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Review Of "Julian of Norwich: Mystic And Theologian", New Ed. By G. Jantzen

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“What does it mean to be an anchoress in postmodernity?” With this
sentence, Grace Jantzen begins the introduction to her new edition of
Julian of Norwich. The body of the book, first published in 1987, offers
the reader a thorough spiritual investigation on writings of the English
medieval anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich. The new introductory
section, written for this edition, expands the meanings of Julian’s the-
ology, and makes it accessible and relevant to the “postmodern” seeker
of spirituality in the twenty-first century.

The book is divided into several parts. In the first section, Jantzen
combines the few biographical details known about Julian with a general
discussion of the life of an anchoress in the second half of the four-
teenth century. Almost all information known about Julian comes from
her own writings, The Showings of the Love of God.

In the central core of the book, Jantzen examines Julian’s set of
visions experienced during severe illness. Her subsequent decades-long
exploration of these visions and the meaning they had, informed
Julian’s spirituality throughout her life. From these visions, and the sub-
sequent spiritual inquiry into the meaning of divine love, comes Julian’s
sophisticated theology.

In the last section, Jantzen guides the reader in utilizing Julian’s the-
ology of divine love into a system for spiritual guidance and growth. In
her new introduction, Jantzen emphasizes this last point. She reiterates
that Julian wrote for all people and all time. Throughout her text,
Jantzen enthusiastically recommends that her readers embrace Julian’s
guidance and reliance on divine comfort as a prescription for healing.
She believes that these writings can be a guidepost for the “anchoress in
postmodernity” showing ways to turn towards “new life” and away from
the “death-dealing structures and practices of modernity” (p. xxi). It is
Julian’s theological interpretations of her visions in which she sees Christ
as maternal, nurturing, and giving birth to humanity, that Jantzen
believes speak most powerfully to the modern reader of these texts.
Jantzen reminds us that Julian’s Showings was the first book written in
English by a woman. She asserts that Julian’s use of maternal imagery in
describing characteristics of Christ connects the lives of ordinary women
to the divine. In the subtitle of the book, Jantzen identifies Julian as a
theologian, thus giving her an authoritative role in an arena dominated
by male voices.

The book is densely packed with insights and interpretations of the
text, full of applicable quotations from the various versions of The
Showings of the Love of God. With this volume, Jantzen attempts to meet
the needs of both a scholarly and a more general audience in search of
sophisticated spiritual guidance. Although the book targets “anyone
Nova Religio

drawn to Christian mysticism, ”as the back cover copy indicates, it might have more appeal to the scholar of medieval mysticism and theology.

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