In England during the Middle Ages, the church was a strong force, and most religious believers expressed their experiences communally. Although public performances of prayers, readings, and hymns held important roles in medieval Christianity, by the fourteenth century, private devotion also began to alter religious experience in England. Through personal piety and devotion, lay and clerical believers developed important aspects of medieval religious experience particularly by seeking a mystical connection with God. The mystical experience is communion with the divine, what Evelyn Underhill defines as a “conscious union with a living Absolute” (73). This kind of personal devotion expressed a new, emotional spirituality that the governing church could not offer. Nicholas Watson notices that this expressive type of theology was especially practiced by women within the church: “English nuns and anchoresses were clearly encouraged by their male directors to cultivate a sense of the immediate presence of Christ, their spouse and lover, and a strongly emotional response to that presence” (647). Whether male or female, Underhill identifies that “the true mystic is the person in whom such powers transcend the merely artistic and visionary stage [...] to the point of genius” where “transcendental consciousness” dominates “the normal consciousness” which is surrendered “to the embrace of Reality” (75). An important English mystic, Julian of Norwich, embodies the pursuit of a connection with the divine that surpasses the human experience and reaches the “point of genius” in her mystical encounter.
Julian lived as an anchoress, separated from the world and dedicated to prayer and contemplation. While she was figuratively “dead” to the world, Julian welcomed visitors into her home for spiritual guidance and played an important role in the religious community of Norwich. When she was thirty, Julian experienced a severe illness that almost ended her life. During the time of the sickness, Julian received visions or “showings” from God that led her to a distinct and deep understanding of faith. Julian recorded her visions and theological speculations in *A Book of Showings*. Although a deeply personal work, *A Book of Showings* speaks to a people yearning for a true communion with the divine. In a time when the English believe in harsh punishment and retribution for sin, Julian of Norwich presents a merciful philosophy of God through her attitude towards sickness, sin, and, most powerfully, in her descriptions of the Trinity.

Through numerous investigations, scholars illuminate Julian’s power of language and nuance in relating a personal experience. Jay Ruud notices the difficulty in using language to present a mystical experience: “For Julian, as for most mystics, the experience of ultimate reality is ineffable. It is a transcendent truth that must be spiritually experienced, and cannot be reduced to the narrow confinement of language, the tool of human logic” (232). However, others scholars believe that through contemplation in the years after her contemplation on her illness, Julian adeptly relates her experiences. F.C. Bauer Schmidt notes that Julian avoids the difficulty of relating the mystical encounter by approaching “Christ’s body as a ‘text’ from which she must ‘read’ the divine nature” (84). By intellectually investigating her visions, Julian provides a nuanced and logical commentary on Christ’s suffering and its meaning to believers. For Eric Colledge, Julian’s greatness comes through “her exceptional independence of such external influence, that her ‘Revelations’ are a singularly pure distillation of her own experiences of
mystical rapture, sanctified by long years of prayerful meditation” (84). In her writings, Julian reveals a clear personal consciousness, but also extends her understanding to others. While she is a part of a visionary tradition, Julian’s “own revelation resolutely (and significantly) refuse[s] to conform to literary type – blossoming instead into what can be characterized as a dialogic, imagistically spare, and theologically dense visionary argument which, taken as a whole, is without structural precedent or parallel” (Watson 650). Through her layered investigation and detailed expression of her experience, Julian of Norwich holds an important place with mystical tradition, but also develops new aspects of mystical writing.

As many scholars notice, Julian represents traditional religious values, yet her work travels beyond the borders of ordinary expressions. Karen Armstrong asserts that although Julian does establish some revolutionary ideas, “she remained a loyal daughter of Mother Church and stayed in seclusion for the rest of her life” (176). In her text, Julian never strays from accepted beliefs, and reveals that she is “a person steeped in biblical thought, particularly that of the New Testament” (Sister Mary Paul 11). As an anchoress, Julian grasps great knowledge of Biblical writings and she is also deeply versed in writings of English and Continental mystics. Tarjei Park also identifies Julian’s conventional methods: “In many respects where Julian seems to be revolutionary, she is so by traditional Christian doctrine. Julian sees herself as being a teacher of Holy Church, and she is quite emphatic about this” (80). Julian reveals a great humbleness towards her own writings and visions, which helps to soften the daring of her theology. However, Armstrong determines that Julian believes “her revelations had not been bestowed upon her for herself but for everybody” and “her book asked Christians to take a deeper look at some of their religious beliefs” (176). While Julian’s experience is deeply individual, she remains a daughter of the church, offering her vision as a way to deepen faith, rather than alter it.
Further, Park believes that, while not straying from doctrinal belief, Julian “moves away from a tradition which sees our sensuality as being an aspect of our humanity that is outside the rational soul, and hence unspiritual. For Julian, sensuality is unified to our spiritual substance by the union achieved by Christ in his Incarnation” (Park 80). Julian utilizes her sensual experience, her vision, to expound on important theological issues. While her work presents new metaphors for Christian thinking, Julian grounds them in deep theological thought that provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Trinity and humanity.

In *A Book of Showings*, Julian uses a distinct theological approach to issues in the Church, particularly sin and love. Although her ideology is different than other medieval Christian thinkers, Bernard McGinn asserts that “Julian’s mystical message is rooted in the Pauline theology of sin, grace, and redemption in Jesus, especially in the notion of the solidarity of humanity in Christ” (239). Her message builds upon common and accepted concepts to reveal a deeper understanding of sin and love. Kevin Madill notices that in Julian’s theology, “sin is the cause of pain and suffering,” an attitude common in Medieval theology (102). Yet, she creates a new vision of the connection between God and humans. Against Augustinian belief of sin, David Aers asserts that “Julian never represents sin as ‘a pervasity of will,’ as rebellion against the grace of God, as disobedience to God’s gift of covenant” (155). Rather, “For […] Julian there is a higher part of the soul that never falls but continues its divine contemplation even though the fallen part of the soul is quite unaware of this” (157). Julian establishes that Christians can always have a connection with the divine, through deliberate actions and reflection, even though humans are sinners. For Julian, sin is not a matter of personal punishment and repentance, but an opportunity to understand the grace of God. Sister Benedicta recognizes that, for Julian, “awareness of sin and self-abasement is not […] a matter of psychological or personal guilt; it is
rather a deep theological awareness of the infinite glory of God, and of contrast of the horror of any sin which offends against it” (28). Julian deepens her understanding of sin and its purpose, and finds that God uses sin to reveal salvation. Through her nuanced notions of sin, Julian’s theology becomes exceptionally simple, paring down her layered thoughts and visionary experiences to one word: love. Bauer Schmidt offers that Julian’s vision presents a “revelation in which both the medium and the message is the love of God taking flesh in the crucified humanity of Jesus. The seemingly simple ‘meaning’ of the revelation – love – can only be understood when it remains inextricably bound to the image of love seen in the cross” (86). Through distinct theological investigation, Julian achieves an idea of love that is important in Biblical tradition and recognizes and important connection between the Jesus’ experience on the cross and the human experience.

In a time when the English viewed the plague and other diseases as punishment for sin, mystics, specifically Julian, view sickness as a manner to connect to the suffering of Jesus. Prior to her visions, Julian desires “three graces by the gift of God,” the second being a “bodily sickness” (482). She explains her purpose by saying, “I desired to suffer with [Jesus], living in my mortal body, as God would give me grace” (484). While a human has difficulty grasping the divine nature of the God, mystics understand illness as a way to transcend above the human experience. Although within the mystic tradition, Julian’s prayer for sickness allows her an opportunity to receive a vision beyond the borders of the human realm. Her sickness becomes a manner to understand and experience the suffering of Jesus and she recognizes her illness as a “gift.” Her attitude demonstrates that can provide understanding of the suffering of Jesus, a connection with the divine many medieval believers desire. In Julian’s eyes, God utilizes sickness, something that most think of in negative terms, in a positive way. While sick, Julian
receives visions from God that allow her a deeper understanding of the passion and Christianity as a whole. Sickness aligns the mystic Julian with Jesus, and provides them a different understanding of how God operates and his divine nature. Julian views God not as a punisher, but a powerful being that can use anything, even sickness, to help a believer experience a connection with Jesus’ suffering, which emphasizes the love of God.

In contrast to typical Medieval ideas, Julian also holds a different, but interesting interpretation of sin that reveals a merciful outlook on God. Always within the tradition of the church, Julian realizes the requirement of sin because of human nature and the original fall. Further, she determines in her work that “sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well” (489). Many scholars investigate Julian’s positive statement about sin, and interpret it as a declaration of universal salvation. However, one cannot simply reduce her statement to this motive. Rather, it connects to David Aers assertion, that, according to Julian, there is two parts of the soul, one that falls and one that remains in communion with God. These ideas illuminate Julian’s conviction that “all will be well.” First, Julian believes that church members never truly lose a connection with God. Therefore, God is always a part of the human soul and he does not reject humans even though they sin, which is a knowing denial of God. Here, Julian presents a merciful image of God, in which he loves so much that he never leaves believers. Julian repeats herself later in the chapter, “It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well” (490). Once again she repeats the phrase, “all will be well” in order to emphasize her assertion that through God, humans are saved. In parallel with her view on sickness, Julian believes that God utilizes and allows sin to reveal his grace and power. Her idea is reminiscent of Romans 6:23, which states, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”
(878). Therefore, Julian remains within Biblical teaching, yet provides readers with a different image of punishment than most Medieval English believers. While God does punish for sin, he also provides the ultimate “gift” through which believers can be free from the punishment. Through her descriptions of humans connection with God and how God can use sin to reveal grace, Julian reminds the English believers that God is truly merciful.

In a powerful argument for God’s mercy and love, Julian offers a complex series of images of God as father and mother. She writes, “God is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord” (491). Modern readers can easily accept the image of God as father, but the vision of God as mother is quite strange. The image of God as father connotes the idea of protector, like a shepherd taking care of his sheep, a vision that occurs throughout biblical tradition. In contrast to modern thinking, for Julian and other mystics, the image of God as mother has a potent meaning. In her writing, Julian discusses the role of the mother: “The mother’s service is nearest, readiest and surest: nearest because it is most natural, readiest because it is most loving, and surest because it is truest” (493). Simply, in daily English life, the mother is the caregiver, one who is constantly nurturing her children. In Medieval English religion, the mother signifies a natural being, a blessed being, wrapped fully in love. Further, Julian assigns three words to the vision of God as mother, which reveals the threefold substance of God. While God as a whole is mother, each part of the Trinity holds its own aspect of mother. Furthermore, Julian notices the power that the word mother expresses: “This fair lovely word ‘mother’ is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things” (494). Here, Julian utilizes another idea of a mother, as one who brings life. Like a mother, God created Adam and Eve as his children, giving them life. Julian
reveals that God contains both the aspect of mother and father, life and caregiver, and protector. Her dual idea of God connects to the Biblical verse Zephaniah 3:17 in which the author states, “The Lord your God is with you,/ he is might to save,/ he will take great delight in you,/ he will quiet you with his love” (734). The image of God as father reveals a being who is “mighty to save,” but the image of God as mother brings to mind someone who will “quiet you with his love,” like a mother cradling a baby in her arms. In both images, Julian demonstrates God’s desire to care for believers. As life-giver, caregiver, and protector, Julian’s beautiful, complex image of God allows for a merciful interpretation of Him.

Continuing with her image of God as mother, Julian specifically employs the act of breastfeeding and to provide a deeper understanding of God’s mercy. First Julian establishes the God gives humans Jesus, as a connection who appeals to humans’ “sensuality” (492). Within this view of Jesus, Julian writes, “The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life” (493). Therefore, not only does God (or Jesus as part of God) provide love and care for his believers, but he also sustains them. In a time when disease runs rampant and many die young, the image of God as sustainer is particularly powerful. Here, Julian offers a nuanced and theologically deep belief in God. While many believe God does physically sustain humans by providing food, Julian reveals that he also spiritually sustains believers through the “blessed sacrament” which provides “true life.” To Julian, the aspect of spiritual sustainment is much more poignant than a physical sustenance. Through God’s food, believers receive forgiveness for sins, and ultimately a blessed life in heaven. By utilizing the image of a breastfeeding mother, Julian reveals an image of God who
nourishes believers in a way that provides them a path to Heaven. Julian logically and brilliantly offers a recognizable image of God that establishes a nuanced understanding of God’s mercy.

Throughout her narrative, Julian weaves the idea of God’s love, which further develops her merciful philosophy of Him. Julian first does this through an image of God as husband: “And in the joining and the union he is our very true spouse and we his beloved wife and his fair maiden, with which wife he was never displeased; for he says: I love you and you love me, and our love will never divide in two” (491). Julian establishes marriage as a union based on love, and compares the institution of marriage to the great union between God and his believers. Therefore, Julian bases the relationship between God and his believers on love, yet also establishes that God is “never displeased” with his followers. Julian’s assertion further establishes that God’s love for his believers requires him to be merciful towards them. The Bible contains many instances of the image of God’s marriage to the church, but the idea that God is “never displeased” with his followers reminds readers of the story of Hosea and his wife Gomer. As Hosea always accepts his wife back after multiple instances of unfaithfulness, the Lord continuously loves his believers, even through transgressions. Julian’s image of God as husband with unfailing love has biblical basis, and continues to affirm her merciful message of God. Because she employs a variety images of human love, Julian connects her images to all believers, not just male or female.

By the end of her writing, Julian fully develops notions of God that establish merciful visions of him, but in the final chapter of her narrative, she clearly demonstrates the Biblical notion that “God is love” (947). Julian writes:

“And from the time that it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual
understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.” (497)

After revealing her visions through logical arguments and beautiful figurative language, Julian comes to the conclusion that “love was his meaning.” Although she does discuss the ideas of sin, sickness, and other negative aspects of human experience, Julian reveals the true nature of her visions, which establishes a merciful outlook on God. Her complex argument, which is written in eighty-six chapters, ends in a simple, but powerful statement of love. Further, she tells readers to “Remain in this,” which reveals her belief that to remain in God’s love offers the holiest connection with Him. In her final chapter, Julian pares down her multifaceted argument to a simple belief that “love was his meaning,” which illuminates her merciful vision of God.

While many Medieval English believers held to the Augustinian ideas of sin, Julian of Norwich offers a merciful view of God. First, Julian asks God to give her a bodily sickness, in which God not only shows mercy through healing Julian, but also he uses the sickness as a way to reveal himself. Further, Julian discusses the necessity of sin, yet also how God utilizes sin as a way to reveal his merciful grace. In her images of God as mother and father, Julian deepens her merciful and loving ideology by demonstrating how God protects and cares for his “children.” Finally, she comes to the conclusion that “love was his meaning,” which reveals her true merciful vision of God. Throughout her narrative, Julian remains humble, and understands the limitations of human understanding. She writes “And in these same words I saw hidden in God an exalted and wonderful mystery, which he will make plain and we shall know in heaven. In this knowledge we shall truly see the cause why he allowed sin to come, and in this sight we
shall rejoice forever” (490). Even though she contemplates on her visions for fifteen years, she still does not totally understand what they mean. Julian writes about her visions in a clear structured manner, even thought there are limitations to human experience and language. Julian serves as a model for modern Christian believers in the manner she approaches her faith. Julian understands that belief in God requires “mystery,” which, for intelligentsia, is a difficult realization to accept. In A Book of Showings, Julian approaches her faith intelligently and logically, but ultimately arrives to a meaning of love, and offers love as a cover to the mystery of faith.
Works Cited


