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## THOMAS MERTON AND JULIAN OF NORWICH: MYSTICISM AND UNIVERSALISM OF SALVATION\*

Great culture of the spirit is shaped by people who are open, capable of understanding and compassionate for others. Mystics belong to this category. They can cross over any religious and confessional divisions. A mystic is far from being a bitter recluse, devoid of the sense of human solidarity. Quite the opposite, his spiritual experience allows him to find the deepest bonds between people. He is able to discover that beauty, which is a herald of their ultimate rescue and transformation. Those who read the mystics' witness thoroughly will find in it a rejection of all fundamentalisms or narrowness of spirit. They will discover mercy and compassion encompassing all people and all creatures.

In this witness there is great wisdom of the view of the world and the human lot, wisdom releasing from exclusivism and overconfidence in oneself. This wisdom is born out of a deep experience of community and solidarity among people. Thus the mystic's witness is enormously edifying. Thomas Merton and Julian of Norwich have helped me to reach deeper into the wisdom of hope for the salvation of all.

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\* Transl. by A. Muranty.

### 1. Eschatological sophiology of Thomas Merton

A few years ago it came to me as a surprise to discover that there had been a point in Thomas Merton's life when he derived his eschatological intuitions from reflections on the Catholic feast of the Visitation of Our Lady, "Day of Wisdom" (2 July). This truth relating to the cult of the Virgin Mary became for him a starting point for reflections whose depth I had had no inkling of. In his spiritual experience this American mystic finds the flawless primal beginning of every human being. For him it constitutes a mysterious *le point vierge* – virginal point of all creation's roots in God, free of sin or fall. However, it is not only a starting point, but also a target, something like a house made of light, where every human being is to return after their pilgrimage. What the mystic discovers to his astonishment and gratitude, is that the beginning finds its counterpart in the final fulfilment. At the end of the pilgrimage everything will be pure, innocent, and unblemished again. This is the basic intuition of Merton's hope for universal salvation.

What is this "virginal point" of all being? In the very centre of humanity the American Trappist discovers the miracle of pure truth, primeval receptivity of created being, the divine spark that belongs to God entirely. It is not our property. We are not free to dispose of it as we wish. The pure and unblemished glory of the Creator is reflected in the very centre of humanity. We are utterly poor on our own. God enters our lives where, despite many falls, there still shines the pure truth of creativity and receptivity.

In this respect Merton's vision reminds me of the sophiology of Russian philosophers and theologians (W. Soloviov, S. Bulgakov). He too, develops a distinctive sophiology of creation. Every human being is, to his eyes, a reflection of divine wisdom – *Hagia Sophia*, which radiates incredible inner beauty. It is not the showy wisdom of the world, but the unblemished, quiet, inner truth of every creation that had been made by the hand of God. Divine wisdom penetrates the whole creation from its beginning to the end. Therefore it is not surprising that, following the great prophets of Israel – Isaiah and Hosea, Merton discovers maternal features in God, the primal source of all purity and innocence of creation. In his reflections appears a biblical image of Wisdom "playing on the surface of his earth" (Prv 8, 31) before the face of Creator. What is Divine Wisdom? The answer, included in the poem devoted to "The Holy Wisdom" (*Hagia Sophia*), is as follows:

Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, in herself, all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being in grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness *tamquam a Domini Spiritu*<sup>1</sup>.

This transformation of darkness into light is in itself a paschal event; *pascha* – i.e. a passage of creation into another dimension of being. This act of transformation from "brightness to brightness", "from glory to glory", worked by "the Lord who is the Spirit" is a clear reference to the Apostle Paul's writings (2 Cor 3, 18). Merton's vision of transformation allows one to see that everything is suffused with glory, brightness, tender goodness and the mercy of God. The very first words of the poem confirm this:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura Naturans*<sup>2</sup>.

It is Wisdom which can be compared to sunlight: "The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God [...] His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by *Hagia Sophia*"<sup>3</sup>. Wisdom is for everyone, without exception. There is no passivity in it whatsoever. We recognise it by its actions. It is "the candor of God's light"<sup>4</sup>, a sign of His simplicity, mercy and forgiveness.

Thus Wisdom cries out to all who will hear (*Sapientia clamitat in plateis*) and she cries out particularly to the little, to the ignorant and the helpless<sup>5</sup>.

The heart of the matter is that "we do not hear mercy", "we do not hear the uncomplaining pardon"<sup>6</sup>. We do not comprehend God who "is at once Father and Mother":

<sup>1</sup> Th. Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 366.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 364.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 365.

As Father he stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. We call her His "glory". In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love.<sup>7</sup>

At this point Merton calls on the tradition of "the recluses of fourteenth-century England", mainly Julian of Norwich, who called Jesus "our Mother"<sup>8</sup>. He adds: "It was Sophia that had awakened in their childlike hearts". He attempts to describe it in insufficient human terms:

Perhaps in a certain very primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. Perhaps she is even the Divine Nature, One in Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And perhaps she is in infinite light unmanifest, not even waiting to be known as Light. This I do not know. Out of the silence Light is spoken. We do not hear it or see it until it is spoken.<sup>9</sup>

An awareness of the boundaries of human consciousness is clearly discernible here. In Eastern tradition this attitude is known as apophatism. How else can one speak of "the Nameless Beginning, without Beginning", which we haven't seen? We know only the manifestations of God's deeds. We multiply words without reaching the inner depths of the Unspeakable Reality. A mystic is no exception in this respect. He struggles with the words, too. *Hagia Sophia* is a Gift, God's Life shared with the creatures, self-sharing Love and Brightness, which transform and unify all.

Sophia is Gift, is Spirit, *Domum Dei*. She is God-given and God Himself as Gift. God is all and God reduced to Nothing: inexhaustible nothingness. *Exinanivit semetipsum*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 367.

<sup>8</sup> In middle ages it can be seen particularly in Cistercian abbots (St. Bernard, Gueric d'Igny, Isaac de Stella), who in this manner understood their duty towards the monastic community entrusted them. Cf. C. Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. More on this subject in: W. Hryniewicz, *Chrześcijaństwo nadziei. Przyszłość wiary i duchowości chrześcijańskiej*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002, pp. 299-303.

<sup>9</sup> *Hagia Sophia*, p. 367.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 368.

The last words express kenotic wisdom showing through Christ's mystery: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself (lit. *ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσε*), taking the form of the slave..." (Phil 2, 6-7). Expressed in the language of emptiness, Paul's brilliant intuition about God who in Christ gave up His divinity, found unique expression in Merton's mystical reflections. The language of completeness suggests power, glory and richness. The language of emptiness expresses the mystery of God's coming to man through the reversed motion, not by completeness, but by emptying and self-restriction. It is the language of love and invitation to take part in the celebration of unity with God. This is why the motif of the Wedding Feast plays such an important role in Merton's poem.

For him Christ's Mother is the created being which reveals all that is hidden within Divine Sophia – which is why she can be said to be "a personal manifestation of Sophia, Who in God is *Ousia* rather than Person"; "perfect Creature, perfectly Redeemed, the Fruit of all God's great power, the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy"<sup>11</sup>. It is she who gives The Divine Logos "the crown" of His human nature.

She crowns him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty. She sends the infinitely Rich and Powerful One forth as poor and helpless, in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross<sup>12</sup>.

Thus once more do we turn to a kenotic vision of God's Wisdom. This is the greatest appeal to human freedom. Through reflection on the mystery of God's Wisdom as revealed in the person of Mary a mystic achieves deeper insight into the mystery of humanity and interpersonal solidarity. The figure of the sinless Mother of Christ, herself a part of the immemorial plan of Divine Wisdom, make this view even deeper. A conviction that we

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 370.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 370. See also S. McCaslin, *Merton and „Hagia Sophia“ (Holy Wisdom)* in: *Merton and Hesychasm. The Prayer of the Heart*, ed. by B. Dieker and J. Montaldo, Louisville, Kentucky: Fons vitae, 2004, pp. 235-254.

are all one<sup>13</sup> deepens. Soloviov spoke of a mysterious “all-unity” (*vseedinstvo*) of the world. Merton is more specific. He experiences this unity “suddenly”, even in the crowd of people, in the very centre of a busy district in Louisville. He recognizes that all people are a sign of Divine Wisdom. He perceives the incredible beauty and shy dignity that shine through them, even though they cannot know who they really are:

... I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation. . . .

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*.<sup>14</sup>

Now let us go back to the basic intuition – there is something divine, pure and unblemished in human beings. Traditional Christian anthropology speaks of the image of God present in man. For a mystic man is a real and touchable icon of God, which cannot be lost. Experiencing this truth is a gift, difficult to put into words – “pure truth”, “a point or spark which belongs entirely to God”, a centre “which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will”, “pure glory of God in us”. It is precisely this centre of humanity that, according to Merton, is out of reach of sin (“untouched by sin”), not at our disposal, but instead remaining independent and indestructible in a truly Divine way.

But this cannot be seen, only believed and “understood” by a peculiar gift. [...] It is, so to speak, His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our

<sup>13</sup> This conviction is also visible in reflections of a contemporary theologian, Leonardo Boff (*Welche Hoffnung haben wir?*, in: *Kirche In* 16: 2002 no. 9, p. 48) about hope: “Alles hängt mit allem zusammen und wir alle sind unter- und voneinander abhängig“. Since we are connected with everyone and everything, even a small gesture may cause a great process of change in human history.

<sup>14</sup> Th. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York: Image Books, 1968, pp. 156, 158.

sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.<sup>15</sup>

In these reflections one may find three phrases very typical of all mystics. Untouched and “virginal point” of humanity becomes a “point of nothingness” and a symbol of extreme poverty in comparison to the Creator of all. One mustn’t lose heart because of such paradoxical terminology. Our human “nothingness” is capable of receiving the whole mystery of heaven, which is present everywhere, in man and in the whole nature. The divine primal beginning of creation reveals the miracle of His Wisdom. To come into being – is to go from nothingness to being. Divine beginning connotes the constant fact of originating from Creator. That is where the beginning is unblemished, pure and free of sin. Man is a creation conceived by God in His image. It applies to every human being with no exception. Everyone carries this divine beginning in the innermost depths of being, even though he may not realize it. It resembles an Orthodox theologian – Sergius Bulgakov’s, category of “certain saint anamnesis”, the concept of “ontological remembering”, ontological memory inscribed in the depths of being by the fact of originating from God.<sup>16</sup>

For Merton the truth about the beginning is at the same time the truth about the end of human history. It is connected with hope that the end of human existence will be in accordance with the divine beginning, not defiled by the erring of created freedom. Such a beginning is a herald and a promise of good end. Merton refers to words of Julian of Norwich: *Sin must needs be. But all shall be well*, to which we will return shortly.

A certain inevitability of sin results from freedom. Sin does not thwart hope. Quite the opposite, it encourages hope that God knew what he was doing when he bestowed this dramatic gift of free decision on man. This is His “secret”, which we will know only at the end of human history, when God’s mercy will unreservedly shine with the ultimate coming of Christ. Hope is a “key that opens our lives” towards the good fulfilment of human history. Christ is the key and hope. Merton speaks of “a wise heart that

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> S. Bulgakov, *Nevesta Agnca. O bogočlovečtve*, část III, Paříž 1945, 574: “*ontologičeskoe vospominanie*”, “*nekij svaščennyj anamnezis*”.

persists in hope among contradiction". From this modern mystic's mouth we find out about wisdom that comes from the heart and wholehearted cognition. Thanks to hope and wisdom of heart Christianity recovers its universal nature. It is a religion of encouragement, trust, and overwhelming compassion.

## 2. Universality of compassion

The mystic's faith has liberating powers. He does not disrespect the question of truth. Yet he speaks of it in a way that emanates the spirit of tolerance, sympathy and understanding.

Ghandi once asked: "How can he who thinks he possesses absolute truth be fraternal?"

Let us be frank about it: the history of Christianity raises this question again and again.

. . . God has revealed himself to men in Christ, but he has revealed Himself first of all as love. Absolute truth is then grasped as love. . . . Only he who loves can be sure that he is still in contact with the truth, which is in fact too absolute to be grasped by his mind. Hence, he who holds to the gospel truth is afraid that he may lose the truth by a failure of love, not by a failure of knowledge. In that case he is humble, and therefore he is wise<sup>17</sup>.

Those words are a meaningful indication of the indissoluble bond between truth and love. Christ's figure appears in them as an impersonation of truth and love. True wisdom goes together with humility and consideration. Truth is too great for us to comprehend it with our minds. In his further words this modern mystic formulates a warning of the temptation of imposing own limited truth on others.

Knowledge expands a man like a balloon, and gives him a precarious wholeness in which he thinks that he holds himself all the dimensions of a truth the totality of which is denied to others. . . . How can he "love" others, he thinks, except by imposing on them the truth which they would otherwise insult and neglect? This is temptation<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

Merton returned to the same subject once more in *The Asian Journal*. He reminded us that the cultivation of inner awareness involves a danger of self-deception. Our inner, subjective sense may easily turn out to be degeneration. One must not make it an ultimate criterion of judgment.

In other words, the standard temptation of religious . . . people is to cultivate an inner sense of rightness . . . and make this subjective feeling the final test of everything. As long as this feeling of rightness remains with them, they will do anything under the sun. But this inner feeling (as Auschwitz and the Eichmann case have shown) can coexist with the ultimate in human corruption<sup>19</sup>.

In the name of propagated watchwords one may perform actions that are inhuman to the highest degree. It follows that subjective process of getting to know oneself has to be continually confronted not only with judgment of one's own conscience, but also with experience and judgement of others. Truth and love are inseparable. We need others so that we are not deceived by our sense of being in the right.

While discovering unity and solidarity with all people, mystics opt for the side of compassion and mercy. Capacity for compassion for others is a crucial quality in the ethos of universal kindness and positively understood tolerance. Mystics are able to learn compassion. They are not ashamed of this lesson. It is particularly evident in Merton's case. For two years preceding his death he had kept a lively correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether, a writer and a professor of theology.<sup>20</sup> In his letter of July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1967 he wrote her about poverty as "the eschatological lot" and the illusory promises of eliminating poverty in the world that are being made. Since this poverty cannot be overcome, he perceives yet another eschatological perspective: "to destroy the wicked society that is so full of contradictions"<sup>21</sup>. In the same letter Merton goes on to write:

But the thing is, I think, to realize that this country is under judgment (it is Assyria, no?), and no matter where we go or what we do, we remain Assyrians who are under judgment.

<sup>19</sup> Th. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *At Home in the World. The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. by Mary Tardiff, OP, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1995.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

I think we have to start from there. Do you agree? And if so, what is it? What does it mean? The Nineties fixed it by putting hairshirts on everyone including the cats and dogs. Is this practical? (Purely rhetorical question).<sup>22</sup>

Three days later, in her letter of July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1967 Rosemary reacts to this startling directive: "Destroy the evil society? or redeem the evil society? I am one of those mad Origenists who believe that when God is all in all, even the last enemy Satan will be redeemed. I believe in giving everyone, even the dogs, not hair shirts (which they already have), but flower power, baby".<sup>23</sup>

In further correspondence Merton did not refer to these words of Rosemary. They were consistent with his own spiritual sensitivity. "Great compassion" he mentions at the beginning of *The Asian Journal*<sup>24</sup> did not become his share until his journey to Asia, when he was standing in front of the Buddha statues carved in rock. One of them presented a seated Buddha in lotus position – one hand pointing to the ground and holding a begging bowl in the other.

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as in exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . Everything is compassion. . . . I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for.<sup>25</sup>

In the talk he delivered in Bangkok on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the day of his unexpected death, Merton explained this discovery as follows:

The begging bowl of the Buddha represents . . . the ultimate theological root of the belief not just in a right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings . . . which are all involved in one another.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, pp. 84-85.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> *The Asian Journal*, p. 4: "And found also the great compassion, mahakaruna".

<sup>25</sup> Th. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999, p. 323.

<sup>26</sup> *The Asian Journal*, pp. 341-2.

Christian teaching about salvation can be experienced and passed on in spirit of dialogue with other religions. However, first of all we have to acknowledge the universality of God's saving power and respect it in other people's distinctiveness. Every religion is a way to salvation. All together, they are, each in its way, mediators in attaining God and salvation. In such an approach Christian identity is not harmed in the least. What is more, it becomes open, tolerant and capable of dialogue. For Christians Christ is the most distinct sign of God's universal saving will, acting through all creation, in all places and at all times. He achieves it by means of the inspiring and transforming power of the Holy Spirit, which incessantly prompts people to search for goodness, beauty, and truth. Christians bear witness to their faith and at the same time ought to stay open to the witness of others. In this way it is possible to discover new, more complete, features of the invisible face of God.

Doesn't such dialogue serve a deeper experiencing of one's own religious life? The Second Vatican Council instructs "by His incarnation the Son of God united himself with every man to a certain extent" and that "the Holy Spirit offers an opportunity to attain participation in paschal mystery to everyone, in a way known to God."<sup>27</sup>

None of us can appropriate the gift of the salvation to himself, his own Church, or his own religion. It is a truly sovereign and divine gift. Although the teachings of the Second Vatican Council concerning various spheres of being a part of God's People do not suggest that all ways to salvation are equal, they present an opportunity to view this question in a manner that is free of confessional narrowing and exclusiveness. In comparison with the past it is a great breakthrough in thinking, which we must not overlook. In conclusion to the lecture he gave on the day of his death Merton said:

And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have. The combination of the natural techniques and the graces and the other things that have been manifested in Asia and the Christian liberty of the gospel should bring us all at last to that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals – and mere this or that.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> *The Asian Journal*, p. 343.

### 3. Universality of hope in the writings of an English mystic.

Reflection on the mystic's language proves extremely instructive. Set against Merton's writings, those of Julian of Norwich (14<sup>th</sup> c.) deserve special attention<sup>29</sup>. The American mystic must have been well acquainted with them. Their language is dramatic, particularly when it is dealing with difficult matters connected with human guilt, suffering, evil and sin.

#### *Sin in human history*

The English mystic wrote in an astonishingly courageous way, using the kind of language, which not only proved a deep intuition of her faith-enlightened intellect, but also showed heart and feeling. Such language was used to write the following apostrophe to sin, which is full of poetic expression. It expresses anxiety and yet hopes that God will prove to be more powerful than the terrifying power of evil.

Ah, wretched sin! What art thou?  
 Thou art naught.  
 For I saw that God is all thing;  
 I saw not thee.  
 And when I saw that God has made all thing  
 I saw thee not.  
 And when I saw that God is in all thing  
 I saw thee not,  
 And when I saw that God does all thing that is done, small and great,  
 I saw thee not.  
 And when I saw our Lord sit in our soul  
 so worshipfully,  
 and love and like, rule, and care for all that He has made,  
 I saw not thee.  
 Thus I am sure that thou art naught,  
 and all those who love thee and like thee and follow thee  
 and wilfully end in thee,

<sup>29</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Showings*. Translated from the critical text with an introduction by E. Colledge, OSA and James Walsh SJ, Mahwah, New Jersey 1987, pp. 123-70 (The Short Text), pp. 173-343 (The Long Text). The short version consists of 25 chapters, the long one of 86. Numbers of particular chapters of either version quoted will be given in brackets.

I am sure they shall be brought to naught with thee and endlessly  
 confounded.

God shield us all from thee!  
 So be it, for God's love (XXIII).<sup>30</sup>

This apostrophe to sin, which survived only in the short version of *The Showings* is an appeal addressed not so much to reason, but above all to heart and feeling. It might have been written during an intensive spiritual experience. The reader's attention is riveted by its opening words. Each of the five parallel statements ends with the chorus: "I saw thee not" or "I saw not thee". The latter verbal form, of long cadence, appears at the beginning and the end of the whole series of parallel statements, which proves a remarkable mastery of language. The piling of accumulated sentences strengthens the intensity of experience, and in the end gives rise to the feeling of contempt for the nothingness of sin. The final, somewhat longer choral cadence leads to the quieter rhythm of the second part of the apostrophe. Yet in that part too, the part expressing human state of being embroiled in evil and sin, there is visible a similar gradual increase of content; it ends in being "brought to naught" and "endlessly confounded". After such an outburst of emotion the final invocation to God is an expression of hope for the rescuing power of His goodness and love.

Julian does not say that sin doesn't exist. On the basis of her inner experience she merely claims that it is "nought". It doesn't have its own, independent being, but is like a parasite on good. It cannot be the final and perpetual state of the world that God would be helpless against. These thoughts bear a vivid resemblance to what in 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote about evil.<sup>31</sup>

Seeing everything in God, the mystic doesn't perceive sin in the ultimate shape of the world (XXVII). Its existence is temporary and passing. Although it does deform God's image in man, it doesn't destroy it or replace it with a new and self-contained image of evil. We still remain beings created

<sup>30</sup> *A Shewing of God's Love: The Shorter Version of Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. by A. M. Reynolds, CP, London, 1958.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 86-89; W. Hryniewicz, *Gehenna i nadzieja... in: Nadzieja uczy inaczej*, Warszawa, Verbinum, 2003, pp. 142-154.

in God's image, which is always a reality both good and beautiful. By his suffering and death Christ defeated the greatest incorporation of evil (the longer version, XIII). Sin is neither the first nor the last characteristic of a human being, because it will cease in the end, just like Jesus' suffering ended in the joy of the Resurrection (LXXV).

This is a truly paschal attitude of Julian's profound optimism, and at the same time a source of her hope that sin and evil can be overcome in creation, and all goodness salvaged. Sin is the cause of suffering, but ultimately "all will be well" (XXVII). In *The Showings* one can find a number of other traces of a composed view on evil and sin, present both in the history of salvation and in every person's life. A conviction of unlimited goodness of God, of necessity for human erring and its place in the plans of Divine Providence is continually finding expression in them. The reality of sin is inseparable from freedom of creation. However, God's goodness does not remain helpless and idle.

For wickedness has been suffered to rise in opposition to that goodness; and the goodness of mercy and grace opposed that wickedness, and turned everything to goodness and honour for all who will be saved. For this is that property in God which opposes good to evil. (LIX)

In Julian's words one can sense the wisdom that is sympathetic to man, cheerful and profound. They make one think of the way St. Isaac the Syrian spoke about sin in the 7<sup>th</sup> century: "As a handful of sand thrown into the great sea, so are the sins of all flesh in comparison with the mind of God. And just as a strongly flowing spring is not obstructed by a handful of dust, so the mercy of the Creator is not stemmed by the vices of His creatures."<sup>32</sup>

Julian's understanding of sin stems from her overall view of the history of salvation. It is a consequence of God's vision and His attitude to the world. To a certain extent it resembles some of the thoughts expressed by St. Irenaeus of Lyon centuries ago. And so, sin – although in itself certainly worthy of contempt – is perceived by the English mystic as a sign of unfulfilment and immaturity in the process of the moulding of humanity. This is why she doesn't speak of damnation, since damnation alone doesn't lead to healing and rescuing. Jesus Christ, our Saviour, cares about the healing of

<sup>32</sup> "Homily 51", *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Trans. The Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Boston, Mass., 1984, 244.

his children like a mother. Being hurt by sin only strengthens the caring love of God. It is a truly maternal love, no situation or predicament or suffering can leave it indifferent. If God condemned, He would leave man to his own devices. It would mean that he gives up the possibility to heal his wounds, which he had sustained as a result of his own failings. God's ways indicate something quite contrary – He heals the wounds of sin with his own love, most completely revealed in Christ. Acquaintance with the writings of the hermit from Norwich teaches this kind of calm perception of God and of the history of His mercy in people's lot.

*"All will be well"*

Intuitions of the English mystic are too important to pass them by indifferently, without deeper understanding. Julian does not exaggerate human sin. She knows that Christ is like a mother full of compassion, mercy and patience, that he can bear human sins and unfaithfulness. Let no man think that everything is lost and ruined! The author of *Showings* does not hesitate to write about the certain necessity of human falls. Indeed, she encourages understanding this necessity:

And when we fall, quickly he raises us up with his loving embrace and his gracious touch. And when we are strengthened by his sweet working, then we willingly chose him by his grace, that we shall be his servants and his lovers, constantly and forever. (LXI)

Full comprehension will be possible only in the next life. Despite the presence of sin in our lives we will then see that it wasn't successful in its attempts to deprive us of God's love, or lessen our worth in His eyes. Experience of the fall will become the source of incessant comprehension of the inconceivable goodness of God. People's failings will not lessen His love. We are learning humility on our own, by seeing our falls and our smallness. However man must see and recognize his own fault. Without it the fall could not be a reason for humility and gratitude. God's mercy also means the fall does not become an irrevocable situation. As she writes in the shorter version of *The Showings*: "God showed me that sin is no shame, but honour to man" (XVII). In these words we hear a distant echo of the astonishing message of the Church on the paschal night: "Adam's sin was indeed necessary! Oh, the happy guilt!" We are faced with great paradox: "wretched sin" she wrote about in the apostrophe can become "blessed guilt".

Neither the fall nor sin are the centre of human history, it is the person of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, who is the very core of paschal Christian faith. In the face of the greatness of Redemption the Easter *Exultet* praises Adam's "happy guilt": "*O felix culpa!*" One cannot think about sin while forgetting the patient and forgiving love of God for sinful people. The power of grace is stronger than sin. "Where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more".<sup>33</sup> A Christian must not think about human guilt, even the greatest, as if God stopped loving a sinful man.

The theological vision of the Norwich hermit, close to the liturgical joyful call *O felix culpa*, demonstrates her spiritual effort to penetrate into the Christian mystery. Her bold thinking was one of the reasons why *Showings* haven't been widely recognised for the past centuries. Julian confesses that she had been reflecting on the sense of the existence of sin. She asked herself the question why God, in His far-sighted wisdom, didn't prevent the possibility of sinning. It seemed to her that if he did, all would be well. Yet in one of the revelations Christ answered as follows:

Sin must needs be. [...]  
But all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.  
(XIII, shorter version)<sup>34</sup>

We have also been assured that Christ "very tenderly" spoke these words, with no reproaches addressed to sinful people: "So I saw that Christ has compassion on us because of sin". Every act of human compassion is a part of His compassion for all. Feminine sensitivity, previously centred on compassionate brooding on His suffering, is now transferred onto all "fellow Christians". In her experience sin emerges as nothingness, negation of being, self-annihilation of a kind. Mysterious words of Christ's promising that "All shall be well" brighten her view of the enormity of evil and sin in the world. Her thought is directed towards the work of salvation, whose power is incomparably greater than that of sin. Man isn't capable of seeing through the mystery of God's inconceivable intent. He is preparing a surprise for us on the other side of life, which for now remains unknown to us. Christ assures Julian:

<sup>33</sup> Rom 5, 20.

<sup>34</sup> XIII. The phrase "All shall be well" appears also in other chapters (XIV, XV, XVI) of the shorter version.

I will make all things well.  
I shall make all things well.  
I may make all things well,  
and I can make all things well.  
And thou shalt see thyself that all things shall be well.  
(XV, shorter version)

The last sentence Julian refers not to herself, but to the whole of mankind, which will be saved by the power of the Holy Trinity. God has mercy on us and manifests His compassion. He wants us to live in peace of mind. He doesn't want human distress. One day everyone will be saved by the joy of Christ and the fullness of His happiness. This happiness isn't full yet, as long as we are not with Him, as long as history of this world is still happening (this thought was very dear to Origen). For many years Julian was pondering on Christ's promise that He will "make all things well". She rejoices in the promise and waiting for this mysterious and glorious deed of God on the last day. Her revelations did not show what that deed will be or how it will be accomplished. Human inquisitiveness is good for nothing!

At this point Julian's spiritual experience clashes with traditional Church teaching about damnation and hell. What does she mean by "All things shall be well"? How is it possible? How to reconcile the teachings about hell with the spiritual experience of God's mercy and compassion for human flaws?

And to this I had no other answer as a revelation from our Lord except this: What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall preserve my word in everything, and I shall make everything well. (XXXII)

This is why one must trust the promise. Julian wants to be faithful both to Christ's word and Church teachings. She is perpetually in the state of inner dilemma, or rather tension, suspension and waiting. Some interpreters have wondered if she can be rated among supporters of the universality of salvation. Not surprisingly, opinions differ.<sup>35</sup> She couldn't have declared a

<sup>35</sup> R. Llewelyn, *With Pity not with Blame. The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich and the Cloud of Unknowing for Today*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982; *Love Bade me Welcome*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1984; Grace M. Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, London: Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 178-9.

different view if she wanted to be faithful to the Church teachings. She remained in the sphere of hope that the appealing force of God's love and mercy, which reaches even into the depths of hell will triumph in the end; that all people will turn to Him of their own free will.

One shouldn't attribute a Julian the doctrine of universal salvation. However, one cannot help noticing her hope for the eventual victory of good in the whole of creation. She repeatedly stresses that in God there is no anger or will to punish – those are against His nature. He only wishes to help us and heal our will:

I saw truly that our Lord was never angry, and never will be. Because he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is peace; and his power, his wisdom, his charity and his unity do not allow him to be angry. [...] God is goodness, which cannot be angry, for God is nothing but goodness. (XLVI).

Anger as an opposite of love, goodness, peace and wisdom is not only on our human side. God perceives us as united with Christ. If he had been angry but for one instant His anger would have annihilated our life (LXIX). In fact His "sweet eye of pity is never turned away from us, and the operation of mercy does not cease" (XLVIII). It is this mercy that will accomplish the great deed of universal healing, although we don't know how this will happen.

We can only hope, together with Julian, that the promise conveyed by the words "all things shall be well" will be one day fulfilled, to the great astonishment of the whole world. She admits that those words, revealed to her by Christ, became her great consolation. There is a great power of inner experience concealed in this unique witness. Its main features are spiritual sobriety, economy of words, moderation and humility. No trace of pointless curiosity! "It is God's will that you should know in general that all will be well, but it is not God's will that we should know it now except as it applies to us for the present..." (XV shorter version). The foundation of this exceptional hope is all God's creation already completed, which at the same time is a herald of what God will yet do to the sheer astonishment of all. "For just as the blessed Trinity created everything from nothing, just so the same blessed Trinity will make well all things that are not well"(XV).

The singularity of standpoint of this 14<sup>th</sup> century hermit stands out against a background of folk piety of her times. It was a piety inspired by the

fear of God, punishment, death and hell, not by the view of God who loves all people and all creatures. Whereas Julian often stresses the great goodness and tenderness of Christ in the process of man's development. Reference to mind and heart help her to understand the inner content of this development in a more profound way. It is Christ himself who stimulates intellect and enlightens heart. It is He who opens the path to cognition of God, which is always partial on this earth. The goal of this cognition is to awaken the capacity of love for everything that God loves and what He does in order to save people.

The hermit of Norwich was astonished to discover God's presence in all that exists. Analogy with maternity made her connect this presence with His goodness, tenderness and subtlety. Julian's God wishes to be trusted by man, particularly when he experiences his sinfulness. "And though our earthly mother may suffer her child to perish, our heavenly mother Jesus may never suffer us who are his children to perish, for he is almighty, all wisdom and all love, and so is none but he, blessed may he be" (LXI).

These words seem to be an echo of what, centuries ago, prophet Isaiah had said: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you".<sup>36</sup> In another place this same prophet says: "My burden since your birth, whom I have carried from your infancy. Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is grey I will bear you; it is I who have done this, I who will continue, and who will carry you to safety".<sup>37</sup>

Julian realizes very well that the immensity of human guilt may frighten and arouse a feeling of shame. Nevertheless escape from God does not lead to anywhere. This is when a child-like attitude is most needed – a child who trusts its mother and turns to her for help regardless of how big its fault may be. It is precisely in this context that the contemplative of Norwich uses the phrase that seems to be a paraphrase of the liturgical *Kyrie eleison*. The innovation of the new version consists, among others, in that it had been formulated under the influence of sensitivity for motherly care and love of Christ: "My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me"(LXI). In Julian's mouth this prayer is a call for help. The sense of fall and loss of likeness to God induces her to even greater trust in Him,

<sup>36</sup> Is 49,15.

<sup>37</sup> Is 46, 3-4.

who, in His compassion and mercy, cares for the lost like a loving mother. It is Him who purifies and heals. "It is his office to save us, it is his glory to do it, and it is his will that we know it; for he wants us to love him sweetly and trust him meekly and greatly" (LXI).

#### 4. *Universality of salvation – liberation for open identity*

An exclusiveness in understanding salvation and the authenticity of one's own religion is one of the motives leading to most obstinate persistence in narrow and closed religious identity. It is also one of the main sources of the historical phenomenon of intolerance and modern fundamentalism.

We live in times when many people, perhaps weary of conflicts, uncertainty and multiplicity of discrepant views start turning towards fundamentalism, integrism and sectarianism. It applies not only to Christian Churches, but also to other religions. Each of the above-mentioned phenomena has its own hue of meaning, which expresses a certain mentality in the field of faith and convictions. A common feature of attitudes described by these terms is, in the field of religion, a tendency to think of one's viewpoint as absolute, which goes together with a trend towards disqualification of the faith and convictions of other people. At the root of this mentality is a suspicion that another man is completely in the wrong, that he is unfaithful and all he deserves is damnation.

The concept of damnation itself ("non-salvation") takes on a tangible usefulness. All those who do not share my faith, do not belong to my Church or my religious community are sent to hell. God loves only the righteous people of my community. We are the chosen ones, we are faithful to God. He will save us and damn all the others. We do not need dialogue, tolerance, and a common search for truth. The truth is ours. There are no important and less important things, major and minor. There is no alternative to the truth we pronounce. We are forced to accept it under threat of damnation...

Those are only a few features characteristic of a closed mentality, inspired by the sense of exclusivity, self-efficiency and fear of others. It has often happened in the course of history that hell was filled with innumerable sinners, infidels, pagans, Jews, atheists and all other kinds of enemies. In the past also Christian Churches have judged one another in this way, governed by a conviction that salvation is only in one of them – only in my Church.

A soteriological universality of hope for everyone frees us of that kind of attitude, inspired by hidden exclusivist thinking. Universal salvation carries great therapeutic potential. It is the cure for temptation to appropriate the gift of salvation to one's own religious community. Such hope becomes an uncommon ally of identity that is open, tolerant and accepts dissimilarity. A duty to expect salvation for all may then become an eschatological motive for loving people and caring about their ultimate lot.

Such hope demands an open, tolerant identity, full of understanding for others. Open identity serves best inter-personal communication. The deepest form of communication does not take place on a verbal level. It goes beyond the area of words and concepts. It is a communion of persons, a community where there is plenty of place for otherness and diversity. Authentic communication is communicating on the deepest level of awareness, both human and religious. It requires spiritual maturity without which understanding of identity will remain superfluous and will not influence the shaping of relations between people in any significant way.

#### 5. *Is it worth it to read mystics today?*

Mystics' faith is a liberating one. They are capable of descending into the depths of human misery and destitution. That is why they speak about nothingness. At the same time they detect in man a fragment of a great wholeness. They discover unity and solidarity with all people. They understand that human tragedy is the tragedy of God. That is where they learn compassion and mercy. In Merton's case this lesson of compassion is particularly important. In a way he married it, just like St. Francis married poverty.

Nevertheless, going back to the great, and often forgotten, witnesses of the past is certainly worthwhile. Julian of Norwich, a woman blessed with extraordinary religious intuition and subtlety of feeling was able to fathom the greatest truths of Christian religion intuitively. She remained the child of her times, and country, solemn and practical, not without a sense of humour, great of heart and mind. While perusing pages of her writings I had an impression that today we all need such witness and such wisdom of a loving, intelligent, and sensitive heart. Religious faith

is a matter concerning the whole man. It cannot be reduced to the area of reason alone, just as on the other hand, it cannot involve only feelings and emotions. A healthy religiousness requires a challenging synthesis of mind and heart. Julian's witness helps us to understand what that harmonious synthesis of man's greatest spiritual endowments consists in. It is true that at present both religion of the heart and religion of the mind are equally threatened by modern scepticism, indifference and secularism. Many people suppose that neither the heart nor the mind have anything to say in matters of faith. One must not remain indifferent to this phenomenon. Nowadays Christianity demands an effort at deepening and expressing anew what is most bold and puzzling in it. It mustn't happen only on the level of discursive reasoning. A Christian appreciates mind as God's gift, but he doesn't worship it.

Mystics are a good case in point to illustrate that the powers of the human intellect aren't based only on the logic of reasoning. Rather it is a spiritual capability to penetrate into the mysteries of faith. It is not by chance that in Julian's writings there often appears a phrase that she had found an answer to her question "in her understanding", thanks to the "eyes of spirit", in spiritual contemplation, inseparable from the wisdom of heart. This wisdom requires an ability to listen, sensitivity to goodness and beauty.

Other things we can learn from the mystics today are the sense of fraternity and solidarity with all people, as well as compassion for their misery and bringing them help. Their faith has become a "wisdom of heart". At the same time it is hope, which teaches cheerful optimism in accepting life and reaching out to meet the Invisible.

Is it worth it to read the mystics? A careful reading of the writings of Julian of Norwich and Merton makes it clear that hope for salvation was a familiar theme for them. Merton found it in his own unique way, by means of a sophiological view of the history of creation. A good beginning heralds a good end – not only in the Mother of Christ, but also in all people. It is hope that in the mystery, which is hidden from us, there will shine "an eternally new beginning that has no end". He, who is the God of Beginning, is also the God of hope and mercy, more powerful than fragile human hope.

Deep intuition of faith coupled with her feminine sensitivity allowed Julian of Norwich to distinguish motherly features in the love of Christ,

the Saviour of all. It is from this motherly love God has for people, that arises hope that all the lost will be rescued. God isn't governed by the logic of male justice, which demands infinite satisfaction, but above all by the logic of love, mercy and caring. Based on earthly experiences we comprehend this divine logic by means of analogy with the love a mother bestows on her own child. Thus it is easier to perceive that human falls only serve to make God's motherly care and love even grater. This message is particularly distinct in the writings of the medieval English writer.

One of Jesus' eight blessings in the Sermon on the Mount seems to be particularly important in our reflections: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Mt 5,7). Blessing is bestowed on those who are merciful to others. To scandalized Pharisees, who don't understand how the Teacher can eat together with tax collectors and sinners, He says: "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (Mt 9,13). Those very words were repeated in the answer He gave to reproaching Pharisees, indignant at the sight of hungry disciples who began to pick grain and eat on the Sabbath (cf. Mt 12,7). The unforgiving debtor from Jesus' parable is punished: "Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" (Mt 18,33). Mercy appears in the Gospel as a pedagogical rule of universal use. As Luke notes Jesus' words: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6,36). A human merciful attitude is an emulation of God's conduct. This thought had been uniquely expressed already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, in the writings of St. Isaac the Syrian.<sup>38</sup>

Mystics are on the side of mercy. They aren't frightened by the abyss of the fall. Their religion is a religion of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are alien to the hellish scenes of Dante's other world, and his appeal to give up all hope (*Lasciate ogni speranza*). They would not agree with the doctrine of eternal hell. They become advocates of hope, which opens the road to noble illumination and the

<sup>38</sup> Cf. W. Hryniewicz, *Dramat nadziei zbawienia*, Warszawa: Verbinum, 1996, pp. 155-60; idem, *Nadzieja uczy inaczej*, Verbinum, Warszawa, 2003, pp. 154-166; idem, *Universalism of Salvation: St. Isaac the Syrian*, in: *Die Wurzel aller Theologie: Sentire cum Ecclesia. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Urs von Arn*. Bern 2003, pp. 139-150.

most precious human initiation possible on this earth. Perhaps this is why mysticism can construct bridges of understanding and harmonious co-existence between religions. It is ecumenical and mystagogical by nature. This is why Julian of Norwich and Thomas Merton are so dear and close to me.