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The Cross and The Citadel: Reconciling Apophatic and Cataphatic Traditions in the Showings of Julian of Norwich

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Generally speaking, Christian experience of God is classified into two categories, cataphatic and apophatic: the cataphatic tradition asserts that God can be both affectively experienced and expressed through symbol, image, and language, whereas the apophatic tradition holds that God is so utterly beyond our ability to form a concept of God that deepest contemplative union is not only inexpressible but cannot itself occur anywhere symbol, image, and language are present. The apophatic tradition argues therefore that God is best known by "unknowing," that the deepest vision of God occurs when God is "unseen" yet inexplicably and undeniably present, to such degree that the apophatic contemplative believes that this unknowing is more true than anything "knowable" or anything that can be "experienced." The problem of course that arises is that any "expression" of apophatic experience, however rational or poetic, must ultimately be denied, since its very comprehensibility contradicts itself and must therefore be called "untrue." Christian theologians can only arrive at paradox, then, when trying to "define" an experience as apophatic (since its
very essence defies definition). What results is a type of "theology of the negative," a via negativa that can only discuss God by saying what God "is not," by asserting with words—usually symbolic, pointing far beyond rational comprehension—the utter inadequacy of any and all words, images, concepts, metaphors, and symbols in respect to those heights of contemplative awareness.\footnote{For an excellent discussion of apophatic symbolism and its usage in Showings, see Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, "The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich," in Marion Glasscoe, ed., The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992).} Apophatic experience can only "seek" God by not seeking, since any object or concept that could be "arrived at" could not be God. In a way, it is a spiritual variety of "deconstructionism" that rests in no system of explaining God and no standard method for confronting God. This explanation itself then would presumably proceed infinitely, constantly refining and rejecting attempts to describe what apophaticism even is, whereby any "conclusion" that may be agreed upon must be discarded as incorrect; yet if this were the actual case and an apophatic contemplative were to dedicate her life to explaining apophatic experience systematically, she could no longer actually be apophatic since her life would be riddled with system, concept, and logic. Thus the apophatic resigns herself to "not knowing." The fullest use of language for an apophatic then would be in its most poetic and symbolic form, seeking not so much to prove but to point, to bring a reader to acknowledge the insufficiency, even absurdity, of language and logic, to coax that reader to rest in nothing that can be understood, in absolute abandonment to God's inscrutable will.

If we were to proceed from the above general categories of apophatic and cataphatic experience and try to apply them to the Revelations of Divine Love (or Showings) of Julian of
Norwich, the fourteenth-century English anchoress and visionary, then even (and perhaps especially) the most casual reader of Julian would have to conclude that she is decidedly cataphatic. Her revelations are not only described as sights and visions but in the first revelation alone (Chapters 2-10 of the Long Text), we find the pages filled with tangible descriptions like "a littil thing, the quantitye of an hesil nutt in the palme of my hand" (5.5),² or blood like "the dropys of water that fallen of the evys [of a house] after a greate showre of reyne" (7.8); we also find countless positive phrases that describe experiencing "the mervelous curtesie . . . of our fader that is our maker" (7.9), Christ who "is our clotheing" (5.5), a God-granted vision of Mary "a simple mayde and a meke, young of age and little waxen above a child" (4.5), Christ's "holy flesh," "pretious blode," "holy passion," "deareworthy death and wounds" (6.6), and "the kinde yernings of the soule by the touching of the Holy Ghost" (5.6).

Finally, and perhaps even more persuasively, we find in Julian a simple and pure confidence in systematic theology, "in the feith and trowthe of holy church" (1.2), in its "teachyng" (2.3) and "all [the] rites of holy church" (2.2). Put together then, it would be hard to deny the markedly cataphatic character of Julian's *Showings*. As such, a reader would likely agree, therefore, with scholars like Frederick Bauerschmidt who conclude that Julian not only embraces the vital social character

² All quotations from Julian's *Showings* (also titled by various editors and translators *A Revelation of Love* or *Revelations of Divine Love*) are taken from Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986). Parenthetical citations refer first to chapter number, followed by a period and the page number where the quotation can be found.
and structure of the Church but, with her unyielding attention to her vision of the crucified Christ, "rejects the kind of apophaticism commended by a work like The Cloud of Unknowing in favor of something that seems at first more akin to the humbler spirituality of affective piety, which focuses on the humanity of Jesus" (86). Here Bauerschmidt seems to prefer Julian, claiming her spirituality is both "humbler" and more Christ-centered than the Cloud author's. The kind of apophaticism Bauerschmidt, later in the same essay, identifies as that wrong kind of apophaticism is one which is either "undisciplined . . . [and] can too easily collapse into a narcissism in which, through the process of negation of concepts and images, the self that negates grows fat" (86), or even more importantly, in another essay, a wrong kind of apophaticism which turns away from the love of Christ's humanity toward something supposedly higher, an apophaticism Bauerschmidt claims "would be represented in The Cloud of Unknowing" (202). He argues that, apparently unlike the Cloud author,

Julian stubbornly refuses to move to a more exalted plane of contemplative experience, lest this separate her from her "even Christians". . . . Julian rejects any path to heaven which would circumvent the humanity of God made flesh, including any contemplative or affective "technique" for spiritual advancement. (205)

The argument requires close attention, since it seems to contain five critical misunderstandings of apophatic experience and expression.

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Bauerschmidt's argument reveals a mistaken belief that the apophaticism typified by the *Cloud*:

1. rejects or downplays the teaching of the Church
2. is more spiritually proud than affective piety is
3. may be undisciplined and complacent
4. rejects or downplays the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Jesus
5. is a "technique"

I will address each critical misunderstanding respectively in order to demonstrate how Julian’s spirituality not so much opposes the apophatic consciousness found in the *Cloud*, but instead harmonizes it with the popular affective or cataphatic devotion familiar to her readers.

I. The Cloud of Unknowing *rejects or downplays the teaching of the Church*.

This claim, implicit in Bauerschmidt's critique of apophaticism, is very clearly and explicitly refuted in the *Cloud*. Chapter 56 itself is entitled: "Those who rely on their own intellectual resources, and on human knowledge rather than on the teaching of Holy Church, are deceived" (48). It ought to be mentioned however that although the very necessity of a chapter solely dedicated to this subject must suggest that much or some doctrine was being ignored or falsely "transcended" by contemplatives, the criticism cannot be fairly applied to the book itself.\(^5\) The *Cloud* author is so firmly opposed to this error that

\(^5\) It is worth noting that Bauerschmidt is not so much concerned with attacking apophatic spirituality per se as he is with opposing how that apophaticism is misapplied in our current age. He opposes writers on mysticism, Karen Armstrong in particular, who foster a brand of pop spirituality that co-opts the language of Christian apophaticism in calling readers to reject doctrine and tradition and instead, in Armstrong's words,
he unequivocally charges its proponents with heresy and claims they are "rightly called the disciples of Antichrist" (121).

2. The Cloud fosters more spiritual pride than does affective piety.

Although this is surely a difficult element to quantify, it can at least be asserted that the Cloud author goes to great pains to warn against spiritual egotism and vanity. Three entire chapters, thirteen through fifteen, are dedicated to the nurturing of humility through the awareness of one's sins. "If this work of grace is to be truly and genuinely understood, all such proud imaginings must ruthlessly be stamped out!" (57). It is essential to note here that in her book Julian does not solely experience Christ as merely external to her humbled self, but Christ is found inwardly, by being brought by Christ into the self, not to glorify self but to discover the union of self with God, her spiritual vision set no longer on God but in God:

... than our lord opened my gostly [spiritual] eye and shewyd me my soule in the midds of my herte....I vnderstode sothly that our soule may never have rest in things that is beneathin itselfe. And when it cometh aboven all creatures into the selfe, [it] may not abyden in the beholdynge of the selfe, but all the beholdynge is blisfully sett in God. ... (67.82-83, emphases added)

3. The Cloud fosters ill-discipline and complacency.

No serious reader of the Cloud could accuse its author of instilling complacency in its readers, unless they were seriously to misread the author's argument that the contemplative is not a person dedicated to "action." This, however, is intended to free

"create a faith for themselves." See Bauerschmidt, "Julian Incorporated," p. 86.
the contemplative not for leisure or self-love but for the serious and relentless uprooting of vice (chapters 28-33) and further surrendering of self-will (chapters 23, 43) even for what is usually considered spiritually good (chapter 70).

4. The Cloud rejects or downplays the humanity of Christ.

This is surely Bauerschmidt's most serious charge and one to which our own so-called New Age is perhaps most guilty of. And indeed it is true that among the entire 75 chapter headings, the name "Christ" is only mentioned once, and the name "Jesus" is not mentioned at all. Although chapter 61 clearly emphasizes that Christ was God, Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are explicit only rarely (e.g. 122, 125-126); more often the text describes "Jesus' grace" and his "fellowship" (57).

It is precisely here, though, in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection that the contemplative life derives its greatest meaning, and it is not that the contemplative has somehow transcended the cross of Christ, nor is Christ merely considered some Pelagian model for personal selflessness; the apophatic contemplative is a participant with Christ on the cross, no longer merely a witness but truly one with Christ's sufferings through the sacrifice of will on the contemplative's part and by the action of purification, illumination, and union on God's part upon and from within the soul of the contemplative. For it is only through

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6 Although it is true that the text of The Cloud of Unknowing could be more explicit to this end, we must take the book in its own context. We, in our particular cultural-spiritual milieu, are not the book's audience. Instead, it is quite likely that the twenty-four year-old novice for whom the book was written (Cloud 56) was unmistakably grounded in not merely the divinity but the blessed humanity of Christ, in Jesus, and thus we are reading of the movement of the novice into the side of the body of the crucified Christ, as it is described in Julian (60.73), so that the contemplative becomes a
this union of infused grace with Jesus Christ that contemplative and especially apophatic Christian spirituality can be said to make much sense at all.\textsuperscript{7} What saves the apophatic from absurdity is, more so than the "negative" surrender of image and concept, the active and eternal grace of the Word of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the soul's union through, with, and in that same Christ, and all his people; and that union is Love. "God can be known by love, and by love the soul enters into union with him."\textsuperscript{8} "Through the self-surrender in love that is essential to contemplation, the authentic contemplative lives in his person Christ's total surrender in trust to his Father's mysterious will."\textsuperscript{9} "Because [God] may well be loved, but not thought."\textsuperscript{10}

participant in the paschal sacrifice not merely by association, (and certainly not by private, idiosyncratic "imitation"), but through the union of infused grace. "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

As the Cloud author puts it: "... it is in the love of Jesus that you have your help. The nature of love is such that it shares everything. Love Jesus, and everything he has is yours. Because he is God, he is maker and giver of time. Because he is Man [note the explicit focus on the Humanity of Christ], he has given true heed to time. Because he is both God and Man, he is the best judge of the spending of time. Unite yourself to him by love and trust, and by that union you will be joined both to him and to all who like yourself are united by love to him..." (56). "It is not very difficult to see that this way... is negative in name only" writes Clifton Wolters in the introduction to the Cloud. "At no time will [the apophatic] say that God is unknowable, save to the power of the intellect, and then only because it is limited." See Clifton Wolters, trans., The Cloud of Unknowing (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 16.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{10} Cloud, p. 60. "More: however much you might weep in sorrow for your sins, or for the sufferings of Christ, or however much you might think of the delights of heaven, what good would it do you? Much good, surely; much help; much profit; much grace. But compared with this blind outreaching
5. The Cloud of Unknowing is a spiritual "technique."

Although the text itself is very specific in its guidance of the novice contemplative, it must be remembered that the author here in no way merely offers technique. This fact only comes clear in the later chapters, suggestive of the later stages of contemplation wherein the soul is "lost in God," without physical, intellectual, or spiritual consolation. In this cloud, no technique, no concept, no image, can sustain the human soul. Anyone who would try to make a science of this cloud "manufactures an experience that is neither spiritual or physical. . . He is dangerously misled and in real peril" (pp. 57-58). "True contemplation is not a psychological trick," wrote Thomas Merton, "but a theological grace. It can come to us only as a gift, and not as a result of our own clever use of spiritual techniques." In this contemplative "cloud," what there is of hope can only be in God's will, God's transformation of the soul, in Love, from the image to the likeness of God, secretly emptying and acting upon it,

for even if a man is deeply versed in the understanding and knowledge of all spiritual things ever created, he can never by such understanding come to know an uncreated spiritual thing... which is none else than God!... Because the thing that limits his understanding is God, himself alone. This is why St. Dionysius said,

of love . . . there is very little indeed that it can do without love. This, in itself, is the 'best part'" (Cloud 69).

"the most godlike knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing." (Cloud 137)

It is possible to conclude from the above that since Bauerschmidt's critique of the Cloud's apophaticism is inaccurate then the spirituality of the Cloud must be in fact superior to the spirituality of Julian's Showings. But that too would be a mistake. Instead, by looking more closely at Julian and at other classic mystical texts, we will find the lines between the apophatic and the cataphatic more satisfactorily blurred.

First, by examining Showings more closely we will find (as Bauerschmidt acknowledges) that "Julian's revelation is in its own way profoundly apophatic,"\(^{12}\) that it is an interlacing of cataphatic and apophatic language and experience that offers readers a spirituality both more satisfying than traditional apophatic or affective cataphatic teachings, and more startlingly apophatic (even in the way of the Cloud) than Bauerschmidt's interpretations would lead us to believe. A careful study of the very beginning of the Long Text will help us by both isolating a particular part of Julian's writing to allow for a close reading, while still remaining true to Julian's overall revelation and her argument as a whole—since the first revelation was for Julian the one "in which all the sheweings that follow be grounded and onyd" (1.1).

Yet before discussing this close reading, we should examine a more external but extremely significant difference between Showings and The Cloud of Unknowing, which may account for several of their apparent differences in emphasis. That is, it may not be the writers who differ so much as it is the different needs and vocations of their readers. Julian may differ from other more traditional apophatics like the Cloud author less in theory than in the respective audiences they each address.

\(^{12}\) Bauerschmidt, "Julian Incorporated," p. 86.
Since Julian's audience is "myn even cristen," (8.9.10; 37.38) her fellow Christians, the ordinary laity, experiencing no overwhelming call to contemplative or monastic existence—unlike the individual contemplative novice the Cloud author addresses (56); Julian presents her experience in such a way that is potentially fruitful for the average believer yet still implicitly offers instruction for those called to deeper contemplation through elements in her text of apophatic negation and symbols of contemplative death and rebirth in Christ. All the while Julian is careful not to lean too far toward affective piety and so to fail in aiding her more contemplative readers and compromise the truth itself. Nor is she so boldly apophatic as are the Cloud author and Pseudo-Dionysius, whose rhetorical approaches would likely at best confound the average believer and, at worst, mislead them to an "undisciplined apophaticism" that could ultimately end in self-annihilation, heresy, or despair. In fact, the Cloud author is careful to caution even that young novice who apparently does have a specifically contemplative calling: "So for the love of God be careful, and do not attempt to achieve this experience intellectually. I tell you truly it cannot come this way. So leave it alone" (58). Likewise, in Contemplative Prayer, Merton warns of a misapplied apophaticism that "leads one into a mere void without any interior spiritual life. . . . To persist in this blank state could be very harmful spiritually, morally, and mentally" (114). In a claim that could very well apply to the average Christian reader of Julian, Merton counsels that:

One who simply follows the ordinary ways of prayer, without any prejudice and without complications, will be able to dispose himself far better to receive his vocation to contemplative prayer in due time, assuming that he has one. (115)
It is just that concern for protecting those who have not been or yet been called to contemplation that leads the *Cloud* author to implore his reader: "I beg you for the love of God not to let anyone see this book unless he in your judgment is able to benefit from it..."(141).

Additionally, it is this sort of innocence from esoteric mystical writings that Simone Weil cites as protecting her from confusion before her own mystical life began:

I had never read any mystical works because I had never felt any call to read them. In reading as in other things I have always striven to practice obedience. There is nothing more favorable to intellectual progress, for as far as possible I only read what I am hungry for at the moment when I have an appetite for it, and then I do not read, I eat. God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact. (69)

The great value of the mystical treatise is to encourage and refine the search of those aware of their own call to the contemplative life, not to draft new contemplatives. At the same time, however, Julian, in being moved for the love of them, does not wish her “even cristens” simply to persist in their own perhaps complacent knowledge of God or merely to take her word for it. Instead she prays “that thei might seen and knowyn the same that I saw” (8.9) not so her experience would be validated but that “would it were comfort to they” (8.9).

Yet another important concern in understanding the complex inter-relationships between Julian and traditional apophatics and between apophatic/cataphatic language and
experience in *Showings*, is the special rhetorical and spiritual relationship between Julian and Christ. Where Bauerschmidt's essay admirably focuses on the body of Christ as instructive and redemptive to Julian's readers, this essay will also pay special attention to changes in Julian's body and vision and find them neither in mere theocentric concentration on the Godhead nor in mere christocentric concentration on the visible body of Christ\(^\text{13}\) but in what Patrick F. O'Connell calls the "paschal" identification of the contemplative with Christ's *kenosis*, death, and rebirth, culminating in contemplative union with the Trinity (344).\(^\text{14}\) This paschal conception of Julian's spirituality seems satisfactorily to synthesize not only general theocentric and christocentric expressions but consequently seals the rift developed by misperceiving cataphatic and apophatic experience and expression as distinguishable opposites; for as even Richard Rolle, likely the most cataphatic of medieval English male mystics, avows:

> He knows God perfectly who recognizes that he is beyond our comprehension and capacity.... If you are wanting to know in the strict sense of the words what God is, my reply is that you will find no answer to your question. I do not know; the angels are ignorant; the archangels have not heard!...It is a praiseworthy thing to be perfectly acquainted with God, that is to recognize that he is incomprehensible; and recognizing him thus, to love him. . . .\(^\text{15}\)

We can see, therefore, that the distinction between cataphatics and apophatics is not so evident as it may have appeared,

\(^{13}\) Bauerschmidt, "Seeing Jesus," p. 190.


especially when we compare Rolle's inability to "know" God by "comprehension" or by "capacity" to the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysius in the classic apophatic treatise, *Mystical Theology*, which concludes with the two-fold argument, "that the supreme Cause of every perceptible thing is not itself perceptible," and "that the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual."¹⁶

The remainder of this essay then will be a textual analysis of Showings's opening narration of the Long Text—the two chapters that lead to Julian's mystical vision of the crucified Christ—and a correlative discussion of other classic mystical texts that should reveal that more truly "paschal" understanding of Julian's spirituality, which ultimately unifies what had seemed to be "opposites"—apparent apophatic/cataphatic and theocentric/christocentric dichotomies.

It is clear that Julian intended the first revelation of the Long Text to prefigure theological concepts that will be developed in greater detail later in the book. The first two narrative chapters, then, can be studied for how Julian herself is prepared by God for contemplative experience, without our compromising the overall message of Showings and still affording us a very precise look at how Julian not so much "weaves" apophatic language into the overall fabric of a cataphatic experience but how she naturally and accurately uses elements of both apophatic and cataphatic language and experience throughout, so the seeming dichotomy is transcended, and the experience is rightly perceived as a single whole.

Chapter Two begins with what seems a very cataphatic description of Julian's desire to see by "a bodily sight" the

passion of Christ (2.2). She desires "more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our saviour" (2.2); it is a seemingly very cataphatic desire, a full use of the human will recommended by much popular devotional literature of the period. Although it is likely that Julian was not yet an anchoress at the time of her vision, it seems that a desire for a compassionate, praising knowledge of the passion had shaped much of Julian's early life, leading to the bodily sickness introduced in the Long Text's third chapter; and it seems certain that affective meditation in her anchorhold on the passion, and—if even incidentally—on her own passion vision, would have been strongly encouraged. In the *Ancrene Riwle*, the thirteenth-century guidebook for anchoresses, on the very first page alone of Part One, the anchoress would immediately find two explicit instructions for prayerful attention to the suffering passion of Christ: "turn your thoughts to the Body and precious Blood of God on the high altar and fall on your knees towards Him," and "after [communion] kneel down with these five greetings, in memory of God's five wounds."17 Yet clearly Julian's experience and her post-visionary contemplation of it had taken her much further into the passion than to mere affective meditation. We find in Chapter Two suggestions of a movement away from the type of knowing available merely to our imagination or senses toward something else (whether it be a more apophatic, ineffable knowledge or a more cognitive, intellective one is not yet certain in Chapter Two—though later both seem definite). Julian describes her desires for a vision and bodily sickness as conditional and passing from her mind, where the desire for three less tangible "wounds" takes precedence—the wounds of true contrition, loving compassion, and willful longing for God.

(2.3). A more apophatic interpretation could be made here about a Julian who begins to rely less on her sense experience and more upon the ineffable grace of God. The three wounds, I think, can be fairly likened to the preparations made in the soul for the three-part movement to deep mystical experience: purgation, illumination, and union. The wound of contrition in the heart of the contemplative would lead to God's purgative grace, the wound of compassion (of "suffering with" Christ) would lead to the illumination of Christ's union with the Father, and the wound of longing would lead to Christ's bringing the soul to union with the Father through the Spirit. Thus Julian focuses on the soul's action in these stages rather than on the action of God, which she leaves, rightly, to God's perfect will: "for I will nought but as thou wilt" (2.3). Thus, where many "even cristens" might receive from Julian instruction in the desire for God, her more contemplative "even cristens" are offered a more implicit, more profound model for preparation for apophatic experience—a model, it is important to note, that Julian sees not as esoteric or exclusionary but inspired by "the grace of God and teachying of holy church" (2.3).

Chapter Three consists of four general parts: the details of Julian's bodily sickness (the fulfillment of her first wish), the "dying away" of the lower and upper halves of her body, the very beginnings of the passion vision, and the desire for knowledge of Christ's passion. In the Long Text, though, Julian is careful to explain that it was not so much her desire for these gifts that brought about their fulfillment but her willingness to surrender these desires to the will of God (2.3). We discover in this, of course, a paradox; Julian is describing a fulfillment by renunciation, a desireless desire achieved by a willful surrender of will. This type of paradox, argue Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, is like the glory in
the self-emptying humility [or *kenosis*] of Christ on the cross [in that] it defies reconciliation to the logic of the world. It is a sign of contradiction, allowing the creative tension between its conflicting significations to generate a precious stillness, a chink in the defensive wall of reason that allows slippage into apophatic consciousness.\(^\text{18}\)

A very close reading of this chapter then reveals some strikingly apophatic language and imagery as well as similarities to classic mystical writers like the *Cloud* author, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila.

The third chapter begins with what I think we might interpret as two different "deaths," each proceeding from two previous days of suffering and culminating in an act of grace on the third night. In the first instance, Julian suffers the bodily sickness to the point of near death and is administered "all . . . rites of holy church" (3.3), and she then lives. In the second instance, Julian remains in her suffering and "wened oftentimes to have passyd" (3.3), believing she was on the point of death, if not dead already; it is here that Julian is granted her vision of Christ's passion. What is remarkable about these two "near-deaths" is not the wrong-headed assumption that Christ comes to function how the Church cannot; it is that, according to Julian's spirituality, she is administered to in each by the same Christ, first in the sacraments of "our moder, holy church, that is, Crist Iesus" (61.76) and second in a more ineffable experience, which to Julian is really no more mystical than the first. So, to Julian, this same Christ is available to all, in the sacraments of the Church and in the unmediated contemplative experience of Christ. To her the Church does not replace or

represent Christ until he comes at the end of time, but is in fact the "mystical body of Christ."\(^{19}\)

In this same paragraph we find Julian introducing the language of apophaticism in regard to her desires—"for nothing was in earth that me lekid to levin for"—which prefigures the apophatic soul's gradual dissociation from a self-centered, materialistic existence (the Night of the Senses described by the apophatic writer, St. John of the Cross), that desert-like passage through emptiness, culminating not in a neo-Platonic dualism between matter and spirit, but in a revelation that the whole of existence is filled with the Love, presence, and meaning of God, a realization Julian describes in one of her most famous passages, from the closing chapter of the Long Text of Showings:

And XV yer after and more I was answerid in gostly vnnderstanding, seyand thus: "Woldst thou wetten thi lords mening in this thing? Wete it wele: love was his mening. Who shewid it the? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherfore shewid it he? For love. Hold the therin and thou shalt witten and knownen more in the same; but thou shalt never knownen ne witten therin other thing without end." (86.102)

A still further proof that true apophaticism is not world-denying, annihilation of the senses, the will, and the mind, is an

\(^{19}\) Christopher Abbot argues, "Julian makes the narration of her response to the crucified Christ simultaneously a narration of her deepening perception of the Church as his mystical body. . . . This visionary Christ, who could have symbolized Julian's privileged isolation from the community of her fellow Christians, comes to symbolize, and to be represented as the instrument of, her discovery of a mystical union-in-Christ with that community."\(^{112}\) See Christopher Abbot, "His Body, the Church: Julian of Norwich's Vision of Christ Crucified," *Downside Review* 115 (Jan 1997): 12.
evidently simple yet theologically-profound statement that concludes the first paragraph of Chapter 3 in *Showings*:

And I understood by my reason and by my feleing of my peynes that I should dye. And I assented fully with all, with all the will of my herte, to be at God will. (3.3)

To a casual reader, the above sentence is little more than a pious, even somewhat quaint, affective Christian response to the inevitability of death. However, when we examine it more closely, especially in the light of an author like Julian who was at least tangentially familiar with Pseudo-Dionysius (see 18.21) and especially with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who is often quoted explicitly in the *Ancrene Riwle*, we find in it far deeper, more contemplative, theological claims. The active principles in the above-quoted sentence, far more active than death, are "reason," "feleing," and the united "wills" of Julian and God. First, it is surely important to acknowledge that Julian seems to claim here a more cataphatic knowledge through sense experience. Yet the sentence itself is not so cataphatic (as in an exclusion of apophatic awareness—a distinction that should be seeming more and more suspect the further we analyze Julian and the apophatic tradition) and is not so tangible and anti-apophatic as it may appear to be. Or, more accurately, apophatic theology is not so opposed to cataphatic experience as simple definitions lead us to assume. A closer look at reason, "feleing" or sensation, and will in the *Cloud* author, in Teresa of Avila, and in Bernard of Clairvaux will help make some important connections.

The *Cloud* author in no way rejects the life of the mind associated with reason and will (130). Instead, he warns of the danger of trying to stop the natural movement of the intellect forcefully, stressing that the beginning contemplative must be
dedicated to "reading, thinking, and praying" (47). Likewise, St. Teresa of Avila teaches:

God gave us our faculties to work with, and everything will have its due reward; there is no reason then for trying to cast a spell over them—they must be allowed to perform their office until God gives them a better one.20 (emphasis added)

Also, and most germane to the above Julian quotation, is chapter 64 of the Cloud, dedicated specifically to precisely those "other principal faculties" of the soul: reason and will (130). Unless "it is enlightened by grace," reason cannot "distinguish evil from good, bad from worse, good from better . . . because now it is so blinded by original sin" (130). Likewise, the will, "the faculty by which we choose good after it has been approved by reason, and by which we love . . . desire . . . and ultimately, with complete satisfaction and consent, dwell in God, . . . cannot do this now unless it is anointed with grace . . . because of the infection of original sin" (130). Without the primary focus on and action of the will and grace of God, the human will and reason offer us no help in our desire for union. In fact, without God's grace, Julian argues, even that desire itself would be impossible: "for I am sekrir that no man askyth mercy and grace with trew menyng, but mercy and grace be first geyvin to hym" (42.44). This is the truer, more contemplative, way to interpret the seemingly simple claim Julian makes regarding her reason in respect to God's will and her own. We find the same longing of will and reason unto death emphatically recommended by the traditionally cataphatic Bernard of Clairvaux in his sermon "Of the Three Ways in Which We Love God" (the Twentieth sermon on the Song of Songs):

Love then the Lord thy God with the entire and full affection of the heart; love him with all the vigilance and all the foresight of the reason; love him with the full strength and vigor of the soul, so that for his love you would not fear even to die. . . .

Additionally, Ray Petry summarizes Bernard's teaching from chapter seven of *The Grades of Humility*, which argues that in this union of God with the soul the stain of sin is lifted:

The divine action has the initiative. Under its ministrations, the soul has been rendered spotless and without wrinkle....The will no longer fights against reason. Reason ceases to represent the truth falsely to the will. The Father joins himself to the soul in intimate espousal.

It is obvious how clearly Bernard's discussion of reason, will, and God's grace is mirrored in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and we can find in mystical writers like Thomas Merton the claim that although the Cloud author is generally considered apophatic, a "dark contemplative" or a proponent of the negative way, and Bernard is categorized as being among "the theologians of Light," the two traditions can to some degree and should be synthesized, "two sides of the same coin."

Proceeding then from the grace granted Julian to assent totally to the will of God, Chapter Three presents a very physical paragraph detailing the "death" of the lower half of her body,

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and the coming of the curate who holds before Julian the crucifix from which her mystical vision seemingly begins.

The paragraph opens with Julian describing that by the morning of the fourth day after receiving the last rites of the Church, "be than my body was dede fro the middis downewards as to my feleing" (3.3). I would like to argue that this illness is not merely the type of physical weakening that is often prefatory to and resultant from mystical experience, beyond what Edmund Colledge and James Walsh ascribe to "God's immediate preparation for her to receive the revelations which ensued,"24 not simply the interior and exterior "languor" that St. Teresa describes as often accompanying contemplative union (93). As much as, or more than any of these, it is also meant to be understood symbolically as the death of the "lower part" of Julian's personhood, that "part" of the soul the Cloud author defines as imagination and sensuality,25 "Not because you can analyze the soul into parts, for that is impossible [thus the Cloud author is not a neo-Platonist], but because these things with

25 Maria Lichtmann also makes an excellent case for reading Julian's paralysis and healing symbolically, as a "metaphorical transformation, a death to her old slothful body and a birthing of the newly soulful one." In Julian, sensuality is not forsaken for a type of angelism, instead it is renewed so that the body becomes "a principle of sensualyte in which God is present. . . . [T]he transformed body is the means through which she comes to know God. . . . a non-rational vehicle of divine perception. . . . [U]nlike those attempting to escape the prison of body, Julian sees her body as the locus of spiritual enlightenment, in other words, as the temple of the Holy Spirit." See Maria R. Lichtmann, "I Desyred a Bodyle Syght: Julian of Norwich and the Body," Mystics Quarterly 17.1 (1991): 1-2. It is precisely this pattern of crucifixion and resurrection, of division then communion, of renunciation leading to fulfillment, that accounts for the paschal character of Julian's narrative.
which they work can be analyzed, some as major [reason and will] and some as minor [imagination and sensuality]” (129). Or as Julian put it:

... our good lord will ever that we beholden us mekil more in the beholdyng of the heyer, and not levyn [or forsake] the knowing of the lower [wherein humility, vocal prayer, and asceticism occur], into the time that we be browte up above, wher we shall have our Lord Ihesus onto our mede, and ben fulfillid of ioy and bliss withoute end. (82.99-100)

Although the obvious interpretation of being "browte up above" would suggest the end of our temporal life and the fullness of seeing God's face in the beatific vision, it also refers to the life of heaven that is begun on earth in mystical contemplation, the unencumbered, inexpressible, love and "knowledge of God" beyond the natural senses that both St. Paul and Julian describe as a "third heaven":

And I know that this man—whether it was in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. (2 Cor 12: 3-4)

Julian describes the experience likewise: "the gostly sight I cannot ne may not shew it as hopinly ne as fully as I wolde" (9.11). It is notable that Julian is also like Paul when she explains her silence by specifying both the "cannot show it fully" of inability and the "may not show it openly" of impermission or divine prerogative.

Additionally, by reading that "lower death" symbolically, two possibilities for Julian in Chapter Three occur, the first rhetorical, the second spiritual. First, the paralysis of imagination and sensuality prevents Julian's more contemplative
readers from simply assuming her passion vision was an act of her imagination or a trick of her senses (an otherwise understandable conclusion, since an actual crucifix is literally directly before her eyes). Second, and perhaps more importantly, the paralysis of imagination and sensuality frees Julian's will and reason to operate beyond the limitations of feeling and fancy. Or as St. Teresa of Avila claimed of her own experience in *Interior Castle*: "I suffer when my prayer is not accompanied by suspension of the faculties, but when the faculties are suspended, I feel no pain until the suspension is over" (78). It is in this state where the senses are seemingly paralyzed or suspended that grace may now operate more exclusively within the higher part of the soul, the part of loving desire, reason, and will. Thus Julian can "be sett upright, underlenand with helpe, for to have more fredam of my herte to be at Gods will, and thinkeing on God while my life would lest" (3.3, emphases added). And although it may be difficult to prove this was Julian's intent, we find a strikingly similar reference in the *Cloud* that describes the body that has been subjected to the spirit: "For when a soul is determined to engage in this work . . . his body, which perhaps before he began tended to stoop because this was easier, now through the spirit holds itself upright, and follows physically what had been done spiritually" (127, emphasis added).26 This, I think it is fair to

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26 The idea of man's spiritual rectitude in his original state and subsequent curvature through sin goes back to St. Bernard cf *In Cant. Cant.* sermo 80, 2 (PL, 183, II66). Bernard may have been influenced in this by Luke 13,10: ' . . . and she was bent over and utterly unable to look upwards . . . ' and 13: 1. . . and instantly she was made straight." St. Bonaventure deals with the theme more in *extenso* in the *Prooemium* to *II Sent.*, 2 (II, 3 ff). The curvature caused by sin directs man to himself and the result is self-love and concupiscence. It must be healed by grace which is *charitas* and a just life without selfishness. . . ." Quoted in "Notes and Commentary," *Works of*
assume, is not so much an argument that one of the fruits of the Spirit is improved spinal posture; it is rather an attempt, first, to clarify that sensible purgation is not some Gnostic or Manichaean escape from the evil human body, and, second, to offer physical evidence and sensible analogy for St. Paul's teaching concerning life in the Spirit:

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your Spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rom 8: 9-11)

For Julian, it is precisely in that higher part of the soul (of reason, will, and especially loving desire) that the sensible universe around the spiritual truth of the crucified Christ fades away: "After this my sight began to failen and it was all derke about me in the chamber as it had be night, save in the image of the cross wherein I beheld a comon light, and I wiste not how" (3.3). It is very important to note that Julian emphasizes the failing of her sight (senses); thus the cross is no longer a typical object available to sense perception, but is a spiritual reality. Additionally, the light trained upon the cross is described as "comon," impossible to be interpreted as natural daylight merely, but the light of God, which to Julian is not extraordinary, since God's light is the reality which the human person was made to reflect, participate in, and share. It is the meaning of life, not

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something special added onto ordinary, "comon" life. Everything apart from the life within that light was "uggely to me as if it had be mekil occupyed with the fends" (3.3).

But that experience is by no means the end of Julian's purgation, illumination, and union. She must suffer an even more apophatic "death" of the upper part, a dark night of the soul, in the language of St. John of the Cross, or as the Cloud author asserts: "Just as we come most readily to spiritual knowledge through the cessation of our natural understanding, so we come to the highest knowledge of God possible by grace through the cessation of our spiritual understanding" (49). It is important to remember here that these deaths are intended to be understood symbolically, not in any way meant to imply that Julian scaled permanently each level of the heights of mystical perfection in a single night (or even to imply such a linearity as words like scale, level, and height seem to suggest), or that this type of visionary experience itself is meant as a goal for contemplatives. Yet, given the considerable development and maturation of Julian's spirituality in the years between the writing of the short and long texts of Showings, years defined by Julian's entry into the anchorhold, her schooling in solitude, obedience, and asceticism, we can fairly assume that the experience was far more than a momentary "glimpse behind the veil" but was instead an infusing of a far more sustained, and sustaining, grace. Although there is no record of how often and to what degree Julian personally experienced later in life the fullness of the revelation she received when she was thirty, the richness and depth of the long text itself, especially in regard to her teachings on sin, prayer, and higher contemplation (which make up the 14 chapters of the thirteenth revelation), stand in a very real sense as proof of that spiritual maturation and grace. In fact, in the thirteenth revelation, Julian herself suggests that continuation of her own growth in contemplation:
And then shall we, with his swete grace, in our owen meke continuat prayors, come into hym now in thys life be many privy tuchyngs of swete gostly syghts and felyng, mesurid to us as our simplehede may bere it. (43.46)

This markedly cataphatic expression of grace is accompanied by other more apophatic descriptions by Julian of a divine grace that "overpassyt al our imagyning and all that we can wenyn and thynken" (43.46) and of a contemplation so perfect "that we can pray ryth nowte but as he steryth us for the tyme" (43.46). Thus, in both experience and expression, we find Julian transcending the traditionally-held distinctions of cataphatic and apophatic contemplation.

Proceeding then from Julian's deceptively simple, yet theologically-allusive description regarding the dying of the lower part of her body in the first half of Chapter Three, we can continue to analyze Julian's death of the upper part as now both mystical revelation and, in some sense, her own personal sacrament with God, her paschal identification with the crucified and risen Christ.

After Julian recognizes the dying of the upper part, ("After this the other party of my body began to dyen so ferforth that onethys I had ony feleing [I scarcely had any feeling]" ) she writes:

And than I went sothly to have passid. And, in this, sodenly all my peyne was taken fro me and I was as hele, and namely in the other [upper] party of my body, as ever I was aforme. (3.3-4)

That Julian would feel more soundness in the "upper part" echoes the Cloud author's assertion that "all material things are subject to spiritual, and according to natural order are determined by them and not conversely" (48). It is here that
Julian most truly desires "compassion," not simply a "bodily sight nor shewing of God" (3.4); and it is here that Julian most fully receives the gift she had most wanted: by truly surrendering her will, her will is paradoxically fulfilled, not as her own will apart from God's will, but as her transformed will that, through and with Christ, is a part of God's will. "I desired to suffer with him," seeking "compassion, as a kinde soule might have with our lord Iesus" (3.4).

And thus we arrive again and finally at Christ, not through mere affective imagination or emotionally-generated pathos for his suffering, nor even through supernatural visions, locutions, or extraordinary "bodily sights," but in true union with him through the death of self that constitutes the mystical nights of sense and soul. It is then not merely through external "seeing" nor through Pelagian imitation but through paschal identification with Christ in the soul of the crucified will that dies and rises not only with Christ but through Christ and as Christ that we may say with Paul, "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20) and that we may, while remaining in the wholeness of our own createdness, say with Julian that: "I saw no difference atwixt God and our substance, but as it were al God" (54.65). Therefore, while it is in fact true when Bauerschmidt asserts that "Julian rejects any path to heaven

27 The notion of the soul being fully united and identified with God while maintaining its own identity as a creation of God is referred to by Harvey Egan as a "differentiated unity." Andrew Sprung points out that in Julian (and in her "knitting" imagery particularly) differentiated unity "implies an immanence that allows distinct coexistence within union, a thorough weaving-in and clothing-round but not, as it were, a chemical change in the substance of the human soul. Souls knit to God, again, are "as it were all God" even as they maintain the identities carved out of their wrestlings with sin." See Andrew Sprung, "'We Nevyr Shall Come Out of Him': Enclosure and Immanence in Julian of Norwich’s Book of Showings," Mystics Quarterly 19.2 (1993): 52.
which would circumvent the humanity of God made flesh, including any contemplative or affective 'technique' for spiritual advancement."²⁸ we can see that the apophaticism described by the *Cloud of Unknowing* is not only not rejected by Julian but is in fact at the very root of her paschal experience, in full participation with the teachings of the Church, the Gospel, and Pauline christology. It is not that Julian (or any true Christian contemplative) has somehow "gone beyond" Christ; instead, she has found in Christ her own truest identity. Thus, in the fullness of God's Kingdom, Christ is no longer crucified and Julian's image of her savior may shift from—though it never should be said to "transcend"—the historical humanity and death of Christ.

To exemplify this shift, one final striking comparison between Julian's and St. Teresa's expressions of contemplative experience will provide perhaps our best example. Most clearly, Julian's perceptions of the Trinity are founded upon the blessed humanity of Christ. Her first revelation describes the crucified Christ as being at the center of an "comon light," that is surrounded by the great crowd of "fends." It is striking, however, just how similar this sounds to Teresa's "interior castle" as recorded by Fray Diego de Yepes:

> [God] showed her a most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle. . . . [I]n the innermost [mansion] was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendour, illumining and beautifying them all. The nearer one got to the centre, the stronger was the light; outside the palace limits everything was foul, dark and infested with toads, vipers and other venomous creatures. (8, emphasis added)

From here it would be obvious to acknowledge the very clear connection between what is outside the castle and what is

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outside the cross: the foul, the dark, and the terrifying. We can also recognize similarities and differences between the ordinary light on the cross and the extraordinary light in the castle, and ultimately, of course, there is the striking difference between the cross and the castle themselves. From this we could draw all sorts of conclusions and perhaps even suggest Teresa's view is less rooted than Julian's in the humanity of Christ. Or, conversely, we could suggest that Julian's vision of Christ fails to emphasize the victory of the cross, implying a Christ who eternally suffers for the sins of humankind, that Teresa's vision recognizes that God is "the Light," not merely "ordinary light" and mundane, but extra-mundane, a light so perfect that it is blindness to the human understanding. All the theological debating that stems from categorizing a vision of the crucified Christ as christocentric and categorizing experiences that do not explicitly refer to the humanity of Christ as merely theocentric could be significantly reconciled with one simple conclusion. The categories are false. By looking deeper into Julian's text we find that her vision of Christ is more than on his humanity and that Teresa's understanding does not try to transcend that humanity in any way. The striking unifying vision between Julian and Teresa, what makes them truly sisters, is found in the sixteenth and final revelation of Showings. Julian is being tempted and tormented by devils who plague her with temptations and a "foule stinke" (66.82). These are clearly the same devils that surround the cross, the same as Teresa's "venomous creatures" who "emitted an insufferable odour" who themselves afflict the castle (8). It is here then that Julian presents a vivid and remarkable unity with Teresa's vision. After flying to the Church, that is the mystical Body of Christ (61.75), Julian describes her own soul, shown to her by God, as if it were a citadel:
an endles world . . . a blisfull kyngdom. . . . In the mидds of that syte sitts our lord Iesus, God and man . . . in peace and rest. . . . [A]nd the heyest lyte and the brightest shynyng of the cite is the glorious love of our lord. . . . And he will that our herts ben mytyly reysid above the deepeness of the erth and all vayne sorows, and enioyen in him. (67.82-83)

Remembering too that the love of God is God's own identity ("Who shewid it the? Love" [86.102, emphasis added]), then we can see that the light that is love is God. "And at the end of wo, sodenly our eye shall ben openyd, and in clerte of light our sight shall be full; which light is God our maker and Holy Gost in Crist Iesus our saviour" (83.100). It is then in this light that we see the citadel and the castle and the cross all as sacrament and metaphor for heaven, the soul, the Church, and the Body of Christ and these, as Julian tells us, are one and the same. For just as Julian enters, like entering a castle, the side of the crucified Christ:

We arn beclosid in the Fadir, and we arn beclosid in the Son, and we Arn beclosid in the Holy Gost; and the Fadir is beclosid in us, and the Son is beclosid in us, and the Holy Gost is beclosid in us: almythyhede, al wisdam, al goodnes, one God, one Lord. (54.65)