

## DAYS OF FIRE AND GRACE: JULIAN OF NORWICH AND FURSEY IN CONVERSATION

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Allow me to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to join you today and to provide a few points for reflection about the legacy of St. Fursey in Catholic Christian spirituality, and his relationship to Julian of Norwich. You will know him much better than I—I am not a Fursey scholar—but I have the advantage of having a wife who has spent some years researching the life of St. Brendan of Clonfert, “the Navigator,” and the general nature and legacy of early Irish spirituality. As you know, Fursey is said to have been in the school of St. Brendan, having received his spiritual formation from two of Brendan’s students, Meldan Mac Ui Cuinn and Moeni, who was reportedly one of the monks who sailed with Brendan in his seven years’ voyage. Fursey later carried his Irish formation to East Anglia, founding monasteries presumably of the same type, and eventually to the European mainland as a missionary among the Franks.

My own area of study, beginning nearly fifty years ago, was to reflect on the theological and spiritual contributions of Julian of Norwich, who of course came from East Anglia. It happened that one day when Presvytera Sharon was talking about the saints who were contemporary with Brendan or who were formed in his monasteries, I was struck by both the similarities with, and differences from, the visionary experiences of Fursey and those of Julian of Norwich.

I believe that the story of Fursey’s visionary experiences, and the impact of his preaching in East Anglia, may have had an influence on Julian, even though she does not mention him by name in her *Showings*. This is an area which graduate students or the curious could well explore today: to ask for example exactly what Offices were recited in Fursey’s monasteries, and whether these still had a presence in Julian’s Norwich; how much of what Julian describes theologically was already present in Irish thought well before her time and which may have remained in conversation in Julian’s time; and whether his story influenced her to become a recluse. For example, Julian does mention St. John of Beverley, and it seems likely that Fursey had a direct influence on St. John’s own way of life and faith.

What is more interesting to me, however, is that although Julian and Fursey are similar figures in some ways, in other ways they seem entirely opposite—especially in terms of the impact of their experiences of afterlife and the lessons to be learned from their visions of the fires of Hell. My own reflection today, then, is on the kind of conversation Fursey and Julian might have with each other, assuming that they have indeed met in afterlife; and also, how one Catholic tradition can hold together the experiences of two visionaries whose conclusions and subsequent lives were apparently so radically different from one another, especially with regard to the Judgment and the afterlife.

### Fursey

Let us begin with Fursey. St. Fursey (Irish, “Fursa”), who died in France c. 649 or 650, was an Irish monk who, according to some sources, was baptized by St. Brendan and educated by St.

Brendan's monks, especially the Abbot St. Meldan. While he was traveling in East Anglia, Fursey fell ill and was thought to have died.<sup>1</sup> During this experience he had visions of the afterlife, which prompted him to record what happened to him. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* the Venerable Bede mentions a "small book" of Fursey's life from which Bede derived his account, but this book appears to have been lost until recently, when the *Transitus Beati Fursei*, an 8<sup>th</sup> century manuscript, was rediscovered in the British Library.<sup>2</sup>

What has long been known is that Fursey's preaching and healing ministry was remarkably inspirational for Christians not only in Ireland but also in England and in France. In fact it has been argued that elements of Fursey's visions found their way into the *Inferno* of Dante; and it has also been suggested that it was Fursey's experience which ultimately gave rise to the medieval Roman Catholic understanding of Purgatory.<sup>3</sup>

In the spiritual tradition of Columba and Brendan, Fursey became an ascetic and a founder of monasteries. Eventually he travelled to East Anglia, and then among the Franks as a missionary. His story would have still been important in East Anglia centuries later in the time of Julian of Norwich; hence my belief that Julian cannot *not* have known about him and his adventures.

It is intriguing to underscore a few features of the Fursey story which, through legends and hagiography which persisted for centuries, may have had some bearing eventually on Julian's own theological perspective and reclusive life:

- First, we should be aware that Fursey's Irish monastic tradition was not derived from the Roman Church, but from the East. Irish monasticism had its roots in North Africa and Syria. It was consciously derived from the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt: figures such as Anthony the Great, Pachomios, Onouphrios, Aresenios, Poemen, Makarios of Egypt, Moses the Black, and Synkletike of Alexandria. This tradition was known to them in Greek and Latin, the Latin having come through the translations by Pelagius and John the Deacon, as well as the observations by the Latin ascetic John Cassian. Their liturgical tradition seems to have incorporated hymns from outside the Latin tradition, for example from St Ephrem the Syrian.<sup>4</sup> It is also noteworthy that in this

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<sup>1</sup> Bede's account in Ch. IXX of Book 3, of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, places Fursey in East Anglia at the time of his illness and first visionary experience. Sarah Atkinson, in her *St. Fursey's Life and Visions, and Other Essays*, places him in Ireland, traveling to Rathmat (or Kill-Fursa) in Munster. In most other details, Atkinson follows the account in Bede as far as Fursey's career among the Angles before departing to the Franks.

<sup>2</sup> *Transitus Beati Fursei*, Tr. Oliver Rackham, Fursey Pilgrims, Norwich, 2007. This remarkable manuscript, apparently copied in France in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, is now in the British Library (Harley MS 5041) and appears to be the basis for Bede's summary of Fursey's life and preaching.

<sup>3</sup> By Sarah Atkinson, p. 263. Regarding influence on Dante, Atkinson cites Palgrave, *History of Normandy and England*, vol. I, p. 163. Regarding Purgatory, Sharon Pelphrey points out that the germ of what would later be understood as "Purgatory" already existed before Fursey, as seen in the *Navigatio* of St. Brendan, especially in the character of Paul the Hermit. However, with her my suggestion (below) is that the medieval concept of Purgatory should not be read into the early Irish Christian understanding of after-life.

<sup>4</sup> The desert tradition was originally oral, perhaps in the language of Copt. Later, written accounts were in Greek and Syriac, and eventually translated into Latin. For the apparent influence of Syrian hymnography on Irish poetry see Sharon Pelphrey, *O Honored Father*, in which she points out similarities between poetic structure in Ephrem's hymns, and the Latin *Navigatio Sanctus Brendani Abbatis*, perhaps composed by Columba.

Irish tradition, women and men were equals and women were not uncommonly abbesses of “mixed” monasteries, that is, of both men and women. Thus, Irish monastics deliberately copied both Eastern manuscripts, and Eastern asceticism.

It is interesting, as an aside, that the Irish liturgical calendar was not Roman. The Irish practice and especially the dating of Pascha (Easter) were viewed negatively by Rome. The Brendan tale shows that in the sixth century, Irish Christians still slaughtered a lamb on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, to be followed by the observance of the Resurrection of Christ on the Sunday of Pascha. They calculated the date of Pascha based on a Jewish and Eastern (Alexandrian) observational practice, the night of the 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan being the night on which the sun sets at the moment that the moon rises. In the West, on the other hand, the method of calculating the date of Easter was not yet fixed; Rome was still experimenting with a variety of different mathematical formulae. This meant that the date of Pascha in Ireland, as in the East, did not often coincide with the Roman date. Since the Irish were thought of as “Quartodecimans,” *ie.* Judaizers, the Roman Church worked to suppress Irish monastic practice, especially with regard to Easter, culminating in the Synod in 664 at Streanaeschalch, the Abby under St. Hilda, later known as Whitby.

- Second, let us recall that like Julian centuries afterward, Fursey had an experience of near-death and of being taught about the afterlife. When he was traveling he fell into a mortal illness. According to his account, from the Ninth Hour until dawn he experienced ecstatic visions of angelic choirs, and received heavenly teachings. Three days later he again was taken up by angels, while demons attempted to take possession of his soul. During this second experience he received a physical wound on his shoulder and face from the fires of Hell. Scars from this wound were visible for the rest of his life. In a separate experience one year later, he was instructed to embark on twelve years of apostolic mission. After this experience, he became by turns a recluse and a missionary, eventually spending the last period of his life among the Franks. Bede reports that Fursey was reluctant to talk about his visionary experience except to persons in whom he discerned a genuine desire for repentance and amendment of life.
- Third, Fursey *preached in East Anglia*. The legends of his visionary experiences and his style of monastic asceticism were known throughout England and France, no doubt well into Julian’s time. I raise this point because monastic and liturgical practice in East Anglia, including the Rule that may have been followed by solitaries or anchorites, must certainly have been influenced by Fursey, who was known not simply as a preacher, but as a hermit and founder of monasteries. An interesting question then is how much this influence may have been present centuries later, both in terms of monastic practice and even in the way the Mass was celebrated in Norwich.

### Julian of Norwich

Now to Julian of Norwich: She lived seven centuries after Fursey, and the Church she knew was Roman, not Irish or Byzantine. However, we recall that there were no anchorites in Norwich for some fifty years before Julian. Therefore, a question is what kind of asceticism inspired her, what sort of Rule she may have followed, and how she learned about it. In Julian’s part of England especially, Irish ascetic practice in the Celtic spiritual tradition, following saints like Columba,

Brendan, Fursey, Brigid (of Ireland), Hilda, and others, would have been foundational. Moreover, the Irish tradition lifted up and empowered women in a way that was rarely approximated in the Roman church in England or Europe. Could Julian have known about this? Until recently I have always made the assumption that Julian followed the *Ancrene Riwle*, but it may not have been so.

It is noteworthy that Julian seems to hold a special affection for St John of Beverly, whose feast-day, May 7, was the day before Julian's visionary experience.<sup>5</sup> St. John had been a monk at the double monastery of Whitby, under the direction of the Abbess Hilda.<sup>6</sup> Whitby is significant because the monastery followed the Irish practice of viewing men and women as equals, with both sexes living a common life and, in this instance, under the direction of a woman. Knowledge of this Irish tradition, which viewed women more positively than in Julian's England, could well have given Julian the courage to compose her *Showings*.

As for Julian's visionary experience, it was in some ways nearly identical with Fursey's. Both Fursey and Julian were pious Lovers of God who were taken severely ill in their youth—that is, in Julian's case at least, “before the age of thirty.” After several days, both of them experienced paralysis especially in their legs (Julian says, “from the waist downwards”). Then they were observed by their friends to have died. At this point, both Fursey and Julian were, in effect, experiencing another world.

Then, after a period of spiritual instruction, both saints awakened and experienced sharp pain and discomfort. Again, after a brief interval, both were returned to the spiritual visions, which lasted through the night. It was during this second interval that both were taunted by demons. Julian was accosted by the Fiend while demons cackled in the background, imitating prayer and taunting her; while in Fursey's case demons struggled with angels over his soul. Finally, after some hours, both awakened, experiencing pain but very much alive.

Julian mentions that she continued to have “touchings” of her visionary experience through the rest of her life. Here again, Fursey and Julian are similar. The startling experience of near-death, and the admonitions of the angels, continued throughout Fursey's life, with at least four experiences of leaving this world, leading him first to become a hermit and then a missionary.

But if we think about it, the two saints' experiences were also very different:

- Fursey was taught by angels, whereas Julian was not, as she pointedly tells us. She did not see any angels at all.
- Julian saw the crucified Christ throughout the visions, whereas Fursey did not see Christ Himself, but angels, bright light, and the wonders of Paradise.
- Julian is very clear that she did not see Purgatory or Hell, whereas these seem to form the central element in Fursey's experiences, in which demons fought with angels over his soul. Moreover, Fursey saw the Four Fires of Hell that burn up the world (lying, avarice,

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<sup>5</sup> Assuming here that her showings began on May 8, not May 13 as has sometimes been published (based on the probable miscopy of viii for xiii in the Paris manuscript).

<sup>6</sup> Ritamary Bradley, *Julian's Way: A Practical Commentary on Julian of Norwich*, 22.

dissension, and mercilessness). While Julian denounces sin, she does not see anything comparable to Fursey's fires.

- And perhaps most important, Julian arrives at deep theological insights: of the mystery of the Trinity, of creation, the Incarnation, atonement, and the Judgment. While we do not know the detail of what Fursey preached, the emphasis may well have been very different: on the need for repentance and time for renewal of life—nothing so subtle as Julian's focus on encouragement, joy, confidence before God, acceptance, in which there is no wrath in God.

From textual evidence, it seems possible that Julian was aware of differences between her experiences and those of Fursey, and that she deliberately remarked on these differences. Although Julian does not mention Fursey by name, the story of his visions of the fiery test, and a struggle with demons, was the paradigm of Judgment which was still in place in Julian's day, as she tells us. Julian remarks that she did *not* see Purgatory or Hell in the course of her showings, precisely because she knew it was to be expected. This was the teaching of "Holy Church," but it may also have been a direct reference to the legend of Fursey.

Here I revise my earlier opinion that in her remarks about Hell and Purgatory, Julian may have been reacting to Walter Hylton. The same applies to her insistence that she was not taught by angels. Perhaps in these things Julian did have Hylton's works in mind, but now it seems more likely to me that both Julian and Hylton were fully aware of the whole tradition which begins with Fursey: visions of tormenting fire, and the test of demons battling or arguing with angels at the point of death. The story of Fursey's experience was likely a commonplace in Julian's world.

Moreover, Julian writes that for the lover of Christ, sins can result in "honorable scars" that are visible even in the afterlife. Could this also be a reference to Fursey's experience? We remember that Fursey was burned on the cheek and shoulder by the fires of torment which he witnessed, and might have been wounded even more severely had not angels intervened on his behalf. These scars were visible for the rest of his life. He is told that the reason for his wounding was his sin in accepting a cloak from an evil man, which a demon now grumpily hurled at Fursey—along with the man himself—from the fiery pit.

On the other hand, Julian does not describe anything like this with reference to herself. In her account, "honorable scars" are simply the effects of sin in our own lives. While we carry the marks of our sinful history into the after-life, it is not necessarily the case that our sins prevent us from experiencing Paradise; nor do we need to be constantly ashamed of them in this life. Rather, they are evidence that in our earthly lives, sin was overcome through repentance. In this sense, sin was "behovable," that is, somehow inevitable but ultimately helpful in the history of our salvation.

In terms of what the two visionaries did following their experiences of near-death, Julian and Fursey were, at first glance, seemingly opposites. Although Fursey withdrew into the hermit life immediately after his experiences, he then emerged to become a traveling missionary. Julian on

the other hand apparently remained an anchoress after her profession until her death.<sup>7</sup> No doubt by Julian's time and in her location, it would have been impossible for her to spread the story of her experiences by traveling and preaching, as had Richard Rolle not many years before. It was not only because Julian was a woman, but also because of the content of her theology and the paranoia of the times, in which Lollard preachers in blood-red robes were going about stirring up trouble and preaching against the doctrines of the Church. Therefore, Julian sought to reach her "even-Christians" by staying where she was, dictating the accounts of her experiences and meditations and passing them on to be guarded and taught by others.

Neither do we know whether Julian worked wonders, as did Fursey. Both in Anglia and in Gaul, many miracles were attributed to Fursey, as recounted in the "Virtues of St. Fursey." Fursey famously healed the sick, even after his own death; and cast out demons, and raised the dead. He stuck his staff into the ground and brought forth a spring which filled a reservoir and supplied the needs of a monastery; for centuries pilgrims came from everywhere in order to be healed by this miraculous stream. Fursey was well known, then, not only as a man who had seen the after-life, and not only as an ascetic and founder of monasteries, but as a healer and wonder-worker. We do not know anything like this about Julian, apart from her offering spiritual counsel to the pilgrim Margery Kempe; and the fact that we know virtually nothing about Julian at all suggests that she was probably not known in her time as a wonder-worker or healer.

Finally, as Fursey was famous among the Franks and had the admiration of important nobles, they quarreled upon his death over the right to bury him. A miracle then occurred, both in bringing his body to the proper place, and then in the preservation of his relics: his body did not decay when it lay on a porch for some time, awaiting the construction of a proper tomb for him in the church; and then after being laid behind the altar, was found incorrupt after four years. In keeping with Julian's anonymity, on the other hand, it is not known where she was buried or when, the assumption being only that she must have died where she was enclosed, in the little anchorhold in Norwich at St Julian's church. There is no tradition of her uncorrupted relics.

### Holy Fire and the Afterlife

Although St. Fursey and Dame Julian were both influential in their own ways in the life of the Church, it is interesting to compare what they describe as their experiences of the afterlife, and the ways in which they understood these experiences. Especially with regard to the Judgment, they seem to have been so different that it is hard to see how they could be compatible. Fursey sees fire and demons, and upon returning to his body realizes that he should go forth to warn about the dangers of being attracted to the things of the world. When, in his visions, he meets the departed priests Beoan and Meldan, they tell him to warn everyone that the judgement is at hand. This is a sober message, intended to shock the sinner into repentance. Julian, on the other hand, sees grace and divine Love, and is instructed to tell her "even-Christians" about the surpassing

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<sup>7</sup> It is not of course known when Julian became an anchoress, and therefore, whether she traveled before that time. Julia Bolton Holloway has put forward the theory that Julian may have gone to Rome with Cardinal Easton upon the occasion of the canonization of Brigid of Sweden. This would have to have been before Julian became a settled anchoress, since an anchorite did not travel. Fr. John-Julian, OJN, proposes that Julian may have been married twice, losing both husbands and fostering out her children, before becoming a recluse. See *The Complete Julian*, Paraclete Press, 2009, pp. 21-29.

love of God such that “all shall be well.” Hers is a joyful message of healing and ultimate salvation, in which there is no wrath in God.

Not only this, but Fursey is said to have stressed the importance of praying for the dead. As mentioned, in the opinion of some biographers, this practice—which he introduced in his own monasteries—may have actually given rise to the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. By contrast, Julian protests that during her visionary experience she does not see Purgatory at all. She does not even see sin, which she finds remarkable and somehow completely unexpected. And when she inquires about the fate of a dear friend who had died, she is instructed not to look into the lives and fates of others. This must have been puzzling with regard to the question whether to pray for the dead.

Nor does Julian experience the struggle between angels and demons at the point of death, although she says that she understands this is the sort of thing that ought to happen, “as Holy Church teaches”—possibly a reference to the tradition of Fursey. At the same time, she is aware of those who have died, seeing for example a soul (perhaps the soul of a child, though this is not clear) ascend like a new-born baby directly into Heaven. This seems to be in direct contrast not only to Fursey but to the view of accepted theologians like Walter Hylton, for whom the soul even of a child would have to descend directly into Hell if not baptized.

Although both Fursey and Julian experienced an encounter with demons, in Julian’s case the demons do not play such a great role. Initially she did not see them at all, remarking that from the teachings of the Church she was aware that at the moment of death the soul should be tested by demons, although it had not happened to her. But on the second night, she did hear cackling in the background, mocking prayer. The demons accused her of being a “wretch” and an untrue sinner.<sup>8</sup> Then a solitary “Feynd” came to test her. This demon was animal-like, a brick-red creature with paws rather than hands, and seemed to be atop of her, choking and assaulting her. She was able to repel him by rehearsing the “feyth of the Holy Church,” which I take to mean that she recited the Creed. Although this encounter began with a very real experience of heat and fire and foul stench, so that Julian thought the room was literally on fire, in the end she recognized that it was only a demonic trick, intended to tempt her away from faith in Christ.

Along with the demons there was, of course, the presence of fire. For Fursey, the fires—which he understood to be the fires of Hell—were terribly frightening. Fursey felt the heat and had to be literally dragged away by the angels to save him from being consumed. Julian, on the other hand, only briefly sensed flames as she lay half-awake, exclaiming that the whole place where she lay must be on fire. She was immediately comforted by those around her, pointing out that there was no fire at all and that it was simply a delusion. In general, we can say, then, that in Julian’s case the primary image was not burning flames, but rather the beautiful diffusion of light which surrounded the cross of Christ at the very beginning of her revelations, and throughout her experience. This light was supernatural. It was not a destructive fire, but comforting and cleansing.

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<sup>8</sup> Long Text, 76.

For both Fursey and Julian, an entire theology and subsequent way of life seem to have been built on the experience of near-death; but in Fursey's case the experience was of destructive fire, and in Julian's case it was not, but rather a divine light which shone around the face of Christ on the cross. So how are these two visions of after-life to be reconciled? Here I would like to make several points:

- First, it is not necessary to interpret Fursey's vision as being the flames of Purgatory, as it was later understood in the Catholic Church. At Fursey's time the doctrine of Purgatory did not exist.<sup>9</sup> From what we see in Bede's account, and others, based upon what Fursey himself said, we do not get the sense that those who were cast into the flames were being *purged* of anything; in other words, it was not their destiny to enter into Paradise. They were simply the damned, and Fursey was terrified that he might wind up in their company.
- Fursey is taught by the angels that he would not be harmed by any fires not of his own making. In other words, the caustic flames were not the result of predestination, nor of wrath on the part of God, nor of God's desire to punish; but rather, they were the natural consequence of one's own deeds in this life. This is very compatible with Julian's observations about the effects of sin, including the idea that sin is a "sharp scourge" for anyone who loves God. In other words, we suffer the natural consequences of our own sins, which for one who loves God, is an unhappy memory; but which repentance can turn into lessons for our own spiritual growth.
- Julian does not see wrath in God. When she enquires about the damned, she is taught not to try to judge others or to enquire into their destiny; and she learns that with regard to the Judgment, she would see for herself that "all shall be well." She does see, however, that it can be salubrious for us to fear eternal punishment. This is an awesome fear of God which she calls "reverent dread." It is helpful for the Christian to keep this always in mind, so that we turn away from sin and plead to God for our salvation. Fursey himself obviously did keep a reverent dread throughout the remainder of his life. He is fully aware of the forgiveness of his sins and the fact that his life has been spared so that he can preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who do not know the mercy and love of God. Bede also mentions that, according to someone who could still remember Fursey, that the saint did not tell about his visionary experiences to just anyone, but only to those who were genuine seekers of God. Therefore, it seems that in piety and also humility, Julian and Fursey are very similar indeed.
- Perhaps most important is Julian's vision of the "Great Deed" that God will do at the Day of Judgement. Julian says that the Church teaches us about forgiveness, and the Church

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<sup>9</sup> The doctrine itself was not articulated until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Roman Church finds traces of the idea in early writers such as Origen, Hippolytus of Rome and Ambrose, although Eastern Orthodox tradition does not accept this interpretation of their writings. Chiefly, in the Orthodox tradition it is understood that the experience of purgation (in the series, purgation, illumination, perfection) takes place in this life, not after death. At the same time, Orthodox Christians pray for the dead—not because there is the expectation that somehow the evil will be saved through suffering in the after-life, but because of the hope that in the Judgment these loved ones will have been saved through God's grace, perhaps for reasons we do not understand.



also teaches us about divine judgement. In this teaching we learn about salvation in Jesus Christ, who suffered on our behalf for the remission of our sins. This is the “first Great Deed” which God has accomplished. But there is a second Deed which is hidden from us, which will take place at the Judgement. This is the Deed which will make “all things well,” but which we cannot presently understand. It is interesting that similar language actually occurs in the *Transitus* of Fursey. As the demons are sparring with angels over his soul, we have this dialogue:

“The HOLY angel, reproving them [the demons], did say: Blaspheme not, whilst thou knowest not the hidden judgements of God.

The Devil replied: What is that hidden thing?

The holy angel replied: So long as repentance is hoped for, divine mercy doth attend mankind.

Satan replied: But here there is no place for repentance.

The Angel replied: Thou knowest not the depth of the mysteries of God: perchance there shall be.

The Devil replied: Let us part, since there is no reason in judgement.<sup>10</sup>

### An Eastern Orthodox Perspective

Given the time in which Julian lived, her failure to articulate anything about Purgatory or the fires of Hell or the wrath of God might surely have caused trouble for her with the Inquisition—quite apart from the fact that women were not supposed to teach theology at all. But from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, Julian’s conclusions are perfectly acceptable. The Orthodox Church does not have a doctrine of Purgatory, which is regarded as unbiblical and the result of medieval speculative thought. But more to the point, the so-called fires of Hell are understood differently in the East and the West. Roman Catholic tradition sees the fires as created for the damned, for the purpose of eternal punishment. In the East, on the other hand, the Lake of Fire (referred to in Revelation 20:14 *ff.*) is understood as *uncreated* fire. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit: uncreated, simply the energies of the eternal God into which all things—including Death and Hades (meaning, in Greek, the place of the dead)—will be cast on the Last Day.

This difference in perspective is significant. I will not take time here to justify the Orthodox perspective, except to point out that throughout the Old Testament, fire can be either destructive or not. It is true that fire and brimstone came down to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. On the other hand, the fire which Moses saw in the burning bush did not consume it; it was not destructive fire. The fiery chariot which carried Elijah into the heavens did not consume it, although after Elijah’s prayer, fire struck and consumed the altar that had been dedicated to Ba’al. The column of fire which led the Israelites out of Egypt did not consume them, although the Earth opened up to consume some who opposed God. Neither did the tongues of flame at Pentecost consume the Apostles. This fire, the Orthodox Church takes to be the same as the holy light on the Mount Tabor, the light of Transfiguration. It is uncreated light.

Then what of the fires of Hell which Fursey saw? The Church Fathers teach that when we die, we encounter the presence of God in a new way. For some, this close encounter is delightful, a

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<sup>10</sup> *Transitus Beati Furseyi*, 23 [87].

great joy, filled with light. For others, however, it is caustic and is experienced as punitive. The difference is not in the fire itself, but in whether or not we are lovers of God. For those who are not lovers of God, the eternal fiery presence of God will be experienced as Hell. It is as the Apocalypse says, “And they were judged, each one according to his works.”<sup>11</sup> But this is not a juridical judgment. Rather, it has to do with our own preparation to enter into eternal Light. If we are, so to speak, made of Love, then we enter with joy; and if we are filled with hatred—like the fellow whose cloak was thrown at Fursej—we will not be able to withstand the fiery intensity of the presence of God.<sup>12</sup>

### The Role of the Judgment

This leaves us with the question of a final judgment. Would Julian disagree with Fursej about the necessity of the final Judgment? Certainly some writers have depicted her as arguing for universal salvation. After all she sees no wrath in God, no flames of Hell, no angels fighting over her soul. However, this is a misrepresentation of what Julian says in her *Showings*. Julian says many things which fit with Fursej’s experience: for example, that it is salutary for us to fear eternal Judgment; that fear of God motivates us to live better; that the teaching of Holy Church about the Judgment is not wrong. What are we to make of this?

As we noted before, Fursej saw that no fire would kindle upon him except of his own making. In other words, this fiery punishment would only affect him negatively if he had opened himself to evil in some way, in this life. If not, he was safe. This suggests the more ancient Christian teaching about the experience of afterlife which had eroded by the Middle Ages in the West, especially through the influence of a Roman juridical model of salvation. In the West, there began to be an emphasis upon legal judgment—a juridical model of faith and salvation—very early, already visible in Augustine’s writings. In the East, however, salvation is seen more in terms of ontology and transfiguration: that is, upon who we are, and the transformation of the soul into the likeness of Christ. Thus judgment is not about an attitude on God’s part but upon the reality of our own selves in the presence of God; it is not about the application of divine Law, but about our own reception of divine Love and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Another observation here is that for Fursej, just as in the Book of Revelation, the smoke and terrible fire *do not emanate from God* but come from the depths of Evil.<sup>13</sup> In other words, this fiery and wrathful destruction is not in God’s nature, it is not from God, but is the character of evil itself, which consumes and devours what it encounters. The Judgment of God is to give over the Earth and those in it who are evil, to the powers of evil.

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<sup>11</sup> Apocalypse (Revelation) 20:12.

<sup>12</sup> Some Orthodox today, especially in Russia, speak of a contest between angels over the soul at the time of death. It is said that at death the soul passes through various stages, or “Toll-houses,” at each point encountering a struggle between angels of light and angels of darkness. The sounds very close to what Fursej experienced, but the doctrine has been opposed by Orthodox bishops, and it is not exactly clear where it originated. It may have reached Russia through Islam, which in turn was influenced by the Zoroastrian tradition of the Persians; or as a Roman influence under Catherine the Great. In any case, it is largely rejected in Orthodoxy as an aberration.

<sup>13</sup> Compare the account in Revelation Ch. 9 of the smoke and fire belching from the fiery pit, that is, from the place of evil.

St. Paul also says that there is a fire which will be kindled upon us, which will burn away whatever is not pure: if we have built our spiritual lives on straw, or wood, or stubble. On the other hand, whatever is eternal will be purified even more: that which is silver, gold, and precious stones.<sup>14</sup> We cannot take into the heavenly Kingdom that which is impure. Thus Julian suggests that this eternal fire is indeed purifying and cleansing, for those who love God. It is important to note, however, that in the theology of both Fursey and Julian, purgation from sin is something which takes place *in this life* for those who love God. This is the experience of both saints, after having tasted death. It is also consistent with the mystical tradition in both East and West, which in Julian's time referred to three stages of the mystical life: purgation, illumination, and union. Again, all three were thought to take place in this earthly life, for those who were being saved.

For the lover of God, then, everything that happens to us, happens in order to cleanse us of sin, to teach us, to draw us closer to God—even those things which are difficult, reprehensible, and uncomfortable. The result of hard testing will always be to draw closer to God. For those who hate God, on the other hand, every negative experience will only serve as a foretaste of the eternal, caustic fire which is to come. And all this is perfectly fair, because it is the natural result of our own choices. But God even has compassion for us when we make the wrong choices and expose ourselves to the effects of evil. For God's part, there is only divine Love, which cannot deny itself.

From my perspective, then, Fursey and Julian should be getting along well. They would agree that it is right in this lifetime to fear the eternal Judgment and to abstain from whatever is impure; to prepare ourselves in this life for an eternity in which there will be no evil, but only divine Love. And they would agree that the glory of God which cleanses us from all sin is a light which we should all seek, in the midst of a dark world.

I close with a reference to the experience of a modern Orthodox saint, Silouan of Athos. Silouan, who died in 1938, was Russian, a giant of a man, who became known as a great ascetic. But in his youth he was frequently drunk, and once in a drunken rage struck another man in the chest, so hard that he thought to have killed him. Silouan eventually left Russia and became a monk at Mt. Athos in Greece, hoping to atone for his sins. The thought that he had killed someone never left him, however, and haunted him so badly that he fell into despair and could not pray. At the point of his lowest despair, Silouan cried out to Christ for help, and was comforted with these words: "Keep your mind in Hell, but despair not."

This is I think the lesson we can learn from both Fursey and Julian: that whatever we may deserve in the way of justice and punishment, is not what God intends to give us in His mercy and grace. Rather, God is unchanging Love and seeks to heal what is broken in us. It may be that we ought to have died, that we ought to have been punished, that we ought not to enter into Paradise to live with God. But God, in His mercy and love, has granted us the opportunity in this life to gain a new life. All our suffering, even to the point of death, is to this end. It is our purgation. It is a reason for us to rejoice. Let us keep our minds in Hell, but despair not—knowing that in the end, all shall be well.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:12 *ff.* This passage is understood in the Roman Church as a source for the doctrine of Purgatory.

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