

The Vulnerability of Theology¹

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The vulnerability of theology is the vulnerability of God.² Thinking about anything theologically must consider God's own vulnerability because theology is about God.

Pursuing this question gets us to a sticky spot: theology does not need religion. Christian theology belongs to the Christian church and to the academy. Throughout the modern period theology has been limited only to religion because of the separation of religion from the rest of life. Theology has focused on the prompting of its own practitioners, to start with religion, to draw attention to religious experience, or to restrict its concerns to whatever is deemed religious.

This gerrymandering process, to make sure that economic, political, scientific, and aesthetic spheres of life stay separate, has reached a fever pitch as modernity has waxed. Paradoxically, the more autonomous each sphere of life has become, the weaker it has become and especially vulnerable to take over by economics, media, and or political power. It is without a doubt the case that theology, like most other pursuits in human life, has suffered because of these separations and divisions.

If theologians must transgress the borders that keeps religion here and the secular there, they do so because their subject matter is God and not religion. As God is the subject of theology as well as its vulnerability, I'm stuck wondering how theology can operate

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without, beyond, or besides religion. A theological justification of this boundary-leaping is in order.

But there's another problem, another place that I'm stuck. I'm caught between two ways that each commend a different approach to taking God as the subject of theology. One tradition, which I might call the theology of hiddenness, urges for us to take God as utterly beyond all things, hidden, and entirely unknowable, an infinity of which our cognition is incapable.³ The other, we might call the theology of the cross, urges its practitioners to spurn speculation and to fix theological attention on God incarnate, God in the flesh, God crucified, God hidden in Jesus of Nazareth.

Rather than give you an instance of each tradition, I plan to take up someone who seems to go in all directions at once, whose theological inquiry rivals any who came before or afterward: Julian of Norwich.

Julian is the name taken by a woman in the fourteenth century who was enclosed as a recluse at the church of St. Julian in

1. Delivered as the 39th Carl A. Mellby Lecture, 9 November 2021, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, on the contested and ceded ground of the Wahpekute Dakota people. I have edited this essay but have largely kept its character as a public address.

2. Vulnerability, as Estelle Ferrasse has traced, has developed in two separate traditions and I mean to make use of both senses. These are, roughly, taking vulnerability as the capacity for injury, death, and harm of any sort or vulnerability as a kind of openness, interdependency, and systemic fragility. Ferrasse's innovation is showing how systemic fragility and injury can be simply a facet of some forms of life that continually damage those who dwell in them in their everyday practices. Christian theology has all three kinds. Estelle Ferrarese, "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World as It Is?" *Critical Horizons*, 17:2 (May, 2016):149–159. Ferrarese collects and develops the long work on ethics of care, starting with Carol Gilligan.

3. Or negative theology or sapiential theology. See Jean-Yves Lacoste, *From Theology to Theological Thinking*, W. Chris Hackett, trans. (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

the important coastal town of Norwich in England.⁴ She suffered from sickness in 1373 that brought her near death and at that time she experienced several showings, as she called them, from God. After writing a short account of these showings, she later in life wrote an extensive theological reflection on them. Wills made by her contemporaries show donations to Julian's support and refer to her as an anchorite or recluse. Anchorites varied in their situation, but in her case, Julian likely lived out her life in a small room attached to the church with perhaps a window to the interior as well as to the secular world. Whether she did so with a cat or with a companion, we cannot know for sure.

Julian likely wrote her longer, more reflective text as a recluse. In this later work, she is torn by the puzzle presented her, a puzzle that is often torn apart and destroyed by the modern demarcation between religion and everything else. She takes God to be beyond all telling, yet she is addressed by God in a crucifix held in front of her that God is love and all shall be well.

In the difference between God hidden and the God hidden in the cross, she is my tutor in searching out these two theological traditions, since Julian cannot resolve this problem on the cheap. She will point us to the justification of theology and its critique.⁵

It may seem unusual to think about someone from the late medieval world as lending aid to us on the other side of many shifts in human life. Theologians have research programs that seek closed off alternatives and lost possibilities when confronting problems. So, do not think of me as a scientist giving up on contemporary theories and becoming smitten with the possibilities that *phlogiston* or the *aether* present our research. Theological models and theories are historical even if they progress and replace older models. It is not at all unusual to consider figures across the centuries as a theologian or to retrace where thinking about God went wrong.

Julian of Norwich as theologian of God's hiddenness

Julian completed her book but did not finish it. In her remarkable *A Revelation of Love*, Julian reflects in the concluding chapter on her writing: "This book is begun by God's gift and grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight."⁶ Julian has finished her book but does not take it to be fully or completely performed in

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its rhetorically sense nor as something organized and completed architecturally.⁷

The obstacle lies not in Julian's incapacity to know God nor her inability to use words to speak of God: indeed, she makes powerful use of the tradition of thinking of God as mother as well as using the language of the fish trade that saturated her Norwich world. She may be friendly to those who do not consider God to be an object of cognition, but her motives do not focus on human limitation. She knows God by reason, by faith, and perhaps by hope. These three lights, as medieval tradition called them, are related and illuminate each other.

When theologians claim that God is unknowable, they often do so by subtraction. By this, they insist that no matter what words or concepts we might use in speaking or thinking of God, we know they never can stick. We should focus, they say, on how words fail, how they do not refer, or how they, being conventional cannot possibly connect to that which is beyond all history.

Julian claims the unknowability of God with these theologians but operates by addition: I can speak of God, but I cannot fully speak of God by saying everything there is to say. There is always more to be said of God. Taking God's unknowability as a kind of excess or surplus means that what humans know of God is always part of what one can know by faith or by hope, however those words, pictures, or concepts might gain new meanings.

It is hard to see how God is vulnerable in any meaningful sense when approached by subtraction. Subtraction, rather, seems to defend a God who is ultimately indifferent and unaffected by any speech or thought by refusing to allow any concept or description to stick to God. The purpose of the subtractive theologian is to clear rather than gather.

If I follow the tenor of Julian's thinking of God, I see that God is vulnerable to the naming and speaking I make of God. God's vulnerability here is the unending and open-ended pursuit of God in speech and thought, resisting any conclusion that would close the door or draw the curtain.

This plurality arrives because what each thing is, what I myself am, what everything is, is because of God's creative act in Julian's thinking. The things and concepts that exist speak of God and

4. For Julian's biography, here summarized, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Introduction" in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Brewer, 2008), 1-16.

5. Other possibilities I know from roughly the same period, give or take two centuries: Meister Eckhart (sort of), Nicholas of Cusanus, and Martin Luther. These matters do not come together again in useful and interesting ways until Johann Georg Hamann. None equal Julian. Eckhart's theology of the cross is hard to make explicit; Cusanus as well. Luther's hidden God differs considerably from Julian's and so departs in many ways from the work to which the hidden God was put. Besides Julian, perhaps only Maximus the Confessor could make promising headway through his wrestling with Origenism, Dionysius, and the Chalcedonian Christology.

6. Watson and Jenkins, eds. *The Writings of Julian of Norwich* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2005), 379. Translations are my own.

7. Watson and Jenkins, eds. *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 378.

are true because God is in all things. In the subtractive version of this approach, God is unfathomably distant to the cosmos and all that is. Nothing can be said of God, no thought can be worthy, because God exceeds all. Rather, taking God as love in all things, a love so proximate that I speak of God when I speak of anything.

Julian's theological method has a surprising result that offers a justification for theology and critique at the same time. As God is vulnerable to all things, so theological work is vulnerable to the entire world. This picture of God requires theologians to seek concepts and speech of God far outside of these religious activities, indeed outside of all things deemed religious.⁸ God in all things and all things in God provides for a remarkable justification for theology. Theologians who take God seriously in this way must learn from many other disciplines, from many religious spheres and traditions, indeed from everything. Julian's picture pushes theologians both outside of the walls of the church, beyond those of the academy, and on into the entire cosmos. Such a thing to do from one small room.

For example, many of the results of natural science rule out some ideas of God acting or God intervening in natural processes. The pictures of God that run aground of science are not just scientifically problematic, but they are also theologically improper. To conceive of God as an actor who does things like any other actor, turns God into something other than what Julian and so many others hold God to be. To me, what is valuable in the work of theology is that it must adjust its picture of God. How it does, is a matter of controversy among theologians just as it is among philosophers of science and scientists as well, as far as they care to think about God.

Returning to the main line of Julian's thought: if theology is fixed to God as its subject matter, a critical moment emerges. Theological work goes wrong when it is too narrow, too autonomous, or too focused. It goes wrong when it is too reductive, turning everything into theology. Or detached from any discipline or dimension of life. If theology is isolated in the religious sphere alone, it risks developing independently and autonomously, morphing into toxic and pathological forms! Theology needs to go abroad, otherwise the religious lifeworld, along with others, will be colonized by the economic or the political, rendering religion and the secular alike into things to be mastered, identified, or commodified. Theology needs to go abroad because the God who is its subject matter is the creator or ground of all things.

A contemporary way of putting this is that theology must be systematic in aspiration and activity but always reject any closure, just as Julian recognizes she cannot finish her book. Theologians need to go abroad from the traditional topics of theology, from religious stuff, if this view of God is to hold any truth, to inquire how attention to social systems, to art, to natural processes all provide ways of signaling God's creative love in their own idiom. This does not mean that everyone is secretly or de facto a theo-

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logian. And it certainly does not mean that every social scientist, artist, or natural scientist needs to reciprocate. Theological work in the mode of the hidden God urges explanatory plurality on, suggesting the incompleteness of frames of knowledge and the excess of reality.

Julian of Norwich as theologian of the cross

Reason isn't enough for Julian; its companion is faith. This faith brings us to a new kind of critique. Desperately sick and near death, a priest visits Julian in her bed and urges her to look upon the crucifix he has brought and holds in front of her face.

Here bodily vulnerability permeates Julian's writing. Jesus' broken body, his pain, even his death, Julian takes as her "heaven." The human Jesus is the only way that Julian thinks of God, which might seem to counter her other impulse to approach God through all things. This line of thinking is so powerful that many theologians follow it to the exclusion of all other models.

The reason for this comes in Julian's extended consideration of Jesus' crucifixion, which culminates in her powerful conclusion that God is here dying, God is here suffering, God is undergoing this shameful, insulting death. Here Julian offers a divergent critique and justification of theology.

In Jesus' death, Julian confronts death's emptiness, futility, and most importantly, death's extension into life. God becoming involved in this means that God does not remain immune or distant or somehow other as God in this human Jesus. I wish to be a theologian of the cross because I know that life is damaged.

This act of embracing the vulnerability of life means that God has joined this life. Focused on this death, Julian's theology of the cross rejects all other pictures and names of God because now God has come as near as human flesh. In Julian's language Jesus' solidarity with others is without restraint. She uses the language of giver and friend and intimate. These all show God is in a kind of reciprocal relationship and one that's categorically different than God's creative work. Julian rejects the tropes and liniments of many accounts of Jesus' death: Jesus' death does not make God loving or satisfy God's wrath or pay God for redemption. Jesus embraces death because of love to make life good and whole.

8. This is Julian's way of putting things. Similar is Thomas Aquinas: "All things are considered in this way of knowing, but insofar as they are ordered to God." *Summa Theologica*, I. q. 1. a. 8. Resp.

The act of such vulnerability means God has Godself become injury and desolation to reject it. The theology of the cross can harbor a critical purpose: to point out injury is to point out a need for reconciliation. But this is a purely negative act. It does not point to resolution or healing. It is a kind of negation and rejection, this time more specific and material than that done by the hidden God theologians because it is the negation and rejection of death. If the theologian of the hidden God is faithful to the rejection of idols, the theologian of the cross is faithful to the rejection of injury.

These claims alone do not erase the many pathologies born of Christian practice and thought. Immense harm and continually destructive forms of life have gotten shape because of the shape of the cross held before Julian in her sickbed. This surely marks where theological traditions have sustained forms of life that are damaged and injurious, fostering ways of damaged life because they fail to reject suffering but instead valorize it. Theologians have learned much from the study of trauma, abuse, and ideological distortion. Many have challenged and reworked this continuing task.⁹ I want to take what I can here to show how her theology of the hidden God and the theology of the cross interact.

The theology of the hidden God seems to diminish the theology of the cross because to say that the crucified Jesus is but one event and moment in the great well of concepts and names for God. That copula, “is,” strikes the hidden God advocates as too strong. It needs loosening, qualifying, or subtracting. No single name is ever enough. And the theology of the cross could remain too isolated if disconnected from God in all things. It ceases to be a theology if it gives up on God.

Yet, Julian’s vision of the cross is stuck on a point: it is this Jesus who says, “love is my meaning.” Julian lodges “love” beyond all the names, concepts, and words that speak of God. Without the suffering Jesus, there is no way to this love. And she says of the two theologies, that she cannot decide between the two.¹⁰ There is no resolution in thought or practice available to the theologian.

This impasse is the most important vulnerability of theology. And neither Julian nor I nor anyone else can resolve it. The standoff between reason and faith cannot be resolved: “There we are astounded.”¹¹ At this most pressing danger, a theologian would be forgiven for giving up. Or going one way or another, giving

9. Most especially, Arnfrídur Gudmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Asle Eikrem, *God as Sacrificial Love: A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion* (New York City: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

10. Julian wrestles with this question in conjunction with a crucial set of concerns she brings together in the question of the relationship between what the church has taught her and what she learns in the showing in the crucifix held before her. This problem explicitly concerns the teaching that God will condemn some (or most) sinners. Here Julian shows her attention to problems that others had great difficulty considering: for instance, the relationship between God’s ordinary and extraordinary power, divine justice and mercy, and the way to conceive of sin, evil, and the purpose of Jesus’ death.

11. Watson and Jenkins. *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 353.

Julian points, as many did, to the light of hope. The hope that God brings life from death, raises the crucified one from death, that “[God] has turned the greatest possible harm into good.” If God can resolve this or make good on the demands of faith or the challenge of reason, it’s up to God. And God might. May. Might. Possibly. Perhaps.

the right of way to either the apophatic or to the theology of the cross. A forced reconciliation that papers over wounds instead of healing them? Julian, rightly, refuses.

I am stuck with her. How can such injury be healed? How can our damaged lives be repaired? The theology of the cross is fundamentally negative. With one small “nevertheless” (*dennoch*).

Hidden God and cross in hope

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It seems odd to rest the justification of theology on this perhaps, the small word that in the middle of death there might be life. But to refuse a resolution as Julian did recognizes that neither the power of belief suffices despite its importance nor that the workings of reason lose their place. There is always more. And that surfeit does not undermine what we do know and believe.

12. Watson and Jenkins. *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 215.