



Coakley, Sarah

God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'

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God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity', is the long-awaited, and currently much-discussed, first volume of an envisioned multi-volume systematic theology – tentatively titled *On Desiring God* – by one of the most interesting and imaginative voices in present-day systematic theology and patristic scholarship, Sarah Coakley (the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge).

In this highly creative and, at times, provocative work, Coakley sets out to develop a robust 'trinitarian ontology of desire', in which divine desire, as a hallmark of the inner-trinitarian life of God, is seen as the 'progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation' (6). Coakley holds that in order to understand and address the anxieties about sexuality, gender and selfhood (which are all related to the matter of *desire*) in our world today, we should look anew to, and render ourselves open to the transformative (and purgative) workings of, the Christian God who is *revealed*, and *met*, as the *triune* One.

As this is the opening volume of her larger systematics, Coakley devotes quite a sizeable portion of her book (the Prelude as well as Chapter 1 & 2) to the theological *method* she will be using throughout the project, which she calls *théologie totale* (a term she coins with loose reference to the French Annales School's *l'histoire totale*). *Théologie totale*, she writes, is a holistic manner of doing theology – in (critical) conversation with (post) modern feminist theory and insights from the social sciences – which involves an 'attentive openness of the whole self (intellect, will, memory, imagination, feeling, bodylines)' to God, other human beings and the rest of creation (88). According to her, *théologie totale* can best be understood as

an *ascetical, contemplative*, and above-all *prayerful* practice of ‘unmastery’, in which the theologian seeks to know and speak *of* God (and all created reality in relation to the divine), by *surrendering* control (and all human desires) *to* God, through the work of the Spirit.

After the lengthy opening section in which she outlines her theological *method*, Coakley turns in Chapter 3 to questions regarding the doctrine of God as Trinity in the patristic era, and how the issues of (sexual) desire and gender was from the outset entangled in the ‘nexus of doctrinal decision’ (100). Coakley is specifically interested in what she calls the oft-neglected ‘incorporative’ or ‘reflexive’ model of the Trinity (which is rooted in Pauline theology and a passage such as Romans 8), where the person of the Holy Spirit is construed as ‘catching up the created realm into the life of God’ – especially in and through the Christian act of *prayer* (111). Coakley shows how this model – in which ‘priority’ (‘logically and experientially speaking’) (113) is given to the Spirit (who draws the *pray-er* into the life of the divine) and human and divine *desire* – strongly features in the work of a thinker such as Origen, but how it came to be seen as quite contentious and heterodox in the (early) church, due to the strong *erotic* language associated with it, and its supposed potential to lead to schism and subversion.

In the next chapter, Coakley interestingly (and somewhat unexpectedly) moves from her discussion of different conceptions of the Trinity and the working of the Spirit during the first few centuries after Christ, to our modern-day context, as she describes ‘fieldwork’ she did at two overtly charismatic churches in a northern university town in England (as part of a doctrinal committee on which she served for the Anglican Church). Coakley gives a detailed account of the questions she asked congregants about the Spirit (especially relating to the Spirit’s role in the act of prayer), and the varied answers she received – answers that revealed both ‘deep spiritual riches and some theological embarrassments’ (184). Towards the end of this fascinating chapter, Coakley creatively relates her findings at these two churches to early patristic debates regarding the Trinity, the role of the person of the Spirit, and Spirit-led prayer (as described in the previous chapter), and shows how these early Christian debates are still highly relevant for discussion in (and about) the church today.

In Chapter 5, Coakley again makes a somewhat unexpected move, by turning her attention to the *realm of the imagination*, as she looks at different iconographical depictions of the Trinity (and the person of the Spirit) throughout the ages. For me, this is undoubtedly one of the most insightful chapters in the whole book; indeed, a master class in the fascinating relationship between art and Christian doctrine. In describing and analysing different visual works (which are all printed in the book), Coakley attempts to ‘provide a discerning hermeneutics of suspicion about historic depictions of the Trinity’, in order, once more, to emphasize the ‘messy entanglement’ of political, sexual, and doctrinal agendas in trinitarian thinking and expression (192). Coakley contends, in the end, that ‘the most successful visual representation of the Trinity’ are those with an apathetic dimension, which ‘direct the will (and one’s desires) beyond the known to the unknown’ – amongst other by accentuating the ‘significant, destabilizing’ role of the Spirit (260).

In the last two chapters, Coakley returns to where she left off in Chapter 3, by again examining different early understandings of God as Trinity, the person of the Spirit (also then in light of the *filioque*-controversy), Spirit-led prayer and questions about sexuality, gender and selfhood that these topics bring the fore. This time, her main interlocutors are Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and, in particular, Dionysius the Areopagite. Coakley concludes by ultimately siding with this ‘incorporative’ or ‘reflexive’ model of the Trinity (with its emphasis on the role of the Spirit – especially then in *prayer*), originally discussed in Chapter 3, and strongly acknowledges the ineluctable (analogous) relationship between human and divine desire – arguing that instead of language of God being about sex (as Freud contended), sex (and all human desire) should be seen as being ‘really about God’ (316).

Everything considered, I am of opinion that this is a wonderfully bold and creative first volume of systematics by Sarah Coakley, which succeeds in bringing complex questions of sex, gender and desire (that are so pertinent in our day and age – inside and outside of the church) into conversation with patristic thought and Christian doctrine. At times, I must acknowledge, it felt as if Coakley was trying to do *too much*, and some readers might experience the book, with its different layers and dimensions, as a bit fragmented. Fully aware of this – even admitting that the fragmentary