

# “All Shall Be Well”: Several Phenomenological and Metaphysical Insights into a Spiritual Experience of Julian of Norwich

Received April 2, 2019  
Revised April 17, 2019  
Accepted April 19, 2019

## Key words

Julian of Norwich,  
mysticism, personal identity,  
phenomenology of sin,  
incarnation

In my paper I present several phenomenological and metaphysical reflections on spiritual experience of Julian of Norwich (1342–1416). First, I discuss the meaning of *sin*, which is qualified as pain, isolation, clash of intentions, misperception, having no essence, as inevitable, and as a “reward”. As unnatural and unreal, sin refrains mind from the perception of the real and the natural and distorts intentional relations toward the world, others and oneself. Within this context, I show how the true sense of personal identity is revealed through the process of mystical transformation. Further, I outline certain ontological and metaphysical claims and questions. Was the medieval mystic taught something about the relation of mind and reality? A possible way how to apprehend the analyzed experiential ontological features is to radically employ and expand the Christian notion of *incarnation*.

## 1 Julian of Norwich: Introduction

Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) is a medieval English mystic, an experienced spiritual teacher and guide. She is also an extraordinary woman with bright and critical intellect, the author of the mystical treatise suitably named *The Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian is an honest seeker who poses essential questions with true philosophical precision. She does not seem to be easily soothed with authoritative and simplifying theological answers of her times [1]. It is not a coincidence that the existential question of sin and evil was in her thinking the most pressing one. She lived in difficult times, went through three sieges of the Black Death (which killed over half of the population of Norwich – probably including her own family), and witnessed executions of heretics and the beginning of the Hundred Year's war between France and England. Julian was fully surrounded by pessimistic moods of the “popular” medieval guilt and sin absorption (John-Julian 2001, viii). Paradoxically, she became well-known for her spiritual optimism and all-embracing hope.

## 2 Briefly About Methodology

My basic methodological and methodical perspective is *phenomenological*. Being attentive to profound experiences of the mystic, I observe fundamental experiential structures of the given spiritual phenomena, searching for evidentially manifested “how” of the given (understood as the specific content of intentional consciousness). Here we mostly remain in a safe valley of experience, presuppositionlessly describing the *reality of consciousness*, which experiences the world in such and such manner. Only then it is reasonable to make also certain ontological and metaphysical claims. Phenomenological descriptions always implicitly point to certain kind of ontology. I hold the view that metaphysics and ontology are legitimate only if they arise out of *immediate experience*, remain closely bound to and attested by it. In this way, metaphysics, ontology and even theology do not have to become mere deductive conceptual systems, thought narratives, but they may truly represent living teachings. Through reliable experiential insights they keep their evidential force, validity and justification. My own philosophical effort here wishes to sketch a path pointing this direction.



### About the author

**Mgr. Jana Trajtelová, PhD.**, works as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy and Arts at Trnava University, Slovakia. Her main areas of specialization are Philosophy of Religion and Spirituality, Phenomenology and Philosophical Anthropology. She is a member of the Center for Phenomenological Studies at the Department of Philosophy, Trnava University and the Editor-In-Chief of *The Yearbook on History and Interpretation of Phenomenology*. In 2011 she published a book on the phenomenology of mysticism, *Distance and Proximity of Mysticism: Phenomenological Study of Fundamental Movements in Traditional Western Mysticism (Vzdialenosť a blízkosť mystiky, 2011)*. She is a co-author of the book *Person as Phenomenon: From Intersubjectivity to Interpersonality (Osoba ako fenomén: od intersubjektivity k interpersonalite, 2015)* and a co-translator of the Anthony Steinbock's book *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* into Slovak (*Domáce a cudzie: Generatívna fenomenológia a Husserl, 2013*). Her email contact is [trajtelova@gmail.com](mailto:trajtelova@gmail.com).

### 3 The Problem of Sin

Julian was taught that it is firstly a human person who is responsible for the uneasy sinful condition. Sin, especially in folk guises of the catholic faith, has been understood as “disobedience to God”. There is also the burdening doctrine of original sin. In *Revelations* we follow Julian’s constant plea for better understanding of these problematic issues. As the mystical lover of God, she daringly bothers Divine Wisdom with questions about sin, guilt, suffering, judgement or punishment – patiently awaiting direct answers or insights. She cannot reconcile profound discrepancies she experiences in the world and in herself. The greatest discrepancy she finds between God she mystically experiences and the image of God (and the correlated image of man) she hears about from authorities. How could He, she asks, ever allow the damnation of non-believers? How could Mother Christ [2] bear the eternal suffering of any beloved creature in hell?

As the mystic she experientially knows the divine presence as the unconditioned *goodness*, sheer *positivity*. The mystical teaching, she has obtained through intimate mystical communion, speaks the same loving language. God, she knows, never blames nor angers [3], and remarkably, never responds to her plea to show her something of hell or purgatory (Julian of Norwich 2011, 75–76; Frykholm 2010, 57).

She sees “*no wrath in God*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 115) but sheer life of goodness, which constantly creates, nourishes and permeates all the known and unknown being. For Julian’s God it seems impossible to judge or damn a human creature so intimately bound with His own divinity. We are “*the dwelling city of God*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 180), we are incarnations of His Son (Julian of Norwich 2011, 129).

There is one important mystical lesson, which Julian cherishes the most among all others – the showing of the *Parable of a good lord and a good servant* (Julian of Norwich 2011, 120–122). This image speaks metaphorically of a situation of sin and mirrors the existential experience of humans in the world.

*I saw two persons in bodily form, that is to say, a lord and a servant; and with this God gave me spiritual understanding. The Lord sits solemnly in repose and in peace; the servant stands near, before his lord reverently, ready to do his lord’s will. The lord looks upon his servant most lovingly and sweetly, and humbly he sends him to a certain place to do his will. The servant not only goes, but he suddenly leaps up and runs in great*

*haste because of his love to do his lord’s will. And immediately he falls into a deep pit and receives very great injury. Then he groans and moans and wails and writhes, but he cannot rise up nor help himself in any way.*

*In all this, the greatest misfortune that I saw him in was the lack of reassurance, for he could not turn his face to look back upon his loving lord (who was very near to him and in whom there is complete comfort), but like a man who was feeble and witless for the moment, he was intent on his suffering, and waited in woe.*

*In this woe he endured seven great pains. The first was the painful bruising that he received in his falling, which was very painful to him. The second was sluggishness of his body. The third was the weakness resulting from these two. The fourth, that he was deluded in his reason and stunned in his mind to such an extent that he had almost forgotten his own love to do his lord’s will. The fifth was that he could not rise up. The sixth was a most amazing pain to me and that was that he lay alone – I looked all about and watched, and neither far nor near, high nor low, did I see any help for him. The seventh was that the place in which he lay was a huge, hard, and painful one.*

*I wondered how this servant could humbly endure there all this woe. And I watched deliberately to see if I could discover any failure in him, or if the lord would allot him any blame, and truly there was none seen – for only his good will and his great desire were the cause of his falling, and he was as willing and as good inwardly as when he stood before his lord ready to do his will.*

*And in the same way his loving lord constantly watched him most tenderly; and now with a twofold attitude: One outward, most humbly and gently with great compassion and pity (and this was from the first level of the showing); another inward, more spiritual, and this was shown with a guiding of my understanding to the lord, and by this guiding, I saw him greatly rejoice, because of the honorable repose and nobility that he wills and shall bring his servant to by his plenteous*

*grace (and this was from that other level of the showing) and now my understanding led back to the first part of the showing, keeping both in mind.*

*Then says this gracious lord in his meaning: 'Behold, behold, my beloved servant! What harm and distress he has received in my service for my love, yea, and because of his good will! It is not reasonable that I reward him for his fright and his dread, his hurt and his wounds and all his woe? And not only this, but does it not fall to me to give a gift that is to him better and more honorable than his own health would have been? Otherwise it seems to me I would be doing him no favor.'*

*In this an inward, spiritual showing of the lord's meaning settled into my soul, in which I was that it was fitting and necessary – seeing his great goodness and his own honor – that his dearworthy servant whom he loved so much would be truly and blessedly rewarded without end beyond what he would have been if he had not fallen. Yea, and to such an extent that his falling and all the woe that he had received from it would be transformed into high and surpassing honor and endless bliss.*

*At this point the showing of this illustration vanished, and our good Lord directed my understanding onward in vision and in showing the rest of the revelations to the end. But notwithstanding all this diversion, the wonder of the illustration never went from me; for it seemed to me it was given me as an answer to my desire, and yet I could not perceive in it a full interpretation for my comfort at that time.*

At another place I was thinking about the parable in a more detailed and systematic manner (Trajtelová 2018). We are in the situation where sin as innocent non-intended falling defines the very ontological and metaphysical structure of reality (and thus human consciousness). The most suitable experiential description of this fundamental situation is simply *pain* – Julian claims that she cannot find the more fitting definition for sin.

The servant innocently gets into a position of suffering and a correlative manner of isolation. We can smoothly link the myth of original sin with the *phenomenon of separation* (Merton 1968). Human consciousness (“soul”, “self”) gets alienated from its own divine source. This grave self-alienation, this

separation from one's true divine identity is accompanied with the birth of an illusory egoic identity and is nourished by fears and self-absorption. Consciousness becomes self-referential in its intentional orientation and unable of transcendence toward anything other than itself [4]. The illusion of autonomy implies *losing the awareness of the broader context* – of the profound interconnectedness of all life and being. It is perhaps no coincidence that Julian emphasizes the divine compassion (Julian of Norwich 2011, 67, 209), since it teaches us to *reconnect*. The reality of sin turns into a battle field of multiple blind, confused, isolated intentions of misperceiving minds [5]. The injuries of sin from the parable are the pains of *conflicting isolated intentions* conveyed by thoughts, aspirations, emotions or deeds – within us and among us. Moreover, we can say that sin is an “optical” illusion related to lack of an important metaphysical *knowledge* – experiential knowledge about the ceaseless presence of the all-embracing divine goodness. Julian's “sin” really refers to innocent ignorance, to lack of spiritual knowledge. She writes: “[M]an is changeable in this life, and frailty and by simplicity and lack of cunning, being overcome, he falls into sin. He is impotent and unwise by himself, and also his will is overwhelmed during this time he is in temptation and in sorrow and woe. And the cause is 'blindness', for he 'sees not' God – because 'if he saw' God constantly, he would have no harmful experience, nor disturbance of any kind, nor the distress that is a servant to sin.” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 110, my emphasis). This means that illusion of sin is a distortion in perception, the *misperception*. Overcoming the illusion through healing our perception is the point of all contemplative praxis [6]. But when sin is the innocent distortion of perception [7], who is then to blame? Julian insistently claims: “But I saw no sin; for I believe it has no manner of essence nor any portion of being, nor it can be known except by the pain that is caused by it.” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 65). In *Revelations*, God persistently teaches her that *all what is, is good*. God is sheer *existence of goodness*. *Being and goodness are synonyms*. All what exists, exists with-in and because of the *overabundance* of the infinite creative power, wisdom and love (anytime Julian uses these three words she refers to the Unity of the Trinity) (Meninger 2010, 17). The infinite loving perfectly permeates its finite concrete manifestations: “He is in all things” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 31). “What is sin?”, Julian marvels, “for I saw truly that God does everything no matter how little, and I saw truly that nothing is done by luck or by chance but everything by the foreseeing wisdom of God” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 31). In other words, sin has no essence. It has no reality, it is fully *unreal*. It has no nature, nor it arises out of the nature, it is *unnatural* (Julian of Norwich 2011, 169). Everything else in the creation is natural, which means divine. Nature and divinity, nature and mercy, nature and goodness are the two sides of the same

coin [8]. The lack of true understanding of reality has no substance, it is a mere deprivation.

However, Julian goes on and surprises her readers. She thinks of sin as an *award*, attributing it *positive value*. It is a positive and necessary component of creative divine intentions. She claims that God sees “the falling” in connections with human rewards and praises (Julian of Norwich 2011, 89). “*It is not reasonable that I reward him for his fright and his dread, his hurt and his wounds and all his woe?*” – asks the good lord in Julian’s parable [9]. Julian asserts *concealed necessity* and even *benefits* of our falling [10] (Julian of Norwich 2011, 164–165) and adds that we will see it ourselves, comprehend and rejoice. The most famous refrain from *Revelations* repeats: “*Sin is inevitable, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all the manner of things shall be well*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 64). Later the mystic finds some release in God’s promise that evil and suffering will definitely vanish by the “great deed” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 73–74). It remains unclear what is meant by this expression. Perhaps the remedy of the great deed – regarding the distorted condition of human consciousness – is simply to follow Julian’s perspective of transformative divine goodness. For Julian, the refrain „*All shall be well*” is much more than certain vague promise or hope; *it is already becoming her new reality*. Her eyes are getting used to the new undeluded perspective. The transformation of a sinful mind presupposes the healing *shift in perception toward the awareness of the ever-present divine goodness – the only true reality*.

## 4 Identity and Transcendence

The sinful consciousness is the innocently fragmented, isolated, perspectivistic, and variously conditioned consciousness, experiencing its own multiple contradictory intentions within itself and in relation to perceived world and other living beings. Sin embraces the context of unavoidable violence. However, the most decisive human existential possibility – *spiritual transformation* – can bring along new and liberating perspective right into the sinful situation. Julian’s main advises from *Revelations*, acceptance – contemplation – optimism, seem to be transformational themselves.

Julian believes that *accepting* the tension of inevitable situation of sin is the most honest position and the most effective way how to live through it. However, the true acceptance presupposes a deeper transcendence. The focus on *goodness* leads her “beyond ontology.” She does it in many different ways – contemplating divine goodness, expecting it, creating it, mediating it to and inciting it within others, and thus

bringing it right into the problematic human reality. But of course, the true acceptance also requires the true transformative *knowledge* about the overall situation, which already evokes the transcendence (in sense of *gnosis* – cognition). It is the knowledge of the *nature of the divine reality beyond* – the latter is the *decisive transformative insight*. At the same time, Julian had to radically *rethink the question of sin*, which lead her to new liberated ways of perceptions, thoughts, and emotions; she had to rethink and transcend what we now call “cultural programmings”. For example, she believes that God encourages her to transcend her culturally conditioned emotions of guilt, remorse or sadness as soon as possible toward newly appropriated trust, joy and optimism arising out of the immediate contact with the Unconditioned (Julian of Norwich 2011, 11 and elsewhere). She offers psychologically and biologically much healthier “life strategy” than to be absorbed by guiltful consciousness. From *Revelations* it is clear that God invites her to carelessly even heedlessly transcend antinomies of the sinful reality – also of her emotional reality [11]. She is taught not to be dependent on any of these conditioned emotions because divine presence is not bound to her perception of “*joy or sorrow*” [12].

Julian’s way of transcendence merges with the mystical *transformation of consciousness*. All mystics and contemplatives, in most of the spiritual traditions, speak about the most significant event for human consciousness – the process of its transformation. In our terms, a sinful self-absorbed, dualistic, isolated mind transforms into an open, interconnected, integrated divine mind. In Western tradition, this transformative process is also associated with deep experience of suffering (the “dark night”) within which egoic mind-structures dramatically collapses under intense dispossessive existential tensions (Trajtelová 2013). After the happy collapse of the egoic structures of the self (provided by contemplative praxis or an excessive suffering), the liberated consciousness bears the same divine qualities, it coincides with them. “*I saw no difference between God and our essence, but just as if it were all God...*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 143) – says Julian.

## 5 Reality and the Transformation of Consciousness

There must be another relationship mentioned – the relationship of the transformed consciousness and the world. Not only had the Julian’s inner reality changed. With the change of her perception, the world around has become different. Lady Julian, the famous spiritual authority of her times, has incited the change in perspective in many other people, either personally or through her writing. Her empha-

sis on goodness and optimism was broadly attractive and profoundly transformative even in her times. Julian, first of all, *teaches to see in new ways*. Concentration on divine goodness nourishes the ability to *see* and *await goodness*. Mystical dwelling in the divine presence has transformed her look into the look of goodness. For example, it is well-known that mystics, saints and contemplatives are able to truly love their enemies. This is possible because they *really see goodness* beyond the painful surface of others' behavior and programings. They *see essentially*, and the essence of a person, according to Julian and mystics, is divine. For the transformed consciousness, not only others are divine, but everything is divine. Speaking with Julian, "*everything is well*" (Julian of Norwich 2011, 78).

The mind of the mystic is the *contemplative mind*, already sinless, transformed, which sees reality as it is – without delusions, self-images or arbitrary narratives. *Contemplation* is a way to surrender (e.g. to accept and transcend), it is a way how to see reality in a way it *originally is*, how to reprogram our minds [13]. Thomas Merton claims that it „*is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive... It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source*" (Merton 1968, 1; May 1977, 11). For Julian and mystics, contemplation becomes the source of real and realistic optimism. It is not naïve optimism; it is not a blind belief into some vague heavenly promise. It is the certainty which has the experiential basis – the goodness already *is* the very fundament of reality. And *once our eyes see it, it becomes real*.

However, philosophers should go further and ask: What reality? What consciousness? Was the medieval mystic taught something about the relation of mind and reality? Let me now make a short speculative detour. I am aware that this note would require much more space in order to be elaborated with precision and argumentative force. Let these lines become hints or leading clues pointing at the direction in which my thoughts about mystical transformation, identity, and reality go.

The relation between reality of consciousness and outer reality seems to be very tight, though very blurred and ungraspable. Philosophically and also scientifically, there is no strict line between the reality of the consciousness and the reality of the outer world. Not only we cannot decide about the nature of what we call outer reality itself (though we may speak of *how reality is given* to a human consciousness), not only we cannot apprehend the relationship between the imma-

nence of consciousness and the transcendence of exteriority, but first of all, we know almost nothing about the nature of consciousness itself. Phenomenologically, it is obvious that consciousness *is the only original reality*, the field in which the experience of the world is given as a constant flow – as phenomenology rightly emphasizes. Edmund Husserl, almost hundred years ago, claimed that subjectivity is the necessary and originary source of the meaning constitution (i.e. reality constitution *within* the consciousness). But on the other hand, Husserl also advocates the knowledge of objective structures of phenomena (reality itself *for* the consciousness). The deepest mystery for Husserl was the relation between subjectivity and objectivity, transcendent reality and reality of our mind – hence the mystery of subjectivity [14]. It seems that the old philosophical enigma is even more problematic regarding new scientific research on brain and mind, especially in relation to interconnections found in neuroscience and quantum physics. It is commonly known that our mind, using our physical brain, to a great extent *really creates* the world around [15]. These philosophical-experiential and scientific insights stand out even stronger learning about contemplative and mystical experiences and its widespread current research (Brewer *et al.* 2011).

Mysticism of Julian of Norwich also indicates that *with individual changes in perception, the world is altered*. From the previous analyzes it seems that the *sinful mind incites the persistence of the sinful ontological structures*, where both *mind and ontology are mutually dependent and mutually self-sustaining*. The transformed, sinless mind brings the original goodness into the world, reveals the originally existent goodness within and for the world, and so partly *recreates* its ontological structures. *The mode of consciousness* (sinful or sinless) is *not arbitrary* since it has the *power to co-create the guise of our reality*, forming or deforming it, revealing its true nature or concealing it. Could this mean that the overall spiritual transformation of the human consciousness would essentially affect the whole antinomical reality – including annihilation of all the forms of suffering, which are innocently given by the sustainment of the same antinomical structure? Would the overall transformation of consciousness mean the remedy of the current ontology, the reversal of the fall? The Julian's "*great deed*"? How would reality without antinomies o sin look like for humans? Certainly, the world would look differently. Let me silence and leave these questions open.

## 6 Peering into Metaphysics: Surprises of Incarnation

In the previous sections I have focused on reality perceived by the human consciousness. Now let me make a small humble step into metaphysics. What is the nature of the relation between the mind and the divine? What is the particular relationship between the transformed consciousness (mystics) and the divine reality? There is still the untouched question posed by Julian: why did God not prevent the “fall”?

After the previous experiential analyzes we perhaps better understand *how* sin is given as inevitable and under what conditions. But let us also ask *why* sin is inevitable. Let me shortly sketch certain direction of a possible philosophical and theological comprehension of this issue.

At some places, Julian surprises her reader with her own daring interpretations of the visions. I focus now on Julian’s important remark about *innocence* of the fall. There is no one to blame for the fall – nor the servant, nor the good lord. The terrain was originally unbalanced, somehow rough, contained “pits”, what dramatically effected the life of the good servant, but also incited the deep compassion of the lord over the beloved servant. We could say, the ontological and metaphysical conditions were (or are) *originally* imperfect.

Let me get back to Julian’s teaching of “*God’s simple loving*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 13). She mystically observes how everything that exists is perfectly soaked and fully submerged in the divine being experienced as goodness (Julian of Norwich 2011, 13). Divinity is inseparable from the whole of creation – creation seen as “*a little thing, the size of a hazel nut... round as a ball*” in the palm of Julian’s hand (Julian of Norwich 2011, 13). She learns that *everything* has its being by the love of God (Julian of Norwich 2011, 23). The whole *Revelations* are led by the mystic’s perspective: “*He is in all things*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 31). If this is so, *what do the innocent imperfections of the finite being mean?* How can the imperfections exist? What do they signify?

Another aspect we have to consider is Julian’s stress on mysterious (and scandalous) identification, even equation of the *servant* with *Adam, Christ, humankind* and an individual *person*. In several places in *Revelations*, these roles are somehow heretically interchangeable. Why does the servant – Adam, Christ, humankind, a human person – incomprehensibly falls into the vicious state of the isolated sinful consciousness, unable to turn sight from pains and imperfections? Julian writes that in the servant “*is included the Second Person in the Trinity, and also in the servant is included Adam, that is to say,*

*all men. (And therefore, when I say ‘the Son’ it means Godhead, which is equal with the Father, and when I say ‘the servant,’ it means Christ’s manhood, which is true Adam)*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 129). And in few lines below she writes: “*When Adam fell, God’s Son fell – because of the true union that was made in heaven, God’s Son could not be separated from Adam (for by ‘Adam’ I understand ‘all men’)*.” With the fall of the Son she means *incarnation* into the Mary’s womb. She also believes that the meaning of this vision is to show that Christ and Adam, in the eyes of God, are “*as but one man*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 129). At another place, interpreting the symbolism of the parable, she notes “*there was absolutely nothing separating the Godhead and manhood*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 130). And at other place, again, she refers to *incarnation as to an injury* (Julian of Norwich 2011, 132). Elsewhere she hints on the holy “*knot*”, the holy unity between Christ and humankind, which originally dwells in God (Julian of Norwich 2011, 142). Christ, Adam, you, and me – it is still the same servant from the parable. Julian writes that *divinity* is our perfect bliss, ever present to us. But she also writes that *humanity* is God’s great pleasure. He rejoices in receiving the human body, to be expressed as Body and in Body, manifesting His glory through human flesh. In Julian’s *Revelations*, the seeming extremities *deity-humanity* remain in the permanent tension within the incomprehensible divine *unity*. In other words, God is *essentially* and passionately involved in the affair of the continuous creation realized in the concrete incarnate self-manifestations. Julian also speaks of Christ’s Body as God’s Desire, which was with Him from the beginning and has accompanied the whole creation (Julian of Norwich 2011, 71). She herself speaks of Incarnation as the *essential* part of God (Julian of Norwich 2011, 154–155).

At this point, if we were consistent, we would have to radically rethink the Christian theological notion of *incarnation*. In Julian’s Trinitarian perspective, divinity of Christ and of the Father is absolutely equal. But there seems to be the equality also between man and Christ – in the fall, incarnation, resurrection (transformation). These insights are not theoretical but based on contemplative and mystical experiences. But if Christ is incarnate, the very “aspect” of Godhead is incarnate. A Trinitarian divine life itself is somehow dramatically involved in the happening of the sin and creation. *Essentially involved. Christ is the enterprise of the “creation”*.

The notion of incarnation serves us as a metaphysical leading clue to the problem of sin and antinomies of reality. If we further followed the thoughts above, we would need to open and broaden the notion of incarnation, and consider its possible ontological, metaphysical and theological consequences. The rethought notion would lead us from a single

narrative of a concrete historical event of incarnation of the divine Son in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, towards its broad ontological and metaphysical possibilities. We could perhaps get inspired with the sense of the “*extended incarnation*” by Teilhard de Chardin [16].

One possibility how to understand the problematic ontological and metaphysical deformity of the innocently sinful reality is precisely to employ the radical meaning of incarnation. Incarnation would mean the *Infinity's* incomprehensible messing up with the *finitude* – *originally*, given from the very “beginning”. Let me ponder about this *impossible merge*: The Formless and the Unlimited keeps manifesting itself in the constant process of creation, in concrete forms, *inevitably* limiting itself. Playful and multiple divine self-manifestation are various and many. The divine creativity enjoys to express itself in forms of massive cosmic energy fields and single atoms of a grass or flowers, as well as in the subtlest move-

ments of human emotions and thoughts. The Infinite Being perfectly dwells in and as the finite – *self-restricted* and *injured*; the uncreated divinity breathes within its created and perfectly individualized forms – even at the cost of a strange self-separation given by the inevitability of self-limiting. The idea of incarnation refers to all cosmic affairs as the *affairs of the emerging divine life itself* (without labeling the pantheistic conclusions). This divine life is originally *relational*, *kenotic* and *processual*, thus also liable to antinomic junction of the impossible merge of the finite and the infinite, limited and unlimited, mortal and immortal, formless and forms. Phenomenon of sin (and also desire [17]) is meaningful only within such metaphysical and theological context. Here I close, without making any definite metaphysical or theological conclusions, leaving the meaning of the Julian’s “great deed” open within the challenging theological perspective.

## 7 Conclusions

I have examined interconnections among the immediate mystical experiences of Julian of Norwich, understanding of sin and guilt, human transformation and the nature of reality. Let me sum up.

1. Phenomenon of sin is qualified as pain and isolation, as having no essence, as delusion and ignorance, as clashes of intentions and disregard of the context, as bearing certain positive value (reveals divine goodness) and promise (sin as an award), and as inevitable.
2. We followed that sin, pain, sickness and dying are synonyms for Julian. The cause of the pain is the lack of knowledge, lack of proper perception, missing of one’s own identity and essence, inability to recognize and enjoy the presence of goodness as the fundament of reality, “*ignorance of Divine love*” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 193).
3. Phenomenologically and ontologically, the notion of sin is bound to the antinomial character of experienced reality. The sinful consciousness is the innocently fragmented, isolated, perspectivistic, and variously conditioned consciousness, experiencing its own multiple contradictory intentions within itself and in relation to perceived world and other living beings.
4. The sinful consciousness and the co-related antinomial reality structure are principally innocent and guiltless.
5. For Julian, the transcendence of the whole antinomial structure is possible. Her approach is specifically “positive” and creates the perspective of spiritual optimism and trust. The way of transcendence merges with the profound spiritual transformation of human consciousness.
6. Her main advises acceptance – contemplation – optimism seem to be transformational themselves. It seems that the mode of consciousness (sinful or transformed) is not ontologically arbitrary since it has the power to co-create the guise of our reality, forming or deforming it, revealing its true nature or concealing it.
7. The reality of sin and its principal innocence could be metaphysically approached by the radical rethinking of the Christian term incarnation.

## Notes

- [1] There is vast body of interpretative theological literature on Julian's *Revelations*. Many of these works are valuable theological and hermeneutic investigations, which aim to integrate Julian into a broader picture of catholic theological teaching. In this article, I do not inquire the *Revelations* from theological point of view. I am trying to be an observer who rather sees her work as an integral part of a deeper spiritual *telos* of the spiritually developing humankind, *telos*, which goes beyond its historical guises and theological limitations. Here I am not in discussion with theologians who picture Julian in more traditional catholic fashion. I focus on her spiritual experience and draw out its essential features upon which I built my further conclusions.
- [2] Julian is famous for feminine qualities, which she likes to ascribe to God, especially the motherhood. At some places the terms she uses have even an androgynous guise and aim beyond gender. She disturbs readers' habitual way of theological thinking with expressions like "Our Mother Christ, He..." (Julian of Norwich, 2011, 160). John-Julian nicely notices that Julian does not ascribe anthropomorphic attributes to God (e.g. "God is tender as our mother"), but she completely turns the perspective saying that all the motherhood, fatherhood, as well as all the humanity is preexisting perfectly in God. She divinizes the human reality, including genders (John-Julian 2011, xii).
- [3] "[But] these two things – blame and anger – I could not find in God" (Julian of Norwich 2011, 105). She even claims that God cannot forgive us our sins, simply because there is no negativity in the divine being, so it makes no sense to speak about forgiveness at all. "I saw no kind of wrath in God, neither for a short time nor for long. (For truly, as I see it, if God were to be angry even a hint, we would never have life nor place nor being.)" (Julian of Norwich 2011, 115).
- [4] If the intentionality is fully transcending. If we spoke in a more current terminology, we could speak of mindfulness. For classical articulation of mindfulness, see, e.g. Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Nhat Hanh 2008).
- [5] Saints and contemplatives in every spiritual tradition are very sensitive toward the pain of the broken bonds and relations. That is why they emphasize *compassion*, which is the consciously and actively lived togetherness. Mystics show how every isolated and isolating movement hinders the vivifying divine flow. This phenomenon I treat elsewhere as idolatry (Trajtelová 2018).
- [6] Contemplation learns to "see" the *real* beyond the mental constructions, to hear the stillness beyond the mental noise, to transcend one's own mind's conditionings.
- [7] Eckhart Tolle speaks about sin as about an inherited dysfunction of human mind. Sin is an inevitable result of human unconsciousness (read unenlightened, usual, normal, everyday "conscious" form of a human consciousness) (Tolle 2005, 108).
- [8] For Julian, human nature is natural, including the body and the sensibility. At the same time, the human nature is the essential part of the divine mystery. The mystic speaks loosely about the natural desire for God or natural love. She claims that the human nature and the God's grace are perfectly concordant: grace is God, nature is God (Julian of Norwich, 2011, 169). Grace and nature present the one and the same efficacy of the divine goodness within the creation.
- [9] However, the notion of an award itself remains mostly obscure and seems to have the weakest experiential power. Perhaps here it comes to Julian's faith – simply embracing this point as God's promise and future reality to come.
- [10] One way of looking at this troublesome point in Julian's teaching is to think about the role of suffering in the process of mystical or contemplative awakening. Mystics claim that the way to mystical union leads through pain of radical dispossession (cf. "the dark night" in St. John of the Cross). Spiritual teachings in all the traditions have always acknowledged the role of suffering in spiritual transformation since abundance of suffering may serve as the vehicle for the spiritual surrender and awakening, which represents the breaking points when habitual egoic structures of human mind collapse.

- [11] Eckhart Tolle makes an important experiential distinction between emotions of negativity and desires that arise out of the egoic state of consciousness (mind) and “love, joy, and peace”, which are “deep states of Being, or rather three aspects of the state of inner connectedness with Being. As such, they have to opposite. This is because they arise from beyond the mind. Emotions, on the other hand, being part of the dualistic mind, are subject to the law of opposites. This means that you cannot have good without bad” (Tolle, 2005, 29). Julian’s lesson intuitively demonstrates this distinction, which mirrors the fundamental difference between the self-absorbed (untransformed) and contemplative (transformed) human consciousness.
- [12] The story I have in mind is even humorous. At the one moment the mystic experiences the highest mystical bliss, at the next moment the deepest pains and sorrows, and “now the one, and now the other, various times – I suppose about twenty times” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 40). She concludes that “it is not God’s will that we submit to the feeling of pains, in sorrow and mourning because of them, but quickly pass over them and keep ourselves in the endless delight with is God” (Julian of Norwich 2011, 41).
- [13] Thomas Merton speaks about contemplative consciousness, which goes beyond the “social and cultural self” – hence beyond all the programmings of mind, and which is the “ground of openness” (Merton 1968, 25). “Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense ‘void’. But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green, or red, or yellow.” (Merton 1968, 4). For Sufis, for example, “fana” demands also such “extinction of social and cultural self, which would be determined by the structural form of religious customs” (Merton 1968, 5).
- [14] See for example Introduction of Husserl’s *Crisis*.
- [15] An example of a popularization of this kind of research is the work of the famous neurologist David Eagleman (Eagleman 2015).
- [16] The notion of the extended incarnation we can find elaborated in a poetic way in author’s mystical-intuitive writing *The Hymn of the Universe* (1961). Teilhard de Chardin, in a form of a prayer, expresses that his vocation is to announce the profound unity of the cosmos and God, which is incarnation (Chardin 1961, 36).
- [17] See my article entitled *Desire and Its Paradoxes* (Trajtelová 2018).

## References

- Brewer, Judson A., Patrick D. Worhunsky, Jeremy R. Gray, Yi-Yuan Tang, Jochen Weber, and Hedy Kober. 2011. “Meditation Experience is Associated with Differences in Default Mode Network Activity and Connectivity.” *PNAS* 108 (50): 20254-20259.
- De Chardin, Pierre Teilhard. 1961. *The Hymn of the Universe*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Eagleman, David. 2015. *The Brain*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frykholm, Amy. 2010. *Julian of Norwich: A Contemplative Biography*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press.
- John-Julian, Fr. OJN. 2011. “Introduction.” In *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press.
- Julian of Norwich. 2011. *Revelations of Divine Love*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press.
- May, Gerald G. 1977. *The Open Way*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Menger, William. 2010. *Julian of Norwich: A Mystic for Today*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.
- Merton, Thomas. 1968. *Zen and The Birds of Appetite*. New York: A New Directions Book.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. 2008. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. London: Rider.
- Tolle, Eckhart. 2005. *The Power of Now*. Sydney: Hodder.
- Trajtelová, Jana. 2018. “Desire and Its Paradoxes: A Phenomenological Study Based on Christian Mysticism.” *Teologický časopis* 16 (1): 31–40.
- Trajtelová, Jana. 2013. “Distance and Nearness in the Mysticism of Saint John of the Cross: A Phenomenological Study.” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 49 (1): 117–134.
- Trajtelová, Jana. 2018. “O Božom optimizme: Príspevok k skúmaniu fenomenológie hriechu na základe mystickej náuky Juliany z Norwich.” In *Studia Capuccinorum Boziniensia IV*. Bratislava: Minor.
- Trajtelová, Jana. 2018. “On Vocation and Identity in Western Mysticism.” In *The Problem of Religious Experience*, edited by Olga Louchakova-Schwartz. Springer (in press).