Protestantse Theologische Universiteit Utrecht

A Theology of Vulnerability, from Vulnerability

A Theological Understanding from Vulnerability, Shaped by Medieval and Contemporary Literature

Master thesis

Anne Eggink- de Kok

2100746

Supervisor Prof. Dr. Louise Nelstrop

Assessor Dr. Joyce Rondaij

Utrecht, 16th of august 2025

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Louise Nelstrop, for guiding me in the process of writing this thesis. I am grateful for her classes in church history, in which she highlighted the importance of the "unheard voices," which have been an inspiration prior to this thesis. A special thanks to her patience with my writing and her ability to understand my somewhat chaotic thinking. I am also thankful to Dr. Joyce Rondaij for her willingness to assess this thesis.

Introduction

Introduction and research question

This thesis offers a contribution of medieval and contemporary literature to a theological approach towards vulnerability. Vulnerability is a layered concept which is often understood as a limit to human life that has to be overcome, specifically from feminist perspective, whereas Christian theology tends to positively validate vulnerability. Despite the central role of vulnerability within Christianity, systematic theological engagements with this theme are scarce and often neglect feminist engagement with vulnerability. Being an exception, feminist and systematic theologian Sarah Coakley, offered a systematic theology from a feminist perspective of vulnerability to close this 'gap.' Due in part to feminist theologian Daphne Hampson's critique on Coakley's theology, I want to suggest that Coakley does not close this gab. Drawing on Heather Walton, a feminist practical theologian, who emphasises the importance of literature to theology, I will turn to the writings of Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic and Ann Voskamp a contemporary author, to question and enrich Coakley's theology of vulnerability. Using Coakley's theology as a case-study that shows how vulnerability is approached within theology, this thesis will show how the literary non-academic voices of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp can contribute to a theology of vulnerability, from vulnerability: a vulnerable theology.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the possibility of creating a theology of vulnerability from vulnerability. This thesis aims to contribute to a renewed approach to vulnerability that is not only about vulnerability, but vulnerable from within. By an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis shows that feminist theory can challenge theology, through non academic literary sources, towards a more complete and nuanced vulnerable theology. It bridges the boundaries between academics and 'life' and gives room to voices that are often unheard.

Accordingly, the central question guiding this study is: To what extent can Julian of Norwich's and Ann Voskamp's writings – from a position of vulnerability – contribute to a renewed theological approach towards vulnerability?

Methodology

This thesis explores Coakley's theology of vulnerability as a case study of a theological approach to vulnerability. By engaging with Coakley's theology as a case-study, her theology functions as an example of the theological discourse on vulnerability. Coakley's theology of vulnerability will be challenged by the analysis of the readings of two non-academic literary sources from Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp. This analysis adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, informed by feminist and literary theory.

The theoretical framework used in this thesis is drawn from feminist philosopher Judith Butler's understanding of vulnerability as precariousness. This understanding offers a critical framework for inquiring into both theological and literary sources.

This study draws on Heather Walton's advocacy for the use of non-academic literary sources to enrich theology, in order to bring an academic theology of vulnerability into dialogue with non-academic literary sources of vulnerability. Using auto-theory – as a specific and feminist form of life-writing, a literary genre suggested by Walton that is open to personal, embodied and vulnerable experiences – as a heuristic lens, enables the interpretation of the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp as significant voices of personal, embodied and experienced vulnerability.

The analysis of the texts of Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* and Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way*, will be done through a close reading with a hermeneutical approach. Both authors are connected by their experienced-based and honest writings about vulnerability – from a position of vulnerability – and by the possibility to read their text through the lens of

auto-theory. Additionally, Julian of Norwich is mentioned within Coakley's theology to strengthen her systematic approach to vulnerability, but refuses to give voice to this embodied, experienced and vulnerable theology Julian of Norwich generates.

Structure of the thesis

The first chapter introduces the complexity of the concept of vulnerability. It shows how vulnerability is addressed within feminist studies and that Butler's understanding of vulnerability – precariousness – offers a suitable theoretical framework to analyse vulnerability within the texts of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp. As a feminist theologian, Coakley's theology of vulnerability is outlined within this chapter and functions as a case-study of how vulnerability is approached from a theological perspective. The chapter also shows how Coakley's theology of vulnerability is critiqued.

Within the second chapter, I will turn to Heather Walton to demonstrate how she advocates the use of non-academic literature as a rich contribution to theology. Walton introduces several genres, such as life-writing, as forms of writing that creates space for personal, embodied and vulnerable experiences. In this chapter I will turn to auto-theory as a form of life-writing, introduced by Lauren Fournier, to use as a heuristic lens for analysing the texts of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp. On top of that I will get back to Butler's definition of vulnerability as a theoretical framework for analysing vulnerability within the text of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp.

In the third chapter, I will analyse Julian of Norwich's writings called Revelations of Divine Love. In this chapter I will first give a short introduction of her life and her writings. Secondly, I will argue that her writings can be understood as auto-theory and analyse her writings through this lens. Butler's definition of vulnerability will function as a theoretical

framework for vulnerability within this analysis. This chapter concludes with bringing back the conclusions drawn out of this literary analysis to Coakley's theology of vulnerability.

The fourth chapter is similar to the third chapter. In this chapter I will first give a short introduction on Ann Voskamp and explain why her writings function as a suitable literary non-academic voice to contribute to a vulnerable theology. On top of that I will argue that Ann Voskamp's writings can also be understood as auto-theory and analyse her writings through this auto-theoretical lens. In this analysis Judith Butler's definition of vulnerability will also function as a theoretical framework. The conclusions drawn out of this literary analysis will be brought back to Coakley's theology of vulnerability.

Positionality

"Practice what you preach" is what was thought in the preaching course I attended in the second year of my Master's degree. Writing about vulnerability, critiquing an academic theology that is not embodied and honest, has to be done from an honest and experienced position. That is why I choose to include a positionality within this master thesis. Being a student in theology, raised in and formed by *the Protestantse Kerk Nederland*, I consider vulnerability to be a subject of academic study, but also a lived reality. Being a young woman in a church denomination that is quite progressive, but also doesn't always allow women to speak, I became aware of the chances my privileged position as a straight, educated, white women give me, but also of the vulnerability that can be present within this privileged position of being a woman. It has formed me to sometimes be afraid to speak out loud. According one of my fellow students, a man, I always tent to do a 'sighting sound' before I speak during class. We discussed this, and I discovered it is my way of making sure I am allowed to speak, before I speak.

Unfortunately, not everyone experiences the freedom to speak. And sometimes, when voices have been spoken, they're not listened to. During my Bachelor's degree I wrote a thesis about the experiences of women within the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk*, a church domination that does not allow women to speak at all by rejecting women to enter ordained ministry. My motivation to write about their experiences was my dissatisfaction with the fact that the discussion on female ministry within this church denomination is carried out exclusively by highly educated men. By qualitative interviews with these women, I tried to give space to their voices, because they are at the heart of the experiences of church-community without female ministry.

Even though I am a part of the academic discourse, I still sometimes experience the feeling that I am not allowed to speak or that my voice isn't heard. I am drawn to voices that experience the same and are not heard or taken seriously. I feel that this experience of my own, contributes to the interest of this specific thesis and has served as an ignition point.

Chapter I

Sarah Coakley's *Theologie Totàle*: a Case-Study for a Feminist Systematic Theology of Vulnerability

This first chapter sets out the concept of vulnerability and how it is approached. Firstly, it provides a short introduction on the meaning of vulnerability to emphasise its complexity. Drawing from this complexity this chapter shows how vulnerability finds it place within academic discourse, especially from a feminist theorist and theological perspective, because of the significant place vulnerability has within these disciplines. analyse the academic landscape in which the concept of vulnerability is given a place. As a result of this, this chapter presents the definition of vulnerability by Judith Butler as a theoretical framework to be able to examine an exceptional example of a theology of vulnerability from a feminist perspective, Sarah Coakley's theology is introduced in this chapter as a case study of a theology of vulnerability. This chapter explicates her theology of vulnerability, and also offers an account of the criticism Coakley has received. Finally, I will set out my own difficulties with Coakley's theology.

Etymolgoy of vulnerability

Vulnerability is a layered concept, contingent on contextual, personal and other factors. The Latin word *vulnerare* can be translated as 'to wound' or 'injure.' The English word 'vulnerability' can be understood as 'the quality of being vulnerable' – which means to be able to be easily hurt, influenced or attacked.[1] This meaning differs from the latin in that it appoints to the possibility of getting hurt, influenced of attacked, instead of the the actual state of being hurt. Vulnerability in Dutch can be translated as *kwetsbaarheid*, whose meaning stays close to

[1] Cambridge University Press, "Vulnerability," Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed 13 July 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vulnerability.

the English, and also emphasises the possibility of getting hurt, influenced or attacked. Both uses of the word differ from the original latin, where the state of being hurt is meant. Even though this specific understanding of the word relates to a physical form of damage, the English and Dutch uses of the word show the possibility of multiple permutations. Related to the understanding of the word are the terms: weakness, helplessness, susceptibility, defencelessness, powerlessness, exposure and openness. These are examples of common synonyms for vulnerability; all emphasise distinct but related aspects. Weakness for example emphasises on the state of the subject which is being vulnerable or weak, but not necessarily defenceless, which emphasises the risk that a direct object might attack or harm the subject. Exposure focusses on a different kind of vulnerability that has more to do with feelings of shame and awkwardness than feelings of pain or discomfort. Weakness, helplessness and some of the other synonyms mentioned also show that being vulnerable can be caused by something that befalls a subject involuntarily. Exposure and openness are synonyms for vulnerability that more commonly emphasise a more voluntarily way of risking woundedness – like a choice to be vulnerable. Openness as a choice to be vulnerable is highly recommended within psychology and self-help-books as a form of personal growth.[2] Within this perspective vulnerability has been addressed as a 'moral virtue' that enables empathy and connection with others.[3]

On top of that, the subject of vulnerability can be vast: a vulnerable state, political system, protected species, social group – because of their beliefs, environment, etc. Because of this, the term is used in a broad academic landscape, across several disciplines. The conscious use of the term vulnerability is increasing in academic discourse and acknowledged in several

[2] It has to be mentioned that this positive emphasis on the choice of being vulnerable has received a lot of critiqe in the light of western supremecy. That being vulnerable on purpose by choice is not something universal.

[3] Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability: Disrespect, Obligation, Action," *SubStance* 3, no. 132 (2013): 67–84, 67.

fields of science: especially in the social sciences where political, economical and ecological themes bring awareness of the vulnerability of humans, animals and nature. Vulnerability has emerged as a signifiant area of research in social sciences, at least since 1970.[4] The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a new consciousness of human vulnerability. [5] Since then, the term 'vulnerability' has been used increasingly in relation to daily life and was therefore increasingly found within academic research.[6] The broad application of the term vulnerability offers the advantage of inclusivity; it avoids isolating specific groups and acknowledges that vulnerability can affect anyone or anything. However, inclusiveness can also lead to a dilution of the term's conceptual clarity. This is quite harmful because it can obscure the fact that certain populations are disproportionately exposed to oppression, marginalisation or harm. This has resulted in an awareness among scholars of the need to critically engage with the concept of vulnerability, recognising its analytical value but also the potential limitations. This has been nowhere more clearly noted than in feminist studies. Here vulnerability has largely been seen as a negative and linked to the oppression of women. I will elaborate on this in the next paragraph.

As shown, vulnerability is a layered concept, a concept which has scarcely been defined. While the normative significance of human vulnerability is generally recognised within various academic disciplines, the concept of vulnerability has received relatively little systematic analysis.[7] This lack of definition might also result from the term being used differently within these different disciplines. A 'simple work definition' of vulnerability is given by Piers Blaikie,

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[4] Plonowska Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability," 67.

[5] Isabella Scheibmayr, "Organizing Vulnerability," Exploring Judith Butler's Conceptualization of Vulnerability to Study Organizations," Gender, Work & Organization 31, no. 4 (July 2024): 1385–1408, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13103, 1386.

[6] Scheibmayr, "Organizing Vulnerability," 1386.

[7] Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy, Studies in Feminist Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, Ben Wisner, in At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters:

> By vulnerability we mean the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (an extreme natural event or process). It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life, livelihood, property and other assets are put at risk by a discrete and identifiable event (or series or 'cascade' of such events) in nature and in society.[8]

This definition specifies mainly the 'risks' that can be the result of vulnerability. It is mostly engaged with the object of vulnerability.

Vulnerability and feminism

As mentioned before, vulnerability has a central place within feminist studies and feminist theory, often embedded within social and political sciences. Vulnerability is often seen as unavoidably connected with power and domination. Ewa Plownowska Ziarek, literary theorist, specified in feminist theory, explores different feminist approaches in her article Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability: Disrespect, Obligation, Action, and appoints this unavoidable connection: "In feminist and anti-racist struggles, vulnerability is intertwined first of all with subjection to racist and sexist violence, with bodily injury and extreme destitution. In other words, it signifies the damaging and indeed disastrous effects of domination and power."[9] By pointing this out, Ziarek acknowledges the hesitation of feminists to validate the concept of vulnerability, because of these embodied sexual and gender-related hierarchical power dynamics. Another issue with vulnerability, raised from feminist studies by philosophers

[8] Benjamin Wisner, ed., *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*, 2nd ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

[9] Plonowska Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability," 68.

Catriona Mackenzie, Susan Dodds and bioethicist Wendy Rogers, is the relation of vulnerability with victimisation: "[…] we need to be very cognisant of the way that vulnerability is often associated with victimhood or incapacity and, hence, of the ways discourses of vulnerability and protection and the labelling of individuals, groups, or whole populations as vulnerable can lead to discrimination, stereotyping, and unwarranted paternalistic interventions." [10] They emphasise the danger of a loss of autonomy by being framed as 'vulnerable' which can lead to a endorsement of vulnerability instead of overcoming vulnerability.

Another feminist voice in relation to vulnerability is offered by Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher, specified in gender theory. Butler acknowledges the unavoidable sexual and gendered connection to vulnerability, but emphasises the university of vulnerability this implies:

> Despite our [human] difference in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a "we," for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made tenuous "we" of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire. We have all lost in recent decades from AIDS, but there are other losses that afflict us, from illness and from global conflict; and there is the fact as well that women and minorities, including sexual minorities, are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realisation. This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies— as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."[11]

[10] Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, 16.

[11] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 20.

Butler suggests that the universality of loss, shows that we are all vulnerable and desirable. Vulnerability is considered to be a logic result of our socially constituted bodies. Butler speaks of a form of vulnerability that is universal, and has an transcendent source: "Although I am insisting on referring to a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself, I also insist that we cannot recover the source of this vulnerability: it precedes the formation of the "I"."[12] An notable point of this unavoidable form of vulnerability Butler makes, is that she mentions it as 'foolish' and even 'dangerous' to argue our vulnerability.

Butler's' engages with the idea of vulnerability as a universal condition: precarious life. ""The reason I am not free to destroy another—and indeed, why nations are not finally free to destroy one another—is not only because it will lead to further destructive consequences. That is doubtless true. But what may be finally more true is that the Subject that I am is bound to the Subject I am not, that we each have the power to destroy and to be destroyed, and that we are bound to one another in this power and this precariousness. In this sense, we are all precarious lives."[13] Butler understands relationality within vulnerability as a ground to suppose that mutual power is present: the power to destroy one another. Because of this, vulnerability causes universal precarious lives. Butler uses the term 'precariousness' to refer to the state of human vulnerability to the actions of others. This she connects specifically to the body, because the body is inherently dependent, vulnerability is embodied which makes human life precarious.[14] Butler: "The shared condition of precariousness implies that the body is

[12] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

[13] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 43.

[14] Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, 3.

constitutively social and inter- dependent […].”[15] A precarious life to her is the understanding of vulnerability as an embodied, and with that, dependent state of being.

The following quotation of Butler summarizes her perspective on vulnerability and underlines the specific focus on the context of the vulnerable object – different than the definition mentioned before. Butler:

> (…) ‘vulnerability’ should not be considered as a subjective state, but rather as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives. We are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation, a person, a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed. Perhaps we can say that we are vulnerable to those environmental and social structures that make our lives possible, and that when they falter, so do we.[16]

Within Butler’s perspective vulnerability always finds itself in relation: to a person, situation or structure – her definition focusses not only on the vulnerable object, but also on the subject which causes this vulnerability. According to this definition, vulnerability is a risk we take to be able to live. If the people and structures we rely on and depend on collapse, so do we. It is an interesting definition, in that it does acknowledge the ‘harm’ of being vulnerable but somehow appreciates it at the same time. In her definition it becomes clear that vulnerability is not something that might be a part of life but definitely is a part of life. Within her perspective, vulnerability is not a personal situation, but a collective human inevitability – rooted within relationality.

Even though, Butler does affirm the idea that the use of the term ‘vulnerability’ has the potential to emphasise vulnerability, which disadvantages vulnerable individuals, groups or

[15] Butler, *Frames of War*, 31.

[16] Scheibmayr, “Organizing Vulnerability,” 1396.

populations, because this discourse maintains paternalistic power,[17] she does shed a more positive light on vulnerability than Mackenzie, Dodds and Rogers do by addressing vulnerability as precariousness and underlining how it is connected to the relationality of humanity.

Vulnerability and theology

Religion is an area in which vulnerability is often evaluated positive. Sacrifice, for instance, is a major theme across world religions, seen as a religious ritual that has become an obsession of modernity according to Johannes Zachhuber and Julia Meszaros, editors of the book *Sacrifice and Modern Thought* in which they explore the theme of sacrifice.[18] Within Christianity, vulnerability is recognised as a key-concept. It is fundamental to the incarnation and Christ's death on the cross (Christ's sacrifice), and to other aspects of the Christian faith as well. Consider, for example, the following scriptural verse: "And being found in appearance as a man, he [Christ] humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8).[19] Through the concept of kenosis, which refers to the theological concept of the self-emptying of Christ as he voluntarily relinquished divinity for humility (as apparent from the preceding verse) and ascesis, which refers to the discipline of the active denial of the self, including worldly pleasures, in order to become spiritually vulnerable, pure and united with God (another form of sacrifice), the place of vulnerability has within Christianity becomes evident. Sharing in Christ's suffering thus became a major theme in medieval mysticism. The

[17] Scheibmayr, "Organizing Vulnerability," 1392.

[18] Julia T. Meszaros and Johannes Zachhuber, eds., *Sacrifice and Modern Thought.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[19] All scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version* (NIV), 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

cross was often understood to be the way through which one was able to unite with Christ. Jakub Urbaniak, theologian and philosopher emphasises the value of this unity through suffering by paraphrasing the 'cry' of the renowned medieval mystic Teresa of Avila, usually dedicated to images of her: "Lord, either let me suffer or let me die!"[20] Another example of devotion to the suffering of Christ is also present within the Meditations on the Life of Christ, a Franciscan manual which encouraged devotees to imagine themselves present at the crucifixion to share in Christ's and his disciples' pain. This manual is seen as the most influential devotional text from the late Middle Ages.[21]

Philosopher Estelle Ferrarese formulates the central place of vulnerability within Christianity as follows:

> The figure of a merciful God who becomes man, that is to say who assumes a vulnerable flesh sensitive to suffering; the Gospels that present the human body as essentially characterised by finitude, and worked from within by weaknesses that continually ruin its pretensions; and lastly, the place conferred on charity as an essential virtue of the believer – all this makes vulnerability a central motif of Christian thought.[22]

This quotation of Ferrarese shows how vulnerability finds its place as a key-concept in Christianity. Considering these feminist and theological perspectives, vulnerability is connected to themes of sacrifice, charity, power, gender, race, sexuality and combinations of these. Within practices of kenosis, ascesis and sacrifice, these aspects are particularly present.

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[20] Jakub Urbaniak, "Suffering in the Mystical Traditions of Buddhism and Christianity," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 2, https://doi.org/http:// dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts. v70i1.2117.

[21] Sarah McNamer, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018): 905, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpg84z2.

[22] Estelle Ferrarese and Steve Corcoran, *Vulnerability and Critical Theory*. Brill Research Perspectives (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 4.

Also, within systematic theology, several recent theologians have, perhaps unsurprisingly, viewed vulnerability as central to their theology. These include Rowan Williams within his *The Tragic Imagination* and Graham Ward within *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life 1*.[23] The significant place vulnerability has within Christianity and how vulnerability is approached from theological perspective, raises questions from a feminist theological perspective. While Butler to some extent finds room for vulnerability, on the whole, feminist theologians have tended to be cautious or critical where vulnerability is concerned.

Several feminist theologians like Sarah Coakley, Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Radford Ruether are critical on how vulnerability is often valued within Christianity. Coakley acknowledges the sexual and physical abuse done to women as a result of 'an undiscriminating adulation of 'vulnerability.'[24] Hampson is radically sceptical on the place of vulnerability visible within the established perspective of the inequality of a vulnerable human and a powerful God.,[25] comparable with Ruether, who critically points out the dangers of the image of female vulnerability in the light of a masculinist Christology.[26]

Nevertheless, Coakley endeavours to bridge the gap between a critical feminist engagement with vulnerability and the central place it has within Christianity, which makes her a notable exception whose embrace of vulnerability extends well beyond that of Butler. Coakley argues that patriarchal frameworks can be repurposed for feminist goals. She exemplifies this

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[23] Gabrielle Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life: Gregory of Nyssa on the 'Wound of Love' in Conversation with Sarah Coakley," Modern Theology 38, no. 4 (October 2022): 777–95, 1. https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12801.

[24] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender.* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2022), 33.

[25] Daphne Hampson, ed., *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminst Theologians Debate Christianity.* (London: SPCK, 1996), 150.

[26] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology: With a New Introduction*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993).

approach through her engagement with vulnerability, which she employs as a central theme in attempting a *théologie totale*. As an influential contemporary theological voice – shaped by feminist insights and responding critically to earlier traditions – Coakley's work provides a fascinating case-study for how modern systematic theology addresses vulnerability. Her work is unique in that it locates itself on the intersection of Christian theology – frequently disposed towards an appreciation of vulnerability – and feminist theory – frequently more sceptical towards this appreciation of vulnerability.

In the second part of this chapter, I will explore Coakley's theological perspective on vulnerability by analysing *théologie totale* as her evolving response to it. Coakley's work offers a particularly compelling case-study in that she does not merely examine vulnerability within systematic theology but rather proposes to reconfigure systematic theology out of an awareness of vulnerability. This is clearly an attempt to set vulnerability at the heart of theology, feminist hesitations considered, and therefore closely aligns with the purpose of this thesis. Yet as I shall discuss, while in many ways admirably, it ultimately fails to bring vulnerability into the heart of theology because Coakley seems unwilling to be vulnerable herself, or actually takes into consideration the (feminist) voices that express their concerns on the subject of validating vulnerability.

Case-study: Sarah Coakley

On the subject of vulnerability within systematic theology, the approach of Coakley stands out. Coakley refers to her systematic perspective as *théologie totale*, which is a reaction of earlier systematics on specifically asceticism (the discipline of the denial of the self, including worldly pleasures, in order to become spiritually vulnerable, pure and united with God), and with that vulnerability. Vulnerability is of great importance for Coakley not only as a theological theme, but also as a methodological tool. Her systematic approach finds its enrichment in her feminist perspective, which makes her aware of the central role of gender, sexuality, desire and power

within the subject of asceticism – and so too vulnerability. Coakley employs the term vulnerability to refer to 'self-emptying' or 'openness'; as a means of creating space for transformative spiritual reflection. Engaging with vulnerability in this way aligns with a definition of vulnerability that affirms it as being open on purpose – i.e., by choice.

When we look closely at Coakley's work, it is clear that vulnerability is central to her systematic theology. This begins with the fact that she acknowledges that systematic theology has increasingly been viewed with scepticism over time. Coakley states that systematic theology in the post-modern world – and its attempt to create a system and order – is sometimes perceived with resistance: "Why is 'order' so often perceived as a front of abuse, and 'system' as an assumed repression?", she asks.[27] In acknowledging this view on dogmatics, she pays attention to the presence of a longing for recognition of vulnerability, primarily in a methodological way. Coakley agrees that dogmatics is sometimes perceived as a hegemony: a discourse which inappropriately totalises and consequently suppresses the voices and perspectives of marginalised people.[28] To these marginalised people non-academic voices could be added, who are also excluded from this discourse. Another critique of systematics that Coakley moots, arises from the philosophical critique of 'onto-theology.' In this view, systematic theology would have a misleading claim on knowledge of God, which results in God being rendered as an object of human epistemic access.[29] A third critique of systematic theology, more precise of systematic thinking, that she observes, comes from within a feminist perspective. This critique contains the conviction that systematic thinking is phallocentric: ordered thinking to clarify, control and master. This phallocentric thinking is mostly seen as a

[27]Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 42.

[28] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 42.

[29] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 43.

male way of thinking and repressive of the use of creative materials, which are often seen as related to femininity.[30] Coakley does not agree with this dualistic perspective on male and female ways of thinking, and with that she does not agree with the validity of this critique. This is an understandable position. However, I wonder whether, in committing herself to this stance, Coakley eschews the critique from a feminist perspective. By remaining open to the possibility of distinguishing between male and female sources of theological insight, she might in fact have broadened the scope of sources in a more inclusive way. I will elaborate on this suggestion in the next chapter.

Coakley offers an over-arching answer to these critiques by advocating for théologie totale, which she elaborates in her work *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity*. *Théologie totale* unfolds a new systematic theological method, which is the opposite of totalitarian theology. Even though it is valued as a systematic method, Coakley emphasises that it is an un-systematic systematic theology, in which every aspect of religious experience is considered. This un-systematic systematic theology builds on a multidisciplinary approach in which marginalised sources, arts, social sciences and empirical research are considered. On top of that – as systematic theologian Heleen Zorgdrager points out – within Coakley's théologie totale not only the dogmatic works of theologians (explicitly the church fathers) have value, but also their personal contemplative writings.[31] Coakley demonstrates this by engaging with Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and John Donne.

Furthermore, Coakley focusses on the task of contemplation and prayer. Coakley addresses contemplation as a contribution to *théologie totale*, but also as the right interpretation

[30] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 43.

[31] Heleen Zorgdrager, "De Moderne Theologen: Perspectieven Op de 21ste Eeuw," ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Wilken Veen (Amsterdam: Boom, 2022), 33.

of kenosis. Coakley elaborates her understanding of 'right' Pauline kenosis, as "founded on an analysis of the activity of Christian silent prayer (or 'contemplation'), an activity characterised by a special form of 'vulnerability' or 'self-effacement.'[32] By this understanding of kenosis, she wants to demonstrate how wordless prayer can hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together. By creating space for consensual divine power to manifest itself. Essential to the understanding of this form of kenosis is the 'consensual' nature of the 'non-coercive' power of God, manifesting itself. The paradox of power and vulnerability is present in the act of silent prayer and waiting on God. I understand Coakley here to mean that choosing to be silent, and to be in prayer, gives autonomy and power to the human being. Divine power does not force itself in an abusive or powerful way, so kenosis has not to be seen as an act of passive surrender, but an active choice to contemplate in silent prayer.

Contemplation makes way for a more embodied way of doing theology.[33] In her own words: "For the very act of contemplation – repeated, lived, embodied, suffered – is an act that, by grace, and over time, inculcates mental patterns of 'un-mastery,' welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the 'other', and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of sexual desires and desire for God."[34] Within this explanation, in line with Butler, she acknowledges the present of the 'other' as being essential within this contemplation – which Coakley considers to be the right way of kenosis, an act of vulnerability.

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[32] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 5.

[33] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 43.

[34] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 43. – Coakley adds to the use of the term 'un-mastery' the following footnote:

> I coin this term deliberately, to distinguish it from Milbank's and others' 'non-mastery' (see John Milbank, Theology a Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; 2nd edn 2006), 6). The desire not to 'master' cannot be summoned by mere good intention or fiat. It is a matter, I submit, of waiting on divine aid and transformation, a transcendent undoing of manipulative human control or aggression.

Also, similar to Butler, she acknowledges the presence of human desire. When speaking of desire, Coakley points out that desire is more foundational than gender: "Desire is more fundamental than 'sex'."[35]

Coakley mentions Julian of Norwich (and the other sources as mentioned above) to substantiate the idea of contemplation as a renewed approach to asceticism. This is underpinned by Coakley's alternative approach to the Trinity, which is also a central motif in her systematic theology. Coakley approaches the Trinity by the practice of contemplative prayer, and doesn't recognise the Trinity as a dogma, but a reality that is revealed to us within prayer. She approaches and understands the Trinity pneumatically, through the Holy Spirit, who invites us into the Trinity through prayer. This approach to the Trinity with an emphasis on the Holy Spirit is recognised within a broader field of mystical theologians: Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruusbroec. Coakley also frames Julian within the motif of 'indwelling Trinity.'[36] Coakley rightly points out to Julian as an example of a mystical theologian that belongs within the motif of indwelling Trinity, because of her writings about mutual desire, prayer, contemplation and unity with God within his bliss. A citation from Julian's Revelations on this matter which Coakley employs is: "Prayer is a true, gracious, lasting will of the soul united and joined to the will of our Lord by the precious and mysterious working of the Holy Spirit."[37]

For Coakley, this is part of how Julian among others mystics (e.g., Meister Eckhart and Dionysius), was opposed to the acceptable trinitarian 'orthodoxy' of her day and ours, by depicting the Holy Spirit as the access to the Trinity, which causes the established Trinitarian hierarchical power dynamics to disappear, which gives space to an even broader equal power

[35] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 10.

[36] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 143.

[37] Julian Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 92.

dynamic of the Trinity in relation to humanity. A central challenge as Coakley sees it is that Julian specifically draws an image of a 'mothering' Christ.[38] Coakley concludes that this shows that mysticism, like feminist contemplative theology, often seeks to resolve the problem of the dichotomy of sexual desire and desire for God (rather than perpetuate it – a feature that Coakley is critical of in other feminist thought). Coakley adds that this won't be 'resolved' unless there is the ascetical transformation of human desire.[39] Butler's understanding of the desire as an aspect of our human beings that contributes to the inevitable vulnerability of human life. So, I would suggest that by seeking to resolve the problem of desire by suggesting ascetical transformation, she still needs to deal with the aspect of vulnerability within this. All this fits within Coakley's overarching goal of producing a vulnerable theology in that is solvable. While these are important points, it is my contention that Julian of Norwich offers a much more interesting and complex account of vulnerable theology (written from a place of vulnerability) than Coakley's analysis draws out. This becomes apparent when we look at Julian of Norwich through the lens of life writing and autotheory in the next chapter.

Within this contemplation, knowing God, for Coakley, has more to do with being known by God, instead of knowing God like any other form of knowledge. Being known is also the way in which a person can be transformed. Zorgdrager argues that for Coakley theology is a recommendation for living, it is a living experience: "Voor Coakley is de taak van de theologie altijd een 'aanbeveling voor het leven'. Theologie is geleefde theologie. We moeten haar belichamen, zodat ze ons persoonlijk en social kan transformeren. […] God is niet te kennen

[38] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 341.

[39] Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 341.

en niet te bemeesteren." [40] In this 'being known' it is necessary to be vulnerable. To be empowered, we have to be known, overpowered in some kind of way, by God. Coakley refers to this phenomenon as 'the paradox of the power of vulnerability.'[41]

As said before, the conscious awareness of vulnerability within academic research was a result of contextual factors, in which vulnerability became apparent. Coakley's theology and systematic approach also are the result of some contextual factors, present in the twentieth century. Economic power and political and medical changes, resulted in a "fear for dependency and vulnerability."[42] In this situation, Coakley noticed not only an intellectual crisis, but also a spiritual crisis. Many theologians reacted to this spiritual crisis, but in Coakley's opinion in a "male," "post-liberal" way in which they valorise vulnerability. [43] These theological perspectives embrace human vulnerability instead of deflecting it.[44] To these theologies of vulnerability Coakley reacts: "Submission has become paradoxically identified with divine 'power.'" [45] Coakley is critical of these writings on vulnerability that draw particularly on the concept of ascesis. Additionally, Coakley is also critical of feminist arguments concerning the same issue. From a feminist theological perspective, Daphne Hampson questions the fact that Coakley, even though she is critical on several explanations of ascesis and kenosis, still validates the (according to Coakley) 'right' understanding of ascesis and kenosis.

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[40] Zorgdrager, "De Moderne Theologen," 33. English translation: For Coakley the task of theology is always 'a recommendation for life'. Theology is lived theology. We need to embody theology; in this way theology can transform us personally and socially. […] God isn't knowable, God cannot be mastered.

[41] Zorgdrager, "De Moderne Theologen," 34.

[42] Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life," 781.

[43] Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life," 78.

[44] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xv.

[45] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xv.

The difference in understanding the concept of ascesis has a lot to do with autonomy and an, according to Coakley, outdated worldly gender framework. Coakley points out that Hampson's understanding of kenosis builds on gender presumptions, in which 'males' need to compensate for their tendency to 'dominate,' whereas 'women' do not.[46] Coakley wonders if Hampson, by stating the dangers of ascesis and kenosis, present in a world of dominating man and vulnerable women, confirms these gender-stereotypes:

> The question that now presses, therefore, is whether Hampson may not, in her perceptive critique of early twentieth-century kenoticists, have fallen into the trap of her own gender stereotypes. Has she not assumed, that is, that 'vulnerability' or 'self-effacement' is prescriptively 'female' (though regrettably so), and thus only 'helpful' as a secondary or compensatory addition to 'male' power and dominance, whereas such ('male') power ought now rightly to be pursued (also by way of compensation) by feminist women? But why should we continue with these outworn gender presumptions in the first place?[47]

Feminist critique

As mentioned above, even though Coakley operates as a feminist theologian, her approach has received adequate critique from other feminist theologians – in particular from Daphne Hampson and Gabrielle Thomas. Hampson's perspective on vulnerability within Christianity – from a feminist position – is a radical one that she herself describes as follows: "For me, feminism consists in not simply accepting the male scenario and placing oneself within is, but in drawing the lines differently."[48] She adds to this: "It is precisely because I hold such an ideal

[46] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 22.

[47] Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 22.

[48] Daphne Hampson, ed., *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminst Theologians Debate Christianity.* (London: SPCK, 1996), 150.

for the self and, furthermore, believe in human equality and relationality, that I do not wish a 'God' who stands in clear contradiction to these."[49]

In a response to Coakley, she is critical to Coakley's way of working within a dichotomy in relation to vulnerability. Hampson explains: "[…]; a dichotomy which would seem to me to be peculiarly masculinist. Either one is in control, one has power and given what else you have to say I think we may add, one is complete in oneself in the sense of being self-enclosed; or one lets go, one becomes 'vulnerable, open, and 'defenceless'." [50] It seems that Hampson would like to subvert this dichotomy and embody power and powerlessness as one whole: "Our goal must be that persons are centred in themselves and open to one another." [51] To Hampson the feminist way of deconstructing the paradigm of power and powerlessness (vulnerability) is by the mutual empowerment of persons. Within this perspective, Hampson argues that Coakley willingly stays within a patriarchal framework by retaining this dichotomy and tries to revalidate vulnerability from a patriarchal and masculine dichotomy. Additionally, Hampson is critical of Coakley's use of sexual language. Hampson accuses Coakley of confirming sexual stereotypes: God as male and the believer as female. In Coakley's defence, she does acknowledge that Coakley speaks of God who neither shouts nor forces, a God who is the good lover. The question Hampson asks is if Coakley insinuates God to be anything else than male.

A notable addition to Hampson's critique to Coakley is that Hampson reacts to a comment of Coakley which says: "Has she [Hampson] not assumed… that…such ("male") power ought now rightly to be pursued (also by way of compensation) by feminist women?" Hampson reacts to this comment with amazement by emphasising her own feminist purpose:

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[49] Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone,* 150.

[50] Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone,* 121.

[51] Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone,* 122.

to deconstruct the dichotomy of power and powerlessness,[52] which is the contrary of Coakley's suggestion.

Thomas criticises Coakley by suggesting that Coakley's understanding of vulnerability – a vulnerability to God – includes God's desire for human pain and suffering. She suggests that Coakley valorises vulnerability as a spiritual and transformative goal, which creates space for interpreting pain and suffering as spiritual virtues. According to Thomas this is because Coakley uses the terms 'vulnerable' and 'embodied' as part of contemplation, without explaining or defining these aspects of contemplation. Considering that Coakley does not open up about her own position of being vulnerable, but only operates from a position of power, and that she ignores the vulnerable voices of the sources she uses, which becomes apparent in how she turns to Julian of Norwich, I suggest that turning to sources beyond a systematic approach, a theology from vulnerability can be formed.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown the complexity of the concept of vulnerability, the difference in valorisation from within feminist studies and Christianity, and how feminist theologians hesitate towards the central place vulnerability has within Christianity – specifically present within themes and kenosis - because of racist and sexist hierarchical power dynamics and the valorisation of suffering and pain. Besides, vulnerability is often associated with victimhood and incapacity which can cause unwarranted paternalistic interventions. Acknowledging these difficulties, as a feminist Butler offers a perspective on vulnerability in which universal aspects are highlighted: sharing encounters with lost and desire, we are embodied beings that are attached and exposed to each other, which creates a mutual state of power and vulnerability.

[52] Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone,* 122.

Butler refers to this as precariousness. Humans are bodily and socially inter-dependent which opens up this layer of relationality as inherently connected to vulnerability.

Coakley's theology is explained as a case-study that shows her honest attempt to bridge the gap between these feminist hesitations and the central role of vulnerability within Christianity, in which she engages with a contemplative form of asceticism and kenosis in which vulnerability functions as a spiritual and transformative goal. In the light of several 'male' attempts to understand the place of vulnerability within Christianity, Coakley endeavoured to bridge the theological validation of vulnerability, with feminist critiques and hesitation considered. Even though her attempt is done from feminist perspective, her theology of vulnerability – *théologie totale*- has been criticised by other feminist theologians like Hampson and Thomas who suggest Coakley's theology confirms patriarchal frameworks, hierarchical power dynamics and her understanding of vulnerability includes God's desire for human pain and suffering. While I do applaud Coakley's attempt to recover a positive view of vulnerability from a feminist perspective, I hesitate, similarly to Hampson and Thomas, as to how successful Coakley's approach really is. I suggest that by ignoring these feminist critiques and by using only the theology she draws out with a systematic methodology of the sources she turns to within her theology and by refusing to give an honest account of her own position, she indeed confirms patriarchal frameworks by operating from a position of power in creating a theology of vulnerability instead of a theology from vulnerability: a vulnerable theology.

This chapter beholds Coakley's theology as a significant case-study that shows how vulnerability is approached within contemporary systematic theology. One of the sources Coakley turns to are the writings of Julian of Norwich, an English mystic, but only uses a significant part of her theology to strengthen her understanding of contemplation. I would suggest that Julians writings *Revelations of Divine Love* offer a deep account of vulnerability, from vulnerability, which is necessary to contribute to a vulnerable theology. She offers a

creative account from a vulnerable position, beyond the established academic boundaries. Because Coakley already turns to Julian but does not acknowledge the richness and embodied vulnerability of her non-academic writings, I suggest that Julians writings are a suitable voice to turn to, when reading them through a literary lens. To complement the contribution of the embodied vulnerability of Julian, I suggest that turning to a similar contemporary voice can contribute to a more complete understanding of a vulnerable theology. Ann Voskamp is a non-academic, contemporary author who, like Julian, writes from an embodied vulnerability.

It is here that I turn to the next chapter to introduce the feminist genre of autotheory as a valuable tool to access these non-academic and creative sources, so they can contribute to an experienced and embodied theology. As a genre, autotheory combines experience with theory, which enables vulnerability to be viewed not only from a theoretical perspective, but also as an embodied and experienced reality. With this feminist genre as a lens, the texts of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp can be red and analysed as a contribution to construct a vulnerable theology. I will elaborate this in the next chapter.

Chapter II

Reading Literature: heuristic lens and theoretical framework

In order to conduct two literary sources that can contribute to a renewed theological approach towards vulnerability, this chapter introduces to two literary genres that can function as a heuristic lens. 'Life-writing' – introduced by Heather Walton as the result of the significance of literature for theology – and 'autotheory' a form of life-writing, explained by Lauren Fournier. By introducing these genres, this chapter functions as a methodological response to the need of a renewed theological understanding of vulnerability, one that contains vulnerability from within, using a literary approach to be able to access embodied and experienced elements within literary sources. Autotheory does not distinction between embodied experience and (academic) theory. These feminist genres – in which creativity, embodiment, experience, academic theory and other aspects are tightly wed together – can be used as a heuristic lens to look at the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp.

Within this chapter, autotheory is introduced and its relevance for theological research is explained. In the chapters that follow, autotheory is used as a lens to engage with the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp, whose embodied and vulnerable writings are able to enrich Coakley's solely academic understanding of vulnerability. Although Coakley rejects the idea of framing creativity as an inherently female trait as the opposite of 'male' rational sciences (for reasons discussed above), it is nevertheless important to move beyond the binary categories she relies upon. We must acknowledge the problems inherent in a platonic male rationale theology – which Julian effectively transcends, because she was barred from being part of that world. Even though Ann Voskamp is not barred from being part of male rational theology, she positions her-selves beyond it. This is elaborated within chapter II and IV. As suggested by Butler vulnerability is not limited to gender. Both, male and female can be vulnerable. Artistic

and creative endeavours can help us see this shared human characteristic. Feminist have been forefront in drawing attention to this resource – not to claim ownership of vulnerability, but to open it up as a universal resource.

Lastly, this chapter will come back to Butler's definition of vulnerability, which can be used as a theoretical framework to analyse vulnerability in the writings of Julian and Voskamp.

Theology and Literature: Life writing

Heather Walton, professor of Theology and Creative Practice, in the faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow, researches the intersection between theology and cultural practices. In her research, the relationship and distinction of theology and literature have a central place. She focuses on what happens when disciplines conflict with each other, or when they "[…] surprise themselves in an amorous embrace." [53] In this Walton experiences an erotic tension. This erotic tension, according to Walton, is something she is interested in because of the unease that often arises in the relationship of literature and theology, more than a merging of the two. The terms literature and theology are frequently used heuristically to describe different means of apprehending the world – theology is associated with order, authority, clarity, reason, responsibility and discernment and literature is associated with excess, beauty, mystery and our embodied passions.[54] In this Walton underlines the same assumptions concerning theology as Coakley addresses – who focusses in particular on systematic theology. Walton addresses the gender-related layer within this distinction between theology and literature, in which theology is associated as being more masculine and literature as being more feminine:

> I have exploited these conventions, and it is frequently the case that when I am discussing what happens when literature meets theology, I am also questioning what

[53] Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), xi.

[54] Walton, *Imagening Theology, xi.*

> happens when the feminine imaginary meets the male symbolic, when beauty meets ethics, when aesthetics meets politics, when the spiritual meets the material, when human bodies incarnate the divine and when human suffering cries out to God. [55]

Even though Walton doesn't fully agree with this division, she does acknowledge that sometimes this is the reality. For Walton, this is reason enough to explore the interdisciplinary of literature and theology, so that questions related to these themes can be analysed. Walton suggests life writing to be a form that is a particularly useful tool to do so, one for which she finds an historical precedent within the Christian tradition: the Bible as a collection of experienced literary narratives. I will elaborate on life writing below.

In addition to Walton attempt to create space for unheard voices, that are unheard because of the gendered distinction between theology and literature, by acknowledging the importance of literature for a more complete theology, another reason to turn to literature is given by historian Jerome de Groot. De Groot who argues that historical literature can bring marginalised voices into focus. Often these marginalised voices play no part of the main historical discourse. But through the recreation these voices (even fictively), main historical discourses can be questioned.[56] This suggestion is specifically applicable to the writings of Julian, who has written a more literary form of theology, because she was barred from the academic discourse of her time.

According to Walton: "People have always used their experiences, whether these be in the natural world, in familiar human relationships or amid challenging historical events, as a vivid source of theological understanding." [57] In the light of her interest in theology and

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[55] Walton, *Imagening Theology,* xii.

[56] Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel.* (Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 140.

[57] Heather Walton*, Writing Methods in Theological Reflections.* (London: SCM Press, 2014), xiii.

literature, she categorised different forms of creative writing, as a helpful way to reflect on (practical) theological research as researcher, by using personal experiences. As mentioned above, Walton suggests The Bible to be a great example of several forms of experience being use as the basis for theological writing. I interpret Walton in this that she considers the gospels to be reports of the writers' experiences with Christ, and within these narrated experiences, theological writing is present. Because of this, Walton states: "A considerable part of their power lies in the fact that they function according to well-understood conventions that enable hearers and readers to respond appropriately to the various elements of the tradition and creatively re-employ them when navigating their own personal or corporate journeys through life."[58]

'Life Writing' (along with journalling, auto-ethnography and poetics) is one of the categories she distinguishes as particularly useful for bringing theology and human experience as found in literature together. According to Walton the boundaries between the different categories of creative and experiences-based writing are flexible. Life writing is a form of autobiographical writing, with a reflective component. Philosopher and novelist Michael Novak says: "Knowledge of self and knowledge of God mount, one after the other, in an ascending, alternating spiral; and in proportion as we discover who we are, we are made ready to discover who God is."[59] This hints at how life writing can raise issues of authenticity and self-awareness that are important in contemplating our profound understanding and appreciation of God.[60] Walton explains that life writing can be of great use within theological research, in this way that

[58] Walton, *Writing Methods,* xiii.

[59] Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge.* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 81.

[60] Walton, *Writing Methods,* 91.

it can help the researcher who engages with the practice of life writing, give a better understanding of the theological research.

Turning to the philosopher Paul Ricœur, Walton states that when life writing is considered through a literary lens, it shows that experience itself is constructed within the narrative process. According to Ricœur the work of 'enplotment' experience is shaped to a form that enables us to access and comprehend experience. 'Narrative' is an essential element to the understand and comprehend experiences.[61]

Walton mentions that Augustine's Confessions is seen as a historical beginning of life writing. According to Walton some scholars view Confessions in a straightforward frame: "They see it as a successful attempt to unify and cohere experience in a single narrative that consolidates the author in relation to his own divine Author." Walton advocates that 'life writings' can function as a useful theological source: "The literary insight that our personal narratives are both scripted and unstable might be thought of as undermining their theological use. However, in my opinion, it opens up much more depth and complexity to the form."[62] She explains this by turning to her personal experiences of reading writings of Bonhoeffer: "If I simply read Bonhoeffer's letters as the saintly musings of a man boldly facing martyrdom, they might be inspiring. However, they became revelatory for me precisely because of the intense struggles they embody and the silences they contain – hands 'compressing my throat'.[63]

I would suggest that the theological theory formed by the experiences of life, formulated within embodied texts by Julian an Voskamp, can be seen as life writing. Even though this genre fits

[61] Heather Walton, "Life Writing and Religion," in *International Handbook of Pracitcal Theology,* ed. Birgit Weyel et al. (De Gruyter, 2022), 47-60: 50, https://doi.or/10.1515/9783110618150-004.

[62] Walton, "Life Writing and Religion," 51.

[63] Walton, "Life Writing and Religion," 51.

their literary style, I suggest that a more specified form of life writing is a better lens to read their texts. While life writing is a helpful approach, and Walton is clearly concerned about embodiment and feminist perspectives, these are further extended in the genre of autotheory, as Lauren Fornier shows.

Autotheory

An even more specified form of writing, similar to life writing, is autotheory. Autotheory is the practice of combining autobiography, feminist philosophy, theory and artistic practices. Autotheory acknowledges the intertwinement of life and knowledge in the same way as life writing does: "Autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation, just as feminist artists and scholars have long argued." [64] The autobiographical and artistic practices are similar to life writing, but the layer of feminist philosophy (often present in life writing as well) and theory, makes it a more specified genre. Autotheory is embedded in feminism, specifically from 1960. 'Personal experiences' were acknowledged as politics, due to the texts of a.o. Gloria Anzaldúa – an American scholar on feminist, culture and queer theory. Lauren Fournier, who is a Canadian writer, artist and scholar of English literature,[65] who specialises in autotheory, describes autotheory in the following way:

> I suggest that autotheory can be approached as a practice that artists, writers, critics, curators, activists, and others tend toward as a way of coming to terms with "theory"- whether as the "master discourse(s)" of theory and philosophy, to take the words of Luce

[64] Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, First MIT Press paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The MIT Press, 2022), 3.

[65] Fournier, "About and Contact," Lauren Fournier, Accessed July 30, 2025. https://www.laurenfournier.net/About-Contact.

> Irigaray, or as the work of making theories – in relation to their experiential, affective lives and embodied, relational practices as human beings in the world. [66]

Importantly for autotheory is the place of the body. Autotheory has a physical approach, specifically present in some forms of autotheory: visual art, film, etc. Because of the importance of the body within autotheory - and with that the vulnerability of the body as such – vulnerability is explicitly essential to the genre of autotheory. In my perception, acknowledging the feminist power that is present in this genre, vulnerability is used to express this power. As an example of how the body, and in this case a specific vulnerable body, has a significant role within autotheory. In the examples Fournier uses, the body is often shown in artwork and photos, but she also mentions Sick Women Theory which is a text written from a position of disabledness. As she puts it, "In Sick Woman Theory, Hedva places their ongoing experience of living with chronic illness as the basis from which to write a new, intersectional feminist theory that upholds the lives, agency, and limits of those who are experiencing illness and disability."[67] Illness and disabledness can be approached as specific forms of vulnerability. In the next chapter I will show that writing about and from a sick body is a fundamental aspect of the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp. The sickness of their bodies – sickness in different ways – shapes their writings while their writings shape the experience of their sick bodies.

As well as the intertwining of (academic) theory and personal experience in autotheory, no direct division is made between the rational mind, and the experiential body. In the case of disabledness, the rational mind can function from within a disabled body that is inherently connected to the rational mind of the disabled person. As exemplified in Hedva's Sick Woman

[66] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practic*e, 6.

[67] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practic*e 30.

Theory, the body is the place from which autotheory is written, but also about which is written. Another feature of autotheory, again apparent in Hedva is the contextual and personal position of the writer (or creator). False neutrality is not desirable, instead, the whole personality of the author is the source of the experiences, questions asked and creative processes: "Autotheory is a mode of theorising that draws attention to itself as such."[68] Additionally a feature of autotheory is flexibility of form and structure, as these are in service of the content of the created piece. Within autotheory there is space to experiment with form and structure, something that we see in Sick Woman Theory… Moreover, there is a critical political agenda present within autotheory – especially concerning inclusivity (as we see in the case of Hedva) according to access to knowledge and academic objectivity. Lastly, autotheory is engaged with intersectionality: race, gender, ablism, power and other identical markers are consciously mentioned, again apparent in Hedva. These can cause or contribute to positions of vulnerability, which show that vulnerability can be seen as an inherent aspect of autotheory.

An important nuance of the role of the 'self' within autotheory is given by the author Christian Lorentzen. According to Lorentzen, autotheory does not refer to a "theory of the self" so much as a theory that emerges from the self. The autotheorist shuttles between self and theory— political theory, linguistics, poststructuralism, affect theory, performance theory, aesthetics, gender— using firsthand experience as a person living in the world as the ground for developing and honing theoretical arguments and theses. All of these facets suggest that this can operate as a useful approach for thinking towards a theology of vulnerability. It is in the light of this that I approach the texts of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp, authors from very different periods but both of whom we can view through the heuristic lens of autotheory as a specific form of life writing. When viewed in this way, we can see that they make important

[68] Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practic*e 30.

contributions to a crafting a theology of vulnerability from vulnerability that goes beyond Coakley.

Theoretical framework

With this in mind, for analysing the literary texts that I am using to contribute to a renewed theological approach towards vulnerability, I want to establish a theoretical framework for the concept of vulnerability. I will be employing the definition of Butler discussed above, which ties in well to the sense of vulnerability engendered in life writing and autotheory. To remind ourselves of Butler's definition:

> (…) 'vulnerability' should not be considered as a subjective state, but rather as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives. We are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation, a person, a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed. Perhaps we can say that we are vulnerable to those environmental and social structures that make our lives possible, and that when they falter, so do we.[69]

Butler's understanding of vulnerability corresponds with Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp understandings of vulnerability, which makes Butler's definition a useful definition and theoretical framework. I would suggest that the genre of autotheory as a form of life writing, also helps to validate Butler's understanding of vulnerability. Autotheory tends to acknowledge the intertwining of theory and experienced and embodied life, Butler understands vulnerability within its embodied and experienced context.

[69] Scheibmayr, "Organizing Vulnerability," 1396.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that autotheory, as a specific and feminist form of life writing is a suitable genre to use as heuristic lens, to be able to analyse the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp, two authors from different periods of time, within a consistent and similar way. As an opposite reaction to a to Coakley's rejection of framing creativity as an inherently female trait, Walton does partly acknowledge the reality of this, and turns to creative literary sources as a way to make space for non-academic (often female) voices. The importance of these voices to Walton is enough to explore the interdisciplinarity of literature and theology. She suggests life writing, an auto-biographical form of writing, to be a useful genre to turn to, because people have always used their experiences as a source of theological understanding. A more specified form of life writing is suggested by Fournier, who explains autotheory as a practice that combines autobiography, feminist philosophy, theory and artistic practices. Because autotheory acknowledges the importance of embodied, disabled and experienced life, it is a more suitable lens to use for the writings of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp, because their disabled bodied form an inherently important part of writings. Also, autotheory is in line with Butler's perspective of vulnerability as a non-static, contextual concept. The next two chapters consist of an introduction of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp and an analysis of their writings with a specific focus on vulnerability within the theoretical framework of Butler's definition and through the lens of autotheory.

Chapter III

Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love: a medieval voice from vulnerability

This chapter shows how a more literary approach of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* through the lens of autotheory can help to reconsider Julian of Norwich as a theological source from vulnerability and how this can contribute to a renewed theological approach to vulnerability. Julian of Norwich is an English medieval mystic from the 14th century, who experienced a series of visions in 1373 which revolve around vulnerability. This has been noticed before, most particularly by Coakley and yet Coakley's engagement with Julian is without the openness to vulnerability that autotheory provides. In this chapter, I will first explain how Julian is addressed by Coakley, before offering a critical appraisal of it and alternative drawing with autotheory. This chapter shows why Julians *Revelations of Divine Love* can be addressed as autotheory, and how this literary lens contributes to expose the richness of a theology from vulnerability present in this text. This will be done by analysing the way Julian addresses vulnerability by a close reading, supported with quotations from her writings. Lastly this chapter shows how these findings can contribute to Coakley's theology to generate a vulnerable theology.

In Coakley's attempt to provide a positive theology of vulnerability, she approaches some medieval mystical sources out of which to draw out useful insights – chosen especially because of their approach to contemplative prayer. Among others, she mentions Julian of Norwich, Meester Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec and John of the Cross. Julian of Norwich is the only female voice among these sources (and one of the few female sources Coakley turns to at all). It is my contention that it is possible to identify a positive theological account of vulnerability in Julian's Revelations, but that this requires a humble, and also comprehensive framework when reading her texts. In this way fellow feminist voices are more likely to be

recognises as useful sources, instead of almost shutting them down. Even though Julian is seen as a theologian by Denys Turner[70] and others,[71] it has to be recognised that she was not a theologian in the scholastic sense of the term. Even though her texts are of high quality, she was not able to take part of a male scholastic world. By ignoring this difference in position, Julian being a woman who does not fit in this specific framework, I suggest that Coakley misses out on the richness of the embodied and vulnerable theology that Julian writes.

Introduction of Julian of Norwich

Julian of Norwich is an English female anchoress from the 14th century. All information that is available of Julian herself is because of her own work (besides a few mentions in wills and a visit to her by Margery Kempe). Her name is probably derived from the church to which she was attached: the Church of St Julian, in Norwich. This might not have been her real name, since it was a custom for anchoresses to adopt the name of the church they were attached to.[72] Julians 'real' name remains unknown which makes her situation somewhat ambiguous: as little information is known about her; by reading her texts, she reveals a lot of her inner self, which feels very personal and intimate.

In her writings, known as the *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian reveals that she has suffered extreme illness, which she prayed for. It is reasonable to assume that Julian recovered from her illness after she experienced her visions. Julian has written down the visions of the Passion that she experiences – on the 8th of May 1373, when she was thirty and a half years old

[70] Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 18.

[71] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xlix.

[72] Grace M. *Jantzen, Julian of Norwich*, 2nd ed (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 4.

– and explains in her texts that her visions are meant for others as well.[73] Very soon after her visions, she writes down the text we now refer to as the 'Short Text.' Twenty years later she wrote down even more, which we refer to as the 'Long Text.' The difference between these texts is that the 'Short' Text' is a documentation of the visions she experienced, and the 'Long Text' is a complemented version of the 'Short Text' in which she expounds her theological interpretations and explanations of these visions.

Julians context asks for a brief introduction as well, because in this context, her writings are differently than other writings from the same time. Julian has experienced a lot of extreme contextual incidents that caused uncertainty. During her life the plague had broken out in England in 1348, which caused the death of many people in multiple waves. On top of this the Great Schism took place and crusades where initiated – in which the Bishop of Norwich played an active role.[74]

The content of Julians writings show that she was an intellectual writer with great knowledge of other spiritual writings. Even though Julian does mention other texts (and quotes and alludes to biblical references), it shows that she might not have had access to these sources right away, because even though she cites the heart of her sources, they are not precise or directly quoted (with references). [75]

Julian has writes down the sixteen visions she has experienced. It is important to mention that she makes sure the right tone is set concerning what the reader will read: "This is a revelation of love which Jesus Christ, our endless bliss, made in sixteen showings or special

[73] Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 3-4.

[74] Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, 10-11.

[75] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, xvi.

revelations."[76] She opens by announcing the important place of love in her revelations, as the main theme. On top of that, she immediately reveals her Christocentric view by saying that Jesus Christ is the one who made these showings, and who is also our endless bliss. In this first statement, it becomes clear that Julian experiences a loving, and deep form of, almost human, relationship with Jesus Christ. She emphasises this even more later on, and this romantic relationship is a notable aspect, because of how she views her own position towards God and Jesus Christ.

The continuing tension between her, being the one who receives these showings, and also being the one who is not worth of any of this, becomes visible. She calls the visions 'special revelations' which implies that it is not common practice to receive showings like this. On the other hand, she continually emphasises her humble position: "These revelations were shown to a simple, uneducated creature in the year of our Lord 1373 […]."[77]

Reading the *Revelations of Divine Love* intrigued me in the same way as it sometimes triggered me. Julians writings are very vivid and graphic. It intrigued me how she manages to write down her feelings and emotions of witnessing the visions and her bodily experiences. The visions of the Passion that she describes are evocative, and for me as a reader, it shapes my own perception of the Passion.

Worth mentioning is the remarkable change of her self-perception and confidence that is visible in the texts. As a medieval woman, living in the fourteenth century, it was not very common, let alone desirable, to write a book of Christian teachings.[78] She doesn't open up about anything that explains who she was – beside her being a woman, ill and a Christian human

[76] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 39.

[77] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 40.

[78] Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, xii.

being. Very often Julians writings are acknowledged as an important theological source – even more accurately: a systematic theological source. This recognition honours her theological expertise, a recognition that she wasn't able to receive herself within her own period of time. Currently Julian's work is highly appreciated and popular,[79] contrasting with how it was received in period just subsequent to hers. The Anglican bishop Edward Stillingfleet (1636-1699) called her work "the fantastic revelation of distempered brains."[80]

Although Julian engages in systematic theology at a high level, it would be reductive to approach her writings solely with the aim of isolating their theological content. Her systematic theology is intricately embedded within, and inextricably bound to, a richer and more dynamic narrative framework – one that is itself constitutive of the theology she articulates. Her writings are a 'story' in which a systematic theology is hidden. Indeed, in what follows, I suggest that it is appropriate to consider Julian's writings as an early form of autotheory.

Analysis Revelations of Divine Love

In her work personal experiences (visions) and theory (her own theological reflections) are intertwined. When reading her texts, no political protest nor claims are made which would suggest that Julian does not interfere with political issues. Nevertheless, from my perspective, the fact that her theological theories are not formed according to the theological discourses of her time, we can argue that her texts contain a political protest in the form of writing of theological theory. On top of this, Julian portrays Christ as 'mother'. Even though Julian's

[79] Philip Sheldrake, "God's Meaning is Love: The Mystical Theology of Julian of Norwich." *Acta Theologica* vol. 22, no. 33 (2022): 89-103: 89, https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup33.8.

[80] F.C. Bauerschmidt, "Julian of Norwich – Incorporated." *Modern Theology* vol. 13, no. 1 (1917): 75-100. https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00032, 75.

writings are well known because of this imaginary, there are earlier sources that use similar language by Cistercian monks, among who Bernard of Clairvaux, and the Benedictine Anselm of Canterbury.[81] Even though this shows that Julian's use of these female images was not unusual in her historical context, I would like to argue that doing this as a women, outside of the established theological discourse, it might nonetheless be regarded as a theological statement with a political aspect in it as well. I would also suggest that Julian is critical in some way of the accessibility to knowledge. She does mention this, not in a reproachable way, but by pointing out a specific public she wants to reach out to: "I am not saying this to those who are wise, because they are well aware of this; but I am saying it to those of you who are uninformed, for your comfort and encouragement, for we are all as one in love."[82] Julian point outs she does not want to reach out to 'those who are wise' but to 'those of you who are uninformed'. In her attempt to criticise this inequality, she immediately suggests that there is no inequality: for we are all as one in love. Considering the fact that Julian wrote a report of her revelations – the short text - and later added her theological reflections – the long text - I would suggest that she is experimenting with the form of her texts. In this difference in form of texts, her own position shifts as well. In the reports, her own reflection and person are not very present in contrast to the later texts in which she has an active role in reflecting and sharing theological insights. In both of these texts, Julians own life is the actual contexts in which the revelations and her theological reflections are taking place. Because of her physical experiences of illness, her body plays an important role in her texts.

[81] Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages, 1. paperback pr, Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA 16 (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 110.

[82] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 51.

Even though Julian's writings can be considered as autotheoretical writings, I approach this with hesitation as I think it is unlikely to believe Julian herself would consider her writings as autotheoretical. This is because she positions God as the origin of the experiences and revelations, instead of herself. Nevertheless, if we set aside this feature of autotheory, Julian might well have been able to view her writings autotheoretical; this at least forms a useful heuristic lens through which to view them.

It was difficult to read Julians texts without focussing specifically on these theological statements. In the first place I was amazed by the powerful and surprising claims she makes. Nevertheless, I have tried not to focus on this theological aspect only, but instead to read her text as a whole. Focussing in particular on vulnerability within her texts. In what follows I will set out my analysis of this reading, divided into four themes, supported by quotations from her writings.

Suffering, vulnerability and the body

Suffering, vulnerability and the body are fundamentally present within Julian's writings. Her physical illness and her visual experiences are the starting point of her writings: "This person had already asked for three gifts by the grace of God. The first was to relive his Passion in her mind; the second was bodily sickness, the third was that God would give her three wounds." [83] Julian longs to suffer along with Christ, willingly - "And I longed to suffer with him, […]."[84] – which she describes as an honest act of love: "It seemed to me I wished that I had been there at that time with Mary Magdalene and with those who were lovers of Christ, so that I might have seen in the flesh our Lord's Passion which he suffered for me, and so that I

[83] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 40.

[84] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 43.

could have suffered with him as others did who loved him."[85] Julian longs for a shared and collective form of suffering where Christ's pains will be her pains.

Julians own female and suffering body functions as the source of her knowledge. She represents a bodily and experienced epistemology. Through her body she experiences pain, illness, and after that a great relief. Her body – an object that is vulnerable to suffering – brings Julian closer to God by experiencing pain and seeing visions: "And, as it seems to me, this suffering is something that exists for a while, because it purges us and makes us know ourselves and ask for mercy, for the Passion of our Lord is a comfort to us against all this, and that is his blessed will."[86] Not only her own body but also the body of Christ is physically important in her writings. When writing about the Passion, Julian describes the bodily and physical aspects of Christ's suffering in great detail. The blood of Christ is also mentioned in a detailed and unusual way: "The great drops of blood fell down from under the crown of thorns like beads, looking as if they had come from the veins; and as they came out they were dark red, because the blood was very thick; and as it spread out it was bright red; and when it came to the brows, then it vanished; and yet the bleeding continued until many things were seen and understood." [87] As a woman reading this passage, the description of the blood made me think of menstruation: the different colours and substances of the blood, dripping from the body. Some scholars who made the same claim have suggested that by pointing out this accurate description of blood, associating it with her own female and menstruating body, Julian uses this to function as an

[85] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 3.

[86] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 75.

[87] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 49.

embodied identification of herself with Christ.[88] By describing the physical aspects of the Passion like this, Julian makes the body, the broken body, maybe even the menstruating body, of great importance for her theology and understanding of God. Viewed through the lens of autotheory, Julian's description of the blood of Christ draws attention to the importance of her own embodied being, sharing in Christs suffering.

By emphasising the body, she distinguishes the body from the spiritual life. To my understanding, Julian argues that bodily vulnerability contributes to a strong spiritual wellbeing: "When a soul has willingly made itself as nothing for love, in order to have him who is all, then he is able to receive spiritual rest. Our Lord God also revealed that it is a very great pleasure to him that a simple soul should come to him in a bare, plain and homely way."[89]

As shown in this analysis, Julian's theology arises from her bodily experiences of suffering and pain. The autotheoretical approach accentuates how it is her own body, a suffering and vulnerable body, that becomes the locus of theological theory. In this way her embodied vulnerability makes it impossible to reduce her theory to static doctrinal theory.

Being humble and strong

As mentioned before, Julian's position in her texts is notable. At first her position is a humble one. Julian presents her knowledge and revelations as something she received by experience, not as something that she knows because of who she is. It seems that her ultimate goal is to lead her reader closer to God and not distracted them by her role as author and receiver of the visions. This becomes clear in how she writes down the visions and reflections, but also because she makes clear that the visions were revealed to her, a normal human being: "These

[88] Cherie Bova, "The Writings of Julian of Norwich as Accomodation and Subverstion," *Canadian Woman Studies - Les Cahiers de La Femme* 17, no. 1 (1997): 22–25, 24. https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/download/8896/8073/0.

[89] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 46.

revelations were shown to a simple, uneducated creature […].”[90] By saying this about herself, she gives the impression that she is convinced that it could have been anyone else who received the visions. Yet, Julian does acknowledge her presence in the text at times, even though she is a woman and suffers from pain. She makes herself and her context a sort of ‘gateway’ to God. She uses her testimony of the visions she saw and the experiences her body had as a true and honest story in which God’s love becomes clear and present. Also, she used examples of her own life to give her reader recognisable, but changeable images that correspondent with what she is saying. For example: “[…] that is to say, God’s servants, Holy Church – will be shaken by sorrows and anguish and tribulation in this world, as a cloth is shaken in the wind.”[91] The image of a shaken cloth in the wind, is probably an example of her own reality that she uses for further explanation. Another example is: “The mother can lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus, he can lead us intimately into his blessed breast through his sweet open side and reveal within part of the Godhead and the joys of heaven, with spiritual certainty of endless bliss; and he showed that in the tenth revelation, giving the same understanding in those sweet words where he says, ‘See, how I love you’, looking into his side, rejoicing.” [92]

The small things, the things that are easily overseen are of great importance in her writings. “’All manner of things shall be well,’ For he wants us to know that the smallest thing will not be forgotten.”[93] In two of the examples that she gives to explain a part of her theology; she emphasises the importance of these little things. The first is an example is of a majestic king and a poor servant: Julian states that the highest honour that a majestic king or a great lord can

[90] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 40.

[91] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 76.

[92] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 131.

[93] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 80.

show a poor servant is friendliness. In this example, the humble servant matters and is seen and valued. The second example is of a thing as small as a hazelnut. In this vision Julian saw a little thing – she compares this thing to a hazelnut, and it reminds her of from her personal life – lying in the palm of her hand. The answer of what it is came to her and Julian explains: "It is all that is made."[94] While looking at it, Julian is frightened that it will not last, since it is so small, but this fear is overcome as she understands that God loves it, in the same way that everything has its being through the love of God: God made it, God cares for it, God loves it. It shows that everything, even the smallest things, are because they are loved by God.

The two examples given, demonstrate how Julian understanding of the concept of vulnerability. Firstly, relationality is fundamental to vulnerability. The servant is vulnerable, because of the majestic king. The little hazelnut in the palm of Julian's hand is vulnerable because of Julian. The second is that this vulnerable life is only a worthy life because of the love and care that it can receive. It is open, which can cause bad things, but this also creates space for love: in Julian's examples God's love. "It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God."[95]

In the passage about the hazelnut, Julian has a vulnerable position herself. She is open and honest about the fact that she does not recognise the small thing that is laying in the palm of her hand, even though she is the one informing the reader: "I looked at it with my mind's eye and thought, 'What can this be?"[96] Julian presents herself not as an authority but as an interested searcher, being intellectually humble and spiritually receptive, by acknowledging her own unknowing. In this way she makes her readers part of her spiritual journey instead of lecturing

[94] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 45.

[95] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 45.

[96] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 45.

at them with already unravelled truths. This prevents hierarchical power dynamics. She embodies an alternative epistemology that challenges the established (patriarchal) subjective epistemologies in which knowledge can be seen as controlling or possessed. Another passage in her writing shows this same vulnerability, a passage that is moving and shows that Julian has experienced the feeling she describes herself: "Pray with all your heart, even if it seems to give you no pleasure because it is helpful, even though you may not feel it. Pray with all your heart, even though you may feel nothing, though you may see nothing – yes even though you may think that you cannot. For in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in weakness, then your prayers are most pleasing to me, even though it seems to you that they give you almost no pleasure. And so, it is in my sight with all your faithful prayers."[97] She creates space for a feeling of being lost and feeling insecure about praying. Nevertheless, she encourages to embrace this feeling and pray from this position of vulnerability.

The difference in her position in the short text and long text, her focus on the smaller things, and the way she is honest about her not knowing, show a dynamic landscape of her position within her text. Analysing her texts through autotheory, highlights these dynamics because of the space autotheory gives to the position of the author, and the freedom to experiment with different writing styles. It shows that Julians writings present vulnerability as possible weakness and as a developing strength. Also, Julian operates within equality with her reader.

Erotic desire

By writing about her relationship with God, especially with Christ, Julian tends to write in such a loving and deeply desiring way that a romantic and erotic layer is present within her text. This becomes explicit when Julian depicts the Trinity as 'lover': "For the Trinity is God,

[97] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 93.

and God is the Trinity; and the Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our unending joy and bliss, through our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ."[98] In the images Julian uses for God's love for humanity, this romantic and erotic layer becomes even more visible: "He is our clothing that out of love enwraps us and enfolds us, embraces us and wholly encloses us, surrounding us for tender love, so that he can never leave us."[99] In this example, humanity as an undressed naked body, is enwrapped by God, like clothing. It reads like a romantic scene in which two lovers are physically connected. Even though Julian writes about this in a positive way – in which God's love is enwrapping humanity – it could remind of unhealthy, sexual relationships in which hierarchical power dynamics are present. However, I think that even though Julian uses these erotic language and images to emphasise this strong mutual love and desire, she breaks down the hierarchical power dynamics that this language and images can be associated with.

Firstly, her writings contain a tension that is visible in a mutual yearning of God to humanity and humanity to God. About God she writes: "[…] for he wants to be seen, and he wants to be sought; he wants to be awaited, and he wants to be trusted."[100] It is interesting that in this passage God is the one who desires humanity. Within this desire, a vulnerable and erotic layer is present, in which God is not always the one that is desired – which can be seen as a dominant position – but also the one who desires – which can be seen as a vulnerable position. Writing about this as mutual desiring creates more equal power dynamics.

[98] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 44.

[99] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 45.

[100] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 53.

Secondly, when talking about desire, Julian mentions her own desire to surrendering to God as something she wants: "And with the will of my heart I fully assented to be at God's will."[101] 'Consent' being an important topic within modern society, Julian seems to emphasise its importance in her own writings. She is the one who repeatedly expresses that she surrenders to God with full awareness. It is her desire to surrender; her heart fully assents. Even though I am not sure that Julian would agree that it is her own desire to desire God – instead I think she would say that the desire to do so comes from God – yet the way she writes about this shows awareness of her own autonomy, and her being the one to admit to this. This autonomous choice of being open and surrendering to God in contemplation is also present within Coakley's theology. Even though Coakley does mention this autonomous choice of being open and surrendering, she does not tie this to Julian's writings.

Thirdly, the erotic, romantic images and language Julian uses, are not limited to erotic and romantic relationships. She does indeed speak of the trinity as 'lover', but there are more intimate relationships present in her writings. It becomes clear that Julian speaks of God as someone familiar and courteous: "And what gave me most comfort in the whole revelation that I saw was that our God and Lord who is so much to be revered and so awesome is so familiar and so courteous."[102] Julian speaks of God in a romantic and erotic way, as being a lover, but it is not the sole sort of relationship that she describes. I will elaborate this in the following paragraph.

God mother, Mary mother of God

Even though this is not an analysis focussing primarily on the theology that is present within Julian's writings, I want to explore her image of God as mother and with that her appreciation

[101] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 42.

[102] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 49.

for ‘our Lady Saint Mary’. Within the theme of Lady Saint Mary and God as mother, vulnerability forms a substantial aspect in her writings, which is the reason why I do want to address it. Julian has great admiration for Mary – a woman who is an example of pure surrendering to God, who envisioning herself as a small and humble human being, which made her filled with God’s grace and virtues, in ways that made her surpassing all created beings. With this, a dichotomy between power and vulnerability becomes visible. The position Mary has within Julian’s writings is of great importance to understand how Julian plays with this power dichotomy. In these two passages in which Julian illustrates this dichotomy:

> The greatness and nobility of this contemplation of God filled her full of reverent awe, and with this she saw herself so small and so humble, so simple and so poor in comparison with her Lord God that this reverent awe filled her with humility. And so, founded on this, she was filled with grace and with every kind of virtue, and she surpasses all created beings.[103]

> For it was this that she [Mary] wondered at: that he who was her creator was willing to be born of her who was created. And this wisdom and faith, recognising the greatness of her maker and the littleness of her created self, caused her to say very humbly to Gabriel, ‘Behold me here, the handmaid of the Lord.’[104]

In these passages, Mary is a created being. A created being that is the smallest, humblest being, but because of this she exalts all created beings. In the second passage, an interesting circularity appears: Mary is the created being, who gives birth to her own creator. The creator in this passage surrenders himself to his creation, willingly, to be born out of it. A shift of relationship - God the father, the creator of Mary, becomes, God the Son of Mary, carrier and caretaker of God. As a mother, Mary protects God’s vulnerability. Even though this is a well-known biblical storyline, Julian emphasises this by writing down the wondering thought of Mary: “[…] that he who was her creator was willing to be born of her who was created.” In the

[103] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 48.

[104] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 44.

first passage, Julian seems to suggest that true vulnerability does not result in weakness but in exaltation – meanwhile this exaltation is being surpassed by God, the one who strives for vulnerability, by walking a path to humbleness and suffering. In the second passage Julian creates a circle in which the vulnerable one is the powerful one, in the same way that the powerful one is the vulnerable one. I consider that Julian is able to underline this circle of power and vulnerability within her writings, because of her emphasis on relationality.

In addition to the role of Mary within Julian's writings, Julian focusses on the role of motherhood by depicting God not only as father, but also as mother. By doing this Julian breaks with the male-gender tradition in relation to God. Firstly, this is an important initiative because by doing this, she uplifts the position of women by relating their gender to God. She breaks with the known image of a male God standing in power in relation to humanity – mostly depicted as female. A second consideration is one that has more to do with the specific depiction of God as mother – a female parent – Julian portraits God as a loving and caring mother, which leads to a less sexually charged relationship between the human and the divine. A relationship in which vulnerability is not exploited by power dynamics but is instead carried and protected. The inevitability of vulnerability within relational contexts becomes more apparent when viewed through the lens of a mother-child relationship, which resonates with warmth and protection. "The mother's service is closest, most willing, and most sure: closest because it is most natural, most willing because it is most loving, and most sure because it is most true."[105]

Despite the fact that Julian challenges traditional frameworks by depicting God as mother, this is not the only way she envisions God within her writings: "[…] for he is our mother, brother, and saviour."[106]As mentioned earlier, she uses erotic and romantic language in which

[105] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 130.

[106] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 127.

God is seen as a lover. She confirms God as father, by explaining God is not only father, but also mother. And she also refers to God as being a brother and a friend. She mentions that God is so familiar and courteous to us, based on the life-like vision she received. The familiarity Julian describes with God is very comforting to read. It shows that even though she points out to God as the highest, mightiest, noblest and worthiest, God is also the lowest, humblest and friendliest: "And what gave me the most comfort in the whole revelation that I saw was that our God and Lord who is so much to be revered and so awesome is so familiar and so courteous".[107] The conflation of roles complicates and enriches the way in which the relationship between humanity and God is understood.

Feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero approaches vulnerability similarly to Judith Butler. Cavarero understands the aspect of relationality within vulnerability as a fundamental human condition and emphasises the positive effects of the 'vulnerable one' in relationships: human vulnerability is an invitation to care and love. "When vulnerability is pure nakedness, when it is the defenceless who incarnates the meaning of vulnus, the violence that inflicts a wound, slips to the background and allows the emergence of a tender and defenceless skin that inspires caresses. Mothers and nurses, who are used to handling infants, know very well what it is like."[108] By replacing violating and dangerous relationships with positive, female relationships, Cavarero is able to emphasise the positive consequence of vulnerability. In ways that resonate and elucidate Julian of Norwich, Cavarero is known for replacing male figures by female figures as figuring the universal symbolic.[109] By doing something similar, Julian emphasises

[107] Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 49.

[108] Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. (Stanford University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503600416, 160.

[109] Tuija Pulkkinen, "Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought: A Politics of Philosophy Point of View," *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23, no. 2 (December 15, 2020), https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.342, 154.

the positive relational aspect of vulnerability within contemplation and asceticism, the explicit love within relationships that is visible within her text, contributes to a better understanding of this engagement with the aspect of vulnerability within asceticism, an understanding of vulnerability that is not present within Coakley's systematic theology on the matter or in her engagement with Julian.

The autotheoretical lens shows how Julian's theology is formed through vulnerability, more than about vulnerability. A reading of Julians writings through this lens shows the theological scope beyond Coakley's systematic, rational and static theology. Julians writings contribute to this from a relational and embodied account of vulnerability.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that Coakley's readings of Julian remain limited by a traditional theological framework in which Coakley acknowledges that Julians theology challenges the established Trinitarian doctrine. This chapter shows that reading *Revelations of Divine Love* through the lens of autotheory, reveals dimensions of vulnerability embedded within Julian's honest and vulnerable life, body and desire. Her writings embody a vulnerability that is present within bodily, emotional, relational and theological aspects. Personal experience (visions) and theory (theological reflections) are intertwined. Her deviation from established theological frames and depiction of God, portraying God as mother, can be seen as an explicitly theological and implicitly political protest. Her texts contain an alternative epistemology, grounded in bodily experience and vulnerability. Her female body is a rich source of knowledge because of physical suffering and mystical visions. Because of this her texts exists as an embodied and vulnerable theology.

Vulnerability is addressed explicitly within her writings because Julian advocates that vulnerability and suffering are no weaknesses, but conditions to spiritual growth. On top of that she challenges established power dynamics by writing about God as a desiring being, and with that, a vulnerable lover. A similar thing happens when Julian depicts God as mother, by doing this, the same established power dynamics are challenged. Even though, this represents an intervention that honours the female gender, the significance of 'Mother God' resides primarily in the reconfiguration of relational dynamics and the consequent reconfiguration of power dynamics. By also mentioning Mary, as the mother of God, an notable circle of power and vulnerability opens up. The female body, as the bearer of God, the embodied place in which a relational vulnerability becomes visible. This becomes even more evident because Julian engages with various roles – mother, father, lover, brother - and reshapes the associated relationships.

Implicitly, Julian's writings show that vulnerability is considered of great importance because of the way her vulnerable, suffering and female body is not addressed as weak, but as a source of knowledge and revelation. Julian seems to acknowledge her body, her vulnerability as an epistemology, in which honest confessions of not-knowing, have a place.

Julian does write about her relationship with God in a romantic and erotic way, but she is remarkably consistent in emphasising her willingness within this relational form. The erotic element is with 'consent.' By also pointing out and re-imagining the mutual relationships of the divine and humanity within maternal imagery, she breaks with hierarchal power dynamics, not from a distance and safe theological perspective, but from within the experiences and vulnerable reality of her life and faith. Julian shows, other than Coakley how the embodied and vulnerable realities of her life and faith are inseparable from the pneumatic unity with the trinity Coakley approaches from a safe systematic perspective. Also, Julian steps out of a patriarchal framework, and uses her female body as the source of theology. She opens up a space that is

accessible for a broad public, by inviting her reader into her personal life with metaphors that are personal but recognizable. Using her life and her body as a contextual field in which the experience of the contemplation, and ascesis takes place, Julian does not operate from a position of power, but is strong within her own vulnerability.

The next chapter turns to the contemporary voice of Ann Voskamp, who writes Christian theory that is embedded within her embodied and vulnerable life. Similar to Julian, Voskamp writes from a position of vulnerability. Voskamp writing demonstrate that, by reading them through the lens of autotheory, they offer a contemporary embodied and strong way to articulate vulnerability as a vulnerable theology.

Chapter IV
Ann Voskamp's *The Broken Way*: a Contemporary Voice from Vulnerability

This chapter shows there are other Christian voices today, that are trying to recapture a positive Christian vulnerability. These voices often occur in novels and fictional literature. They provide a creative and non-academic source that moves beyond the patriarchal mould that Coakley operates within. To explore one of these voices, I turn to the New York Times-bestselling author: Ann Voskamp with her book The Broken Way, which I consider to be a poetical form of autotheory. Coakley does not turn to Voskamp as a source for het theology of vulnerability, but she does acknowledge– as mentioned in the first chapter- the importance of literature and art as valuable sources for her unsystematic-systematic theology: théologie totale. I suggest that she offers this, without actually turning to creative literary sources. Besides the fact that Voskamp writes about the theme of vulnerability from a position of vulnerability, Coakley's lack of turning to creative literary sources is why I think Voskamp's writings can contribute to a vulnerable theology, by reading her texts through the lens of life writing. This chapter will first give a brief introduction of Voskamp. Also, it will give an analysis of the way Voskamp addressed vulnerability by a close reading of her text, supported with quotations. As a conclusion this chapter shows how these findings can contribute to Coakley's theology to generate a vulnerable theology.

Introduction of Ann Voskamp

Ann Voskamp is a New York Times -bestseller, with (a.o.) her book *The Broken Way*. Voskamp is a Canadian author, who writes her honest thoughts about life and faith. Voskamp writings have become popular in blogging with 'mom-blogs.' In the same way as Julian of Norwich, Voskamp doesn't mention many facts about her life, like her profession or education.

Even though various internet sources suggest that Voskamp holds an academic degree in psychology, this is not broadly verifiable. While Voskamp occasionally refers to her academic background by inserting quotations from previous professors, it does not constitute a significant part of her being an author. She is open about her feelings of sorrow, pain and depression. The main context in which her narratives are located is her personal life of living on a farm in Ontario, Canada, being a wife and a mother of seven children and church-member of a local country-church.

Voskamp decided to write down the things she was grateful for in difficult periods and dark times. Doing this changed her perspective on life, and she wrote a book about this change of perspective: Thousand Gifts. After this book she wrote The Broken Way, Way-maker and several prayer books and children's books.[110]

In an interview with a Dutch Christian broadcaster, she describes experiencing a calling to engage in theology as a woman through an embodied theological approach. In her perspective men sometimes lack a capacity for being open and vulnerable, especially in writing theology. She experienced this gap within this 'male-theology':

> I find myself thinking of theologians like Tim Keller and John Piper. Both men – and I could name others – have written profound and richly layered books, from which I have learned a great deal. Yet, I can't find anything about their personal lives within their writings. So sometimes I do wonder: could it be that we – as women – are called to contribute what is still missing? Could it be our vocation, so to speak, to draw the flesh over the bones of theology? Theology must be 'embodied' to be able to truly come close and touch people's hearts. The best way of doing that, is by telling stories. After all, it was Jesus who told us so many parables. A good story sticks with you. And to me, a good story inevitably involves vulnerability. And yes, that can be frightening because

[110] Uitgeverij van Wijnen, "Ann Voskamp," Duizenmaaldank, accessed July 4 2025, https://www.duizendmaaldank.nl.

you never know who is going to read these intimate things about your life, and within which context this happens. [111]

In this same interview, Voskamp mentioned that to her, this view is also the result of her perspective on the different roles that man and women have within the body of Christ. It is interesting to me, that by saying this, she shows her own need for embodied theology, on top of the rich, but 'bony' theology written mostly by men.

Voskamp work is not discussed within academic research. Nevertheless, within media discourses her work has received a lot of critique from various sources. Voskamp is accused of mysticism, *theo-eroticism* and pantheism. [112] Especially the way she writes about her relationship with Christ is judged within these media discourses: "This heresy is called *theoerocism*, sometimes called *theoeroticism*. It's thinking of God's love in terms of the Greek word eros rather than agape. In other words, she thinks of Christ as a lover — not just a saviour."[113]

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[111] Gert-Jan Schaap, "Bestsellerauteur en spreker Ann Voskamp: 'We leven in een gebroken wereld,'" eo.nl, Accessed July 1 2025, https://www.eo.nl/artikel/bestsellerauteur-en-spreker-ann-voskamp-we-leven-in-een-gebroken-wereld?srsltid=AfmBOorHmHMi0NHjf1VsfbCoDDtOQ7V71nxGuMLOrml-mXUvaiVrw5QE.
Original quote: "Ik denk even aan theologen als Tim Keller en John Piper. Beide mannen – ik zou ook andere kunnen noemen – schrijven diepe en rijke boeken, waar ik veel van heb geleerd. Maar veel over hun persoonlijke leven vind je er niet in. Soms denk ik: zijn wij als vrouwen misschien geroepen om dat wat in die zin nog ontbreekt aan te vullen? Is het onze roeping om als het ware het vlees over de botten van de theologie te trekken? Theologie moet 'belichaamd' zijn om écht dichtbij te komen en harten te raken. De beste manier om dat te doen, is door verhalen te vertellen. Niet voor niets vertelde Jezus veel gelijkenissen. Een goed verhaal blijft hangen. En bij een goed verhaal hoort wat mij betreft kwetsbaarheid. En ja, dat is eng: je weet nooit wie zulke intieme dingen over jouw leven leest, en binnen welke persoonlijke context dat gebeurt."

[112] Bob De Waay, "Romantic Pantheism, a Review of One Thousand Gifts by Ann Voskamp," Lighthouse Trails Research, Accessed June 19, 2011, https://www.lighthousetrailsresearch.com/blog/romantic-panentheism-a-review-of-one-thousand-gifts-by-ann-voskamp/.

[113] "False Teacher of the Day #12: Ann Voskamp," DISNTR, Accessed May 25, 2021, https://disntr.com/2021/05/25/false-teacher-of-the-day-12-ann-voskamp/?

Analysing The Broken Way

The Broken Way (2016) is a work of reflective writings in which brokenness is addressed as a place of personal and collective transformation and holy encounter. Brokenness, as a way to healing, is captured within theory and personal experience. Within The Broken Way giving, vulnerability and mutual dependency are at the core of Christian living.

I would like to argue that Voskamp's writings can, to some extent, be understood as autotheoretical texts. Similar to the work of Julian, Voskamp's writings are personal, vulnerable and embodied. Voskamp's body has a significant role in her text. In The Broken Way, Voskamp mentions that her writings are formed by the trauma and visible scars on her wrist of self-harm: "Kneeling, I'd picked up one of the shards, dragged its sharp edge across my skin, relieved by the red line slowly seeping up, like you could drain yourself out of pain. I'd try to cut my way through the hurt down to the core of things."[114] The scars on her wrist from self-harm are the embodied pain and suffering that Voskamp experiences through her life. The tattoo of a cross, covers the scars on her wrist and visualises Christ's presence within her suffering and vulnerability. Also, Voskamp suffers from iron deficiency anaemia:

> Another doctor's appointment in an hour to stick a needle into the bluing vein and draw out the lifeblood to see if there's enough iron in it. No surprise there, really. That my blood would lack the element required to produce steel. I keep praying like a fool that the cross on my wrist—its iron is seeping into me, its strength forming me. Any kind of love that lacks the iron of the cross in it is anaemic love.[115]

She uses this bodily experience as a physical and embodied example of the theology present in her work. Iron deficiency anaemia is common to female bodies as a result of hormonal

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[114] Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way*: A Daring Path into the Abundant Life (Grand Rappids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 19.

[115] Voskamp, *The Broken Way,* 95.

misbalances and menstruation. Within this perspective, Voskamp female body becomes a theological source. Voskamp's writings are a combination of social and bodily experiences, examples of everyday life from her context and her theological reflections that form into theory. Experiences and theory are intertwined within her writings. Even though Voskamp works with texts, she uses a poetical language in which she captures the richness of her surroundings, like the warmth of touch, the refreshment of rain and the pain visible in people's faces. With this, she experiments with different forms of writing: creative and poetical written scenes and theoretical reflections supported by theological sources. Doing this is consistent with autotheory in which experimenting with form constitutes a defining feature of this genre.

Concerning a political dimension, Voskamp has an explicit and pronounced political opinion regarding migration policies of Canada and the United States in which she defends the welfare and rights of refugees, but her writings are not explicitly political. Regardless of this, she encourages the taking care of others as an opposite voice within her capitalistic, individualistic and western context. On top of this, as mentioned in Voskamp's introduction, Voskamp addresses a deprivation within academic theology concerning embodiment and an experiential focus. She senses the need to bring nuance to this matter specifically from a female perspective.

Because Voskamp's personal life concerns her rural living area, her family, being a mother of seven children, being the wife of a farmer, being the older sister of a little girl killed by a vehicle, her bodily deficiencies and many other aspects strongly evident within her writings, herself as a person has a significant role in her writings. Although her personal life and her persona are of great significance, due to her conviction that she should contribute to a more comprehensive and holistic theology especially as a woman, I don't think Voskamp would consider herself a feminist according to established feminism. Since she has openly spoken about her perspective on different gender-roles, she diverges from the political aims of

feminism. This distances her from certain aspects of autotheory. Nevertheless, I would argue that this specific position is not explicitly present within her writings, on the contrary, she writes from within her female being as if it is a marginalised voice that needs to be heard.

In what follows I will set out my analysis of this reading, divided into three themes, supported by quotations from her writings.

Brokenness, vulnerability and the body

Brokenness, vulnerability and the body have a central role within Voskamp's texts. The physical brokenness of her life and body are the starting point of her writings: "It may have been more than two decades since my cutting throughout my teens, but standing there in the kitchen this older, more battle weary, more broken woman, looking out over wheat fields of our own, I'm overwhelmed by how my skin's starved again for the cutting, for the breaking edge of glass again. How my wrists want to feel that sharp, bleeding relief and haemorrhage out of all this pain."[116] In this passage, she mentions the longing of her body for physical pain to be able to deal with her life. She stopped self-harm but is tempted by the pain she feels as a mother because of her daughter's suffering: "But I know a mother's labour and delivery never ends, and you have to keep remembering to breathe."[117]

Voskamp acknowledges vulnerability as a premise of life: "All of us get pushed from safe wombs out into this holy mess. All of us need someone to catch us and hold us right from the beginning, and for one sacred moment, every single one of us is cupped. And then they cut that one thick umbilical cord. You can spend a lifetime feeling pushed out, cut off, abandoned—

[116] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 2.

[117] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 24.

inexplicably alone."[118] Everyone experiences vulnerability because of the way we are born – it is an existential condition, connected to loss, abandonment and loss of control.

The body is experienced as a locus of vulnerability, but also as a theological locus. The body is a bearer of scars, love, memories, grace etc. It is the place in which *eucharisteo* – the word Voskamp uses for the practice of 'giving thanks' – takes place: "And the Farmer hands me the basket of bread. What do you do if you feel too wounded, too devastated to receive? Sometimes desperation drives you through devastation. I break off my piece of the loaf. This is My body—and the crushed kernels dissolve into me, become me. The wheat seed grew into a wheat stalk that ripened and was broken and came to my brokenness. If you didn't know how bread is made, you might think it looks like complete destruction."[119] By eating the crushed kernels, her body receives the broken body of Christ, present within bread made out of broken kernels.

Analysing Voskamp's writing through the lens of autotheory, her embodied and vulnerable life in which trauma, motherhood and the rural surroundings of her everyday life, are the source of her theory. Her body can be seen as the source through which she receives theory.

Being humble, being loved

Voskamp embodies an interesting position within her writings, in which she presents her vulnerable being and life to reflect about wholeness. In her writings she alternates between a psychical and psychological form of vulnerability that is context-bound, and vulnerability as an insurmountable state, a fundamental dimension of being. This insurmountable state of being

[118] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 1.

[119] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 51.

vulnerable is present in her insecurities self-worth and being loved. When Voskamp's husband comes home from working on the field, she experiences a moment of resistance receiving love and care: "He takes my bare feet in his hands and starts kneading in these slow circles all across my weariness. Slow circles across the bottom of my foot, pressing away the day with his hand, pressing back what hurts with his earth-lined field hands. He looks up at me. Why do I want to pull back, pull away? Why is it so hard to receive? Why is it so hard to believe you are believed in? Why can it be easier to pour out than to let yourself be loved?" She invites the reader in this insecurity by explaining the nature of this insecurity, and framing these questions in a universal way that includes every reader: "How can you believe that there is enough in you of any value? How do you believe there is enough of you to live given – and be wanted?"[120] These questions seem to contain a dual layer of meaning – how you can be enough for the people and the world around you, but also to God: "It feels strange, even wrong to believe He could find any value in my tarnished brokenness." [121] The image she uses to describe herself asking these questions, struggling with self-worth is that of a wide-eyed deer: "Wash my paling face at the bathroom mirror. The woman in the mirror is a wide-eyed deer caught in the headlights, life running her down […].[122] Her vulnerability is mirrored in the body, the face, the shame. But instead of denying or solving this vulnerability, she lets it be. The everyday life examples resonate with a broad audience, drawing them into the emotional and narrative nakedness of these explicit moments. In this Voskamp embodies a

Even though Voskamp struggles with the brokenness and vulnerability, being inevitable, her writings seem to value vulnerability as a place of connection and meaning. Voskamp reveals

[120] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 121-122.

[121] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 121-122.

[122] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 121-122.

her believe that within this space of vulnerability meaning, love and the divine become present: "There is the truth: Blessed—lucky—are those who cry. Blessed are those who are sad, who mourn, who feel the loss of what they love—because they will be held by the One who loves them. There is a strange and aching happiness only the hurting know—for they shall be held."[123] Voskamp advocates this idea of vulnerability as a locus for meaning, love and God inspired by Matthew 5.[124] Instead of romanticising vulnerability, she acknowledges its cruelty. But by embodying vulnerability, she tries to convince herself and her readers that Christ is present within vulnerability, and because of this, vulnerability becomes a strength: "That cross on the wrist, wasn't it as sign of Jesus' believing? Isn't the cross a sign of Christ believing in us, believing that the busted are to be believed in? Which feels unbelievable."[125] Although there is power present within vulnerability, Voskamp also turns around the concept of power. While reading a magazine in the general practitioner's waiting room, she is drawn to the naked reality of the other people waiting with her. The magazine tells a story of a women who believes that fulfilling your bucket list goals, gives you the power of taking matters into one's own hands to live a worthy life. In this moment Voskamp realises that power lies within 'giving' instead of 'taking': "Exhilaration isn't in experiences themselves, but in exalting Christ Himself, in expending everything for Christ. […] What if the deeply satisfying life was found in givenness of sacrifice — to something of significance— through the spirit"[126] Within this founding she understands the meaning of koinonia – communion. I would argue that Voskamp's cohesion

[123] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 17.

[124] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5:3-4, New International Version).

[125] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 121-122.

[126] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 132.

between vulnerability and koinonia, corresponds with Butler's vision on vulnerability and relationality.

Voskamp's own position within her writings is vulnerable, from within the explicit rawness of her broken life. Instead of forcing her theory on her readers, she is exploring, feeling and stumbling her way through her text: "I've changed into this woman who's embraced a love so large it's broken my heart in a thousand aching places."[127] By the courage to speak from her own position and being open about it, she functions as a guide instead of a teacher. Her self-confident position is fed by the believe of Christ's believe in her: "We in our brokenness believe in God – and God believes in us through our brokenness."[128]

Analysing her text through the lens of autotheory, exposes how she refuses to write from a powerful position, but instead invites the reader into her honest writings. It gives the reader the possibility to recognise its own life within that of Voskamp. Also, within her writings Voskamp uses the space of vulnerability as a place to give and connect.

Christ, the Farmer and the Sleeping Toddler

Throughout her writings, Voskamp introduces some of the people that are present in her life. Some of them are close to her, others are strangers. When writing about these characters she gives these characters nicknames with capitals. Her husband is consistently referred to as 'the Farmer': "When the Farmer comes in after eleven o'clock from the field, he carries it in on his grimy shirt, a few pounds of dirt. I wonder if he feels the whole gritty world on his shoulders. He finds me in the rocking chair at the window in lamplight."[129] In the same waiting room at

[127] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 2.

[128] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 123.

[129] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 117.

the general practitioner, she uses nicknames for the other patients waiting: Sleeping Toddler, Upside-Down-Kid and Lady-Waiting-for-Ink. Voskamp writes:

> "This is a profound mystery: God became emptied of God. When God pulled on skin, when He rounded small in a womb and a billion cells broke and grew into God-the-flesh, He emptied Himself. His emptying, His kenosis, was a glorious self-renunciation. Jesus, wooed by the interests of others, "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and [was] made in the likeness of men." He emptied of His will and offered Himself to His Father's will alone because this alone is abundance. Jesus' self-emptying hid His divinity but became the window through which we saw divine majesty. At the end of the waiting room, a mother cradles her swaddled one to herself and I can hear swallowing, suckling, the givenness of a woman so a child lives."[130]

I would suggest that this passage shows that Voskamp plays with various images of God by using capitals for the nicknames. At first Voskamp outlines her theological understanding of kenosis, in which she emphasises God's vulnerability because of his self-renunciation. After this, she brings this theory alive by writing down this observation of a mother who feeds her baby in the waiting room. The image would fit in this theory as if God did surrender himself in the arms of humanity, like this baby is swaddled and fed by his mother. Another passage in this waiting room shows a different scene of a baby falling asleep at his mother's lap:

> "The restless toddler's given way to sleep, splayed and perfect in his mother's arms. The flame in the fireplace curls against the glass, the rain plunking on the roof like a visitation. […] Sleeping Toddler's cheeks are flushed, his mouth open and breathing a holy warmth, draped across his mama's strong gardening arms."[131]

Voskamp's descriptive writing contains most of her implicit theological theory. The toddler has given in to sleep, even though his surroundings, flames and rain, might evoke a sense of threat or unease. Nevertheless, the baby feels the safety to surrender itself to the strong

[130] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 153.

[131] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 130.

arms of his mother: breathing holy warmth while doing that. Without explicitly saying it, Voskamp's writings suggest the image of a loving, trustable and caring God, being like a mother to humanity.

To stretch this idea even further, where Julian implicates a mutual love and desire, Voskamp seems to implicate mutual love and care. The word she uses to symbolise this desire to care is 'cupping'. In the following passage, it is Christ who loves and cares for her by cupping her face: "When we're rejected and abandoned and feel beyond wanting, Jesus cups our face: "Come close, my Beloved." When we're dirty and tear-stained and despairing, Jesus Christ is attracted to us and proposes undying love: "All that you're carrying I take . . . and all that I am is yours."[132]

By establishing this practical symbol of care, she opens up a space for mutual care within many different relationships, that symbolise the mutual relationship of love and care between humanity and the divine – each relationship in their own way. Voskamp implicitly envisions God as mother, but also God as daughter, who takes care of her mother:

> "Usually, I'm the one cupping her face in my hands, but now she's got me here, kneeling in front of her, so she takes my face into her hands. And she bends so close I can feel her breath warm. "We need to tape hearts right to us, Mama. So, we always know." She strokes my cheek. "So, we always know His love's around us everywhere." His love's around us everywhere. […] Her palms warm on my cheeks, I feel it in one long moment—how we can be held again. I want her to never stop holding me.[133]

Voskamp describes the desire to be held forever by her daughter, the daughter who loves and cares for her when Voskamp is feeling broken. The image of God as father has been changed into a whole new level of relationships with new levels of power – Voskamp being the adult

[132] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 153.

[133] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 38.

mother, is held in the little and caring hands of her daughter, a child. The cupping of faces symbolises this desire to care, which is invited by vulnerability. Her own or another person's vulnerability, Christ's vulnerability is the way to love and care. Vulnerability evokes this desire. The following passages, shows that this vulnerability can be of any kind according to Voskamp, and allows unequal power hierarchies to blur through the collective condition of inescapable vulnerability:

> "And there's this kid in a too small, faded yellow T-shirt, dangling upside down from his chair at the end of the row of waiting chairs, hair cascading and his rounding belly button looks for all the world like the one begging you to push it for the answer to joy—and for this one strange, beautiful moment, I'm looking around a room of glorious strangers with hearing aids and walking sticks and plastic costume jewellery and bonnets and belly buttons, and all our lives are woven together, breathing and broken and bound to this wide world and each other. […] I want to cup all their glorious faces."[134]

The way Voskamp engages with 'cupping faces' as a symbol of taking care of other's vulnerability is consistent with the theory of the 'face' of Levinas Butler engages with, and adapts: "I would like to consider the "face," the notion introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse."[135] She partly agrees with Levinas' theory of the face and adapts it. According to Levinas, there is no self without the other, and it is the face that reminds us not to kill because of our own living. Butler adds that within the face of the other, it is not our own precariousness we need to value, but the others precariousness.

[134] Voskamp, *The Broken Way* 128.

[135] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

Voskamp's writing change this theory in a strong image of cupping faces and feeling drawn to taking care of the vulnerability of the other.

Conclusions

Within Voskamp's writings, vulnerability is not to overcome, or to be solved, but fundamental to life. Voskamp's writings show that her contribution to a vulnerable theology, can only be done through the lens of autotheory, instead of through a systematic lens. Her writings are an embodied and living account of vulnerability and show the rich opportunity of what Coakley intends to do by advocating a *théologie totale.* The poetical form of writing, showing her experienced vulnerability, invite readers to engage with these experiences and this enables them to recognise their own vulnerability.

Voskamp does not romanticise brokenness and vulnerability. She leaves it be, struggles with it, but does not want to solve it, she endures. She envisions vulnerability as a space in which relationships can exist with God, with the other. With this, she turns vulnerability into a responsible power – the power to give instead of taking. Voskamp does not only speak from vulnerability, that is from a place of suffering, but also from a place of exploring and searching. Instead of lecturing her readers, she invites them within the images of her life and gives them a narrative to feel recognition and theological insight.

Her way of writing, implicitly addresses various forms of relationship between God and humanity. By writing the nicknames of people in her life with capitals, she gives the expression of a divine aspect within their human being, she associates them with the being of God. At the same time, she gives examples of how their vulnerability invites her to 'cup their faces' as a symbol for the desire to take care of them, to take care of God, to be taken care of by others and to be taken care of by God. Voskamp addresses the concept of vulnerability within a similar way as Butler and makes it alive by the familiar examples of life in which the relational element

of vulnerability gets a face. In this Voskamp's writings also remind of the theory of the face in Levinas.

The rich poetic imagery in Voskamp's writings, make her theology of vulnerability inextricably linked to her experienced and vulnerable examples. In this way Voskamp's writings contribute to Coakley's suggestion that theology is not the product of rationality but intertwined within the reality of life. By turning to Voskamp's writings through the lens of autotheory, this is actually shown: how a contemporary, creative, non-academic author, can contribute to a complete vulnerable theology.

Conclusion

This thesis shows how a Medieval and a contemporary literary source are able to contribute to a renewed theological approach towards vulnerability. As shown in the first chapter, vulnerability is a complex and layered concept, valued differently from Christian theological and feminist perspectives. Sarah Coakley offers an attempt to bring these different perspectives and validation of vulnerability together within *théologie totale,* a systematic theological approach towards vulnerability, shaped within an un-systematic systematic methodology and a renewed perspective on ascesis and kenosis, that has functioned as a suitable case-study of a contemporary, systematic approach toward vulnerability, that considers feminist critique.

In addition to the critique offered by Hampson and Thomas – who advocate that Coakley confirms patriarchal frameworks by operating within hierarchical power dynamics and by creating space for the interpretation of God as one who desires human suffering and pain – I suggest that Coakley also ignores the potential of non-academic voices and does not open up about her own position. Thereby I conclude that Coakleys approach does not bridge the gap between the different perspectives. In this thesis I suggest that turning to the experienced and vulnerable sources of Julian of Norwich and Ann Voskamp – beyond a systematic methodology- can sharpen this attempt and in doing so contribute to a theology from vulnerability: vulnerable theology.

With Butler's useful understanding of vulnerability from a feminist perspective as a theoretical framework and autotheory as a heuristic lens, non-academic literary sources can be consulted to actually change the patriarchal systematic approach from within, being able to access literary sources that contain marginalised voices, and experienced and embodied accounts of vulnerability. This as an alternative to the patriarchal systematic approach Coakley

claims to renew, but still functions as a systematic methodology to draw out the theology of the experienced and embodied sources she consults.

Through the lens of autotheory, Julians writings offer an alternative epistemology. Her female, suffering and vulnerable body can be seen as a source of revelation and with that a locus of theology. Her vulnerable and embodied writings undermine patriarchal frameworks and her honest and humble position invites the reader to engage in her experienced and embodied theology. Julians imagery turns over established hierarchical power dynamics, by expressing her feelings of desire and love, within different forms of relationship to God. Butler's academic understanding of vulnerability is applied within the way Julian experiences her vulnerability in her relation with Christ, both sharing a suffering body.

Ann Voskamp's writings, show, through the lens of autotheory, how contemporary experience-based literature can be a valuable addition to a theological approach towards vulnerability. This becomes visible in her poetic way of writing in which she invites her reader to recognise oneself within her experiences of suffering and vulnerability. Similar to Julians writings, Voskamp's body functions as a source of revelation and a locus of theology. Voskamp portrays how vulnerability and relationality are intertwined by the desire to care of others, and to be taken care of by others. Her poetic writing opens an understanding of the other within God and God within the other (also in line with the theory of Levinas). A specific nuance Voskamp gives in vulnerability and relationality is her expression of the vulnerable position of being the one that is cared for, instead of the one that takes care.

Considering the above, when we turn to Coakleys attempt to a theological approach towards vulnerability, we can state that she could have enriched her theology, by recognising the depth of the experienced sources from vulnerability, written by authors like Julian and Voskamp. Acknowledging this depth, is crucial to explain and understand a theological approach towards vulnerability, because it recognises the reality of vulnerability as something

that is experienced and embodied, more than rationally understood. As Butler states: vulnerability is inevitable to life. By giving a voice to sources that experience and embody this, like Julian and Voskamp, patriarchal power dynamics that ignore this reality, are undermined. Which contributes to a theology understood, experienced and embodied *from* vulnerability. Without recognising and emphasising the value of experience, visible within literary sources addressed through a suitable heuristic lens, like autotheory, vulnerability can be reduced to an empty concept within academic discourse and be understood in a limited way.

Julian and Voskamp invite their reader to the reality of life, without a statical systematic 'solution.' They offer imagery that is able to portray each unique context and experience of different individuals and thereby create a universal experience of vulnerability.

With this thesis, I hope to encourage other researcher to be receptive for sources that portray terms like vulnerability, in an embodied and experienced way, to honor these vivid terms and not ignore their reality. This thesis exposes how this could also be applied to better understand other vivid terms like love, fear, hope, and belief.

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