

Reviews

JULIAN OF NORWICH by Grace Jantzen. *SPCK*. 1987. Pp. x + 230. £8.95.

This is certainly an interesting book on Julian and her background; and in principle it seems very appropriate that a philosopher of religion should tackle a 14th-century theologian who attempts to deal seriously with several important questions which arise in philosophy of religion. All the same, Dr Jantzen's book is disappointing. At the outset she apologises in advance for any anachronisms, of which she may be guilty, which is disarming; but unfortunately there are pervasive anachronisms, which seriously interfere with Dr Jantzen's own purpose. In particular she seems bemused by modern pious jargon which hinders what might have been a fascinating encounter between a 20th-century philosopher of religion and one of her medieval counterparts. In true modern style, Julian has to be taken as a 'mystic' and discussed in terms of 'experience'; Dr Jantzen even tells us what Julian means by 'experience', a word which, so far as I know, Julian never uses. Accordingly, to cite a particularly lamentable instance, Julian's hard speculative point, that if we had a clear vision of God, we would be incapable of going wrong or of suffering any kind of distress, is wantonly subjectivised to become a claim that 'if we allowed ourselves to be fully receptive of God's deep abiding love and protection' all our 'harmful feelings and inward unhappiness which easily leads to sin would be resolved' (p. 210).

The most unfortunate factor in the book, however, is Dr Jantzen's insistence on trying to interpret Julian in the context of a doctrine of creation which would have been entirely unacceptable to Julian. Whereas Julian, like St Thomas, believes that God acts directly in the acts of all his creatures, so that he is always 'the doer', Dr Jantzen maintains that, in creating human beings, God 'forgets his rights', 'restrains himself', even 'humbles himself to be a being among beings'; he imposes self-restraint on his omnipotence to allow us to be individuals (pp. 132–41). Dr Jantzen may think Julian's philosophy is wrong, but in that case she should have argued with her. It is scarcely profitable to interpret her in the light of a doctrine which is contrary to her own.

Granted this fundamental misapprehension, it is not surprising that Dr Jantzen fails to grasp Julian's doctrine of the wrath of God (pp. 179–80). She also fails, it seems, to appreciate Julian's real problematic, which is not one of testing experience (as modern mystical theology requires) or one of reconciling devotion with doctrine (pp. 79–80, 104); her problem is the much more serious one, that her doctrinal data, all derived from revelation (both public revelation and her own showings), appear not to be mutually coherent.

A further obstacle to understanding is posed by other ways in which Dr Jantzen forces Julian into an alien mould, determined more by modern concerns than by those of Julian herself. Thus Julian is persistently presented in the light of modern notions of 'the life of prayer' and the 'spiritual life' (seen, of course, as meaning 'growth in wholeness'). Like a standard modern Christian, she is critical of the church and always open to reconsider doctrine. She comes to accept her own femininity in learning to see God in feminine terms. And so on. It would be unfair to blame Dr Jantzen too much for this, since this kind of anachronistic reading of medieval texts is all too common. But it does not help anyone to understand a serious and difficult writer like Julian, not least because it obscures the theological enterprise she was engaged in.

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