Julian of Norwich: A Portal of Hope and Spiritual Healing For Victims of Childhood Abuse

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The theology of Julian of Norwich provides the disenfranchised an important and unique gateway into relationship with God. Julian’s writings are rich and the more I read them, the more I learn from her. This paper intends to explore but a few of Julian’s concepts and show how they relate to survivors of abuse, specifically survivors of childhood abuse, who are seeking to know and love God more deeply.

Julian provides victims of childhood abuse a model for journeying into a deeper relationship with God through her fundamental optimism, her concepts of Jesus the Mother of Mercy, the Trinity, onewing, her theology of the cross, the necessity of sin, as well as Julian’s openness and persistence in her seeking. “Julian’s optimism is not a simplistic optimism, but a true Christian hope grounded in an experience of God through faith.”

Julian’s concept of the Trinity is Christocentric, “where Jesus appears, the Blessed Trinity is understood...in this sight of his blessed passion and the Godhead that I saw with my full understanding, I knew well it was strength enough for me...to withstand all the fiends of hell.” Julian’s descriptions of Jesus provide victims of childhood abuse a way to conceive of an ever-available source of strength, a loving protector for anyone struggling to survive abuse.

Her visions of Jesus are exciting, surprising, joyful, dreadful, comforting, and challenging. She rejoiced in the attention she, a humble sinner, was being paid by the Lord. “For I wanted to thank our Lord, who is so reverent, so holy and apart, for being so homely (familiar) with a sinful creature.”

For many victims of abuse, approaching God can be difficult and frightening. Issues of trust, survival, value and blame are paramount and can be obstacles on their journey into relationship with God. Victims of childhood abuse may feel afraid of a powerful God, betrayed by their “Father”, too ashamed or unworthy to pray, or reluctant to be vulnerable in the presence of a male God.

Survivors of abuse, especially female survivors of sexual abuse, often report that they do not feel safe approaching a male, judging God. Sometimes they try to “go in the back door” by praying to Mary, the (human) mother of Jesus, or a patron saint. While these are valuable options, Julian provides an important alternative, one that transforms the traditional understanding of God.

God has been genderized as male in formal and colloquial terminology of the church. While most people readily admit that God has no gender, our experience of God has been given to us exclusively in male terms. There is currently no approved name for the feminine nature of God, and no ritual celebrating the feminine nature of God in our prayer book, or hymns, or otherwise in present culture. The result has been a wounding experienced by most if not all Judeo-Christian women.

The “feminine wound,” a current colloquial in feminist and womanist conversations, happens when a girl learns that she is “less than” due to her gender. She also learns that boys are “better than” girls, members of the dominant fraternity, and they know it.

Over time, the male privileged class has vilified females and the feminine. Pre-Christian feminine symbols became associated with evil, for example, the snake. In addition, the picture painted of women in the Bible is a comparatively dismal one. The life-

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blood of a woman was deemed unclean, and so was the woman. Women are characterized as unclean, seductive, daughters of Eve, whose only redeeming function is the production of a son.

The institutional church is rife with examples of sexual misconduct on the part of clergy and lay leaders. Too often, victims are blamed or vilified while the priests/ministers and leaders are left to continue their destructive behaviors or disappear quietly, with all dignity and pension preserved. In the meantime, women and youth have been raped, physically and spiritually, and are often left with no justice, and no healing. Even the church is not necessarily a safe place for victims of sexual abuse. It is understandable then, that when a girl or woman has been raped she will probably not be inclined to desire intimacy with a male God.

Males maintain cultural, economic, physical and spiritual power over females. For victims of abuse, being powerless is an all too familiar experience. Julian describes a journey into relationship with God that is welcoming for victims of abuse. “And thus in the time of our pain and our woe, he shows us the look of his passion and his cross, helping us to bear it by his own blessed virtue. And in the time of our sinning, he looks on us with tenderness and pity and keeps us mightily, defending us against all our enemies…And this is a gracious touching and sweet enlightening of the spiritual life which confirms us in faith, hope and charity with contrition and devotion and also contemplation and all manner of true solace and sweet comforts.”

“Julian’s meditations do not pretend to take away the pain of today’s world, but they can inspire believers to rise up in the midst of the struggle and fix their eyes on God. They promote the virtues of self-acceptance and neighborly love and show how these qualities help creatures discover the face of God. This ability to recognize God in all things is crucial for creatures who are so prone to discouragement because they keep forgetting they are loved.”

Children who experience abuse often come to believe they are in a world unconcerned with their needs and their safety, in fact, unconcerned with them. They often feel alone, isolated, betrayed, different, dirty, unsafe, unworthy, and unlovable. They seek love and attention in whatever form they can have it. They don’t trust themselves, others, love, the world, or even God. They bear a great burden of guilt and shame. Their childhood has been stolen.

Julian provides words of comfort in her concept of Jesus, the Mother of Mercy. “And even though some earthly mother might allow a child of hers to perish, our heavenly mother, Jesus, may never suffer us to be lost, for we are his children. And he is almighty, all wisdom, all love…For now he wants us to behave just like a child; for when a child is upset or afraid, it runs straight to its mother with all its might.”

From her vision of the bleeding head of Christ, Julian proclaims her understanding of how God loves us. “God has made all things that are made; and God loves all that he has made… in humankind there is God: and in God is all. So that he that loves like this,”

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4 John Skinner, ed., Revelation of Love, Julian of Norwich, 156.

5 Brendan Doyle, Meditations with Julian of Norwich (Santa Fe, New Mexico, Bear & Company, 1983) from the Foreward by Patricia M. Vinje, 8.

6 John Skinner, ed., Revelation of Love, Julian of Norwich, 137.
loves all.” (emphasis mine) This amazing transformation of the visual from destruction to overwhelming love provides a portal of true hope to the victim of childhood abuse.

We share Julian’s warm surprise in the tenth showing, when she describes being invited by Christ to look upon the wound in his side. “With a joyful face our good Lord looked down at this side and I was invited by his tender gaze to ponder this wound...Now I realized that his heart was broken in two...And with this our good Lord gently spoke: ‘Lo, how I loved you.”

Julian assuages fear of exclusion and isolation in her “image of Christ’s motherhood of mercy [which] serves to reveal the tender, homely way God relates to our humanity through Christ’s incarnation. For Julian, Christ is the archetypal mother...Christ’s motherhood thus grounds the full cycle of our human life, from before our birth until after our death. Moreover, Christ as mother not only reveals a maternal love at the heart of the Godhead but also brings us into that love...Christ our mother from whose womb we come and to whose womb we return.”

Julian reveals the grace of God’s healing love as she speaks of the working of the Holy Spirit. “The ground of mercy is love, and the working of mercy is our being kept in love.” “For mercy works in keeping us. Mercy works by turning all things to good...Mercy works by keeping, suffering, quickening, and healing, all from tenderness of love...All this comes from the abundance of [God’s] love.”

It is common for victims of childhood abuse to have trouble placing trust in anyone, particularly someone who is more powerful than they. For many victims, their survival was placed at risk by the abuse and they were often left to protect themselves. Their basic sense of trust has been violated since those who were supposed to take care of, protect and nurture them harmed them instead.

According to Dr. Gerald May, “An image of God as powerful may be associated with dominance and submission issues and with dependency conflicts.” The child victim’s “basic trust and mistrust will affect [their] spiritual journey as much as they affect the rest of [their] life. If one tends to mistrust oneself and others...a similar attitude will likely be carried into prayer.”

Many victims of childhood abuse are told or come to believe that the abuse was their fault. In their immaturity, they concoct reasons to explain their abuse such as; “I am a bad child.” Their self esteem has been systematically destroyed and they eventually hold themselves as too stupid, ugly, unlovable, etc. to be worthy of the love of their mother, father, caretaker, God, etc. They become increasingly self-focused and frustrated at their inability to effect change in the abuse by changing themselves. A cycle of co-dependence develops in the context of lost personal boundaries. Love and violence become for them an insidiously singular concept.

As the violence continues in their lives, rage and guilt develop within the victims. Their relationships of dependence are contradictory and confusing. On the one hand, they

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11 Gerald G. May, M.D., Care of Mind, Care of Spirit (San Francisco, Harper, 1992), 75.
12 May, Care of Mind, Care of Spirit, 65.
need their parents\textsuperscript{13} to love and take care of their needs. On the other hand, their parents threaten their very survival. They get angry that their parents have betrayed them, then guilty over their anger with their parents. The guilt leads to fear that they will be punished for their anger, so their anger is repressed. Anger builds on top of anger, and this cycle continues through the years. Their mistaken belief that they are “bad” is confirmed over and over again.

Julian’s message that we are not alone and that God is trustworthy is particularly important to victims of childhood abuse. From the parable of the Lord and Servant, Julian teaches that God “wants us to trust that he is always with us in heaven, true man drawing us up into his own person…; and he is with us too on earth leading us on…; and he is with us within our soul endlessly dwelling, ruling, and caring for us.”\textsuperscript{14}

Julian employs the simple, earthy analogy of clothing to illustrate the intrinsic love of God. ”While I still had sight of our Lord’s head as it bled, he showed me further understanding of his homely love…He is our clothing that wraps and folds us about; it embraces us and closes us all around as it hangs upon us with such tender love; for truly he can never leave us. This made me see that he is for us everything that is good.”\textsuperscript{15}

Children from abusive environments quickly learn which emotions are approved for expression and which are not. Anger is rarely acceptable, except for the abusive person. Therefore, their unacceptable feelings, including their anger, are repressed.

Barry and Connolly illustrate the consequences of repression for the person on a spiritual journey. “Beneath the confusion and frustration often lurk other reactions even less acceptable to him. Anger at significant people in his life, resentment toward God, disappointment with himself, a sense of worthlessness may lie submerged in his consciousness. As he is called to speak ‘the whole truth’ to the Lord, these feelings may threaten to emerge into awareness.”\textsuperscript{16}

Julian’s comfort is found in her celebration of creation delivered within “a rich theology of original blessing…We are not basically sinful but are basically good, and through sin we grow…[Julian] acknowled[es]…the harm caused by guilt and the privatizing of failing so natural to the human condition.”\textsuperscript{17} Julian informs us that “it belongs to us meekly to accuse ourselves; and it belongs to the property of the goodness of our Lord God courteously to excuse us.”\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, whatever darkness threatens to be revealed from deep within, God is ready to love and forgive us. For a victim of abuse, this concept provides profound comfort.

Children who tell of their abuse often do so reluctantly. They fear retaliation by their abusers. They fear being punished for whatever they did to cause the abuse. They fear being completely cut off - an abusive relationship is better than no relationship at all.

Julian, however, provides assurance against this in her concept of the Trinity. “For the almighty truth of the Trinity is our Father, for he made us and keeps us in him; and the

\textsuperscript{13} For simplicity, the concept of caretaker will be signified by the word “parent” throughout this paper in the context of the experience of the child victim of abuse. This term in no way limits the caretaker to the biological progenitor of the child.


\textsuperscript{16} William A. Barry & William J. Connolly, \textit{The Practice of Spiritual Direction} (San Francisco, Harper) 71.

\textsuperscript{17} Brendan Doyle, \textit{Meditations with Julian of Norwich}, 19.

\textsuperscript{18} D.S. Brewer, \textit{Julian of Norwich}, 115.
deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother in whom we are all enclosed; and the high goodness of the Trinity is our Lord and in him we are enclosed and he in us.”

In addition, Julian’s concept of “oneing” confirms that we can never be completely cut off from love. “For he says as much: ‘I am loving you, and you are loving me: and our loving shall never be parted in two.’”

Abused children often “test the waters” with bits of their story, waiting to see what consequences will befall them. If they find that their telling brings undesirable consequences, they quit telling. They often even recant their disclosures in an effort to make it all “go away.” If their telling does not hurt them too much, they tell a little more. As they tell, they need constant reassurance that they are loved and safe. The process toward full disclosure is slow, as trust needs to be rebuilt in the experience of the victims.

In Julian’s description of Jesus, the Mother of Mercy, she describes the wondrous kindness and tenderness of God’s maternal love. “And therefore he is compelled to feed us, for the precious love of his motherhood makes him a debtor to us. The mother may suckle her children with her own milk, but our precious Mother Jesus, he may feed us with himself...he may lead us homely into his blessed breast by his sweet open side and show within part the Godhead and the joys of heaven, with spiritual certainty of endless bliss.”

For a child, in whose experience the concepts of love and violence are inextricably related, seeking and accepting the love of God can be a powerfully threatening thing. They may have developed a very durable (though not impenetrable) outer shell to protect them from further hurt. The result is that intimate relationships become difficult, if not impossible. “A similar phenomenon takes place in the relationship with God,” according to Barry and Connolly. “If I feel I have been hurt by life, I am likely to be as impervious to the Lord’s overtures as I would be to the overtures of any man or woman who had hurt me. I will be resentful and afraid that I might be hurt again.”

Love that has no violent component is often not trusted, or even recognized, by victims of childhood abuse. Violent behavior has been normalized in their lives and they expect violence to be a part of their love relationships. Violent love is familiar. Love that is not violent is strange and the victim may attempt to introduce violence into the relationship to bring the relationship into agreement with their experience as well as to test the devotion of their partner. It is a test destined to fail, however, since a violent response is both sought after and feared by the victim.

Julian proposes that in God we find the peace that settles this turmoil. “I saw that God is our very peace, and he is our sure keeper when are at peace within ourselves, and he works continually to bring us into his endless peace. And so when we are made meek and mild by the working of mercy and grace, we are fully safe. Then suddenly the soul is oned to God when it is truly at peace in itself, for in him no wrath is to be found.”

Victims of childhood abuse become adept at living in or with various levels of denial. They have learned to minimize or deny their abuse in order to maintain a necessary relationship with their abusers. They may have adopted addictive behaviors to cover or mask their pain. They may have allowed themselves to be silenced or their memories may

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22 Barry & Connolly, The Practice of Spiritual Direction, 73, 74.
have been repressed, both to ensure their survival. Maintaining their denial, “not knowing” is surviving for many victims of childhood abuse at least for a period of time or until their safety is otherwise assured.

In the same way, not knowing how God judges them, especially since they judge themselves so harshly, may be how they survive spiritually. As a result, journeying into a deeper relationship with God can be extremely threatening. But Julian provides assurance in her proclamation that God “wants our hearts to be raised mightily above the deepness of the earth and all vain sorrows and rejoice in him.”

Accepting the violence of a parent or partner is familiar and, for the most part, seems survivable to victims of childhood abuse. However, opening themselves to the violence of a wrathful God, the supreme (male) Judge, as God is often described in the Bible, seems suicidal. Living without the love of a parent or partner is survivable, if not preferred. Living outside the love of the Creator is not; it is the ultimate isolation.

Julian emphasizes that wrath is contrary to the nature of God. “…it is utterly impossible that God should be wroth. For wrath and friendship are two opposites…For I saw very clearly that where our Lord appears, there peace is established, so that wrath has no more place. And I saw no manner of wrath in God.”

Rather, Julian “understood wrath as a human characteristic arising from ‘a lack of power or a lack of wisdom or a lack of goodness.’”

In addition, Julian describes “creation as wholly good”, God’s love as “unconditional”, and “human suffering can be seen as part of the pattern of love, not as punishment imposed by an angry God, or as random misery permitted by an indifferent one.”

This is significant for victims of abuse who wonder “Why did this happen to me?” It provides an alternative to their probable conclusion that they were abused because “I am a bad child.” They wonder if their abuser is more powerful than God or if they themselves are simply unworthy of God’s protection. To the contrary, Julian informs us that the Lord taught her, in the parable of the Servant and the Lord, “Seeing that I have made well the greatest harm, I want you to know that I shall make well all that is less.”

Children who experience sexual violence as part of their childhood abuse experience additional complications. Most of these children are threatened into silence. The threats cause the children to fear not only discovery, but also their own power. They are led to believe that their words (telling) can cause catastrophic consequences for themselves and their abusers, who are also usually loved ones. Despite the fact that the true blame belongs to the abuser, the victims experience the catastrophic consequences from their telling as real and blame themselves. They conclude that they are the cause of everyone’s pain; that they have terrible power they don’t understand and can’t control. It is understandable that they often recant.

Children can not easily process the incongruity of stimulating sexual touch and the deep emotional and spiritual wounding that results from sexual abuse. They also have difficulty comprehending the illegality and the “system” that becomes involved. When many tell, they are not believed and, in fact, are punished for telling. Girls often learn to

25 D.S. Brewer, Julian of Norwich, 96.
27 D.S. Brewer, Julian of Norwich, 80.
fear their own sexuality having been blamed and labeled seductive. Many boys experience gender confusion.28

The betrayal of sexual abuse becomes even more apparent to the child-victims as they mature and realize the true and destructive nature of the assault they experienced. Victims of both genders experience rage from the violation. However, rage is unbecoming a victim and is counter-productive to being believed. As a result, many victims repress or internalize their rage. If the sexual assault was traumatic enough, the entire event(s) may be repressed for many years.

The repressed or internalized rage works like poison on the developing child. It inhibits the development of self-esteem. It is often later expressed in eating disorders, addictions to drugs, alcohol, and/or sex, criminal behavior, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and learning disorders. Julian offers hope saying, “Our Lord tenderly touches us, calls us delightfully, saying in our soul, ‘My dearest child, let go of all this you love. Turn to me for I am enough for you; take your joy in your Saviour and in your salvation.’”29

Some victims of incest, torture, ritual abuse or severe sexual assault have dissociative experiences sometimes resulting in multiple personality disorder; a complete disintegration of their personality. This is an extreme response to unrelenting or grave trauma. However, substantial anger and rage are common to victims of abuse. The victims’ rage, in whatever degree it is experienced, becomes feared and the victims believe that any experience or expression of it could overwhelm them and lead to their own destruction.

Seeking the love of God inevitably leads one to ask where God’s help was when these horrible things were happening. While experiencing and expressing anger at God is normal, healthy and part of healing, victims of childhood abuse fear their own anger. They also fear God’s retaliation or withdrawal from them and so they are inhibited.

Julian offers a God who suffers with us and is not absent or impotent against the abuse. Julian’s confusion about why God had allowed there to be sin at all corresponds with many victims’ question, “Why did this happen to me?” Jesus comforts Julian with the following words: “Sin is necessary, but all shall be well. All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well.”30

Julian is called to trust God, but finds that difficult. This is a quality with which victims of childhood abuse can easily identify. Jesus comforts Julian’s continuing doubts repeating his promise: “I may make all things well; I can make all things well, and I will make all things well, and I shall make all things well; and you shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well.”31

Children who are victims of intra-familial incest have the added confusion caused by their father’s (or grandfather, uncle, etc.) betrayal. The child knows the abuse is wrong, but is powerless to stop it. They may also innocently trust their father who probably told them that this is his way of loving them and that this is their special secret. Along with that is the usual threat that if anyone finds out bad people will hurt Daddy and take him away from them.

Incestuous relationships also have a devastating effect on the personal and sexual development of the child victim, as well as on their spiritual development. In addition to

28 Most perpetrators of sexual violence with children are male.
the issues described above, as Dr. Gerald May points out, the “image of God as ‘Father’...is inevitably influenced by the child’s human father.”  

When the human father has betrayed their child by incestuous behavior, the barriers on the spiritual journey can be prohibitive.

When trust is being re-built, the sacrament of the Eucharist can be a lifeline for victims of childhood abuse. “In Holy Communion we experience the ‘most tender courtesy of Christ’ whose self-emptying and self-giving are the meaning of this ‘precious food of all true life’. Here is the tenderness and warmth that Julian associates with the word ‘Mother’.

Julian’s earthy simplicity provides a portal for progress as she describes her vision of the hazelnut. “I saw three properties about this tiny object. First, God had made it; second, God loves it; and third, that God keeps it...he is the Maker, the Keeper, the Lover.” Julian continues with a task of faith building relevant to victims of abuse, “I understood this revelation to teach our soul to cling fast to the goodness of God...what delights him most, is when we pray simply trusting his goodness, holding on to him, relying upon his grace.”

Julian also provides a model for the empowerment of victims of abuse by her own actions. She learned that she was valuable to God and was certain, therefore, that her message was worthy of being shared in the face of opposition. “Despite the misogynist climate of her time...Julian refuses to be silenced...she found the courage to believe in her ability, and to insist on her right, to articulate even the most difficult of the revelations – to act as God’s intermediary...’Ought I to believe, simply because I am a woman, that I should not tell you of God’s goodness? When I saw the vision I also saw that he wants it to be known.’”

Each age has its lepers and Samaritans, those whom they feel justified in objectifying, excluding and oppressing. Oppression wounds individuals and cultures. From her own experience of the feminine wound, Julian provides a gateway for the restoration of the feminine nature of God into Christian experience as well as the re-valuation of the female children of God. “In our own cultural struggle toward equality between sexes, Julian provides us with the best (and most metaphysical) basis of all for such equality...it is clearly our repudiation of the feminine in God which has allowed the Church to raise its armies, to burn those who diverge from its codified and canonical ‘truth,’ and to develop a God who is primarily a lawyer and a judge!”

Julian’s theology and experiences provide an invitation to victims of childhood abuse to seek to return to a loving God. Julian shares her journey into relationship with God openly and honestly. She shares her own struggles with doubt and ignorance. She persists in her desire to know. “Julian likens the errant soul to a headstrong toddler who must be free to run and explore her little world if she is to grow to maturity, but who inevitably falls, tearing her clothing and becoming hurt and dirty. This is a homely and...

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32 Gerald G. May, M.D., Care of Mind, Care of Spirit, 75.
33 Austin Cooper, Julian of Norwich (Great Britain, Burns & Oates, 1987) 115.
engaging picture of the sinner, crying out – as Julian puts it – not to a God of punishment but to a loving mother Christ. The loving mother picks up the toddler, cleans and comforts it, then holds it close again.”38

While some people might withdraw from Julian’s graphic depictions of Christ’s suffering head and body, the victim of abuse is comforted in the shared knowledge of the nature of abuse. They have lived the physical reality of violence against an innocent body. They have known suffering; even if they have not known neighborly love and they can share that with the Christ described by Julian.

In the end, Julian finds and shares what she was seeking, faithfully declaring the truth she was given that “all shall be well.” “Julian offers to our regard her world. It is one in which pain, illness, sin, desolating loneliness, and numbing stupidity occur, but one in which, because every human creature in it is suffused with the presence of God, all things are, finally, and also in an underlying deep and present reality, ‘well.’”39

Julian of Norwich is a model of hope; brave, simple, beautiful, and earthy. “Julian was able to do what any Christian person today longs to do: to transcend the madness of the world, to see through its insanity and pass beyond it to the eternal verities.”40 In this way Julian of Norwich provides an important and unique gateway, a portal of hope and spiritual healing to victims of abuse.

38 Margaret Guenther, Holy Listening, the Art of Spiritual Direction (Cambridge, Cowley Publications, 1992) 27.
Bibliography


Julian of Norwich (c. November 8, 1342 – c. 1416) is considered to be one of the greatest English mystics. Little is known of her life aside from her writings. Even her name is uncertain, the name Julian coming from the Church of St Julian in Norwich, where she occupied a cell adjoining the church as an anchoress. At the age of thirty, suffering from a severe illness and believing she was on her deathbed, Julian had a series of intense visions. Julian became well known throughout England as a spiritual authority. (Summary from Wikipedia). For further information, including links to online text, reader information, RSS feeds, CD cover or other formats (if available), please go to the LibriVox catalog page for this recording. Help and hope for your journey toward healing For those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and those who love and care for them, The Wounded Heart offers a tender, compassionate window into the psychological effects of abuse and the theological foundations for healing. Thirty years ago, with great courage and vision, Dan Allender brought Christians to the table to acknowledge, understand, and help victims heal from their firsthand experience with sexual abuse. I appreciate especially his last section about how to give victims hope. He says, The most common error in some Christian groups is to ignore the problem or offer true solutions in a trite way. Julian (or Juliana) of Norwich (1343 – after 1416), also known as Dame Julian or Mother Julian, was an English anchorite of the Middle Ages. She wrote the earliest surviving book in the English language written by a woman, Revelations of Divine Love. She lived practically her whole life in the English city of Norwich, an important centre for commerce that also had a vibrant religious life. During her lifetime, the city suffered the devastating effects of the Black Death of 1348–50; the Peasants