

**Extracts from the Annual Julian Lecture**  
**12<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

***Inspired by Julian:***  
***Seeking a Feminine Mystical Way for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

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Can there be a feminine mystical way for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? In what I have to say, three different strands of reflection come together:

1. making connections between mysticism and feminism;
2. exploring a *via feminina* for contemporary women and men;
3. the great significance of love and wisdom for a feminine mystical way.

The literature on mysticism is vast and so is that on feminism. But comparatively few feminist theologians have written on mysticism, at least in comparison with all the other topics they have explored. Moreover, the leading authors on mysticism are still predominantly male and rarely use feminist insights or gender perspectives in their discussions of the subject. This has largely been left to a few women writers.

[...]

### **Mysticism and feminism**

A surprising development worldwide is the growing realisation of the global spiritual heritage of women across different religions and cultures. So many spiritual ‘foremothers’, female saints, mystics and female religious communities are being discovered today, offering us many unexpected surprises. Yet a comparative historical enquiry provides plenty of evidence that most religions have validated women’s lives primarily in terms of domestic observances and family duties. Religions have been less inclined to encourage women’s search for religious experience and enlightenment, or inspired them to follow exceptional paths of spiritual devotion and perfection. Imprisoned by the daily tasks and recurrent demands of immediacy that the maintenance and nurture of personal and community life have always required, women have been so much equated with *immanence* that the realms of *transcendence* have remained largely out of their reach, forbidden to their desire.

[...]

In spite of the existence of what the German theologian Elisabeth Gössmann calls ‘women’s counter-tradition’ to official Christianity,<sup>1</sup> pursuing the life of the spirit always remained an exceptional path open mainly to individual women from an advantaged social background. We therefore have to ask how far women have really had access to a spiritual space of their own? How far were they really encouraged to pursue, or were ever admitted to the pursuit of, similar spiritual ideals and disciplines than men? How far could women provide spiritual advice and leadership for both women and men? It is only in our postmodern era that women *as a group*, and not simply as individuals, have been able to respond in greater numbers to the invitation, challenge and gift of *transcendence*. That raises questions about modern women mystics and the possibility of developing a feminine mystical way in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Gössmann, ‘The Image of God and the Human Being in Women’s Counter-Tradition’ in Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999: 26-56.

## Exploring a *via feminina* for contemporary women and men

Beverly Lanzetta is convinced of the importance of gender implications for the spiritual life.<sup>2</sup> She invites us to a re-reading of mystical theology from a feminist angle in order to discover new spiritual lineages and revelatory traditions. [...] She presents the *via feminina* as a 'radical mysticism' which seeks new forms of expression and engagement, while recognizing at the same time that some features of traditional mysticism reveal themselves as products of patriarchy. These have to be dismantled and replaced by something new for the present world.

[...]

Lanzetta describes Julian's mystical experience as 'graphic and raw', especially when Julian contemplates the thirsting face and crucified body of Jesus on the cross. She recognizes Julian's distinctive theology of the feminine, 'in which the meaning of sin and suffering is transformed and her worth as a woman is affirmed. Conceptualizing this journey through the image of the motherhood of God, Julian works out her equality and dignity of personhood, and the sinlessness of her fellow Christians.' (p.84) Lanzetta affirms our need for a feminine Divine, our longing to experience God as mother, as Julian does so movingly when she speaks about God and Jesus as our mother and praises God's all-embracing motherly love for the whole of creation again and again.

It is impossible to follow the intricate arguments of Lanzetta's study which includes many quotations from the Long Text of Julian's *Showings*. But I want to mention the typology she discerns as common to both Julian and Teresa in relation to 'the inner life of suffering and sin, and the contemplative processes that take them from oppression to freedom and from human love to divine love' (86). These are then the five qualities especially noted by Lanzetta in both Julian's and Teresa's mysticism:

1. longing to love, the extended passion and desire for God which is a mutuality of passion flowing between God and the human person. This passion inspires the mystical journey, but also heals and restores the human person;
2. great determination, surrender and courage;
3. the inner monastic heart, which Lanzetta considers as perhaps the most revolutionary element. This is the transposition of the physical monastery from a material reality to a state of consciousness, a state of the heart that involves a daily commitment to maintain an inner aloneness – an inner monastery as a place where God and soul dwell alone, in intimacy, providing a unitary perspective from where all reality and all experiences can be evaluated;
4. spiritual detachment consisting of spiritual love, detachment and humility that find expression in the essential work of compassion for others, and in the daily round of activities and responsibilities;
5. the annihilated self, the self that must surrender itself in order to find the mystic's *true self* inflamed by love. (86-98)

Much more could be said on all of these, but I want to move on in order to reflect on the place of love and wisdom that figure so centrally in Julian's visions. These are so much needed for healing our deep spiritual wounds of today. They form a distinctive part of a feminine mystical way that can help to renew contemporary spirituality.

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<sup>2</sup> See Beverley Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom. A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) and *Emerging Heart: Global Spirituality and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

## Love, wisdom and the feminine mystical way

Counsellors, pastors, even some politicians and many ordinary people are all too aware of the great spiritual hunger that reveals itself in so many contemporary phenomena. What can be done to bring about more justice, harmony, peace and happiness in a world so torn apart, where so many people suffer great material, emotional and spiritual deprivation?

[...]

The American ecological thinker Thomas Berry describes the wisdom of women as one of the essential resources for contemporary cultural and spiritual renewal. He sees ‘the great work’ of building a viable future for people and planet as a human project that belongs to both women and men. However, it demands the transformation of all our institutions, from global politics, governance, education and financial arrangements to all aspects of culture, including religion. Berry thinks that humankind will not be able to achieve this radical transformation if we do not draw on all available resources. Most important among these are four kinds of wisdom: that of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, that of the classical philosophical and religious traditions of the world, and the new wisdom of science, still in its beginning phase, but advancing with amazing speed and success. The wisdom of women is very ancient, but it is now reasserting itself in new forms, transforming western and other civilizations. Berry says, ‘The wisdom of women is to join the knowing of the body to that of mind, to join soul to spirit, intuition to reasoning, feeling consciousness to intellectual analysis, intimacy to detachment, subjective presence to objective distance.’<sup>3</sup> This can be read as a description of some of the qualities associated with a feminine mystical way that is now open to both women and men and is prefigured in the lives of earlier women mystics.

## Conclusion

Some theologians, like Karl Rahner or William Johnston for example, only see a future for Christianity, the church or even religion, if mysticism and mystical spirituality will take the lead in people’s lives. As Beverly Lanzetta writes in her latest book: ‘...it is the mystical quest that underlies and informs global spirituality today.’<sup>4</sup> The contribution of women mystics, and the further emergence of a feminine mystical way that embraces the powers of love and wisdom, are indispensable for this.

[...]

Spiritual work is demanding, not light work whose benefits can be gained without effort. To lead women and men of today to spiritual awakening, to a deeper awareness, to a new spiritual consciousness and actively engaged spiritual practice, is the great calling of our time. It demands many spiritual resources. It requires great integrity, deep honesty and truthfulness, and a passionate commitment to the life of the Spirit, to become ‘attuned to the rivers of longing that flow between the divine and human heart’ (Lanzetta 2005: 87).

Julian’s vision of love, especially of God’s all embracing motherly love, are a great inspiration for this task. Anchored in a passionate and compassionate spirituality, Julian can guide us on a new feminine mystical way that, through love and wisdom, can help us heal the wounds of our world.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work. Our Way Into the Future*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999, 180.

<sup>4</sup> See Beverly Lanzetta, *Emerging Heart. Global Spirituality and the Sacred*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, ch. 3.