God’s purpose is to make us ever more like the divine. Irenaeus did not see incarnation as the result of sin. We were created in such a manner that after a process of growth and instruction we become like the incarnate one. (Gonzales 1987:70)

Pelikan helps us further by writing the following on describing Irenaeus’ concept of recapitulation:

Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation can be read as the most profound theological vindication in the second and the third centuries of the universal Christian ideal of the imitation of Christ. For Irenaeus, the imitation of Christ by the Christian was part of God's cosmic plan of salvation which began with Christ's imitation of the Christian or, more precisely, with Christ's imitation of Adam (Pelican 1971:144).

For Miles (2005:32) recapitulation is a powerful insight, namely, that human life can only continue from the place at which it was arrested. She describes Irenaeus as saying that because of the disobedience of Adam the human race is traumatised and development arrested. Christ, who is the New Adam, **re-enacted** the original crisis situation, which is the temptation to be one's own god. Adam used his freedom to disobey and Christ's response was obedience:

Because of his solidarity with human beings, by returning to the primal situation and reversing the human response, Christ effectively overcame the human race's deadness, making it possible for human beings to be, in the words of a fourth-century Eucharistic prayer, "truly alive" (Miles 2005:32).

This frequently quoted maxim cannot, therefore, be understood outside of Irenaeus' bigger theological concept of recapitulation, in which the incarnation becomes salvific.

## **BEING FULLY ALIVE**

Flourishing is a concept that is often thought about in theology. Human sciences help theologians in rethinking our own Christian anthropology and human lives. Flourishing can be understood from different perspectives. It can be understood psychologically, in terms of living up to your full mental potential. It can be physical, namely being healthy, well fed, in good condition. I associate the word with growth. I see chubby, happy children playing without a care, with a lot of caresses, acceptance, love and safety all around.

Is flourishing the same as perfection? Is flourishing the same as being healthy or even as being wealthy? Not being persecuted? Then Irenaeus himself was not flourishing. It is difficult to compare second century Gaul with today's context where we have higher expectations of life and where our criteria of fulfilment and having "enough" changes frequently.

What will a theological understanding of flourishing be? Maybe such a discussion must start with a rethinking of what Irenaeus meant with "being alive." In the first place, he does not place it outside the borders of revelation. For him life is linked to God. But life can also be seen as just a biological concept, namely the ability to breathe, your lungs and heart working. It is obvious that if somebody does not accept God in Jesus Christ their heart does not automatically stop pumping. That would be absurd. Paul writes symbolically and theologically about life and death, e.g. in Ephesians. We realise if we read Paul that life and death is symbolical, theological. In Ephesians 2:1 we read: "You were dead through your trespasses and sins" and verse 10 "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (NRSV).

It looks as if flourishing and living in a theological context is more than breathing and having enough to eat. But we also say that God has everything to do with food as well. What is flourishing without falling into the old pious trap that looked after the soul but not the body? Maybe Irenaeus' understanding of the image of God as freedom can help us here. Does being fully alive perhaps have to do with human potential and identity? Does it mean the freedom to grab and live life without running against restrictions and discriminations? To be able to live your destiny and to be illuminated? Even to choose against belief? If flourishing isn't perfection is it the freedom to make faults and live life?

Maybe the word "participation" is the word that better describes what Irenaeus meant. But then we also enter the world of mystical and contemplative spirituality. Experiencing God makes me fully alive. But

how does this impact on justice, dignity and flourishing which are important themes in gender studies?

## **SOME FEMINIST VOICES**

Firstly it must be stated within the bigger context of this article that reformed feminist voices tend to stay within reformed writings, and do not necessarily delve into the early works of the Church Fathers. In reformed theology the incarnation does not stand central and is not always worked out in great length. That is not to say that reformed theologians cannot shape their theology with more incarnational insights especially when discussing anthropology, personhood and the concept of being alive.

I will first consider the contribution of a Catholic feminist theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, and her take on Irenaeus theology.

In her book *She who is, the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Johnson states that the right speech about God is inseparable from ‘solicitude’/caring for all creatures. (Johnson 1992:14)

In dialogue with the above statement she refers to the axiom of Irenaeus *Gloria Dei vivens homo*. She writes:

because God is the creator, redeemer, lover of the world, God’s own honour is at stake in human happiness. Wherever human beings are violated, diminished, or have their life drained away, God’s glory is dimmed and dishonoured. Wherever human beings are quickened to fuller and richer life, God’s glory is enhanced. A community of justice and peace and God’s glory increases in direct and not inverse proportion (Johnson 1992:14).

For her the female reality is included in homo: “We can say, *Gloria Dei vivens mulier*: the glory of God is woman, all women, every woman everywhere, fully alive.” (Johnson 1992:15). Where woman is violated God’s glory diminishes.

Donovan (1988:296), also a Catholic theologian, interprets Irenaeus from a “sanctification” angle:

I would suggest that prior to conversion to Christ one sees God “prophetically” along the lines of the OT seeing described by Irenaeus. During the post-conversion earthly life one sees God “adoptively,” as Irenaeus has showed us. On a daily basis this works out as Irenaeus anthropology describes it. We sense the struggle between “flesh” and “spirit.” Through experience we learn to “choose life.” It is God’s dearest hope for us that ultimately in the resurrection we will come to the “paternal vision” the face-to-face seeing of glory. Then truly we will be fully alive to the glory of God.

I do not know if Donovan’s interpretation helps us to understand flourishing in more concrete social categories. However, she does show that the aliveness of Irenaeus has a strong spiritual, participative character.

Wendy Farley, who comes from a Presbyterian tradition, but has worked a great deal on the concept of non-dualism and, even recently, on some women mystics, is a Protestant voice that helps in the rethinking of Irenaeus and incarnation and being human. Farley in her book *Gathering those driven away. A Theology of Incarnation* writes that she saw what Irenaeus meant when she met the Dalai Lama:

A human body can contain and radiate the Divine. Such a body heals minds and bodies and relationships. It embodies compassion and good humour. It is exactly fitted to whatever situation in which it finds itself without wavering from its unique fingerprint of personality (Farley 2011:134).

Surprisingly she dialogues outside the Christian tradition, Catholic or Protestant, and links Irenaeus with her own experience of a Buddhist holy person.

Farley goes further and confesses that she rediscovered Christ after she met the Dalai Lama (Farley 2011:134). She realised that before that she

has never seen or really believed in incarnation, which she describes as a human being fully lit by an unwavering divine presence. “After that, I found myself falling in love with Christ, entirely against my will and confounded by my intellectual and spiritual formation.”

Farley (2011:134) concludes that it is not the great Christological debates but the “experiential roots that vivify the meaning of incarnation.” For her: “This fullness of life is participation in the divine life” (Farley 2011:169) and “This participation in the divine life is a paradoxical participation in the apophatic divine mystery that is manifest as fullness of life.” (Farley 2011:169). In her rethinking of participation and incarnation she quotes Irenaeus:

For as His greatness is past finding out, so also His goodness is beyond expression; by which having been seen, He bestows life upon those who see Him. It is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God; but fellowship with God is to know God, and to enjoy His goodness (Farley 2011: 169).

Irenaeus links the incarnation with the soteriological but experiential act of “seeing,” Christ. A Protestant theologian links her faith in Christ with the experiential act of seeing the Dalai Lama and therefore an embodied Christ in her experience.

Irenaeus in his historical context of debate with Gnosticism saw the danger of not accepting the incarnation. Not seeing Christ in the flesh means not participating in our own fleshliness and aliveness.

The full quotation of Irenaeus: “For the glory of God is the living man; and the life of man is the vision of God” is of more help for me in doing feminist theology from a reformed perspective. If one focuses on the “glory of God is man fully alive,” contextual, liberation theologies can tend to focus only on social and cultural factors that may or may not bring about flourishing. If this aliveness or flourishing, however, is linked with the senses, incarnation and an almost mystical participation in the fleshiness of Christ, then aliveness becomes a visible groundedness in the incarnate and

resurrected Christ. This is not to deny any practical social justice orientated theology for human flourishing and the abolishing of oppressive behaviour, it rather roots this in theology and not just human rights.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is true that there is a historical gap between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However the Church Father Irenaeus can help us in dialogue with modern day neuroscience, anthropology, gender studies and social justice issues to rethink what it means to be truly human. He is used already, but perhaps his theology can be revisited still more fruitfully.

In Irenaeus, life has theological and spiritual meaning. It is more than biological life but does not exclude it. Being fully alive for Irenaeus cannot be understood outside of the revelation of God in Christ and the seeing of the believer of Jesus as God. He is quoted as seeing God present in a human being fully alive but Irenaeus would not have been able to see humankind outside of God as would many secular people today.

For Irenaeus, incarnation is a core element. Being fully alive also has to do with growth and being ‘on the way’ with God. God saves - not just by dying and being resurrected - but by becoming human. Maybe his contemplative and participative language can help theologians to a more integrated theology, especially in Protestant reformed theology, where cognitivism has led many believers to move away from the joy of just being human in the presence of God and seeing this being as glory per se.

As a reformed theologian I believe we constantly revisit and transform our theological foundations. We cannot ever be static.

Irenaeus helps us to understand glory not as one-sided as it was possibly read into Calvinist theology, but as an inter-play between God and humanity. God is glorified in human beings who flourish but flourishing is grounded in incarnation. And flourishing-aliveness does not distinguish between male and female. Irenaeus was writing against Gnosticism, but he was truly formulating the poetry of possibilities which is rooted in the

experience of vision, the seeing, of the incarnate God. These possibilities have everything to do with justice and gender issues and the conviction that life in all its forms needs to be cherished and embraced.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Article developed from paper delivered at one-day conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians on “Gender and Human Flourishing,” 8 May 2014 at the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch.

<sup>2</sup> “Church Fathers: Against Heresies” (Book IV, Chapter 20). Online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103420.htm>, (accessed 4 February 2014).

<sup>3</sup> “Irenaeus – Texts.” Online at [http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0195\\_irenaeus/02\\_iren-txt1.htm](http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0195_irenaeus/02_iren-txt1.htm) (accessed 4 February 2014).

<sup>4</sup> “Irenaeus Texts.” Online at [http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0195\\_irenaeus/02\\_iren-txt1.htm](http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0195_irenaeus/02_iren-txt1.htm). (accessed 4 February 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The gender-exclusive language with regard to God is used throughout the article for the sake of stylistic convenience.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

**JOHNSON, Elizabeth A. 2014: *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of love*. London; New York: Bloomsbury. xviii + 323 pages. ISBN 978-1-4729-0373-0.**

In *Ask the Beasts. Darwin and the God of Live*, the theologian Elizabeth Johnson addresses the ecological crisis of our present age, but does so in conversation with science, specifically Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The work arose from an ongoing interdisciplinary faculty seminar at Fordham University to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. It is a dialogue between his *Origin* and the core tenets of the Christian tradition as articulated in the Nicene Creed. Johnson notes at the start:

If God is in fact the all-encompassing reality Christian faith proclaims, then what science says about nature, whether physical, chemical or biological can never be irrelevant to a deeper experience of God (quoting Christopher Mooney, 9).

In the past science and theology have often been conflictual, or totally disparate (save in such mystics as Chardin), and theology has been mainly anthropocentric (even androcentric!). Yet creation is the starting point of both scripture and creed.

Johnson proposes that a dialogue between science (here biology) and theology could uncover a challenging dynamic 'in consulting the plants and animals' (the book's title is from the Book of Job 12:7) for in considering the natural world in its own right we might also find, as she notes, 'our own identity reimaged as vital members of the community of creation rather than as species divorced from the rest' (xvii). The dialogue

of her book proposes such a re-imagining, and challenges us theologically, ethically and spiritually.

The first chapters deal with Darwin's work at some length, demonstrating how his ongoing observations and experimentations culminated in the theory of evolution. But she notes that in his early years it was precisely his encounter with God *in* nature rather than a deduction of God *from* nature that so thoroughly engaged him. She describes Darwin as a 'beholder' (42), whose gift was 'to envision the origin of all living beings in relationship to one another and to their environment over a deep sequence of time' (44). He used the metaphor of the Tree of Life (120) as the expression of how such 'endless forms most beautiful' have come to be through the laws of nature itself and in constant response to life's deep imperative. 'Once we see that all organisms have a *history*, when we understand that all living beings are *related*, then the light will dawn' (98).

Johnson speaks of *Origins* as 'Darwin's gift to theology', and then examines his work against our Trinitarian beliefs. We believe God is the ultimately transcendent origin and creator of the universe, not as a sculptor who completes a work and is then done with it, but perhaps as a singer whose song continues throughout creation. Creation is sustained in being and becoming in the Holy Spirit, as we say in the Creed, 'the Lord and Giver of life'. The scriptures testify to the Spirit's dynamism with images such as wind, water, fire, wisdom. The creator God is encountered personally in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and in his mission made present and active via the outpouring of the Spirit, dwelling in all, though infinitely transcending (147). Nothing, then, is 'purely natural', but all is the on-going dwelling place of the Spirit, who creates and moves in matter as much as in the mind. Matter is not an inert substance but has a dynamic urge to explore, to surpass itself in becoming (175). Johnson notes that

the Giver of life not only creates and conserves all things... but is also the dynamic ground of their becoming, empowering from within their emergence into new complex forms (156).

Augustine spoke of nature as one of the two books of revelation. Johnson notes that '[t]his interpretation of the natural world as sacramental and revelatory supports the intense religious experience innumerable people report as having when they commune with nature...[and] the anguish that arises in reaction to the destruction of natural places...' (152).

In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter Johnson deals with that suffering and death which is part of all of existence; the struggle to evolve is always at a cost. Death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life (184), and Darwin's 'entangled bank of beauty' is also a place of pain and death (186). Christ, the Incarnate Word, joined the material world and shared in the condition of all flesh (195). He revealed God as Love: compassionate, inclusive, healing matter, and furthering human flourishing. His death was not natural but at the powers of the state, yet he freely engaged that death. His final cry encompassed all earthly suffering and was carried to the heart of the Trinity, whence it is now embedded in the very heart of the living God (206). No one can hence be alone in their suffering since his 'redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life' (205).

But if his death is 'embedded', so too, says Johnson, is his resurrection, as seed to the fruit. His destiny is now that of all the earth, not just spiritually, but in the body (208). 'In Christ's resurrection, the earth itself rose' (quoting Ambrose of Milan, 208). The evolutionary world was not left behind, but transfigured by the resurrection. The *Exultet* of the Easter vigil sings to the earth, rejoice at *your* resurrection (209). Biologically new life always emerges from death, over time. Theologically 'the cross gives grounds to hope that the presence of the living God in the midst of pain bears creation forward to unimaginable promise' (210). It doesn't solve the problem of suffering, says Johnson, but 'It does make a supreme difference in what might come next' (210). New Testament texts speak of 'all of creation groaning awaiting the freedom of children of God' (Rom 8:18), of Christ as 'first born of all creation' (Col 1:15), and so on. There is a cosmic scope in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Humans are only one branch, twig of the tree of life. In us ‘matter has gradually become alive and...has even begun to think and pray’ (quoting John Haught, 254). Humanity’s evolution proceeds now both biologically and culturally, giving us responsibility for that evolution. And here, says Johnson, is the area of our great ecological concern. We are a finite earth, but we consume at an ‘infinite’ rate. Extinction is said to be happening at a rate unprecedented in the history of the world and extinct IS extinct, never to return, never to realise its potential in an evolutionary future, and so affecting the ecological network of life on earth. Here is where the necessity of conversion can be placed, a conversion to the earth itself, to be ‘treasured and safeguarded for the sake of its future in God’ (255).

Johnson says such a conversion must be fostered intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. She uses the word ‘shepherding’, as perhaps ‘that role among creatures...for which we are ultimately responsible to God’ (280). It suggests a basic perspective from which we can operate in regard to our earth awareness.

In her final chapter Johnson proposes a paradigm of the relationship of humans to the earth. The Genesis command to ‘have dominion’ over the earth was too often interpreted as domination, seeing the earth as a neutral backdrop for our human activities, or as that which is to be exploited for our own ends. Stewardship alone, says Johnson ‘does not go the distance’. What is needed is ‘a different conceptuality of the human place in the world’ (267). Drawing on the scriptures, she proposes that of the ‘community of life’, which ‘paradigm’ she elicits from various Old Testament sources, Job, the psalms, the lamenting prophets, and from the book of Revelation. She proposes three practices in order to become ‘beholders’:

- 1) Contemplation – to see the world as God’s handiwork, deepen our human connection with it, enfolding all species in love and compassionate care (282);

- 2) Asceticism – to remove whatever blocks awareness of the presence of the Spirit and the movement of grace in our lives, an asceticism that is sensuous and earth-affirming, leading us to live more simply, freed from enslavement to market practices that harm other living creatures (Von Hugel said Darwin was the greatest ascetic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 42);
- 3) Action – those activities which further social, economic and ecological justice, on behalf of the poor, of both humans and nature. Within the context of Christian faith such actions and practices ‘bespeak a profound turning to the God of life’ (284). We are all kin, flourishing is for all, ‘the evolutionary future may still surprise’ (286). Without such a vision today we are irrelevant. But with it, we may know ‘a great adventure of mind and heart, expanding the repertoire of our love’ (286).

This book, typical of Johnson, is beautifully written, and would reward repeated reading. Darwin was anathema to many believers in his era. Perhaps it is only from the perspective of 150 years that he can be so graciously and beautifully ‘redeemed’ by a singular theologian of the twenty-first century.

*Reviewed by:*

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**LOHFINK, Gerhard. 2014: *No Irrelevant Jesus: On Jesus and the Church Today*. Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press. x + 321 pages. ISBN 978-0-8146-8264-7.**

This book is composed of a number of talks given over an extensive period on the topics of Jesus and the church. Although the topics were not prepared in book form they demonstrate a considerable coherence under the central theme of the Kingdom of God. The author takes us through a broad range of theological topics which are always explained in a straightforward lucid manner. They exhibit freshness of thought and presentation and are contextually grounded both in the church and wider context.

Lohfink ranges from healing and multiplication miracles to history, from tradition to the origin of ministry and the Petrine office, from Jesus' saving purpose to a radical exposition of love (definitely not a feeling but an innate drive in the direction of others in their deep need). The language used (even in translation) is superb as is the theological reflection. His simplicity in expounding doctrine is deeply touching. For instance:

Resurrection, then, is collected history, preparing itself already in our daily dying and rising. What does not happen in this life, in this history, cannot be raised at the end. If there is no *communio*, no communion among us now, there can be none in eternal life. If reconciliation does not begin here, it will not happen after death. If the reign of God does not begin here and transform our lives, then it will not do so in the 'great beyond'. If rejoicing in the Holy Spirit does not take fire here, it will not be so in heaven. If the communion table of the Eucharist does not exist here, there can be no heavenly wedding banquet (35).

Need I say more? This is eminently practical theology in its best sense, praxis, a two way street between doing and reflecting. It is not a matter of reading a 'feel good' manual on the spiritual life. It is a serious attempt to engage the mind and heart and hand in the pursuit of a lived spirituality.

In the chapter on Paul a strong emphasis is placed on the family unit as the household whose purpose is to build up the community in a way that nuclear family set-up fails to do.

Not being a Roman Catholic I struggled with the chapters on episcopacy and the sacraments; yet, there was meat to chew on nonetheless, even from a reforming perspective, because Lohfink remains scrupulously true to scripture, particularly with regard to the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. He does appear to struggle with the non-dominical sacraments. However, his own definition of a sacrament would warm the heart of John Calvin:

A sacrament is a visible sign [the whole of the sign includes the interpretive word], instituted by Christ, that points to an invisible reality and, through the church and within its life, gives a share in that reality (189).

This volume offers an excellent guide to the key theme of Jesus' teaching – the kingdom of God – it is a book for the 'ordinary reader' as well as the more informed mind. This is accessible theology which is truly contextual. It is not revolutionary but it is radical as it penetrates to the root of each issue discussed. Unlike a diet, Christianity is not a temporary aberration but involves a lifelong lifestyle change. I found reading this book stimulating and challenging to my personal spiritual reflection and I heartily recommend it to others who are also looking for some faith stimulation. Reflect on the humility of the author in the closing words of his book:

But now I want to read my bible quite simply again. I carry the burden of scholarship with me in my backpack. It is necessary, and we have to bring it along with us, because it helps us to understand the text in its final form. And yet in the end I want to be carried forward by the text itself and its fascination. I rejoice in it. I am frightened by its claim. I allow myself to be consoled by it. I live in it like a child whose mother tells it a story at bedtime (314).

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