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978-0-521-55228-8 - God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'

Sarah Coakley

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GOD, SEXUALITY, AND THE SELF

God, Sexuality, and the Self is a new venture in systematic theology. Sarah Coakley invites the reader to reconceive the relation of sexual desire and the desire for God, and – through the lens of prayer practice – to chart the intrinsic connection of this relation to a theology of the Trinity. The goal is to integrate the demanding ascetical undertaking of prayer with the recovery of lost and neglected materials from the tradition, and thus to reanimate doctrinal reflection both imaginatively and spiritually. What emerges is a vision of human longing for the triune God which is both edgy and compelling: Coakley's *théologie totale* questions standard shibboleths on 'sexuality' and 'gender', and thereby suggests a way beyond current destructive impasses in the churches. The book is clearly and accessibly written, and will be of great interest to all scholars and students of theology.

SARAH COAKLEY is Norris–Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. Her publications include *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge, 2000), *Powers and Submissions: Philosophy, Spirituality and Gender* (2002), *Pain and its Transformations* (2008), *The Spiritual Senses* (with Paul L. Gavriluk; Cambridge, 2011), and *Sacrifice Regained* (Cambridge, 2012). Coakley is also the editor of *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (2003) and co-editor (with Charles M. Stang) of *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (2009).

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For J. F. C.

*But we will have a way more liberal,
Than changing hearts, to join them, so we shall
Be one, and one another's all.*

John Donne, 'Lovers' Infiniteness' (1633)

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This book assumed its first, preliminary, shape a very long time ago, in the 1990s, when I was invited to give the Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge University. Soon afterwards, when I migrated to a new post at Harvard, I became rapidly – and vividly – aware of the barriers of cultural difference that made my undertaking, indeed my whole theological approach, bemusing to my new American interlocutors, and especially to those in the liberal religious tradition. The impenitent philosophical realism in this project, the absolute centrality granted to the practice of prayer, the talk of the entanglement of 'sexuality' and 'spirituality' (both terms laden with different cultural baggage in the two continents), the insistence that early Christian – and especially celibate, monastic – traditions could throw some crucial and positive light on celebrated current dilemmas about 'sex' and 'gender': these traits were seen as at best quaintly English or Anglican, and at worst manifestations of a feminist false consciousness. Thus, for a long time the project was shelved while I reflected with real seriousness on the force of such criticisms, adjusted to my new cultural milieu, and took stock of the concomitant resistance, in an era of postmodernity, to the very project of a Christian systematic theology.

At the same time, however, a set of ecclesiastical paroxysms was occurring: Christian churches worldwide, but especially Roman Catholics in Boston and Episcopalians and Anglicans in North America, England, and Africa, were thrown into new and profound crises by sexual scandals, divisive debates about homosexuality, and

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continuing disagreements about women, gender roles, and church leadership. In this context of simultaneous exposure and threatened schism, I became newly aware that the approach I had been essaying in my earlier lectures fitted neither the standard liberal nor conservative approaches to these debates; but it was not a compromise between them either. Rather, it cut across the disjunctive divides all too familiar from press coverage and mutual accusation, insisting instead that prayer and a renewed asceticism (not, note, repression) had to be at the heart of any attempt to solve the profound questions of desire with which the churches struggled; and – perhaps even more counterintuitively to many – it argued that only engagement with a God who has been ineluctably revealed and met as *triune* could hold the key to contemporary anxieties about sexuality, gender, and feminism. However, this was not the approach to the Trinity that had by this time become almost commonplace amongst 'social trinitarians', including some feminists, who looked to the persons of the Trinity as *imitable prototypes* for good political, ecclesial, and personal relations. On the contrary, I saw my approach as involving a much more profound, challenging, and disconcerting engagement with God in prayer and scriptural reflection to be easily subsumable into the existing range of political and ecclesial agendas. In short, it seemed I wanted to say something that was not otherwise being said, and which, in practice, proved difficult to be heard by the existing theological parties of dissent.

Yet thus it was that finally, after various other published prolegomena had been completed first, the last lap in the writing of this book was reached. I had written a book (*Powers and Submissions*) which had already focused centrally on the practice of contemplation; I had followed that with edited studies of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite. So now theological courage returned, and a reconceived version of my original text was forged

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into the first volume of a larger systematic project which, as it is planned, will eventually have several parts. As currently conceived, the second volume (*Knowing Darkly*) will adumbrate my theological anthropology of the 'spiritual senses', and at the same time turn to the vexed modern category of 'race'. The third volume (*Punish and Heal*) will address the public realm of the polis with its secular institutions of prison and hospital, and so re-examine the doctrines of sin and atonement. Christology (*Flesh and Blood*) will advisedly be left till last, not as demotion but as climax: the mystery of the incarnation will be approached via a theology of the eucharist.

The rationale for my newly conceived understanding of the task of systematic theology, and for its intrinsic connection to these pressing contemporary questions about sex, sexuality, and gender (terms to be carefully defined), is provided in the opening sections of this book. This volume on the Trinity, however, is just the initial segment in the larger systematic project, to be entitled overall, *On Desiring God*. Thus to reconceive questions of sexuality and gender in relation to the trinitarian God is but the first, albeit adventurous, step in a new theological landscape.

This book is also an experiment in a form of writing that academic theology unfortunately increasingly eschews. It aims to be comprehensible to the general educated reader as well as to the professional theologian, but without – I trust – any loss of scholarly acumen. It is written, certainly, for colleagues and students; but no less too for those in the churches – and those who hover agonizingly at the edges of institutional religion – who occasionally wonder how Christianity remains intellectually defensible as a worldview at all, and how it may go forward in the face of the exposure of its massive historic collusion in gender blindness and abuse of power, its tragic (and continuing) mismanagement of the economy of desire. In short, it is written for all those who continue to seek a vision of God for today, one attractive

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enough to magnetize their deepest human longings so as to *order* their desires in relation to God.

To set oneself this task of communication to a wider theological readership is not easy, and involves a certain risk for the established academic, especially one who is now subject to regular government 'assessments'. The author in the academy habitually writes with one eye on the reviewer, friend or foe; and the tendency to heap up extraneous references, to engage in self-aggrandizing polemics, or to employ impressive, if inflated, jargon is at times almost irresistible. Here, however, I have consciously attempted to deflect such traits; and I have enlisted the help of several long-suffering students, friends, and parishioners to call me to account on this score. If the academic reader seeks further references, or indications of my own engagement in current scholarly debates, I here refer also to my other writings; and I provide in the bibliographic notes at the end of each chapter the detailed links to the material that has informed my argument. In this way I have kept the number of footnotes to a minimum. I have also supplied a glossary of technical terms at the end of the volume. I take this calculated risk – of relatively simple and direct communication – for a reason. For even as systematic theology today undergoes a remarkable revival, it is in grave danger of rendering itself socially insignificant by sheer obscurity of expression.

Yet my alternative form of writing is in no way a resort to a popular mode, let alone to anti-intellectualism. Indeed, I strongly resist certain false and stereotypical disjunctions: between belief and practice, thought and affect, or, for that matter, academic and accessible writing. As the argument of the book unfurls, it will become evident why the theological method employed here is appropriately conjoined with a direct style of writing. For the book is written for all those who struggle at the intersection of

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the theological, the political, the spiritual, and the sexual, as well as for those whose particular theological vocation it is to interpret this nexus. The method I here call *théologie totale* involves a complex range of interdisciplinary skills; and to link the theoretical to the pastoral in this way is a task of some considerable spiritual and intellectual delicacy, just as to write so as to be 'understood of the people' makes its own ascetical demands on the author.

So much by way of brief introduction to this book's undertaking. The rest of this preface must now be devoted to the giving of thanks.

Despite the long delay in production, I remain much indebted, first, to the Hulsean electors at Cambridge for the honour of my original election; and I am especially grateful to those who gave me hospitality and friendly criticism during my weekly visits to Cambridge from Oriel College, Oxford, where I was then teaching. Nicholas Lash, David Ford, John Milbank, Tim Jenkins, Brian Hebblethwaite, and Janet Martin Soskice must be singled out for my special thanks, and their influence may be detected at points in what I have written. But I am no less grateful to the other senior members at Cambridge who attended the lectures, and to the gratifyingly large audiences of students, who also offered their comments.

At Harvard I was fortunate to enjoy the criticism (sometimes deservedly severe) of graduate students in several seminars and classes devoted to the subject of the Trinity. Their influence is particularly evident in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book. I thank them all, and trust that what I have learned from them, and also from my Harvard feminist colleagues, as I gradually became attuned to the American theological milieu, will be manifest in what I have written. Others outside Harvard did me the honour of engaging meticulously – whether approvingly or critically – with the

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substantial argument about patristic trinitarianism, and its systematic import, that lies at the heart of this book: Lewis Ayres, Brian Daley, SJ, Kevin Hector, Andrew Louth, Kilian McDonnell, OSB, Robert Murray, SJ, the late Lloyd Paterson, Columba Stewart, OSB, Kallistos Ware, Robert Wilken, and the late Maurice Wiles.

Various Harvard research assistants – Philip McCosker, Robert St Hilaire, Philip Francis – were a considerable help to me in gathering bibliographical materials and nobly lugging them to my door. The two Philips, especially, ensured in their distinctive ways that this book got finished, Philip McCosker invaluable assisting me again in Cambridge with the bibliographic notes in the final push, as did Mark McInroy and David Grumett as research associates there earlier. Michon Matthiesen (then a doctoral student at Boston College) was a constant source of encouragement at a time when I was despairing of completion. I must also mention the continuing luxury of a 'priest's hole' in which to hide, pray, and write, which was for a while vouchsafed to me by the rector of the local Jesuit community in Cambridge, Massachusetts, John Privett, SJ, who claimed he was paying me back for some hiding done by Jesuits in English houses 'in more turbulent times'. My parishioners in Boston, Deborah and Joseph Dyer, also gave me such sanctuary. For me, the solitude they provided was an invaluable aid to reflection.

Despite the cultural shifts I underwent during my sojourn in North America, this book remains – I am assured by my critics – a discernibly Anglican product. Be that as it may, I am glad to record my indebtedness to the Church of England Doctrine Commission (on which I served for ten years long ago, from 1982 to 1992) for the stimulus it provided to my thinking at that time; and more especially to Bishop Alec Graham (sometime chair of the commission), and to Church House Publications, for allowing me to reuse the material

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on charismatic spirituality that I originally wrote for one of the Doctrine Commission reports (*We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, London, Church House Publications, 1991, ch. 2). As will be clear from that material (now reworked as Chapter 4 of this book), I owe a great deal to the people in both of the charismatic groups in Lancashire whose membership I investigated. They welcomed me into their worship, and in their interviews with me generously gave me their time, their trust, and the depth of their spiritual insights. As I hope Chapter 4 will show, there is much buried theological treasure in the parochial life of contemporary churches and groups. The late Mary Douglas was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement as I sought to bring social science and theological methods creatively together in this regard.

Without two periods of sabbatical leave from Harvard, the first generously funded by the Henry Luce III Fellowship programme, the second by the Lilly Foundation, this book – and the other related projects, mentioned above – could never have been completed. The first period of leave also allowed me to spend some time in Princeton gathering materials for the iconographical chapter of this volume at the Index of Christian Art; the staff there were particularly gracious and helpful. On the practical publishing side, Alex Wright at the Cambridge University Press, and then his successors Ruth Parr and Kevin Taylor, encouraged and assisted me all along the way. When I asked for yet more time to redevelop this text as the first volume of a proposed systematic theology, Kevin Taylor remained unflappably supportive. And Kate Brett, Laura Morris, and Anna Lowe *firmly* helped to bring the project to completion.

Finally, as any honest author knows, and especially any feminist scholar, books are not written (let alone finished) without certain costs and compensatory adjustments to the lives of others in the

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family. Our daughters Edith and Agnes have over the years developed a good line in lampooning technical trinitarian jargon, and will doubtless be glad to see this particular project complete; while I have struggled with the Trinity they have grown into womanhood. My beloved husband Chip can alone count the cost to domestic comfort, or to the speed of his own research, and he must be mightily tired of hearing about the 'progress' of this book. He thought it would never be done. My thanks to him may be inadequate, but to him I dedicate this first volume of systematics in its final form.

Trinity Sunday, 2012

Abbreviations

The following acronyms are to be found within the bibliographical notes and footnotes:

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
FC	Fathers of the Church
GNO	Gregorii Nysseni Opera
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i>
TCL	Translations of Christian Literature