Julian of Norwich, a mystic living in England during the fourteenth century, composed a unique theology for her time period. The visions Julian immortalized in her book, A Revelation of Love, offered a different interpretation on God’s love in comparison to other theologians both during and after her time. Julian was never widely spread due to her gender and most likely because of the radical ideas entailed in her work. Thus, for most of the time following her death she has been widely ignored. This is not something Julian had intended for her work and it was her hope that her book would be read by many a diverse audience. In the 20th century, however, Julian’s work was rediscovered and her desire for widespread testimony was met. Her visions focused on God’s love, the sanctity of sin, and the reverence of motherhood rather than the focus on intellect and extreme self discipline that was widely accepted during medieval times; this paper will examine her work and discuss the possible impact it could have made on Christianity had it been studied and applied during her time.

Julian was born in 1342 in Norwich, England (Watson). According to Nicholas Watson, Professor of English at Harvard University, and Jacqueline Jenkins, Associate Professor of English at the University of Calgary, little is known about Julian. It is known that she was an anchoress; she enclosed herself in a room adjoining St. Julian’s church in Norwich, England (Watson) where her name is derived from. Christopher Abbott of Oxford University explains that after joining the convent, Julian asked God for three things: to have a better understanding of Christ’s passion, to suffer bodily sickness, and to have three wounds (Abbott). “The younger Julian ‘s devotion to the person of Christ is principally characterized by a desire to be emotionally stirred to love him through as vivid as possible an inner realization of his suffering,” (Abbott 48). Julian desperately wanted her own understanding of Jesus’ love and thus she begged God to show her the pain of Jesus Christ. God granted her these desires; Julian fell very ill and in her feverish state had sixteen visions. She then became an anchoress and dictated these visions to a scribe in English rather than Latin. This act made Julian the first known woman to write a book in English. Julian chose this language because she (unlike others who believed God was for the educated man) wanted to reach
out to the lay people (Abbott). Julian’s passion alone would have caused a change in the mentality of those who wanted to analyze the Bible surgically and without emotion. In addition, Julian’s chosen language for her book would have reached a further audience in England than the Latin counterparts. It is from her visions themselves, however, that Julian’s true impact would have been made.

Julian’s visions created a strong bond between her and God. “Julian ‘hears’ the words of God…these words do much to establish and sustain the intimate, friendly nature of the relationship between Julian and her creator,” (Beer 139). Through the “shewings” (showings, or visions) she “came to [understand] six things: first is the tokens of his blessed passion, the second is the maiden that is his most dear Mother; the third is the blessed Godhead that ever was and is and shall be—all-might, all-wisdom, and all-love; the fourth is everything he hath made—for well I know that heaven and earth and all that is made is great and large and fair and good; the fifth is that he that made all that is made, made it for love—and by the same love it is kept, and shall be, without end, as it is before said; the sixth is that God is all that is good, as I see it—and the goodness that all things have, it is he,” (Walsh 59-60). These understandings that Julian came to know carry the bearing of changing common thought in Christian theology and will be examined in the coming paragraphs.

The first bit of knowledge that Julian came to understand was “the tokens of [Christ’s] blessed passion”. Common theology is that Jesus Christ died for the sins of man to take our punishment and did so in sorrow. The lay Christian would also not study in detail the excessive suffering that Jesus underwent in order to pay for the sins of man. Julian, however, “from each [showing] of Christ’s pain she extracts the message of Christ’s love,” (Beer 141). The vision of Jesus with his crown of thorns and the wounds on his side did not bring her sadness but ardor for her savior because Julian “saw that the love which he hath to our soul was so strong in him that he willfully he chose his passion with great desire; and meekly he suffered it with great joy,” (Walsh 81). Julian was graphic in writing and the sight of the savior as a broken being touched her deeply as is evident when she writes, “As long as I saw this sight of the plenteous bleeding of the head, I could not stint of these words—‘Lord, bless us’. Jesus Christ loved her and all humanity dearly and thus he suffered on the cross with a glad heart because he could rejoin his followers after their death. Julian’s book here would have influenced Christian thought in many ways. The first is the raw description of Jesus’ wounds and his suffering as she saw it. This would cause believers to gain a better picture of Jesus and all that he suffered for them. In addition, Julian’s idea that Christ took this punishment willfully and with joy would further enforce the idea and strength of Jesus’ love. This concept was greatly lacking in medieval literature.
Perhaps the most controversial revelation in consideration of her time was the position of Mary in the church and, by association, motherhood in general: “the maiden that is his most dear Mother” (Walsh 59). Julian also knows that Mary was holy when she writes” and we pray him by the sweet love of the Mother that bore him; but all the love that we have because of her—it is of his goodness” (Walsh 55). Julian is praising Mary for Jesus’ safe birth and the love that she taught him. The religious commentators of and before this time did not share Julian’s view of the divinity of Mary. This is important to remember when considering her revelations. Sir Thomas Aquinas, the famous medieval theologian, “considers women to be weaker and more inclined to sin than men both in nature and in body” (Ferrante 101). He also writes that “that the only women mentioned [in the genealogy of Christ] are sinners in order to show that Christ came to redeem sinners” (Ferrante 102). Thomas Aquinas, in short, believes in the subservience of woman and the holiness of God the Father, not God the holy Parent (as Julian appears to see God). In addition, “… the virgin Mary is put down… She no doubt received the gifts of wisdom, miracles, and prophesy in high degree…but not to use them…to contemplate, as benefitted her condition of life, i.e. her sex” (Ferrante 101). Mary is, as already ascertained, simply the vessel through which Jesus Christ came to Earth. According to Joan M. Ferrante, Professor of English at Columbia University, women are depicted in clergy literature as “tools of higher…forces, alien even to the men who write about them” (Ferrante 100). This evidence shows that the world Julian lives in is in fact male dominated and this domination carried over into religious analysis that renders women like Julian unholy and sinful. Julian rejects this idea with her book; she writes that “The mother’s service is nearest, readiest, and surest: nearest for it is the most natural, readiest because it is the most loving, and most sure since it is the most faithful “ (Thiébaux 455). Julian believes, as is evident in this quote from A Divine Revelation, that the mother’s role in raising a child was incalculably important. It is interesting to note that Julian is not a mother, yet she still understands and values the importance of a mother’s duty to her child. Julian also states that “This fair, lovely word ‘mother’ is so sweet and natural and kind in itself that it cannot be truly said about anyone to anyone but about him and to him who is the true mother of life and all. To the property of motherhood belongs nature, love, and wisdom, and knowing – and this is God” (Thiébaux 456). This comparison of a mother’s attributes to the holiness of God is a radical idea. Julian is affirming that God, instead of being only a Father figure, is also a Mother figure. “Julian reveals that God’s nature is inherently motherly: God acts towards humanity as mother because God is mother,” (Reinhard 630). This calls into importance the things that mothers must do, namely nurturing, protecting, and teaching. Though these things were always women’s job,
Julian is postulating that these jobs are on par with the holiness of God. She also reinstates the importance of Mary by saying that “Lady Saint Mary...is, the high wisdom and truth that she had in the beholding of our maker” (Walsh 57). This comes into significance when considering the religious views of the Holy Men who ran opinion in the land in which Julian lives. Julian believed that Mary was to be glorified more than she was because she bore and raised the Christ child. The fact that the Lord chose Mary to raise Jesus Christ enforced in Julian’s mind the holiness of motherhood. In addition, “The Virgin is a true and universal paradigm of God’s love for everyone,” (Abbott 163) because God chose a woman to raise his son.

Julian, however, does not discredit the idea of God the father. She instead pairs the role of mother and father on an equal playing field. It is important to remember that “Julian’s theology does not replace a patriarchal father but completes him” (Reinhard 644) and that this is not a feminist treatise on a holy and all together female God. Julian writes that “God is a father, endlessly pleased with his children. He is a mother, too, always willing to help and, if need be, discipline them” (Watson 2). Thus equal importance is placed on both parental roles, an entirely different role than that which was commonly accepted and taught. In addition, “It is important to note that Julian is not the first person in Christendom to imagine God as mother....Isaiah describes God’s ‘enduring labor pains to bring forth new life, “ (Reinhard 630), but such Biblical imagery was not commonly known due to illiteracy and/or largely ignored in the stead of male theology. Finally, “Julian’s fresh and balanced images assure us that seeking a feminine image of God within Christian Orthodoxy is not a passing cultural fad” (Boris 21) but something that must be considered. Had Julian been widely read throughout Europe, her ideas would have caused a cultural revolution as both woman and men are considered important and not one over the other.

The third consideration of Julian “is the blessed Godhead that ever was and is and shall be—all-might, all-wisdom, and all-love” (Walsh 59). This assertion on “all-love” is important to consider. Throughout Christian history, God has been considered dark and eager to punish the human beings on Earth who are bathed in sin; Julian, however, offers a different interpretation of God. “Christ came to the aid of sensuality, to comfort it; and he comforts it again in giving Julian her revelation, which reenacts the Passion to show its true meaning: ‘alle shalle be wele’. This promise tantalizingly suggests that all humanity will gain salvation,” (Watson 2). Julian affirms that God will love his creation because of Christ’s passion and will not punish them. She reaffirms his promises to protect us in his might and wisdom and by so doing reasserts the power of God. This would have changed the face of God from one of punishment to one of love.

The next insight that Julian has to offer further establishes Christ’s
love for humanity. Julian writes that “everything [God] hath made—for well I know that heaven and earth and all that is made is great and large and fair and good,” (Walsh 60). This idea of God’s goodness in all of creation casts a different theory onto the subject of sin. Instead of viewing it as the scourge of humanity, Julian considers it to be a blessing in that sin draws humanity closer to their pure and perfect God. “She advises that, should we fall into sin, we should not hide from God in shame but run to God for comfort and healing,” (Boris 21) and by so doing further come to understand the almighty God. This idea, had Julian been widely accepted, would have created a different language one uses when considering God. “[God] instructs [Julian] not to contemplate the damage caused by sin, but rather the positive effect of the passion, the glorious reparation,” (Beer 145) and it is this reparation that is the gift God intended by allowing man to fall. In Julian’s theology, people would not be expected to nor would they clothe themselves in shame when they inevitably sinned; rather they would go to God with the knowledge that they are made in his goodness and his lightness. This would have also put more focus on the here and now instead of looking to the afterlife because humanity would be expected to enjoy all of God’s creation in its goodness.

The fifth showing is one that takes the fourth to the final level. Julian believes that the God “that made all that is made, made it for love—and by the same love it is kept, and shall be, without end, as it is before said” (Walsh 60). God’s love is infinite and deep even though humans are bound to fall from is perfection. This means that regardless of human failings, God will love all. With this same token, humans are to practice this same love for all of humanity. “The love of God that unites us so completely….also bonds us as brothers and sisters” (Reinhard 645) and as such humans should not be susceptible to hating one another. The Christian faith is intended to bind its followers together, regardless of sex. Considering the Crusades that went on both before and after Julian’s life and the sexism that ran rampant through medieval times, her ‘love to all’ theory could have been applied and might have stopped many a bloody war as well as broken the sexist theories of the likes of Aquinas.

The final concept that Julian learns is “that God is all that is good, as I see it—and the goodness that all things have, it is he” (Walsh 60). This idea is revolutionary in that it frees God from Christian theology. Not just the words written in the Bible are good; things outside it that are good must be from God because of his goodness. In addition, this means that God is joy. Julian says that “I did not see Christ laugh; nevertheless it pleases him that we laugh for our own comfort,” (Beer 144) and as such things that bring humanity joy are not evil just because they were not written in the Bible or mentioned in a creed; they are good because God is. Finally, Julian says that” God is all that is
good, as I see it. And God hath made all that is made; and thus he that loveth the whole—all his even-christians—for God, loveth all that is” (Walsh 61). This returns to the concept that Christians are instructed to love one another because God says so and they should never pass judgment on each other. This is also radical to her time because Christians, as they do today, judge one another instead of spreading God’s love. Perhaps if she had been considered there would have been more love throughout Christian theology.

Julian’s message truly showed her love and understanding of God and Jesus Christ. She wrote her visions down in hopes that others would come to understand the same six key things that she did. “Thus Julian is a link in the chain of love descending from God; and as she passes on the message of divine love we also come to feel the tender love she has for us all,” (Beer 142) but that does not mean that she wants us to not have any relationship with God or that we have to be an anchor to do so. Julian wanted all to develop their own relationship with God; she did not want Christians to use an intermediary as many were doing but instead seek God on their own. “God’s love is stressed repeatedly throughout the Showings, and, at its end, is declared to be the meaning of her revelation,” (Boris 22). Julian simply wanted Christians to comprehend the vastness of God’s love for them and this message could have derailed the entire concept that God was a vengeful one, requiring indulgences and sanctions for ones sins. If Julian had been widely read, perhaps the Reformation would have occurred two hundred years earlier.

Julian was, however, not widely read, excluding a few monks, and her fame came more from the oracle mentality surrounding her. People came to visit her because God spoke through her, but they did not seek her out for her wisdom. “Julian’s pastoral intention is discrete but unmistakable. Her concern for interiorized religion finally and crucially expresses itself as a concern for the ups and downs...of the spiritual life as experienced by actual individuals,” (Abbott 177) but she was never considered any sort of religious authority because of her sex. It is important to note this when considering her teachings.

Julian acknowledged that she was a woman. In her first opening statements, Julian tells the reader that “She is no teacher, but a ‘woman, unlettered, feeble and frail’” (Walsh 2). Julian knew the boundaries of her society and also knew that she would never be widely spread though she desperately wanted to share the love of God through her work. Her visions gave her a unique perspective on God “[a]nd it is precisely through the a deepened perception of the equable and unifying love of Christ in the Church that Julian finds herself – a woman, a non-cleric -- free to address her readers with an authority of charity “ (Abott 76). Julian’s understanding was that God loved women and could speak through them just as readily as he could a man. This act is her final gift to the world. Julian was reclaiming women’s
consideration of God by writing and producing her work. Julian is no doubt aware of this fact when she compiled her revelations. She makes note in the revelations acknowledging her sex, “Because I am a woman,” she writes, “should I therefore believe that I ought not to tell you about the goodness of God?” (Walsh 2). According to Father John Walsh, Julian is asserting that it is not to be considered odd that these visions are coming through her. She is reclaiming the holiness of women from men like Thomas Aquinas and other religious fathers who disliked her theories (Walsh). Julian's theories and very act of writing her opinions showed that she believed in equality and love of women and that the church should accept such things as well.

This paper is not meant to overestimate in the power of one woman's writing in a time when mass produced books were scarce and illiteracy was felt more widely than the Black Plague; the purpose is merely to point out the way that Julian was not accepted and the fact that she tried to reach many Christians to teach a new message that could have changed their faith entirely. Julian preached having a personal relationship with God that completely negates the purpose of having any form of an intercessor. Churches taught that only the holiest could speak directly to God, but her teachings erase the need for such an entity. In addition, her strong belief in the love of God and his willingness to forgive renders indulgences unnecessary; this was another staple in Church doctrine. The position of woman was also considered to be lesser than that of a man and the Virgin herself was not as important. Julian wrote with the hopes of changing these notions. If Julian had been read during her time it is possible that widespread changes would have occurred throughout the church instead of the Reformation that occurred two hundred years after her life had ended.

Works Cited


