Sarah Coakley


Amidst current Christian wranglings over the role of women in church life and leadership, theological questions about the relationship between femininity and the divine have become ever more pressing. Sarah Coakley’s recent book joins the outpouring of feminist responses to these questions by exploring the nexus of sexuality, power, and Trinitarian theology that emerges from the question of what it might mean to desire God. Through a method that she calls *théologie totale* (modeled on the French Annales School’s *l’histoire totale*), Coakley sets out to reinvent systematic theology for the postmodern age. Perhaps unsurprisingly (in light of such works as Kevin Hart’s *The Trespass of the Sign* and the subsequent last phase of Derrida’s career), this reinvention involves an apophatic, mystical turn, centered on contemplation and prayer in the Spirit. Coakley’s model of prayer draws on chapter 8 of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament: in a passage detailing the eschatological groanings of Creation, Paul writes, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26, NRSV). Prayer, Coakley argues, leads a person to the limits of her knowledge, necessitating the Spirit’s intervention. Thus, prayer is an inevitably disordered act of desire for God, to which the Spirit responds by drawing the pray-er into the life of the God through a re-ordering of desire in the (cruci)form of the Son.

Coakley approaches this argument from disparate angles. In patristics, she reinterprets Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine by putting their theologies of gender and prayer into conversation with their Trinitarian thought. From a sociological angle, she includes fieldwork on two Lancashire congregations that had undergone Spirit-based church renewal. Perhaps most interestingly for readers of this journal, she undertakes an art-historical foray into Trinitarian iconography, arguing that the visual marginalization or omission of the Spirit poses problems for both Nicene orthodoxy and for feminism. After walking readers through games of “hunt the pigeon,” she explores patterns of replacing the Spirit with feminine figures like Mary. The effect of these tendencies, she argues, is the privileging of a male Father-Son dyad, which analogously (but not identically) subordinates the Holy Spirit and women. Still, as the fieldwork reveals, increased ecclesial openness to the Spirit unexpectedly yielded increased spiritual power for women, creating tension with patriarchal ecclesiological norms.
Thus, instead of a top-down, Father-Son-Spirit Trinity, Coakley argues for a Trinity to which a newly equalized Spirit offers entry through practices of ascetic contemplation. Such a Trinity is hierarchical not in the sense of human power relations and their drive for subordination, but rather (through a reassessment of Pseudo-Dionysius) in the sense of an order qua order. Within the Trinity, such an order must include the Spirit as an equal—and in an ecumenical gesture Coakley here seeks to accommodate Eastern and Western approaches to the *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed. On an ecclesiastical level, the order is not patterned on the Trinity (as in social Trinitarianism), but remade in the shape of the Son through a contemplative practice in which ecstatic prayer meets the ecstatic procession of the Spirit, thereby reordering human desire and effecting the full inclusion of women as different-but-equal participants in the body of Christ.

Coakley rightly eschews a triumphalist tone, presenting her concluding summary theses as “not uttered dogmatically, but tentatively." Having embraced postmodernism, she can hardly do otherwise. And yet, in keeping with her apophatic insistence that the hermeneutics of suspicion must never come to an end, I will prod at both method and conclusions. The method is unabashedly Platonic—a point that Coakley makes explicit in her recuperative use of Pseudo-Dionysius: “Why should Christianity and Platonism here *not* genuinely converge and intersect? It has indeed been the burden of this volume to suggest such.” Readerly opinions will vary on the validity of such a move, and rather than adjudicate it, I wish to suggest that N. T. Wright (in his recent *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013]) offers an alternative approach rooted in Paul’s reinflection of Jewish categories. According to Wright, Paul “regarded the spirit, as he regarded the Messiah, as the personal presence of *YHWH* himself,” thus enabling him to remain “a robust second-Temple Jewish monotheist” (767). On this account, Paul develops a proto-Trinitarianism ordered less by Platonic philosophy (which, as a Hellenized Jew, he cannot altogether avoid) than by the challenge posed by his theophanic experience on the road to Damascus to the daily practice of praying the *Shema* (see Deut. 6:4). This formulation might serve Coakley well: Platonic dualism forces the question of priority, whereas Paul’s monotheistic approach makes a demotion of the Spirit less thinkable. Prayer notably retains a prominent position in this theology, as does the spirit’s role in noetic renewal (see Rom. 12:2). This is to say that Coakley is right to make Romans 8 the foundation of her theology, but, valuable though her patristic exegesis is, she might usefully have spent more time with Paul himself. Because Coakley projects that this will be the first of a four-volume work of systematics, *On Desiring God*, though, she may simply be holding off the Pauline exegesis for later.