Review

God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'
By Sarah Coakley
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 365, £55
ISBN: 9780521552288
doi:10.1017/S003181911300079X

'Sex is important to us because we desire God, but most sexually active people do not know this'. So once said a theologian I admire, to which my philosopher friend replied: 'God is important to us because we desire sex, but most religious people do not know this'. The riposte is familiar and tempting to those who have been brought up on a particular version of the Nietzsche/Freud/Naturalism diet, but Sarah Coakley challenges the terms of this seemingly easy won battle in the first volume to a larger systematic project, to be entitled overall *On Desiring God*. First, she grants the 'messy entanglement' of sexual desire and desire for God (155); second, she argues that desire *per se* is 'rooted in the divine' (52), and, as such, is a more basic category than physical 'sex' ('mere sex' as Iris Murdoch put it). Finally, and in response to those for whom such a position is several notches below the level of intellectual respectability, she dares to question the assumption that '*physiological* desires and urges are basic and fundamental in the sexual realm' (7), rescues Freud himself from such a viewpoint – he did, after all, implore us to remember 'how near the enlarged sexuality of psychoanalysis coincides with the *Eros* of the divine Plato', and sets about deconstructing the framework which confounds our thinking in this and other related areas.

In the present context this framework forces us to choose between physical sex and God, and to those for whom God is, at best, an ephemeral presence, and, at worst, a positive threat to our humanity, the choice is obvious. The response to this response is not to take the opposing line – God rather than sex – for this is to remain within the offending either/or framework, and we are returned in any case to the difficulties which made the 'sex' option so appealing in the first place. Rather, it is a matter of challenging the assumption that these terms – God and sex – are mutually exclusive. We do this by granting that the basic category is desire, that desire incorporates the sexual, and that it is irreducibly God-involving in the sense

that God is its source and ultimate goal. It is in this way that we can say that desire for God is to be put above all other desires (11), that sexuality properly so called can be approached only via God (1), and that sexual desire and desire for God are irrevocably 'entangled'.

The idea that desire is a more basic category than physical 'sex' is a philosophically respectable position, and it is defended, for example, in Roger Scruton's *Sexual Desire*.[1] Scruton is concerned likewise to undermine the assumption – scientistically motivated he believes – that physiological desires and urges are basic in the sexual realm, doing so on the ground that the picture fails to accommodate the interpersonal dimension of sexual desire. So he accepts that sexual desire is a more basic category than physical 'sex', but denies that desire, thus understood, is God-involving in any sense.[2] Is Coakley justified in making this move? The dice are unfairly loaded if it is assumed that a move in the direction of God is bound to be a matter of adding something inherently problematic and indeed, irrelevant, to the concept of desire, for this is to beg the central question at issue. Rather like rejecting Scruton's position on the ground that physiological desires and urges are basic in the sexual realm.

So should we take seriously what Coakley is saying? Clearly so if she is telling us something important about the concept of desire, although we can try to block this conclusion by protesting that theology stands to be exorcised by a superior secular philosophy. We have already questioned a version of this complaint, and Coakley's conception of the theological task – at least as defined and practiced in this book – poses a challenge to those who would doubt its credentials on philosophical or non-philosophical grounds. She describes what she is doing as '*theologie totale*', this being a form of systematic theology which promises to repair some of the 'false divides' which vitiate our thinking in this area, including that which comes into play when the words 'system' and 'total' are interpreted as banners for a power-wielding fundamentalism, and we retaliate by abandoning clear and well-ordered thinking. The general reparative aim is familiar from Coakley's approach to the concept of desire, but how does it work in the context of comprehending the nature of theology and its relation to other disciplines? Coakley is not suggesting that philosophy – or indeed, any other discipline – is to be subsumed or overcome by theology, for this would be to remain within the offending either/or

[1] London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986.

[2] Scruton's position was ambivalent on this score even back then, and it would be interesting to hear his account of the matter post *The Face of God* (Continuum: London, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911300079X Published online by Cambridge University Press

framework, and 'outright rejection…is as dangerous an alternative as outright submission' (18). Rather, these disciplines will 'retain their own spheres…although the invitation to enter into the realm of faith, or conversation with it, can ever be laid before them' (89). Coakley's fieldwork on charismatics (chapter 4) offers a rather interesting invitation to the social scientist, for it lends justice to her view that social science provides a crucial adjunct to theology's purpose, whilst providing a challenge to the reductive presumptions which have guided modern versions of the subject. Likewise, we are given a clear sense in which the project can speak to feminist concerns – significantly so, given that the Christian tradition within which Coakley is working has appeared inimical to such a perspective.

The message so far is that theology involves these various disciplines without being reducible to them, and that dialogue on all sides will have a mutually enriching effect. We are told also that theology thus understood will be sustained by the practice of contemplation, this involving 'an attentive openness of the whole self (intellect, will, memory, imagination, feeling, bodiliness) to the reality of God and of the creation' (88). Theology in this sense then is no mere intellectual exercise. Rather, it involves 'an ongoing journey of purgative transformation and change' (88) as we 'swim in the tide of the Spirit itself' (92) and order our desires in relation to God. A world apart from some of the more sterile undertakings which go under the name of theology, and a whiff of Hegel too.

The Hegelian undertones were already present in Coakley's professed aim of transcending 'false divides', and lest the reader worry that this brand of theology is looking increasingly dodgy by association, we can note that Hegel does not have the monopoly on this kind of dialectic, and that we should be wary in any case of assuming the rather skewed version of his position which tends to get bandied around. Either way, it is surely relevant to the question of the nature and significance of Coakley's approach that some of our best contemporary philosophers have been engaged in a similar reconciliatory enterprise, their focus being the false divides or 'dubious dualisms' which have held sway in the areas of mind, metaphysics, and ethics, when, for example, nature is dualistically opposed to value, mind to world, or science to philosophy.[3] It is notable, of course, that the oppositions between theology and philosophy and God and world do not figure in this constellation. However, a dialogue along Coakley's

[3] See, for example, John McDowell's *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994) and James Griffin's *Value Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911300079X Published online by Cambridge University Press

recommended lines is beckoning, not least because the participants in this particular context share so many aims and presuppositions.[4]

To swim in the tide of the Spirit itself may seem like an aim too far, although the idea can be made palatable to secular ears – witness left-wing Hegelian scholarship. For Coakley it brings us to the Trinity – the subject-matter of the book as a whole. After all, this is a book about the God of Christianity, written 'for those who puzzle about how one might set about coming into relation with such a God in the first place; and who wonder how – without sacrificing either intellectual integrity or critical acumen – one might discover this baffling, alluring, and sometimes painful encounter to require thematizing in trinitarian terms: "Father", "Son", and "Holy Spirit"'(1). It should be clear from what has been said that the puzzle at issue here is no mere intellectual conundrum – as if the Trinity can be 'done' in the way that one does a Sudoku. Rather, and to return to Coakley's metaphor, it is a matter of learning how to swim in the tide of the Spirit, and we do this by taking up the life of contemplation or 'deep prayer in the spirit' (25). Is this, she asks, just another form of wish-fulfilment or projection, 'spun out of a misguided inner need for comfort or certainty?' (25). Yes, on the assumption that the envisaged approach involves nothing more than an appeal to 'subjective experience' – as if the spirit's tide is a self-created movement which is fated to remain within those confines. No, given that we are working at the intersection of a range of disciplines and sub-disciplines which provide the necessary context for situating, understanding, and evaluating the kind of prayerful attitude at issue. And no, given that the practice of prayer is more often disturbing than comforting. After all, it 'provides the context in which silence in the Spirit *expands* the potential to respond to the realm of the Word, and reason too is stretched and changed beyond its normal, secular reach' (25).

How does Coakley purport to tackle the puzzle of how one might set about coming into relation with God? Not by presenting a neat set of intellectual instructions, but, rather, by doing something similar to what Rudolf Otto is talking about when he describes how somebody might be converted into a religious experience. The relevant *X*, he tells us, 'cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes "of the spirit" must be awakened'.[5] Coakley offers a variety of means to 'awaken the

[4] See my forthcoming *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) for a dialogue along these lines.

[5] *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911300079X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Spirit' in us, the most exciting of which is her use of iconography in chapter 5. As she put it, 'there is a revelatory *irreducibility* about visual symbolism that will not simply translate without remainder into the verbal'(191), and '[t]he most "successful" visual representations of the Trinity…do not attempt to *describe* what it is like *chez God*, but rather to stir the imagination, or direct the will, beyond the known towards the unknown, prompting symbolic "hints half guessed", (197). Theology, thus understood, is a form of prayerful contemplation which invites the reader into its ambit. Not just one whose imagination has already been stirred in the required direction, and not just the professional theologian. Rather, Coakley is speaking also to those who take issue with the project of systematic theology on various grounds – philosophical, sociological, psychological, feminist, moral – but who are open-minded enough to accept the invitation for dialogue.

There are, of course, outstanding philosophical questions, and it will be a task of the second volume to consider the relevant issues in more detail. Take, for example, the claim that 'desire' is *really* about desire for God (9). What does this mean? And what is its justification? Is Coakley granting with Augustine that all our desires are *really* for God, our hearts being restless otherwise? If so, then it follows by deduction that sexual desire is God-involving, but what does *this* mean? Coakley is not wishing to undermine the significance of human sexual love, so there is no suggestion that my desire for *you* is really a desire for something quite different, namely, God, and, in any case, it would be wrong to treat God as some kind of competitor for our affections. Rather, we are told that God – or more specifically, God's trinitarian nature – is the source and goal of human desire, and serves as the means of its transformation (6). This would hardly make sense on the assumption that God's love and human love are to be held in permanent anti-thesis. After all, how could human love have its source in something from which it is to be dualistically opposed? And how could this not mean that our deepest desire is to transcend our humanity? The offending framework is operative in the traditional dualism of *eros* and *agape*, and Coakley rejects it to grant – with Dionysius and, more recently, Pope Benedict XVI – that God's love is wholly *eros* and wholly *agape*. It follows that human desire is already God-involving in some sense, and we are told that the goal of desire is to participate in the (ecstatic) love of God. So I desire the desire of God. How does this desire relate to the erotic desire I have for another human being – my desire for the desire of someone other than God? Coakley tells us that human erotic ecstasy 'might ultimately relate to divine ecstatic love…by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911300079X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the "interruption" by the Spirit of any merely "egological" duality inherent in their relationship, such that the human lovers are themselves aware of a necessary "third" between them' (318). This is difficult and contentious stuff even if we become convinced – as many will not – that the sex/God distinction is 'false'. One wonders whether there is a secular analogue of this talk of the Spirit's interruption which might make the thought more intelligible and acceptable to one who has yet to embrace the Trinity in all its glory. I hope that I have said enough to suggest that the overall project is worth taking seriously, and that philosophers may indeed find that their reason has been stretched beyond its normal, secular reach.

Fiona Ellis
f.ellis@heythrop.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911300079X Published online by Cambridge University Press