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Shrinking pigeon, brooding dove: the Holy Spirit in recent works by Sarah Coakley and N. T. Wright

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Abstract

This article contrasts recent works by Sarah Coakley and N. T. Wright as they pertain to Paul's treatment of the Holy Spirit. In particular, Coakley reveals the inadequacy of Wright's claim that the early fathers were impeded in developing a high view of the Spirit because of an allegiance to 'Greek philosophy'. Likewise, Wright's more comprehensive treatment of Paul helps to reveal potential problems with Coakley's apophatic tendency to describe the human encounter with God as 'a love affair with a blank'. In the end, however, both thinkers are united in acknowledging the leading activity of the Spirit, both in prayer and in enabling the Christian to declare that 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor 12:3). In these ways, both authors converge in an attempt to restore the Holy Spirit to a rightful place in Christian theology and devotion.

Keywords: apophaticism, Sarah Coakley, Holy Spirit, Paul, pneumatology, N. T. Wright

> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.[1]

On the landscape of English biblical and theological studies, two of the most notable works of 2013 came from a pair of Anglican scholars. First, from Sarah Coakley, there emerged the initial offering of a proposed four-volume systematic theology, which attempts to address such wide-ranging topics as *God, Sexuality, and the Self* from the standpoint of the Trinity.[2] Next, from N. T. Wright, there came the sprawling fourth instalment in his series on Christian origins: *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.[3] This work aims to show how Paul actually 'invents' something we may call 'Christian theology' by coming to view the

[1] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'.
[2] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* [hereafter *GSS*] (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).
[3] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [hereafter *PFG*] (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

traditional Jewish themes of monotheism, election and eschatology through the lenses of the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit.[4]

Despite the massive differences between these works, a common theme between them involves a desire to rediscover the importance of the Spirit as seen in certain strands of Paul's theology.[5] For Coakley, Romans 8 especially reveals a contemplative and charismatic alternative to what she refers to as more traditional and 'linear' depictions of the Trinity.[6] In such 'linear' models, she claims, much of church tradition (as seen in Christian iconography) has reduced the Spirit to an ever-shrinking 'pigeon', barely visible and functionally redundant amid the masculine dyad of the Father and the Son.[7] The alternative to this error is what Coakley refers to as an 'incorporative' and prayer-based understanding of the Trinity. Here, as witnessed by the Apostle Paul, the Spirit is granted a certain logical and experiential 'priority' as the one who enables the believer to say that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor 12:3), and who catches up the praying Christian (with 'wordless groans') into the divine life (Romans 8).[8]

Given that Coakley's constructive argument rests heavily upon a certain reading of Paul in Romans 8, the aim of this article is to place her systematic theology in a kind of cross-disciplinary 'conversation' with the recent work of Wright. The claim to be made here is that such a conversation can serve to inform both works by smoothing out imbalances, illumining some blind spots and helping to pave the treacherous path between the first and twenty-first centuries. Thus, with a nod to Hopkins' poem, we will join both writers in acknowledging ways in which the Spirit may be brooding anew over the 'bent world' of Pauline studies (as Wright suggests), and the 'black West' of dogmatic theology (as claimed by Coakley). We begin with a more extensive overview of Coakley's argument.

The shrinking pigeon: Coakley on the Holy Spirit and its place in Romans 8

As Coakley admits, the combined subjects of sexual desire, desire for God and the doctrine of the Trinity are hardly conventional starting points for a multi-volume systematic theology. Then again, her project does not aim to be conventional. The method is a *théologie totale:* 'A new form of systematic

[4] Ibid., p. xvi.

[5] While the truth of this claim will become obvious with regard to Coakley, its veracity with regard to Wright may be seen, for instance, in his claim that, 'The Holy Spirit is, in fact, the usually forgotten element in justification.' *PFG*, p. 914.

[6] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 128.

[7] Ibid., p. 212. Subsequent biblical citations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

[8] Ibid., p. 111.

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theology that attempts to incorporate insights from every level of society and to integrate intellectual, affective and imaginative approaches to doctrine and practice.'[9] In this volume, such goals are met by giving voice to contemporary questions of gender and sexuality, by conducting 'fieldwork' within local charismatic congregations and by calling upon the media of art and iconography to inspire the doctrinal discussion.

What, though, is the overarching thesis? As Coakley claims, her goal is to turn Freud on his head: 'Instead of "God" language "really" being about sex, sex [or sexual desire] is really about God – the potent reminder woven into our earthly existence of the divine "unity", "alliance", and "commingling" that we seek.'[10] As Coakley argues, 'Desire ... is the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of the human longing for God.'[11] With this central claim now noted, we are thus prepared to grasp what Coakley sees as a crucial twofold function of the Holy Spirit within the lives of human beings.

As she argues, it is '*in and through the Spirit*' that God the Father 'both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them ... into the likeness of his Son'.[12] Coakley's claim is that it is the encounter with the Spirit that both *ignites* the human longing for God, and *burns away* the impurities of those destructive human longings. Thus, and again in reference to Paul, Coakley claims that: 'it is the same Spirit that inflames the heart with love (Rom 5.5), and also imparts the (much neglected) "gift" of "self-control" (Gal 5.23)'. In this way, the Spirit both draws humans together in unity, and interposes boundaries between them.[13]

But what about the Spirit's role within the Trinity? In a related fashion, Coakley claims that the Spirit 'is what makes God irreducibly *three*, simultaneously distinguishing and binding Father and Son'.[14] As she states, the Spirit's 'love presses not only outwards to include others, but also inwards (and protectively) to sustain the difference between the persons'.[15] Such realities ultimately defy exhaustive explanation, for as Coakley claims, to

[9] Ibid., p. 352. For more on Coakley's unique method, see the book review by Katherine Sonderegger, '*God, Sexuality and the Self*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18/1 (Jan. 2016), pp. 94–8.
[10] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 316.
[11] Ibid., p. 26.
[12] Ibid., p. 6 (emphasis added).
[13] Ibid., p. 15.
[14] Ibid., p. 24.
[15] Ibid.

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speak of the Trinity at all 'involves a necessary form of noetic slippage'.[16] Thus the need for some 'appropriately apophatic sensibilities',[17] and for a posture of contemplative or charismatic prayer.[18] Such prayer should therefore be seen as 'the chief context in which the *irreducible* threeness of God becomes humanly apparent to the Christian'.[19] And such prayer is precisely what Coakley finds in Romans 8.

As Paul states, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for although we do not know what to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us 'through wordless groans' (Rom 8:26). Likewise, when we cry 'Abba Father', it is the Spirit bearing witness 'with our spirit that we are God's children' (Rom 8:15–16). As Coakley reflects:

> the priority here, logically and experientially speaking, is given to the *Spirit*: the 'Spirit' is that which, while being nothing less than 'God', cannot quite be reduced to a metaphorical naming of the Father's outreach. It is not that the pray-er is having a conversation with some distant and undifferentiated deity ... but rather, that there is something admittedly obscure, about the sustained activity of prayer that makes one want to claim that it is personally and divinely activated from within, and yet that activation (the 'Spirit') is not quite *reducible* to that from which it flows (the 'Father').[20]

In moving from Paul to *personal experience*, Coakley states that

> it is the perception of many Christians who pray either contemplatively or charismatically (in both cases there is a willed suspension of one's own agenda, a deliberate waiting on the divine) that the dialogue ... is a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays (see again Romans 8.26–7). Here, if I am

[16] Ibid., p. 23.
[17] Ibid., p. 45.
[18] In the glossary included at the end of *GSS*, Coakley defines *contemplation* as 'prayer or communing with God that does not use ordinary propositional language, but rests in silence or near silence' (p. 346). While her meaning of 'charismatic prayer' is not defined, it would seem to involve praying 'in the Spirit' through the use of tongues, as well as a general openness to the Spirit's guidance as it blows where it will, sometimes in surprising ways. Coakley advocates for all of this while attempting to avoid the sectarian and emotive 'embarrassments' that she also finds within charismatic traditions. See *GSS*, ch. 4.
[19] Ibid., p. 55.
[20] Ibid., p. 112.

> right, is the only valid *experientially based* pressure towards hypostatizing the Spirit.[21]

For Coakley, the reason that we may say 'three' with regard to the divine persons has to do with the mystical experience of the Holy Spirit as sometimes happens within deep prayer.[22] Once again, Romans 8 inspires her to reach this understanding. As she summarises, Paul's language implies: (1) 'a certain loss of control to the leading experiential force of the Spirit'; (2) 'an entry into a realm beyond words'; and (3) 'the striking use of a (female) "birth-pangs" metaphor to describe the yearning of creation for its "glorious liberty"'.[23]

Yet if all this is really present within Romans 8, then what happened to this prayer-based model of the Trinity? Coakley's claim is that the early rise of Montanism – with its ecstatic focus on the Holy Spirit, its sectarian tendencies, and its elevation of even 'wretched women' to positions of power[24] – contributed to an ecclesial nervousness regarding future accounts of the Trinity that were not 'firmly reined back into the rationality of the Logos'.[25] Thus it was, with just a few exceptions, that this 'incorporative' model of the Trinity was overshadowed by more 'linear' and hierarchal accounts within the subsequent centuries.[26] As illustrated by her survey of trinitarian iconography,[27] the brooding dove would be replaced by what appeared more like an ever-shrinking 'pigeon' – 'small, shadowy, and hard to see'.[28]

Given that so much of this argument rests on a reading of Paul in Romans 8, it is perhaps surprising that relatively little space in Coakley's monograph (only about four pages) is devoted to an interpretation of this text, let alone its author. The question then is whether such an impressive theological

[21] Ibid., pp. 112–13. While there may be other 'exegetical' or 'logical' pressures towards 'hypostatizing' the Spirit, Coakley here limits herself to 'experientially based' arguments.

[22] This claim builds on Coakley's contribution, 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 29–56.

[23] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 126.

[24] So says Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 8.12; cited in Coakley, *GSS*, p. 121.

[25] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 117.

[26] Coakley locates the occasional exceptions to this trend in certain statements from Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and, chiefly, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. On this point, see also Sarah Coakley, 'Prayer, Politics and the Trinity: Vying Models of Authority in the Third-Fourth-Century Debates on Prayer and "Orthodoxy"', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66/4 (2013), pp. 379–99.

[27] See Coakley, *GSS*, ch. 5.

[28] Ibid., p. 212. Coakley credits her former colleague, Meg Twycross, with this evocative description of the 'diminished' Spirit within much of Christian iconography.

construction has been placed upon an exegetical foundation that may be unable to support its weight. With this possibility in mind, we now turn to ask what may be gained by placing Coakley's relatively scanty Pauline argument in conversation with a book that has no shortage of exegetical engagement. In fact, if Coakley says too little in the way of Pauline interpretation, then Wright's 1,500 page behemoth, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, runs the risk of saying so much that the reader is left buried in an avalanche of information. We move now to place these works in conversation.

The brooding dove: Wright and the Pauline treatment of the Holy Spirit

A delightful feature of Wright's massive study involves the way in which the various stages of the work revolve around a common metaphor: the *birds*. Here Paul's Greek philosophical context is titled 'Athene and her owl', his interaction with paganism 'a cock for Asclepius', and his engagement with Rome 'the eagle has landed'. For Paul's Jewish context, however, the metaphor is grounded in a promise: 'Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem ... he will "pass over" it and will rescue it' (Isa 31:5).[29] As Wright claims, Paul's understanding of such promises involved a comprehensive reimagining of Jewish belief around the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. Thus, with regard to the Spirit specifically, Wright proceeds to cite Hopkins' poem 'God's Grandeur' in order to claim that 'This is the bird [the Spirit], perched and ready, in which all the others are concentred and gathered.'[30]

Yet how does Wright's treatment of Paul and the Spirit compare to that of Coakley? Perhaps the most notable difference is that while Coakley claims that it is 'the central project of this systematic theology ... to give new coinage to ... Christian Platonism',[31] Wright displays chagrin over the way in which certain constructs from Hellenistic philosophy would allegedly come to overshadow and replace the Jewish background to Paul's reimagined monotheism. Thus he claims that while 'later trinitarian theologians were giving the best answers they could' to questions of 'persons', or 'substance', or 'nature', 'they seem to have left behind or bracketed out the more helpful categories of second-temple Judaism and done their best to express the same ideas in the language of Greek philosophy'.[32]

[29] This 'flock' of metaphors can be glimpsed by a mere perusal of Wright's table of contents.

[30] Wright, *PFG*, p. 1265. This same page cites Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'.

[31] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 9.

[32] Wright, *PFG*, p. 721.

> [T]he earliest [Jewish] Christians ... leapt without difficulty straight to identification of both Jesus and the spirit[33] within the divine identity, which the early Fathers then struggled to recapture in the very different categories of hellenistic philosophy ... The Jewish context provided the framework for a thoroughly 'high' christology and pneumatology, and it was the attempt to restate that within the language of hellenistic philosophy, and without the help of the key Jewish categories, that gave the impression of a difficult doctrine gradually attained.[34]

What should we make of this? For the sake of clarification, Wright's point is different, if only slightly, from the older (post-Harnackian) thesis that there exist two opposing and compartmentalized worldviews that one may label as 'Hebraic' and 'Hellenistic'. In this way of thinking, now widely disputed,[35] words like 'Platonic' quickly become shorthand for 'bad' and words like 'Jewish' shorthand for 'good'. While Wright sometimes come close to this way of speaking (too close, as I will argue momentarily), his lament is not so much about the use of Greek philosophical categories, but rather the corresponding *loss* of certain insights from Judaism. Yet what was lost that must be rediscovered?

First, Wright makes much of the Spirit as 'the New Shekinah', the personal indwelling of God's glory (or presence), within his rebuilt temple, the church.[36] As he puts it, '*the indwelling of the Spirit constituted the long-awaited return of YHWH to Zion*'.[37] Thus:

> the conclusion – which ought ... to be as weighty for systematic theologians as it certainly is within the exegesis of Paul [is] that the spirit has taken the role of the returning Shekinah ... one cannot conceive of a higher pneumatology than this.[38]

[33] Here, as elsewhere in this volume, Wright does not capitalise his references to the Holy Spirit.

[34] Ibid., p. 710.

[35] See Dale Martin, 'Paul and the Judaism/Hellenism Dichotomy: Toward a Social History of the Question', in Troels Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001). For a patristic-based critique of the so-called 'Hellenisation thesis', see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), esp. pp. 388–92.

[36] Wright, *PFG*, p. 711. Wright even goes so far as to say that 'Paul's aims and intentions could be summed up as the vocation to build and maintain *the new Temple*.' Ibid., p. 1492.

[37] Ibid., p. 712.

[38] Ibid., pp. 716–17.

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In Romans 8, as elsewhere, Wright notes that *both* the Messiah *and* the spirit can be seen as indwelling the Christian. Hence, 'Paul can shuttle to and fro between them, not making them straightforwardly identical or interchangeable but nevertheless aligning them closely.'[39] Through such patterns of speech, Wright arrives at the conclusion that Paul 'regarded the spirit, as he regarded the Messiah, as the personal presence of YHWH himself'.[40] Such 'temple-language' is therefore '(incipiently) trinitarian language'.[41]

For Wright, a second pneumatological notion that must be recovered within Paul's 'revised monotheism' involves the Spirit and 'the New Exodus'[42] moving towards God's 'New Creation'.[43] Here again Romans 8 bulks large. For Wright, however, the emphasis lies not so much upon the individual praying Christian (as in Coakley), but upon the New Exodus *community*, which is being led out of slavery (to sin), through the post-baptismal wilderness (the Christian life), and towards the promised inheritance (God's New Creation). As evidence of this theme, Wright points again to Romans 8. As Paul states:

> All who are led by the Spirit of God, you see, are God's children. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery, did you, to go back again into a state of fear? But you received the spirit of sonship, in whom we call out 'Abba Father' (Rom 8.14–15).[44]

For Wright, such passages reveal that 'The Spirit is the personal powerful manifestation of the the One God of Jewish monotheism',[45] for '*What the one God of Israel had done in the Exodus narrative, and had promised himself at the eschaton, Paul sees being accomplished by the spirit.*'[46] In the end, such realities lead Wright 'with cautious hindsight' to describe Paul's thinking as 'a nascent trinitarian monotheism'.

> It has none of the hallmarks of the later trinitarian controversies: no mention of 'persons', 'substance', 'natures', of any such analytic or philosophical trappings. But here, at the heart of first-generation Christianity, we have a theology which compelled the later theologians

[39] Ibid., p. 716.
[40] Ibid., p. 727.
[41] Ibid., p. 1517.
[42] Ibid., p. 717.
[43] For instance, ibid., pp. 1127, 1493.
[44] This translation is that of Wright himself.
[45] Ibid., p. 719.
[46] Ibid., p. 721.

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> to engage in that kind of discussion: a portrayal of Israel's god in action, fulfilling his ancient promises . . . and doing so not only through, but *as* 'son' and 'spirit'.[47]

In summation, we may say that Wright would agree with Coakley that the Apostle Paul, in Romans 8 especially, helps to lay the groundwork for a trinitarian monotheism in which the Spirit plays a crucial role. One difference, however, can be seen in the way Wright leans heavily upon Jewish constructs while sometimes eschewing the Hellenistic (or more precisely, 'Platonic') insights of the later fathers. For Coakley, such insights are profoundly helpful in developing Paul's thought further into a trinitarian ontology of desire. The next stage of this conversation will be to step back from both works, and to ask how their respective insights may shed light on one another.

Once more, the Areopagus: how Coakley and Wright may mutually inform each other

The aim within the space remaining is to ask a different version of Tertullian's old and somewhat tired question regarding Athens and Jerusalem. With regard to Coakley and Wright, 'What does a Platonically inspired systematic theology have to do with a heavily Jewish account of the Apostle Paul?' How might these two works be said to inform each other? We begin with some apparent imbalances that may need to be corrected.

As we have seen already, Wright makes some rather sweeping statements, claiming that the early fathers would have done better in developing their views of Christ and the Spirit had they chosen to stick with Jewish 'categories', rather than turning their attention to the constructs of 'Greek philosophy'.[48] Thus while early Jewish Christians supposedly 'leapt without difficulty' to a high christology and pneumatology, 'the early Fathers *struggled* to recapture' such advances, resulting in the false 'impression of a difficult doctrine gradually attained'.[49] Without denying the unfortunate loss of certain Jewish insights within the life of the early church,[50] such statements reveal that Wright's patristic understanding is *not* on par with his expertise in Paul and second-temple Judaism.

[47] Ibid.

[48] See again Wright, *PFG*, p. 721.

[49] Ibid., p. 710 (emphasis added).

[50] For a recent and fascinating confirmation of this reality, see R. Kendall Soulen's retrieval of the Tetragrammaton for use within trinitarian theology. *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

First, if the Jewish concepts of 'New Shekinah' and 'New Exodus' were themselves sufficient to develop a 'nascent trinitarian monotheism', then one may wonder why the Old Testament Israelites were not *already* at least 'binitarian' prior to the birth of Christ. Surely they believed that God's *Shekinah* had filled the Sanctuary, even while the highest heavens could not contain him. And surely they knew that YHWH's *rŭach* had been involved in leading the people through the wilderness and toward the promised inheritance. Yet despite this, we do not possess a series of Jewish works that are the 'un-hellenised' equivalents of Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit*. This obvious reality ought to give pause to Wright's claim that the loss of such Jewish insights led to the perception of a difficult doctrine gradually attained.

Second, in further contradiction to Wright's claim, we should note that many of the early fathers did *not* struggle to affirm a high view of the Spirit, either because of their use of Greek philosophy, or for any other reason. As Coakley notes, the first two centuries were not, as some have claimed, 'dormant years' for pneumatology.[51] While the Montanist controversy likely contributed to a certain pneumatic nervousness within the subsequent tradition,[52] patristic specialist Khaled Anatolios notes that, even before the third and fourth centuries, 'Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen ... had significant things to say about the Holy Spirit'. Indeed, if pneumatology was neglected in the years that followed, it was because 'the question of the status of Christ's divinity' had been pushed to the fore of the debate.[53]

If anything, it was the early heretics and not the early fathers who were prevented from developing an orthodox treatment of the Spirit because of their indebtedness to philosophical constructs. In contrast with the *Pneumatomachi* ('spirit-fighters'), who taught that the Spirit was a created being, both Athanasius and the Cappadocians used a combination of scripture and philosophical reasoning to show that the Spirit belongs firmly on the divine side of the Creator/creature distinction. In this case, the use of certain logical and philosophical arguments was important because these *tropici* (an Athanasian term for the group) were fond of using biblical 'tropes' deprived of context, in order to claim that the Spirit was a creature.[54]

In all of this, Wright unfortunately illustrates the reductionist danger of implying that, if persons from other disciplines (say, systematic theology)

[51] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 116. She makes this claim in contrast to that of her mentor, Maurice Wiles.

[52] This view is also affirmed by Anthony Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit: In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 180.

[53] Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 133.

[54] For a recent summary of the period, see Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 218–19.

were only better versed in 'my field' (in this case, Paul and second-temple Judaism), then all of the debates and problems of the subsequent centuries could have been avoided, or at least greatly reduced. History is more complicated than this. In this case, a mutually informing conversation between theology and biblical studies could go a long way towards eliminating these sorts of sweeping reductions. As Coakley notes, along with a chorus of recent patristic specialists,[55] the wisdom of 'Jerusalem' and 'Athens' need not always be at odds if 'we are more interested in truth than attribution'.[56]

At the same time, there are also ways in which Coakley's contemplative and Platonic appropriation of Paul may be informed by Wright's more thorough exegesis. Beneath her prioritising of the Spirit and the mystical prayer of Romans 8, there is a desire to relieve the Christian of some (mostly unnamed) truth claims regarding gender and sexuality. As Coakley argues, we must be continually open to the fact that the Spirit 'blows where it will' (John 3:8)[57] in 'a strange subversion of all certainties'.[58] Thus, in proceeding from Paul to one of his most famous (pseudo-)disciples, Dionysius the Areopagite, we find that to encounter the divine is to encounter a 'ray of darkness',[59] and to desire God is to celebrate 'a love affair with a blank'.[60]

Yet what would Paul himself have said to this? While we cannot be certain, the phrase *mē genoito* is one that comes to mind. For the Paul of scripture such celebrations of 'un-knowing'[61] might seem all too similar to the inscription on a certain Athenian altar: 'To An Unknown God.' And at this point, 'Jerusalem' most definitely had corrective words for Athens. As the Paul of Acts would put it: 'You are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you' (Acts 17:23).

[55] See especially the recent patristic scholarship by Lewis Ayres, John Behr and Khaled Anatolios, each challenging the so-called 'Hellenisation thesis' set forth by Harnack and a previous generation of scholars. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicea*; Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*; John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004).

[56] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 316.

[57] Ibid., p. 89.

[58] Ibid., p. 342.

[59] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1. Cited in Coakley, *GSS*, p. 323.

[60] Coakley, GSS, p. 342. As Coakley acknowledges, this 'wonderful' phrase is that of Dom Sebastian Moore, 'Some Principles for an Adequate Theism', *Downside Review* 95 (1977), pp. 201–13. For additional engagement with this theme, see Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), chs. 2 and 9, respectively.

[61] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 43.

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To be sure, Paul was not averse to what we may call 'mystical experience'. He could speak, for instance, of knowing 'a man' who was caught up to the third heaven, where he heard inexpressible things (2 Cor 12:2–4). Yet as Wright notes, 'Such experiences are never made the basis of any argument: the only thing that was ever "revealed" to him which functions in that way is the gospel itself, given "through the revelation of Jesus the Messiah" (Galatians 1.12, 16).'[62] Herein lies a problem with Coakley's apophatic appropriation of Paul's thought, for it, at times, seems to replace the shrinking 'pigeon' with an opaque Messiah and a halting, hesitant, and unclear Gospel. As Coakley concludes, in a sentence that is indicative of much within the work, her insights 'are not uttered dogmatically but tentatively, for the contemplative can hardly afford to speak otherwise'.[63] Paul himself was more explicit.

The virtue of certain apophatic sensibilities can be seen in the way that they prevent the theologian from claiming an exhaustive knowledge of things that are in fact 'too lofty' for us (Ps 139:6). As Paul exudes, God's judgements are, at points, 'unsearchable' and 'his paths beyond tracing out' (Rom 11:33). Yet in Coakley one sometimes senses that her brand of apophaticism is functioning in a more obscurantist way. As she states, the reason for her book is simple: 'Institutional Christianity is in crisis about "sexuality".'[64] This much seems true. Yet given this claim, it seems odd that her work (which prides itself on showing how theology works 'in the field') proceeds to bring, not clarity, but what sometimes seems more like a form of ethical obfuscation couched in stunning but sometimes incoherent prose.[65]

In fairness, Coakley does acknowledge that the Spirit both draws humans together, and imposes 'boundaries' between them. Yet when the question turns to what these moral 'boundaries' should look like within the tangled realm of human sexuality, the 'dazzling darkness' (another of Coakley's favourite phrases)[66] once again moves in, leaving the reader to wonder what is actually being proposed.[67] Contrast this with the unambiguous (if not always

[62] Wright, *PFG*, p. 414.
[63] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 343.
[64] Ibid., p. 1.
[65] E.g. 'The vertiginous free-fall of contemplation [is] the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge.' Coakley, *GSS*, p. 43. Both here and elsewhere the prose is impressive, yet one wonders if it might be better to 'speak five intelligible words, than ten-thousand' (1 Cor. 14:19) such as this.
[66] See Coakley, *GSS*, p. 96.
[67] See, for instance, Coakley's refusal to address 'the so-called "problem" of "homosexuality"', (ibid., p. 11) and her rather vague hints regarding 'gender fluidity'

welcome) clarity of Paul himself on matters of sexual behaviour.[68] Perhaps, then, Coakley's systematic theology could stand to benefit from Wright's attempt to trace the *overall coherence* of Paul's thought, rather than building large edifices on mystical snippets divorced from the Jewish ethical foundation that governed Paul's thinking. Apophaticism, while at times helpful, can also be a 'dodge' that allows us to evade hard questions by preferring Coakley's 'ray of darkness' to the light of truth, as if Paul had never met with Ananias, and sought instead to glory in his 'scales' (Acts 9:17–18). Contemplative theology needs the discipline of biblical studies also.[69]

Yet lest we end on these rather negative notes, the final pages of Wright's enormous study reveal some genuine continuity with the desire of Coakley to focus on the Spirit's place within the life of prayer. As Wright states, in a concluding homage to Romans 8 especially:

> If we are to paraphrase Paul's very soul ... to catch his deepest aims and intentions at the moment when, by his own account, the divine breath was groaning in him and the Heart-Searcher himself was listening to the resultant inarticulate desires, we must recognize in him a kind of tune which all things hear and fear, the deep and constant gospel-inspired activity which, in form as well as in substance, might have seemed folly to Greeks and a scandal to Jews. We have at several points noticed Paul's prayers, not simply as pious attachments to the outside of his theological or practical teaching but as their very heart. This is the place to end, and perhaps begin.[70]

Folly to the Greeks and scandal to the Jews. At this point, Athens and Jerusalem stand side by side. Likewise, the very different studies of Coakley and Wright are united in an attempt to restore the Spirit to a rightful and distinctive

(e.g. p. 65), which are rooted in the way Romans 8 speaks of Christians generally as being adopted as 'sons', and of the creation itself as 'groaning' like a woman in labour. For further context, see also Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, ch. 9.

[68] See Wright's treatment of this, for instance, in *PFG*, p. 1117.

[69] In a related reassessment of one of Coakley's favourite patristic sources, Nathan Eubank has recently argued that the culminating moment of mystical ascent within Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis* is *not* the apophatic experience of 'darkness' (as argued by Coakley and others), but rather the encounter with the person of Christ, the 'tabernacle not built with human hands'. While the present article is not focused on patristic sources, Eubank's research fits nicely with my own attempt to dampen Coakley's enthusiasm for apophatic 'darkness' as the culmination of contemplative prayer. See Nathan Eubank, 'Ineffably Effable: The Pinnacle of Mystical Ascent in Gregory of Nyssa's *De vita Moysis*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16/1 (January 2014), pp. 25–41.

[70] Wright, *PFG*, p. 1516.

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place within the life of faith. As Coakley states in one of her own concluding theses:

> *The contemplative acknowledges the leading activity of the Holy Spirit, and so jealously guards the distinctness of the third 'person'.* Trinitarianism ... is always in danger of reduction, the loss of the wafting 'pigeon', the apparent redundancy of a hypostatized relationship.[71]

Here there is agreement. As Wright notes, 'For Paul, belief itself is something which is effected on the one hand through the spirit and on the other through the word of the gospel ... "nobody can say *Jesus is lord*" except by the holy spirit.'[72] Here, as in Hopkins' poem, is the brooding dove, 'in which all the other [birds] are concentred and gathered'.[73]

[71] Coakley, *GSS*, p. 341.
[72] Wright, *PFG*, p. 917.
[73] Ibid., p. 1265.

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