

## Sarah Coakley: Systematic Theology and the Future of Feminism

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**Abstract:** In recent years Sarah Coakley has begun, if only in fragments, to work towards a unified description of the particular sort of systematic theology that she will develop in her forthcoming four volume systematics. Simultaneously, trends in feminist theology have pointed towards the systematic enterprise as a fertile future ground for feminist enquiry. This essay considers in detail the approach of Sarah Coakley and the contribution she can make towards an ongoing project of Christian feminism.

### 1. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

IN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE of Christian feminism it has become near impossible to define "feminism". Some scholars have been happy to step beyond the feminist critique, believing challenges have been met or "proven illusory".<sup>1</sup> This assessment is bolstered by the profound fragmentation pertaining to women's identification,<sup>2</sup> and the deep confusion regarding definitions of gender.

Indeed Susan Frank Parsons argues that central dogmatic claims<sup>3</sup> of Christian feminism have themselves unravelled. Parsons painfully reminds us that a liberation motif - so popular in Christian feminism -

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1. Nicola M. Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2003), 106.

2. By this I refer to the extremely varied disclaimers that often accompany feminist's identification of themselves and others.

3. Parsons acknowledges that it may be seen unusual to claim a dogmatic stance in feminism. It is true that most feminist theology has critiqued dogma in general and maintained a staunch stance against such dogma. Yet Parsons also shows that certain elements of feminism have been held dogmatically and the same staunch defence of such claims and practices ensures "feminist theology undertaken by Christian women has been and continues to be dogmatic". See Susan Frank Parsons, "Feminist Theology as Dogmatic Theology", in Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 114.

has in fact failed to provide a satisfactory paradigm for emancipation. Optimistic methodologies that propose humanistic responses to oppression have not only created a “hierarchy of victimhood” but have inspired no *telos*, no eschatological hope.<sup>4</sup> These are not new observations. But in light of the general confusion surrounding what we call “feminist theology” it is clear that a fresh approach is required to reinvigorate the field. Or as one feminist put it, “if Christianity uncritically conforms itself to secular discourse, including feminism, it risks losing its identity and becoming the poor relation of secular theory”.<sup>5</sup>

In response, many feminist theologians – like Christian scholars of many specialities – are turning to the sources found within the Christian tradition.<sup>6</sup> What is ironic in this instance is that for the feminist, the history of patriarchal subjugation accompanies these sources. Feminists are now willing to suggest that traditional materials may provide paths of new enquiry needed to revitalise Christian feminism. Nicola Slee observes how the Christian tradition “is itself a dynamic, fluid cluster of lived stories which, rightly understood, have always been open to change, even radical, subversive change”.<sup>7</sup>

Sarah Coakley is one of the most distinctive voices in this trajectory shift. Coakley is an Anglican theologian, a feminist, an ordained priest of the Church of England, and is currently the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. In her early years, Coakley was particularly interested in liberal scholarship, and her doctoral dissertation was a groundbreaking re-evaluation of Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>8</sup> In the years since, however, Coakley’s work has demonstrated a shift away from the liberal paradigm. Like other Christian feminists, Coakley seeks to integrate a variety of sources, including those often rejected by feminists. As Gavin D’Costa has stated: “Coakley’s is a highly erudite, challenging and eirenic theological voice. She is at home with an awesome variety of genres and periods: analytical

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4. Parsons, “Feminist Theology”, 121.

5. Tina Beattie, “Global Sisterhood or Wicked Stepsisters: Why Aren’t Girls with Godmothers Invited to the Ball?”, in Deborah Sawyer and Diane Collier (eds.), *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 125.

6. Serene Jones and Tina Beattie are good examples of this shift. See for example: Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace, Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Tina Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women’s Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002).

7. Slee, *Faith and Feminism*, 116.

8. Coakley would subsequently release a modified version of this dissertation entitled *Christ without Absolutes*. B. A. Gerrish described it as the “most acute and thorough exploration of Troeltsch’s Christology that has so far appeared”. In this book Coakley argues that Troeltsch’s project continues to justify future engagement with the social sciences. This facet of her early thinking becomes particularly influential in Coakley’s later arguments about the nature of systematic theology. See Sarah Coakley, *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

philosophy, liberal and post-modern feminist theory, pre-modern and contemporary theologies, art and spiritual practices.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Coakley’s endeavours all point towards the systematic process. Coakley is pushing Christian feminism towards the sources of orthodoxy and the renewal of systematic theology. In this manner, she has been able to traverse the patterns of liberal and contextual theologies. For Coakley, feminism cannot simply be a subset of twentieth-century liberalism. Gender studies must be recognised as central to orthodoxy, intrinsic to all theological research, and thus at the centre of the systematic enterprise.

It is well known that systematic theology has no strong tradition among English theologians or Anglicans, much less Christian feminists.<sup>10</sup> Straddling the three worlds of feminism, Anglicanism and systematic theology, Coakley is aware of this dearth, and yet insists that what is currently needed is precisely the coherent vision of Christianity that a systematic approach provides.<sup>11</sup> Indeed she goes so far as to suggest that systematics alone can “adequately and effectively respond to the rightful critiques that gender studies and political and liberation theology have laid at its [theology’s] door”.<sup>12</sup> Coakley has so far only once provided a definition of what a systematic approach might look like. She describes systematic theology as:

an integrated presentation of Christian truth, however perceived (that’s what system here connotes); wherever one chooses to start has implications for the whole, and the parts must fit together. However briefly, or lengthily, it is explicated (and the shorter versions, have, in Christian tradition, often been as elegant, effective and enduring as the longer ones), systematic theology attempts to provide a coherent and alluring unfolding of the connected parts of its vision.<sup>13</sup>

It is the “allure” of such logic that especially characterises Coakley’s approach. Coakley recognises the inherent pull of life’s matter(s) into the larger Christian scheme as demonstrated in her arguments around gender. Coakley posits issues of gender, race and class as intrinsic to the theological (or philosophical) enterprise.<sup>14</sup> In this she seeks to

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9. Gavin D’Costa, Book Review of Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (2004), 330.

10. This is certainly changing (for all three parties mentioned), and Rupert Shortt discusses this issue with Coakley in *God’s Advocates*, along with several other prominent theologians such as Rowan Williams, Tine Beattie and John Milbank. See Rupert Shortt, *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005).

11. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 76.

12. Sarah Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task”, *Criterion* 47, no. 1 (2009): 2.

13. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 4.

14. William J. Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion, Oxford Handbooks in Philosophy* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 517.

contrast her method with the belittling gestures of systematicians like Pannenberg, Jüngel and Jenson towards theologians engaging with the challenges of feminism and gender.<sup>15</sup> The argument that she has been developing over several years is that gender must not be seen as irrelevant to the systematic approach. What Coakley is doing, then, is building towards a systematic theology that recognises issues of race, class<sup>16</sup> and gender as central themes, not as the domain of contextual theologies unable to achieve systematic coherency.

Yet for Coakley, gender is viewed from a theological perspective at the outset, *prior* to any contemporary social considerations. The challenges of patriarchy and feminist liberation are explored as the theological agenda develops. Coakley acknowledges her own attraction to the dominant forms of gender theory (Butlerian and French feminist theory) and understands deeply the “ritual of reinforcement” that takes place in the culturally enforced binary of gender.<sup>17</sup> Yet Coakley views gender with a view to the Judeo Christian creation narrative. In contrast to Butlerian schools of gender theory – often seen in Christian feminism – gender is viewed with an eye to the primeval account of creation. As both “embodied and differentiated”, creatures are understood primarily as those in relationship with the divine. Coakley points to the *imago dei* as the fundamental point of enquiry regarding both gender and difference. It is precisely because of this fundamental distinction that creatures find themselves relating to one another.<sup>18</sup> Consequently it is impossible to speak theological truth without acknowledging this profound dimension of human experience. To ignore it, as in most systematics, is what Coakley describes as “a form of wilful blindness”.<sup>19</sup> What she proposes is a view of gender that is fundamental to the theological task because it “sets the exegesis of complex scriptural texts in full relation to tradition, philosophical analysis and ascetic practice”,<sup>20</sup> the three

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15. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 4.

16. Coakley has most commonly addressed themes of gender binaries and fluidity, yet in one essay she takes her approach to point to the poor and displaced. When considering the epistemic conditions necessary for seeing the risen Christ, she remarks “it is always in the erasure of expectation that Jesus presents himself to me – in the entirely unromantic other, in the exhausting and defeating poverty of my neighbour, in the nuisance of the beggar at my gate. And that ‘apophatic’ lesson surely sustains the insights of the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: 31-46, if anything does.” See Sarah Coakley, “The Identity of the Risen Jesus: Finding Jesus Christ in the Poor”, in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 316. Coakley’s hermeneutical response may be likened to those of liberation theologies, but her methodology is very different. She is not utilising a hermeneutic of suspicion or claiming preferential treatment for the poor. Rather, her systematic commitment to apophaticism in theology and practice, along with a contemplative reliance on the Holy Spirit, provides the basis of this reading.

17. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 9.

18. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 9.

19. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 75.

20. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 75.

imperative sources for Coakley's theology. Indeed she goes on to argue that, although Christian feminism and systematic theology are often perceived as warring disciplines, each needs the other for its proper development.

Coakley is of course aware of the common objections to the discipline of systematics; indeed, the development of her system is premised on the validity of these critiques. First, there are the Heideggerian claims of so-called onto-theology. Heidegger powerfully critiqued Christian discourse about the divine by pointing to the employment of unacceptable Greek metaphysical articulations of God. For him, this was the mistake of viewing being as a present substance, which in theological terms presented an obvious dilemma. He argues that within the religious framework, divine being had in fact become concealed and inaccessible.<sup>21</sup> When being was presumed revealed, it was "done so in terms of the 'world', and the ontology which has thus arisen has deteriorated to a tradition in which it gets reduced to something self-evident – merely material for re-working".<sup>22</sup> In short, Heidegger was charging systematics with idolatry. Though Heidegger's critique is neither a recent nor a frequent topic in many works of systematics, Coakley finds it necessary to respond, knowing that this critique has ongoing influence (certainly feminism can, and has, pointed to these charges of idolatry in considering the interplay of patriarchy and systems of theology) and has indeed dealt systematic theology a severe blow.<sup>23</sup>

Another contemporary critique is from the Foucauldian tradition, concerning the relationship of power and knowledge in the necessarily hegemonic nature of systematics. The powerful and destructive effects of totalising systems (pointing towards systemic oppression and the hegemonic discourse postulated to justify such oppression) are evident throughout the often dark history of the church. As a feminist, Coakley is particularly concerned with those approaches to systematic theology that continue to push aside issues of gender, race and class. She argues that so "long as such topics are excluded *a priori* from systematic theology's *loci*" the charge of hegemony will continue to validate its claims.<sup>24</sup>

Finally the critique arising from French feminist theory has labelled the entire systematic task as "intrinsically phallogocentric".<sup>25</sup> It is the distinctly masculine symbolic language of theology that continues to repress the feminist semiotic mode of reflection. Any attempt to

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21. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (London: SCM Press, 1962), 43.

22. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 48.

23. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 5.

24. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 6.

25. For instance, see the highly influential publication Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

construct systematics in the traditional manner constitutes an “offense to feminist sensibilities”.<sup>26</sup> Coakley agrees that consideration of gender and bodily difference can and must become central to discourse. She commends, in particular, the insights this tradition has provided into the undeniable cultural dominance of “male thinking”, and into the unconscious forces we negotiate in the domain of gender.

Thus, for Coakley, each of these critiques is valid and demands a response from systematic theology; quite simply, systematics can survive only if it is able to deal with these concerns.<sup>27</sup> In Coakley’s view, all of these critiques have a shared root: they assume that the systematician “idolatrously *desires* mastery”.<sup>28</sup> Idolatry may relate to issues of gender, knowledge and power, but the shared root of such idolatry is the yet deeper problem of desire. “To speak theologically: *unredeemed* desire is at the root of each of these challenges to the systematic task”.<sup>29</sup> Coakley thus uses these critiques of systematics to prepare the way for the “particular sort” of method that she will utilise. She refers to her proposal as a *théologie totale*.

## 2. THÉOLOGIE TOTALE

The *théologie totale* that Coakley has in mind is not totalising in a political sense, but total “because it attends, contemplatively, to every level of doctrine’s instantiation and outworking, and every manifestation of the doctrine’s range in the realm of human expression and the academic disciplines”.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, systematics cannot be reduced merely to one more discipline. In keeping with a common thread in the feminist academic approach, Coakley argues that systematic theology should be incessantly exploring the margins of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, ritual theory, musicology, art, history, gender theory and so forth.<sup>31</sup> Yet Coakley is promoting a methodology that seeks to attend not only to “high” academic discourse but also to lived experiences of the liturgical, pastoral, aesthetic, cultural and incidental (hence the *totale*). In this manner, ordinary bodily negotiations must also come to bear on the systematic enterprise – it is in engaging with each of these sources that we then might call the process truly “systematic”. Notably, Coakley argues that this approach is in step with the post-Lacanian school, and gives prominence to the role of the semiotic. The *théologie totale*, I would argue, is thus uniquely able to speak of the inter-dependence of

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26. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 7.

27. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 11.

28. Thus a desire to know all leads to onto-theology, a desire to denominate and maintain a privileged position in society inspires hegemony, and a desire to conquer difference represses the feminine or other.

29. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 8.

30. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 4.

31. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 75.

reason, imagination and embodiment. Or as Coakley notes, within this spectrum we learn “how the fundamental apparatus of human desire is formed, deformed and transformed in relationship to God and to others”.<sup>32</sup> One thinks here of issues of bodily performance, sexuality and materiality.

Already this sort of theology recognises the extraordinary limitations of the sources and methods that have traditionally characterised systematic methodology. Indeed, Coakley’s systematics will include ecclesial and sociological fieldwork, thus showing how “doctrine actually relates to church practice, and how different people in slightly different social and political and class circumstances work out these things on the ground”.<sup>33</sup> Here one can see the continuing influence of Troeltsch on Coakley’s methodology.<sup>34</sup> In an interview with Mark Oppenheimer, Coakley speaks of her experience teaching contemplation to African American inmates in a Boston jail.<sup>35</sup> Coakley acknowledges the obvious tension: teaching the oppressed how to live with oppression. Yet she believes there is a special type of dignity in learning to live with our inner noise in situations of oppression.<sup>36</sup> Gerrish may be right to question how such methodology can enter into the normative theological task,<sup>37</sup> but he misses the fact that Coakley wants to move beyond the boundaries of the normative and to delve deeper into actual Christian experience.

Yet Coakley’s most radical methodological innovation is the claim that *théologie totale* must include the purgative contemplative practice of silence as its undergirding point of reference. It is in this practice, she suggests, that all the “fragmented pieces of life are lined up and drawn inexorably in one direction”.<sup>38</sup> In her view, ascetical theology does not chart ascriptions of belief on a flat plane, but acknowledges the complexity of reformulation.<sup>39</sup> Returning again to the theme of desire, Coakley insists that this involves

an understanding of theology in progressive transformation (in via, as we might say), and one founded not in any secular rationality or theory of selfhood, but in a spiritual practice of

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32. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 76.

33. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 83.

34. In the final chapter of *Christ without Absolutes*, Coakley shows that Troeltsch’s social-psychological approach brings Christological reflection to the very centre of the believing community.

35. Mark Oppenheimer, “Prayerful Vulnerability”, *Christian Century* 120, no. 13 (2003), 28.

36. Oppenheimer, “Prayerful Vulnerability”, 28.

37. B. A. Gerrish, Book Review of *Christ Without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch*, in *Journal of Religion* 71, no. 2 (1991), 272.

38. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 70.

39. Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology”, in Dorothy Bass and Miroslav Volf (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 83.

attention that mysteriously challenges and expands the range of rationality, and simultaneously darkens and breaks one's hold on previous certainties. A theology that starts from, and continually returns to, this practice is one that in no way can sidestep the urgent exigencies of questions of desire, but one that also knows the dangers of any merely mindless activation of them.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, spiritual contemplation and openness to divine interruption (even alteration) are actually central to the theologian's systematic and academic task. It is precisely this transmission and adaptation of knowledge, deriving from ascetic practices, that provide the cohesion of doctrinal statements that she is making. Referring to her student days and her training in "doctrinal criticism", Coakley observes: "what I discovered as a result of time on my knees was that my earlier dismantling of doctrines such as the incarnation and the Trinity was itself being challenged and recast".<sup>41</sup> Thus, as noted earlier, when Coakley talks about the epistemic conditions necessary for seeing the Risen Christ, she appeals to a "transformation of the normal sense perception" as a prerequisite for resurrection belief.<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, her doctrine of creaturehood (radically opposed to the autonomous models typical of feminism) argues that at the heart of the creature is a radical dependence of the creature on God.<sup>43</sup> She shows how consistently culture and indeed patriarchy have defiled this idea of dependence, and yet she acknowledges its theological validity. Coakley argues that absolute dependence is indeed at the heart of true human creatureliness and the contemplative quest,<sup>44</sup> serving as a reminder of the theological theme of desire, and of Coakley's concern for a systematic theology that can withstand only by absorbing the objections of its critics.

Returning to the claims of onto-theology, then, Coakley argues that the apophatic dimensions of classic theology, with its fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing, can dissolve these claims.<sup>45</sup> An appropriate apophatic sensibility cannot simply be decided in advance (as if un-mastery were a mere act of will<sup>46</sup>), so here *théologie totale* becomes crucial. The tension in Coakley's understanding of

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40. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 4.

41. Shortt, *God's Advocates*, 71.

42. Sarah Coakley, "The Resurrection and the 'Spiritual Senses': On Wittgenstein, Epistemology and the Risen Christ", in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender, Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 152.

43. Sarah Coakley, "Creaturehood before God: Male and Female", in *Powers and Submissions*.

44. Coakley, "Creaturehood before God", 68.

45. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 5.

46. Coakley critiques the "false humility of a theological liberalism that re-makes God under the guise of Kantian or neo-Kantian nescience". See Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 6.

legitimate apophaticism may help to make sense of her frequent use of traditional male metaphors for the Divine. Where gendered language is concerned, Coakley is arguing that something deeper and more piercing is required, "lest mere repression of certain forms of language simply drive the problem deeper".<sup>47</sup> Knowing and un-knowing are each related to the actual practice of contemplation. The desire to know God, and yet to have that desire purged, is the paradoxical condition of contemplation. This un-mastery must "involve the stuff of learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition".<sup>48</sup>

The *théologie totale* is also utilised to absorb the charges of hegemony in systematics. Coakley argues that practices of contemplation and ascetics are themselves indispensable means of a true attentiveness to the despised or marginalised other. On the surface this appears a highly problematic (and subjective) claim, especially considering the insights of modern psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, many historical studies of ascetic communities do point to a far greater awareness and attentiveness towards the other. Coakley further argues that the method of *théologie totale* is "rooted in the exploration of the many mediums and levels at which theological truth may be engaged".<sup>49</sup>

Coakley also returns to the claims of phallogocentrism from French feminist theorists, and once again posits *théologie totale* as a remedy. Her methodology encapsulates the realm of the semiotic into the act(s) of contemplation, just as it insists on the place of arts and aesthetics as doctrinal sources. And in Coakley's essential move as a feminist, this method acknowledges the full theological significance of gendered difference, yet avoids the binary stuckness that Coakley critiques in French theory. Coakley achieves this last and most difficult move by returning once again to "the tangled root of desire". For instance, she argues that the performativity and ritualisation of sexual gender theory finds its "theological counterpart in contemplation".<sup>50</sup> These performances are not fundamentally cast as acts of resistance: "they are instead a submission to a unique power-beyond-human-power and, as such, are already gendered in a particular and unique sense in relationship to God".<sup>51</sup> Coakley is arguing that not only gender, but our sexual desire and embodied difference hold up for us a mirror, reminding us of our profound dependence on God. What has not been explicit now becomes clear: Coakley asserts that desire is a condition

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47. Shortt, *God's Advocates*, 73.

48. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 6.

49. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 7.

50. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 9.

51. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 9.

more fundamental to humanity than gender.<sup>52</sup> This doctrine, says Coakley, is – perhaps unexpectedly – the critical category unrecognised in scholarship regarding gender.<sup>53</sup>

### 3. CONTEMPLATION, THE TRINITY AND GENDER

Coakley goes on to argue that contemplative practice disrupts the gender binaries we assume as either fixed or to be abolished. The latter option is not corrective; gender is not to be eradicated but transformed.<sup>54</sup> This transformation of gender, and gender binaries, is evoked in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. Coakley shows how such transformation, for Gregory, is achieved through a lifelong ascetical journey (and return) to a de-genitalised state.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, she suggests that Gregory perceived concerns for rigid demarcations of masculine and feminine were in effect issues for “immature Christians”.<sup>56</sup> Going deeper in one’s contemplative practice would result in far greater gender fluidity. Fittingly, this gender fluidity does not accompany repugnance towards the bodily, or the sexual act.<sup>57</sup> This relates to the Trinitarian affect (the contemplative pilgrimage of “incorporation into the Trinity”) and the welcoming, destabilising activity of the Holy Spirit. Coakley has argued previously for an understanding of the Holy Spirit as a means of incorporation into the trinitarian life.<sup>58</sup> Reading the text of Romans 8, she describes the way the Trinity “allures and conforms creation”.<sup>59</sup> She also hints at the potential of trinitarianism to dismantle the patriarchal hierarchy associated with many popular notions of the Trinity. Hence a distinctive trinitarian perspective is argued as not only necessary but finally liberating for conceptions of gender. It is through the incorporation into trinitarian life that the possibility of gender fluidity emerges.

Coakley refers here to Gregory of Nyssa’s commentary on the Song of Songs, to point towards a more fluid reading of “threeness” in the godhead, one that contemporary theology has largely missed.<sup>60</sup> She suggests that Gregory not only provides a remedy for the common

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52. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 78.

53. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 8.

54. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 8.

55. Sarah Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God,” in *Powers and Submissions*, 153.

56. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 79.

57. Themes notable in the earlier writing of Augustine. See Coakley, “The Eschatological Body”, 162.

58. Sarah Coakley, “Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins on the Doctrine of the Trinity”, in Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (eds.), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 29–56.

59. Coakley, “Why Three?”, 37.

60. Sarah Coakley, “‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity: Current Analytic Discussion and ‘Cappadocian’ Theology”, in *Powers and Submissions*, 128.

tritheism of analytic scholarship, but also that a true reading of Gregory challenges the “three men” obsession, placing “emphasis on the ‘dizzying’ intimacy of the divine, that which is always being reconfigured and reconstructed”.<sup>61</sup> It is prayer (and especially contemplative forms of prayer) that provides the only context in which the mysterious and yet paradoxically unambiguous threeness of God becomes humanly apparent; indeed it was in describing the ascent of such spiritual practices that Gregory’s perception of the Trinity was most fluid.

This irreducible threeness in God cannot be insignificant for the matter of gendered twoness, since the human is precisely made in God’s (Trinitarian) image, and destined to be restored to that image. It must be, then, that in this fallen world, one lives, in some sense, between twoness and its transfiguring interruption.<sup>62</sup>

As a further clarification, Coakley uses the doctrine of incarnation to elucidate the implications of threeness and twoness; because, in the incarnation, “the son crosses (and we might say transgresses) the ultimate ontological binary “difference” – that between God and humanity”.<sup>63</sup> Coakley describes this destabilisation of incarnation profoundly as she reflects on the liturgical act of Eucharist.<sup>64</sup> As an ordained priest who stands *in persona Christi*, Coakley has found herself crossing from the traditionally understood “masculine” divine side of the altar, representing Christ, to the “feminine” side in representing the church. It is in this liturgical act that she finds a symbolic reference for the same gender subversion. The incarnation becomes the profound example of destabilisation: defying the binary and radically recasting twoness and difference.<sup>65</sup> The life of contemplation welcomes this recasting within the binaries of lived experience. In this way, gender is rendered both subjective and fluid to that which is more fundamental: “the workings of divine desire in us through the power and operation of the *third* that is the Holy Spirit”.<sup>66</sup>

It is this “particular sort” of systematic theology, the *théologie totale*, that Coakley argues is not only able to deal with the challenges of contemporary critique, but reveals to us a deeper engagement with gender. Such evolving transformation not only shapes and alters belief

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61. Coakley, “‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity”, 129.

62. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 10.

63. Sarah Coakley, “The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered”, in Miroslav Volf (ed.), *God’s Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 139.

64. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 79.

65. Coakley refers to the Ephesians text that explicitly genders this binary, and speaks of Christ as the bridegroom or husband of the church (“feminine”) which is yet his very own body. Again this points to a subtle fluidity or questioning of gender and binary, despite the normal patriarchal and subordinationist reading of this text. See Coakley, “The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered”, 140.

66. Coakley, “The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered”, 140.

theologically, but it negotiates a more malleable experience of gender in the one who contemplates. The disruption that has been experienced is none other than the Spirit itself. Gender and difference are now drawn into the purgation that accompanies the presence of the trinitarian God. As we are swept up into the life of the Trinity, "twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by threeness".<sup>67</sup>

#### 4. SARAH COAKLEY AND CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

Coakley's work poses fundamental questions and challenges to Christian feminism, and her systematic project could hold the key to a radical reconfiguration of the systematic task itself. In this section, I will turn to those specific aspects of Coakley's project that may alarm and illumine future feminists. The supposed subjectivity of Coakley's *théologie totale* may make some feminists uneasy. On the one hand early feminism fought to remove the subjective ontology associated with the feminine,<sup>68</sup> seeking to raise the status of women's objective powers of reason. If women are not afforded the same analytical capacities as their academic counterparts, they may appear to be banished once again from the powerful realm of objective reason. Yet such claims of reason have been powerfully critiqued,<sup>69</sup> making way for the affirmation of the "semiotic" so prevalent in French feminist theory. Here, subjectivity emerges through autonomous imagining and not within the framework of a monotheistic tradition. In an essay entitled "Divine Women", Irigaray argues that as long as a woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own.<sup>70</sup> From this perspective, a subjective stance before the Triune God becomes a further tool of subjugation, despite the powerful status that subjectivity is now afforded. In the face of such confusion, Coakley's approach signifies a major shift in feminist tactics.

Of course, Coakley is not a feminist writing a methodology for feminists; she is proposing a new form of systematics. The contemplative position assumed is considered to be the proper subjective stance for all theologians, regardless of gender. This is not to suggest that Coakley is sidestepping the feminist agenda; rather she places it at the very centre, refusing simply to accept the tag of "context" placed on the second sex. Fundamentally, her approach is to assert that

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67. Coakley, "Is There a Future?", 11.

68. This position is seen of course in the revolutionary writing of Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century. See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Pelican Classics.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). This is also true of early second wave feminism.

69. A decisive example of this critique is found in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

70. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 57.

theology (feminist or otherwise) begins with contemplation and not with contextual experience.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, Coakley rightly critiques the projections of a self-made-divine, as propagated by French theorists, for its inevitable relegation of the feminine to “eternal marginalization”.<sup>72</sup> She notes: “the kind of feminist epistemology I propose here involves a much wider range of evidences than is normally employed by systematians, and I would claim that that contributes to an expanded objectivity rather than to an intensified subjectivity”.<sup>73</sup> For the Christian feminist, then, subjectivity may be viewed as neither the tool of patriarchal subjugation, nor the vital ingredient of exclusive feminine divinisation. In Coakley’s proposal, both the “symbolic” and the “semiotic” are integral functions of a truly systematic approach.

However, if Irigaray’s proposal is rejected because of its failure to influence patriarchal systems, one might wonder whether Coakley has adequately described a real instrument for human-to-human transformation. She has argued that practices of vulnerable contemplation and asceticism become the means to develop genuine attentiveness to those on the margins.<sup>74</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou is not convinced, and while he begins his retrieval of the kenotic tradition through the work of Coakley, he believes that feminism requires something more to respond to the actual challenges of social justice.<sup>75</sup> But in response to the wider corpus of Coakley’s work, Gavin D’Costa reaches a different conclusion: “the still and quiet waiting of wordless prayer need not be rendered apolitical and passive – as it so often is – but can be seen to paradoxically hold together vulnerability and empowerment, expressing profound creaturely dependence upon a God who grants life and flourishing”.<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps what is most hopeful and suggestive about Coakley’s approach is not that it provides a theological concept of revolt, but that it proposes a real encounter with divine empowerment. Like any theory, feminist theology cannot and does not bring about social liberation. Coakley’s argument is that contemplative practices are truly transformative and empowering, and truly give rise to the prophetic voice and act.<sup>77</sup> One feminist theologian, Andrea Hollingsworth, has

71. As noted by Rachel Muers, “Book Reviews”, *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 9, no. 1 (2002), 122.

72. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 7.

73. Shortt, *God’s Advocates*, 73.

74. Coakley, “Is There a Future?”, 6.

75. Papanikolaou takes Coakley’s “power-in-vulnerability” thesis, and, in conversation with von Bathalsar’s Trinitarian view of kenosis, constructs a kenotic healing of abuse theory. See A. Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis and Abuse: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation”, *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2003), 41-65.

76. Gavin D’Costa, Book Review, 330.

77. Margaret Daphne Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1996), 110-111.

used Coakley's teaching on contemplation to explore "the ways charismatic piety might contribute to the empowerment of Pentecostal women in the majority world today".<sup>78</sup> Hollingsworth hopes that more Christian feminists will use Coakley's work to construct a pneumatology which links contemplative practices with women's empowerment. If the sins of patriarchy and all forms of oppression can be found in human – or, if you like, masculine – abuse of power (and in its root of "desire to control"), then power in the hands of the other may seem the most unlikely remedy. The potential for Christian feminism may lie precisely in the rediscovery of vulnerability – in the paradoxical power of the emptied Christ who overcomes the world.

Indeed, Coakley's brief yet suggestive hints towards an incarnational theology present a profound reimagining of *difference* for future feminist theology. Coakley herself articulates the crossing of ontological difference in the radical refutation of theism seen in the incarnation. In this "unfathomable act of penetration, the fundamental binary difference is transgressed and destabilized".<sup>79</sup> Here, one can also see the important implications for a Christian feminism still trying to untangle the complicated web of matter, evil and the feminine. Coakley's description of the incarnate interruption of difference can, I believe, be used to destabilise the spatial and non-spatial domains. Furthermore, her appropriation of gender fluidity provides a theological framework (and thus a hope and *telos*) within which Christian feminists could begin to build. The methodology of Coakley's *théologie totale* speaks of a distinctive Christian framework for encompassing the insights of French feminist semiotics. Acts of contemplation most certainly engage unconsciousness and welcome truth via imagination and aesthetics. The *théologie totale* goes beyond a theoretical application of secular feminist theories; it adapts and translates such theories within a broader, distinctively Christian systematic vision. In fact, within this approach, secular theory, though most welcome, would not determine the trajectory of outcome of theological enquiry.

As I have tried to show, behind the various facets of Coakley's theological project is her unique methodological approach. Her research crosses multiple disciplines, and her conclusions suggest that feminism is still called to explore new frontiers.

##### 5. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM?

While isolated features of Coakley's work can be used in ongoing gender studies, her real importance for Christian feminism arises from

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78. Andrea Hollingsworth, "Spirit and Voice: Toward a Feminist Pentecostal Pneumatology", *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 29, no. 2 (2007), 189-213.

79. Coakley, "The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered", 139.

her whole theological vision. The systematic project, as a coherent and alluring scheme, is itself the real goal towards which she has always been working. Whatever isolated contributions the feminist believes Coakley might offer are already enmeshed in this (frequently denounced) project of systematics. In short, Coakley's most important prophetic contribution to Christian feminism is nothing less than the reclamation of systematic theology.

But what would such a radical reclamation mean for feminist theology? There is no doubt that such an approach would mean a move away from contextual theologies. This is not to deny the specific contexts of women, but it is to affirm that gender is already at the substantive doctrinal centre of constructive theology. If feminists were to reclaim systematic theology, starting points for feminist theology would be altered and placed within a larger framework. Critical issues with which feminism has been largely unengaged, such as trinitarianism and themes of creation, free will and evil, would open themselves up to new (and gendered) analysis. What's more, a systematic approach would be freed from the conflicting accounts of women's normative experience. The starting point of theology would be defined not by laboured articulations of marginalised identities, but by fundamental doctrinal themes. In turn, such a move would free the individual theologian to pursue a more cohesive picture of gender's place in the theological landscape. The creativity of feminist writing would of course be welcomed in the kind of systematics Coakley proposes – a systematics in which multidisciplinary engagement is not only encouraged but necessary. The feminist would thus engage in a reflexivity of method, whereby traditional feminist concerns, such as metaphors for the divine and definitions of sin, would become fluid and malleable in the systematic process itself.

The picture I have suggested for the future of feminist theology suggests a period of difficulty, and even of radical revision. But it also offers great promise. In the work of Sarah Coakley, Christian doctrine has once again been imagined through the diverse lenses of Christian tradition. Yet in this instance it has been re-imagined as if gender truly mattered. It may well be that the future of Christian feminism lies in this kind of revitalised systematic theology.