"SIN IS BEHOVELY" IN JULIAN OF NORWICH'S REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE

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When in Genesis 1 God is said to have looked upon his creation and to have seen that it was good, we are perhaps inclined to think, in view of the sorry events recounted in Genesis 3, that the divine optimism was a trifle premature, and some think disturbingly so, theologically speaking. For if we had to say that God, the creator of all things visible and invisible, is as responsible for the choices of Adam and Eve, and so for their sin, or for the existence of the serpent who tempted them, as he is for the birds and the bees, then we should be in deep trouble with our theology of creation. For birds and bees are indeed delightful things, but make no choices; but when it comes to choices, the record of creation is rather less impressive.

And so, as we know, those who do worry on this account invent something called the "free-will defence" which involves saying—broadly speaking, for versions do differ—that when God created man and woman he created a space for them which he chose not to occupy himself (as I heard Lionel Blue say on BBC Radio the other day), a space called our freedom which, being empty of God, could be safely occupied by evil choices without compromising the goodness of what God has created. The point being, I suppose, that no space occupied by God could be space occupied simultaneously by our free moral agency. Hence, if sin comes from our freedom, it does not come from God.

This, as Herbert McCabe used often to say, is a quite idolatrous notion of God, though it would also seem to combine with a quite Pelagian account of human agency. And I shall not try to add anything much to what Herbert had to say on the subject. But I would like to note just how far the

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theology of Julian of Norwich departs from that of the “free-will defence”, and to note how supremely untroubled she is in her conviction of the divine goodness by the existence of sin; so untroubled that not merely does the free-will defence seem a wholly misconceived solution to the problem of sin; it is misconceived because it sees sin as a problem in a way that Julian does not. Julian does not say: sin is a scandal we need a theodicy to remove. Sin is, of course, a scandal, but she manages to say, consistently with this, that “sin is behovely”: we need a theology which enables us to see how that is so and why it is that, sin being behovely, “all manner of thing shall be well.”2 But since it is not entirely clear what she means by “behovely”, I want to offer a few points by way of explanation: a lexical and a logical point, a third and a fourth which are theological, and the fifth of a more practical sort.

I

The lexical point concerns Julian’s Middle English word “behovely” and what she might mean by it. We do not know what Julian read—and for that matter we do not know for certain that she could read at all. Famously, she describes herself as “a simple creature and unlettered”.3 But that could mean almost anything and virtually nothing. It could mean that she was unable to read Latin unaided off a page. But that does not mean that she knew no Latin and could not understand it if someone read it to her. Some people say that “unlettered” means that it was only Latin that she could not read, or did not know, assuming Julian to imply that she could read English for herself. But that does not follow, and we cannot be entirely sure even of that—though it is very likely. In the end, however, it will not matter much if she could not read English from a page or write English down on a page, since obviously she could understand English being read to her and could have had an amanuensis to dictate her Revelations to.

So the fact is that we have no idea what Julian could read, did read, or had read to her. On the other hand, it is not entirely profitless to speculate as to her sources: I once had a research student who gained much understanding of the late medieval character of Julian’s theology from the purely counterfactual exercise of annotating the text of the Revelations with references to Latin theological authorities, in especially Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry and Bonaventure, as if, did you not know that she had not read them, she had explicitly drawn upon them as a theologian of the schools might have. And certainly, she writes as impressively as a fourteenth century theologian might have who did know these sources. So, if you do insist (in my view rightly) that she could not have read these authorities in any systematic way, that only goes to show how relatively unimportant formal literacy is in the middle ages from the standpoint of the passing on of a theological tradition. If in a narrow sense Julian does not
know these texts, there is a broader sense in which Julian knows their tradition well.

All this is by way of protecting my flank in view of the lexical point I want to make in explanation of Julian’s “behovely”. The lexical point is that we can understand much of the logical, epistemological and theological force of Julian’s Middle English “behovely” if we can understand the logical, epistemological and theological force of the Latin word conveniens as, had she been literate in the Latin authorities of her times, Julian would have understood it. In short, “behovely” means to Julian much the same as what conveniens means to Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. So, when Julian says that “sin is behovely” what she means is that sin is conveniens; and she means it in a sense which Thomas and Bonaventure would have understood, which is, as I shall explain, roughly this: that it “fits”, it is “just so” and that there is something it fits with. And that is my lexical point quickly and painlessly done with, though not of course uncontroversially.

II

Next, a point in logic. It is true that nearly all modern versions of Julian’s text translate her “behovely” simply and straightforwardly as “necessary”: “sin is necessary”, then, as Clifton Wolters has it in his modernisation for Penguin Classics. But this is to over-simplify and distort: what is described as “behovely” in Middle English, and as conveniens in medieval Latin, does indeed have some character of the “necessary” about it; or at least we can say that what is so described meets with some prior expectations of it, it is not arbitrary; you say of what is conveniens that in some sense it is as it should be. But what character of necessity is implied, and what force there is to the “should”, is likely to be incomprehensible to us today, having in our post-empiricist times constrained ourselves to work with a comparatively impoverished vocabulary of modal terms. This is especially so with what Quine called one of the “two dogmas of empiricism”, the view that all necessity is de dicto and analytic, or, in other words, that all necessity is the necessity of a proposition, and that a proposition is necessary if its being true or false, whichever it is, is determined by the meaning of the words alone. If all necessity is analytic, then it follows for this empiricist dogma that there are no de re necessities. Anything a proposition is about is a matter of fact; and there are not, and cannot be, any necessary “matters of fact”, no “natural” necessities.

To be sure, medieval platonists, at the extreme end of contrast with the medieval nominalist equivalent to our post-Humeans, found de re necessities only where there was an object of knowledge (episteme), a “Form” or “Idea”; for from the correct, if tautological, premise that what is known must be true, they invalidly drew the conclusion that only the necessarily true is known. But Thomas Aquinas, who was clearer than his platonist contemporaries about how to distinguish between de dicto and de re necessities, felt
no pressure to yield to arguments from either platonists or from contemporary nominalists, neither of whom could allow (even if for opposed reasons) that there are “natural” necessities, necessities arising from the way things are in nature. And it is important to know this, because it is only against the background of a medieval mentality which allowed for whole hierarchies of differentiated grades of necessity and contingency, de dicto and de re, in logic and in nature, that it is possible to understand the notion of the conteniens, and so of the “behovely”. I do not think that either medieval nominalists or medieval platonists were in any better position than twenty-first century empiricists to make sense of these notions.

For some things in the world are more or less contingent: there are extents to which they might have been otherwise. And other things are more or less necessary: there are degrees to which they could not have been otherwise. But beyond the necessities and contingencies of logic and of the natural order, there are looser forms of both, and Wittgenstein gets nearer to this open-minded medieval laxity about the scope and character of necessity when he points out that, contrary to the empiricist dogma, not all statements which are necessarily true are exceptionless analytical statements. “Most chess moves are valid” is, he says, a necessary truth, though not of course exceptionless and not analytic. Manifestly, not every chess move is a valid move, but if there are chess moves then there is chess, and if most chess moves were invalid there would be no game of chess at all. And there are yet other kinds of non-logical and non-natural necessity—and so, correspondingly, of non-arbitrary contingency: there are some which are tied up less with either logic or cosmology than with matters of identity and story.

III

For example: Turner happens to be 5'8½" tall. But we can easily imagine his being 5'9" tall, though, impressive as he undeniably is in stature, he is not and never will be quite as imposing as that; or we can imagine his being 5'8" tall, which he is not, but about 45 years ago was. So he is 5'8½" tall, but he might not have been. His being the height he is is a “contingent” fact about Turner.

In fact Turner’s height is very contingently connected with his identity, and his variations in height are a very minor detail of his story, even for him. There is little difficulty in accepting that Turner would still be the same person if he were half an inch shorter than he is, and in any case, if he lasts long enough he probably will shrink by that much anyway. But is Turner contingently English? Suppose you thought he was Irish and then I tell you he is English. This might come as a bit of a surprise: and you might change your view of Turner a bit more than if you thought he was 5'8" and he turns out to be half an inch taller. Of course there would be no reason drastically to revise Turner’s individual identity if you got his nationality wrong, but
the revision to your view of him would be somewhat more radical, because his nationality is somehow less "contingently", more "necessarily", tied up with his being him than his height is.

Then again, Turner is heterosexual. But is he contingently heterosexual? Perhaps there is a version, recognisably still of Denys Turner, which is gay, but it is harder to think that Turner is so contingently heterosexual as he is 5'8½" tall or English, for it would at least be less than clear that Turner could be otherwise in sexual orientation in quite the same casual way in which he could be otherwise in height or nationality. Still, I suppose that even at the age of 60 it could turn out that all along he has been a repressed gay. And if it did, I am sure that there would be further episodes to the revised story of Turner which, even if unpredicted at the age of 59, could post factum be comprehensibly connected with the story of Turner thus far. There is therefore an extent to which Turner's sexual orientation is contingent, a matter of more or less, the more or less being the extent to which you can find a place for it within a story of Turner, within a coherent biography.

Next, Turner is male. But how contingently male? Children, at least, give thought to this question and puzzle, not just about the answer, but about the question itself: "What if I had been born female (or male)?" The question puzzles and is beginning to run close to the edge of what we can entertain as truly envisageable alternatives because though perhaps we think we can think of ourselves as being otherwise in gender, we can feel uneasy about thinking thus: would I really be the same person were I female? Then again, how are we to think about the question: "Suppose I were my sister?" To be sure, as questions go, that is now well over the edge of what we can truly envisage, for we are not really envisaging anything at all, but only imagine that we are doing so, when we appear to contemplate how the I which I now am could possibly be the same I which my sister is; were I my sister I would be my sister not I. And so on, for we can think of cases even more incomprehensible: "Suppose I were an angel?" Tempting as it must be for you to view me in that higher angelic light, for my part I do not think I am at all contingently human: I could not have been an angel, for there is no angelic "I" which could be continuous with the "I" I now am. Therefore, Turner is not at all contingently human; necessarily not his sister; he is perhaps contingently male; certainly contingently heterosexual; even more loosely attached to his nationality; and it is only with the very slackest of threads that Turner is attached to his height. In this connection with personal identity and story, there are degrees of contingency and necessity. They are, as we might put it, biographical contingencies and necessities. You can see the degree of necessity or of contingency of these things as being determined by their place within the particular story of Turner.

Hence, all these degrees of contingency and necessity betoken degrees to which my selfhood and identity, given that I exist, are tied in with different features of a particular individual's biography—sometimes crucially, some-
times more or less incidentally. And so we could say that the "scale" of contingency and necessity which these examples illustrate is a narratal scale, because the degree of contingency and of necessity of any particular fact or event is determined by the place it occupies within a story, by how far it is, as it were, part of the plot.

But now consider another kind of question about contingency, which I used to ask when I was a child, but rarely ask in adulthood, a sort of existential question: "Am I contingent?"—or, to put it in the childish way I remember asking it: "What if I did not exist?" Being somewhat less egotistic in adulthood than children customarily are, I can now easily accept the possibility of a world without me ever having been in it: it could have been any sort of world at all, except this one. But beware: whatever world might have existed without me in it would not be this world minus Turner, because this world minus Turner is this world with something missing from it; and had I never existed, there would have been, as it were, no Turner-shaped expectation to be disappointed. And so I would not be missing from such a world, as I will be missing from this world when I have been removed from it by death. I can imagine that eventuality, indeed with age one is increasingly caused to contemplate approaching expiry—and when I do fall through the hole, it should not take long before the world closes up on the gap. For that reason, given that I exist, I can contemplate the difference, even if a rather small one, between the world with me in it and the world without me in it. There would be something missing, if not much. That there would be something missing, if not very much, means that my existence is not absolutely contingent in relation to that larger narrative of human history. Even if, antecedently to my existing, there was no necessity for me at all, still, given that I exist, certain necessities do obtain: other things than me could not have existed if I had not—for example, my mother could not have been Denys's mother. There is a story my having existed is locked into, even if there could be no story my not having existed would have made a difference to, had there been no me in the first place.

It follows that even the question, "what if I did not exist?" is still a question concerning the place of me within a narrative, for all its apparently existential character—it is still, as Thomas Aquinas would have put it, a question of quid est?, an essential question about what there is. For the explanation of my existence is still tied in with features of the world as it is, is still an existence to be explained against the background of what other beings there are, and what kind of beings they are, of what they chose to do or not to do, of their fortunes and their misfortunes. I am, as it were, part, if only an insignificant one, of the world's actual story, and so even this question remains on the scale of "narratal" contingency and necessity.

But finally, what are we to say about a question which goes ultimately beyond what can be envisaged: "What if nothing at all existed?"—or, "Is the world's existence as such contingent?" The answer to that question has to
be that the world—everything that exists—is absolutely, in every possible respect, and awesomely contingent: there is no story the world's existence as such belongs to; and this is because the world's existence as such is the story, and outside of it there is nothing. And we can see that from the completely unreasonable, because completely unanswerable, nature of the question. There simply cannot be an answer to the question "What if nothing at all existed?" because the "What if . . . ?" part of it means: "What state of affairs would obtain if nothing at all existed?" and obviously no state of affairs of any kind would obtain if nothing existed: as between there being something and there being nothing we are no longer looking at construable alternatives. If not very much would be missing were I not to exist, nothing at all would be missing were nothing at all to exist: because to be missed there has to be something that what is missing is missing from. So the question itself seems entirely off the scale of what can be envisaged; or, as you might say, the question is now properly theological.

IV

We may seem to have been distracted by all this from the business of the "behoverly" or the conveniens, but we have not. For I said that the conveniens has some of the character of the "necessary": that is conveniens which is as one would have expected it to be; it "fits" in some way with something, and as far as concerns the point of logic which I raised, it is now the question: where should we place the conveniens on the scale of necessity and contingency—I mean, where should we place it in its theological employment in the high medieval period, an employment with which it is possible Julian was in some way familiar when she said of sin that it is "behoverly" and, as I would say, conveniens?

In answer: I think for a start that a medieval theologian would not have said that creation as such is conveniens, or, if willing to do so, that it is conveniens only in a very extended sense. For the conveniens shares this much with the necessary, that it "fits" against a background, a background which makes sense of it. Now the point about the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo is that the preposition ex does not stand in front of the nihilo as if denoting a material cause, something the world is made out of; or at any rate, it does not do so unless, as Thomas Aquinas says, you take the negation in the nihilo as negating the ex itself, and so take the whole expression as meaning: there is a sort of making here, but no "out of", no material cause, no antecedent "stuff", no kind of "change" because there was no prior condition to change from; and since there was nothing prior to creation, there was no background which could generate an expectation which the existence of things meets. As I have just said, if there were nothing at all there would be nothing missing. That there is anything at all, therefore, meets no obligations of any kind that there should be anything. There is no sense to be made of
the notion, therefore, that creation—in the sense that there is anything at all—is *conveniens*. That there is anything at all does not "fit in with" anything that makes sense of it.

On the other hand, it was tempting for medieval theologians to say that there is a *convenientia* to creation, caught as they were between wanting to say that the divine action of creating is, on the one hand, absolutely necessary and on the other, that it is absolutely free. You can see the problem there is here in the hopeless confusion of anthropomorphisms you generate if you try to get both the freedom and the necessity into a sort of single explanatory picture of God's decision-making procedure; if, that is to say, you envisage God as having to make up his mind concerning what it would be best for him, all things considered, to do, faced as he was with the options of doing nothing at all and creating something or other; and if to create, of all the possible worlds he could create, which to pull off. It would seem that were God to create any world at all, then you would naturally expect that nothing short of the best possible world could do for a perfect God. But would creating the best possible world necessarily be a better option than that of creating nothing at all? How is God to know which would be best?

We all know the sort of trouble such quasi-narratives of the act of creation get you into, hard as they are altogether to expel from our thinking. But we can do something to remedy the misleading impetus of imagination. In the first place, the very idea of some sort of scale of goodness on which to rank the merits of possible worlds is a nonsense: of course I can easily think of a possible world better than this one, for example, a world in which Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were not murdered. But can you work out what on earth could be meant by the best possible world? For my part, I can't even work out what could be meant by the best possible ice-cream, and as Thomas says, say what you like about any world you could describe, there is always one better than it in some respect. I think that this is something which Plato did get right: the "best possible" could not be something contingent, or an individual instance of anything, or something brought about, and conversely what is contingent and an instance of some kind and brought about cannot be the best possible. So given any individual instance of anything, there is always some possible instance which is better than it. Which being so, you might think it right to conclude that if this world is not the best possible world it cannot seem to have been a very good idea to have created it at all: if God was going to create any sort of world, it would seem wrong, at least *inconveniens* that it should have been a second-rate world. Would it not therefore have been better to have created nothing than to have created what is less good than God might have made it?

There you go, did I not tell you that you could get yourself into all sorts of trouble if you set out to think along those lines? For that last is a question even more absurd than the one before it. For since whatever world God had created there could always be a better one, there couldn't be an actually exis-
tent best possible world. Hence, the fact that there could be a better world than this one cannot make it preferable that God had not created anything at all rather than this less than perfect, "second-best", world. In the same way, there cannot be any sense to the question: is it a good or a bad thing that there is anything at all? What we mean when we say that God created the world freely is precisely that God created what there is "out of nothing", that is to say, under no constraint of pre-conditions, whether of material or final cause, there being nothing there before it for the world to be made out of, nor any purpose behind it which creating it serves. So, it is not on account of some purpose achieved thereby that the existence of things is good, as if, had there been nothing, some divine purpose would have been frustrated, or as if what God has created more or less satisfactorily pulls that purpose off. *Et ille est maxime liberalis*, says Thomas of the divine creator: "he is absolutely free-handed"; and he goes on to explain that this is because creating a world is not something which answers to any sort of divine need, is not something God does *propter suam utilitatem*. If creation issues in some way out of the divine goodness, it is not that God has some purpose or other which creating the universe, and you and me, is designed to achieve. Creation is not a means to anything at all. It cannot be in that way that what God creates is good, or, for that matter, bad, not as means are more or less adequate to end, but more in the way that a sonnet or a string quartet is good or bad: if good, still, not as serving some good purpose; if bad, then not as failing to do so.

For these reasons I do not think that there is any kind of *convenientia* to, absolutely speaking, the existence of things rather than nothing. *Convenientia* requires a bill to be filled, and there is no bill that there being anything at all fills, nor is there any bill which what there is either fills or fails to fill. That there is anything at all is not an alternative to there being nothing: for that there is something is a state of affairs of some kind, whereas there not being anything at all is not a state of affairs of any kind at all, and so is not an alternative state of affairs—hence, is not a better or a worse alternative. Therefore, there is no sense to the question: which would have been better, to have created what God did create, or not to have created anything at all?

V

So, how are we to understand *convenientia*, and of what should we say that it is *conveniens*? I think that the understanding of the *conveniens* within high medieval theology was of what we might call a "narratival" kind, or perhaps equally, of an "aesthetic" kind. Think of it this way: the *conveniens*, that which is "beovely", possesses not a law-like intelligibility—of that kind which one provides when explaining something against the background of the causal mechanisms and sequences which generate it, but rather that which you provide for a particular event, or kind of event, when you provide a place
for it within a particular individual's story. It is *conveniens*, therefore, not on account of being explained by a universal and timeless causal hypothesis, but on account of its fitting within a narrative bound by the particularities of time and place. We grasp the *convenientia* of an event when we grasp how it is "just so" that it should happen that way, that "just so" being something which we see when we have got hold of the plot which makes it just right that it should happen thus.

You see, then, what I mean when I say that the *conveniens* shares something of the necessary and something of the contingent. The *conveniens* is not wholly either, and this is because neither the necessity nor the contingency which are combined within the *conveniens* are quite those of formal logic or of scientific explanatory laws. There is a sort of contingency about the *conveniens*, because its "just so" is not that of the scientific prediction which is born out by events: what generates the expectation which the *conveniens* meets and fulfils is a particular story, the exigencies of a plot which just happens to have turned out in this way or that thus far, and, so far as it has got, makes sense of what happens next. And this narratival way of "making sense" of what follows is nothing like the way in which the conclusion of an entailment is made sense of by the premises which entail it; it is more like the right way something happens in a story. For even if everything in a narrative could have, logically, been otherwise, when we say of what does happen that it happened *convenientius*, we say, because we see, that it was just right that it should happen so, and not otherwise. It 'fits'. There is a plot to it. Its contingency is not that of the arbitrary.

Or, you can think of it this way: the patch of shading at the bottom right-hand corner of this painting by Rembrandt could, of course, have been otherwise; and it is neither here nor there whether, had Rembrandt painted it otherwise, we would or would not have to describe it as a variation of the same individual painting, or as a different individual painting. For what matters from the standpoint of logic alone is that one way or the other the presence of that patch of shading in the picture is contingent: it is so and it might not have been so, it is purely a matter of the artist's choice. And yet from another point of view that perspective of formal logic—that anything at all in the painting could have been otherwise—seems to miss the point, which is, rather, that nothing at all could have been otherwise, everything is exactly as it should be, everything in that painting is perfectly appropriate, right, fitting, meet, just, beautiful and, in a word, *conveniens*. So it is contingent, in the sense that you would have no sense of there being anything missing had we the painting without the patch of shading, and there is no antecedent requirement that it should be there in the bottom right-hand corner; but also it is "necessary", in the sense that the painting as it is sets up its own standards of expectation: we now know just how far a painting without that shaded patch would have fallen short of the quality of the one we have with it: when we look at the painting we can see that it has to be
exactly as it is, but in a sense of “has to be” that has nothing to do either with analyticity or with natural necessity.

VI

These things being so we are perhaps closer to finding a theological significance in the *conveniens*, or, to put it in another way, perhaps we are closer to seeing why there is a theological need for some such explanatory category as the *conveniens*. First we can see why in neither of its two main senses should we want to describe “creation” as *conveniens*: not in the sense of the divine action which brings it about that anything exists, because, as I have explained, the *conveniens* is something which may be determined only in relation to the particularities of a narrative plot, and, *ex hypothesi*, there is not and cannot be any narrative of the divine creative causality. Nor should we say of *what* God has created that it is *conveniens* that it should be so; for we have no ground on which to stand and judge what God has made as being, to employ a modern vulgarity, “fit for purpose” or otherwise: if what God has made is good, it is not as the *conveniens* is good that it is so.

But we might want to have an account of the *conveniens* available to us in connection with salvation history; for to speak of “salvation history” is not to speak of something else’s going on, called “salvation”, apart from history, but to speak of history’s having the character of salvation; and to say that is to say of this particular time- and space-bound trajectory of events, which is what has actually happened in all time and space, that it has a plot: what has happened was meant to happen in just that way. And that being so, we might have reason for saying that sin is *conveniens*, or as Julian says, “behovely”, as we should if we could identify the narrative, or at least be sure that there is one, with which there being sin fits. For there being a plot within which sin “fits”, just is what you would mean by “salvation history”. And here we can at least see what the main elements of Julian’s theology of history must be if, in the sense in which I have been trying to explain the word, she can describe sin as “behovely”. For, to be sure, there is no absolute necessity that there should have been sin. There seems to be nothing at all in Julian’s *Revelations* which would indicate her thinking that it would be incoherent—I mean, contradictory nonsense and an impossibility—to envisage a world in which God brought it about that everyone freely chose the good. In fact Julian tells us that her first anxiety about sin—her first theological scruple—was “often” to wonder why God had not prevented sin in the first place, since of course he could have prevented it. She admits to realising later that this was a foolish anxiety, but it is interesting to note that what she realises was foolish about this scruple was not her having thought that God could have created a sinless world and did not, but in her supposing that “all manner of thing could be well” only had God created a sinless world, and so that he should have done so. So she wanted, foolishly, to know why he hadn’t.
That God could have created a sinless world is not for Julian in doubt. For God can bring about anything you can without contradiction describe. It is possible without contradiction to describe a state of affairs in which human agents, being confronted with the options of good and evil actions, always in fact freely choose the good actions. Consequently, it cannot be incoherent or a contradiction to envisage God's bringing about just that world. And of course it is easy to see how "all manner of thing" would have been well in a sinless world. What the Lord chides Julian about for foolishness is her having failed to see that in whatever world God has created, "all manner of thing would be well"; consequently, in a world in which there is sin, in which sin is inevitable, all can be well too, and sin's inevitability is part of the picture, or if you like, part of that plot, of all manner of thing being well. And that, in the end I think, is the theological meaning of "behovely" and of conveniens: that sin is "behovely" means that sin is needed as part of the plot—or, if you like, that the plot needs sin.

Now it clearly follows from this that if, as is implied by the "free-will defence", you deny that God could have brought about a world in which everyone freely chose only the good, on the grounds that God's "bringing it about"—the divine causality—is incompatible with the freedom of human moral agency, then you will have also to deny that God has brought about the actual world in which people some of the time freely choose the good, and some of the time freely choose evil. For the same incompatibility between divine causality and human freedom will have to be presupposed in either case. But the reason why Julian will not accept any form of retreat into the free-will defence is that, if you deny that God has brought about just this world, in which just these choices of good and evil are freely made, then you have no grounds at all for saying that "all will be well", and none for saying that sin is conveniens, or "behovely". For it is only if we know that everything that happens, for good or ill, is part of the plot which God has scripted, that we can know that it is conveniens that it did happen.

And Julian is resolute that everything is part of the plot, including sin, preferring the theology of Jesus, that even so trivial a matter as the degree of one's baldness is part of it all, to the theodicy of Irenaeus, for whom, startlingly, the whole drama of human agency and its freedom is not part of it; for she says that whenever she asked "what is sin?" she asked it as one who "saw truly that God does all things, howsoever small they may be. And I saw that in truth nothing is done by chance or accident, but all by the fore-seeing wisdom of God". God did not so act, as he could have, to create a sinless world. What God has created is a world in which there is the quantity and intensity of sin that there is, so that even if God cannot properly be said to have brought about my sin, God may properly be said to have brought about this world in which I sin, including the free choice with which I do so. There is a sense, therefore, in which we have to conclude that, that being so, and because there is not a single thing that happens, howsoever
little, that God cannot be said to have done or to do, to permit or to have permitted, then the amount and intensity of sin in the world is exactly right, exactly as it should be, *conveniens*, "behovely": none of it necessary, all of it freely done, and all of it part of the plot, all of it part of what was intended.

VII

To which you may object (among other possible lines of attack) that if for Julian God is the cause of absolutely everything without exception that happens, and that, that being so, absolutely everything is part of the plot, then the notion of there being a plot—that what happens is a story in which all turns out to be and to have been well—is thereby made absolutely vacuous; indeed it becomes a sort of tautology to say of anything at all that, if it happens, then it is *conveniens*, "behovely". And it is, of course, a general truth about narratives that the ‘grander’ they are and the more inclusive, the more nearly tautological they become. Now what Julian appears to have in mind is a narrative which is, logically, the grandest possible. Hence, the objection runs, it becomes absolutely tautological to say of any particular event that it is *conveniens*, which means that in describing an event as *conveniens* you are saying nothing about it other than that it happened. So you might object, and even if you don’t, one critic did when I last read this paper.

To which I reply, not so. For what Julian says is that whatever does happen is *conveniens*. She does not say that whatever *could* happen would be *conveniens*. And not everything that could have happened has happened; not everything that could yet happen will happen. So from the fact that anything which does happen is *conveniens* it does not follow that anything else that might have happened would have been just as *conveniens* as what did happen. There is, therefore, a particularity and a contingency to the actual events of all time, that is to say, they form a *particular* history such that, logically, it is possible to entertain actual counterfactuals: it makes sense in the same way to consider what would have been different had the French Revolution not occurred as it does to consider what would have been different had I not occurred, even if the variables in either case are immensely hard to marshall into a meaningful retrodictive. But if, given their particularity and contingency, the actual events form a concrete, individual history, this is simply a logical fact; but that they also form a *story*, the story of their all being well is, on the other hand, a substantive theological belief-claim, and no tautology. For if things could have been otherwise than they have been, and could yet be otherwise than they will be, it is also true, absolutely speaking, that they could have been such that not everything has been or will be well. Hence, just because if it happens it is behovely it does not follow that whatever might have happened would have been behovely. Therefore, that a thing’s happening entails that it is behovely is not a tautology, but a sub-
stantive truth about actual events and a truth we could not have known short of its being revealed, whether canonically in scripture, or personally to Julian.

VIII

At which point in delivering an earlier version of this paper another objection was pressed upon me, namely that you could very well regard Julian's conclusion about sin—if indeed I have got it right—as fatalistic, or at least deterministic, and her practical attitude towards "dealing" with evil as quietistic and excessively passive. If all is well, because even sin is part of the plot and so "behovely", then nothing is to be done because nothing could be better than it is—or, at any rate, it would seem that there is no reason why we should strive that anything should be better than it is, for things are intended to be exactly as they are and are exactly as they are intended to be. So you might say, though I hope that none of you, my readers, will.

For if by now you still have that problem then you cannot have understood anything at all of what Julian is saying. You might, of course, disagree with her, but if you do, you must expect her to disagree with you, and you must expect to have a genuine argument about theological concepts. You might think that to say, in the sense in which I explained her position, that 'sin is behovely' entails that sin is trivialised and that it does not matter, or that there is no point in resistance to evil and sin; but Julian shows no sign of accepting such entailments: "there is no harder hell than sin", she says, and adds, fiercely: "We are to hate sin absolutely, we are to love the soul eternally, just as God loves it. Our hatred of sin will be like God's hatred of it: our love of the soul like God's". You might think that to say that sin is "behovely" is to say that the world containing the quantities of evil and sin that it does is a world willed by God and so sinful acts could not be free—but you cannot expect Julian to agree with you as a matter of course; and in fact she does not. About such things you can argue with Julian, as theologian does with theologian, bearing in mind that Julian's theology of sin—her apparent optimism—is not based on some refusal to see sin, and its evil, in the stark light in which, on account of the Holocaust, we must do so today; nor does her conviction that, in the outcome, "all will be well" reduce in any measure the freedom of the acts with which we resist or submit to evil as the case is. For Julian, everything which you would say, were there no God at all, about sin, evil and human agency, and about the conflict between good and evil into which human agents are inserted, and about the need to struggle against evil and injustice, still needs to be said about them knowing, as we do, that all of it is brought about by a God who in doing so devises a "plot" whose sole meaning is "love". Her theology can be defended only if there is no ultimate inconsistency within that conjunction. And on the score of that, you might disagree with her, since she sees no formal inconsistency in it, and you might.
That said, you would not be so much disagreeing with Julian as comprehensively misunderstanding her position were you to respond to her that we are in no position to make sense of how God’s causing my free actions is compatible with their being free, or of how God’s causing my free actions is compatible with their being sinful. For that we can make no sense of these things Julian not only admits, but gives a good deal of emphasis to insisting upon. As she puts it, to know how it could be that “sin is behovely” would require our knowing now things which we could not know, for they are, for the time being, secrets held within the mind of the Trinity itself and withheld from us until the final judgment. For Julian, it is essential to know that we could not know how it is that “sin is behovely”; and that any explanation we may think we possess on which it would appear to make sense to say this must, *eo ipso*, be mistaken about something. 19 Being unable to make sense of it, therefore, is a test of the validity of our response to sin. 20

But to say that we can make no sense of it is not the same thing as saying that there is no sense to be made of it, or that we know it to be contradictory nonsense. The position concerning sin seems to be, for Julian, the following: there is what we have to say about it, namely first that it is “behovery”, that it is part of the plot, necessary if the true story of the divine love of creation is to be told; and yet, secondly, each sin is freely done and might not have been. But how they can be consistent with one another, that we cannot see, for we cannot now achieve the standpoint from within which their consistency can be comprehended, because we do not and could not know the sense the plot makes of it until the story is over. And that, after all, seems to me to be a pretty good definition of the predicament of theology itself, as of all good practice too: theology shows where the mysteries lie, and if mysteries are demonstrably not nonsense, still it is no business of theology to try to crack them. For Julian, as for the best in the medieval theological traditions, the business of theology is to know what we can know in the light of what we know we cannot know, and to do what we can do as bearing a meaning which only God, and not ourselves, can give it.

**NOTES**

1 This paper was read in an earlier version at the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain in Leeds in August 2002. I am grateful to Férdi Stone-Davis of the University of Cambridge for helpful comments on that earlier version, to Fr. Christopher Hilton likewise a research student at Cambridge and to Margaret Hebblethwaite for some important corrections of emphasis made in the course of discussion at that conference. Some further amendments were made in the light of comments made at postgraduate seminars at the Departments of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, and of Theology at the University of Durham in October, 2002. Juliana Dreshvina of the University of Oxford has objected that much of what I appear to attribute to Julian in this paper by way of formal theological teaching is not to be found at least in those terms, if at all, in Julian’s own writing. Of course in one sense she is right, but I feel entitled to “see” these theological opinions in Julian's *Revelations* in much the same sense in which
Julian herself "sees" in her "shewings" the theological elaborations she spins around them in her Long Text, written some twenty years after the visions were shewn to her.

2 Revelations of Divine Love (Long Text), c31.
3 Revelations, c2.
5 Summa Theologiae, 1a q45 a1 ad3.
6 I used to wonder about this when I was a child. Was Jesus the best possible human being? In one sense, the answer is yes, in that no sin was found in him, and in us there is plenty. But in every other sense he was not. In the first place, de facto there were possibilities of human "realisation" which Jesus could have achieved as a man, and did not—for example, he was not a father: I am, and to that extent I am a more "perfect" human being than Jesus was. Secondly, being male excluded his achieving possibilities of human realisation available only to women, thus he was not a mother, to which extent my wife is a more "perfect" human being than Jesus was. Moreover, much as is to be made of the human wisdom and knowledge of Jesus, as a man of his times there are things which Jesus knew nothing of which you and I know as a matter of course—e.g. Einstein’s theory of relativity... and so on. Whatever perfectus homo does mean it cannot mean "perfect human being". There isn’t anything that "perfect human being" means just as there cannot be anything which "best possible sonnet" means.
7 Summa Theologiae, 1a q44 a4 ad1.
8 The Lord tells Julian: "Look. I am God. I am in all. I do everything! I never cease upholding my work, and I never will. I am guiding everything toward the end I ordained for it from the first, by the same might, wisdom, and love with which I made it. How can anything be wrong?" Revelations, c11, pp. 81-82.
9 Revelations, c27.
10 Revelations, c11, p. 80: "For I saw that God in fact does everything, however little that thing may be". And: ". . . he wants us to know that not only does he care for great and noble things, but equally for little and small, lowly and simple things as well. This is his meaning: 'Everything will be all right'." Revelations, c32, p. 109.
11 "... all that has been done is in some way God’s doing. It is not difficult to see that the best deed has been done well, and as the best and highest deed has been done, so the least deed has been done just as well. All this is in accordance with the nature and plan that God has decided for everything from before creation. There is no doer but he (my italics)." Revelations, c11, p. 81.
12 Note that Julian does not say that however awful things are in the meantime, all will turn out well in the end. What happens "in the end" is that we will see how everything was alright at the time; and that is what we must believe now at the time of its awfulness.
13 I paraphrase Professor Philip Alexander at the postgraduate seminar of the department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester.
14 By Margaret Hebblethwaite.
15 Revelations, c40, p. 123.
16 "God reminded me that I would sin", Revelations, c37, p. 117.
17 "... we see deeds done that are so evil, and injuries inflicted that are so great, that it seems to us quite impossible that any good can come of them". Revelations, c32, p. 109.
18 Revelations, c66, pp. 211-212.
19 Julian does not deny that we should explore the reasons and causes of evil human acts, for "[it is God’s will for us to pay attention to all his past acts"; but there is, for her no point in attempting a theodicy, in attempting, that is to say, to "justify the ways of God to man", and we should “always leave on one side speculation as to the last great deed... for I saw this truth in our Lord's meaning: the busier we are about discovering his secrets in this manner or that, the farther we shall be from their discovery.” Revelations, c33, p. 112.
20 Which is not to say that there is not more to be said about it than is contained in the narrow focus of this paper. A full account of Julian’s theology of sin requires examination of what she regarded as the best answer given to her, and the only one available to us this side of death, namely that contained in the parable of the “Lord and the Servant”, the fifteenth of the “shewings”, to be found in chapter 51 of the Long Text, and in the subsequent meditations on the meaning of the Trinity.