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

Sarah Coakley

Excerpt

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## Prelude: the arguments of this book

Institutional Christianity is in crisis about 'sexuality'. Its detractors in the supposedly secularized and liberal climes of Northern Europe, who nonetheless yearn for what they call a satisfying 'spirituality', see this crisis as a sign of its failure to engage the contemporary world. Its conservative defenders, to be found mainly in religiously observant parts of North America and throughout the southern hemisphere, take it as an indication of cultural decadence and a deficiency in scriptural obedience. Probably both sides are right, but perhaps neither, exactly; this book notably does not aim to solve the problems in the terms currently under discussion. Instead, it aims to go deeper: to come at the issue that is now called sexuality through a different route – that of the divine itself.

For this is a book about God, and more specifically about the Christian God. It is 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'. Further (and this may seem odd to the contemporary reader), this book is written in the fundamental conviction that no cogent answer to the contemporary Christian question of the trinitarian God can be given without charting the necessary and *intrinsic* entanglement of human

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sexuality and spirituality in such a quest: the questions of right contemplation of God, right speech about God, and right ordering of desire all hang together. They emerge in primary interaction with Scripture, become intensified and contested in early Christian tradition, and are purified in the crucible of prayer. Thus the problem of the Trinity cannot be solved without addressing the very questions that seem least to do with it, questions which press on the contemporary Christian churches with such devastating and often destructive force: questions of sexual justice, questions of the meaning and stability of gender roles, questions of the final theological significance of sexual desire.

It is the purpose of this introductory prelude to explain in advance how the various lines of argument in this book fit together. An overview will supply a perspective on the whole.

## DESIRE, PRAYER, AND THE TRINITY IN THE 'FATHERS'

A perception of the significance of the right ordering of desire was not, of course, alien to some of the greatest early Christian thinkers of the late antique era; and a central part of my task in this book will be to explore how, for them, the perception of 'perfect relation in God' (the Trinity) was fundamentally attuned, and correlated, to their concomitant views about men and women, gender roles, and the nature of 'erotic' desire. Not that we can oblige any contemporary reader to accept their positions without critique (they are in any case various); but rather I shall aim, first, to lay bare the subtle – and forgotten – ways in which these elements in their thought connect, such that they may now illumine contemporary theological choices. At the same time it will become clear that the way they speak of desire has a different valence from today's post-Freudian context, and one as yet not cognizant of modern evocations of 'sexuality'.

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This difference is itself revealing, as I shall show. Some of the most significant figures in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, especially) feature large in this volume because of the fascinatingly *different* ways in which they relate their perceptions of intense desire for God, their often problematic feelings about sexual desire at the human level, and their newly creative understandings of God as Trinity.

Yet the modern textbook account of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity has largely obscured these crucial points of connection, often by concentrating more on philosophical issues of coherence than on the fathers' biblical exegesis or ascetical exercise. It is not customary, therefore, to study the fourth-century Gregory of Nyssa's (fascinating) views about virginity and marriage while *simultaneously* exploring his contribution to the development of technical trinitarian terms; it is not usual, either, to reflect on Augustine's understanding of sexual relations while studying his magisterial theological reflections on trinitarian analogies. But this omission is odd, not least because these two authors – prime progenitors of different, but mammothly influential, trinitarian visions of the Godhead – *themselves* saw these points of connection and discoursed upon them explicitly (see Chapter 6). And they did so under the impress both of scriptural injunction and of ascetic dictate, not merely by taking thought philosophically. Both of them, too, had extremely sophisticated ways of insisting how God cannot be compared or likened to anything creaturely (how a relationship with God is necessarily *unlike* any other), as well as a keen sense of how one's particular vision of God nonetheless also informs the whole realm of the personal and the political. Once one grasps these nexuses of association which they offer, one is also able to see – intriguingly –

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that their two trinitarian traditions are not as disjunctive as they have long been presented; and here I contribute to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to reconsider the supposed gulf between early 'Eastern' and 'Western' views of the Trinity.

In addition to misrepresenting (or flattening) the trinitarian developments of the fourth and fifth centuries, the standard modern textbook narrative has more fundamentally and fatally obscured, as is argued in some detail in the earlier part of this book (Chapter 3), much of the richness of the earlier, *emergent* stage of trinitarian thought forms in the first three centuries of the Christian era. The picture here is more complicated than is the case with the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine; because it must be admitted that polemical patristic authors of huge significance (the great fourth-century defender of the council of Nicaea, Athanasius, par excellence) have themselves been strongly implicated in purveying the conciliar-based narrative I now seek to query or complexify. That is, it is not just the story of councils and creeds and dominant ecclesial and political personalities to which one should attend in an account of developing trinitarianism; and nor should the only principle of selectivity be a focus on an approximation to a presumed later 'orthodoxy' (in the sense of assent to creedal propositions). By repressing or marginalizing much of the early history of the doctrine of the *Spirit* (messy and erratic as it may seem), accounts of early trinitarianism that give sole attention to the status of the 'Son' vis-à-vis the 'Father' up to the mid fourth century, miss much of the drama: *at one and the same time* the crucial prayer-based logic of emergent trinitarianism is missed, and the related, and complicated entanglements with questions of human gender, power, and desire mutely disregarded.

So at the heart of this book is a proposed rereading of the formative, patristic sources for the origins of the doctrine of the

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Trinity (Chapters 3 and 6). This task in itself already involves – in addition to the primary scriptural and doctrinal exegesis – the application of some contemporary scholarly methods (sociology of religion, cultural theory, gender analysis, for instance) not generally brought, even now, to the textbook account of the 'history of dogma'. But this – it should be stressed immediately – is not a *reductive* reading. It does not presume, that is, that the history of doctrinal development can be explained away in terms of something else: bids for power, for instance, or sociological forces, or manifestations of repressed sexuality, or devious attempts to occlude the voices of the oppressed. Some of these factors were indeed undeniably in play, to one extent or another, in this narrative history, and will be duly acknowledged; but they cannot exhaust the account of what was taking place theologically and *spiritually*.

My own reading of this early patristic period, then, neither reduces the history of the development of trinitarian doctrine to non-theological forces, nor assumes that the achievement of classical orthodoxy is the arrival at some stable place of spiritual safety. 'Orthodoxy' as mere propositional assent needs to be carefully distinguished from 'orthodoxy' as a demanding, and ongoing, spiritual *project*, in which the language of the creeds is personally and progressively assimilated. Nor, on the other hand, does my approach see the very emergence of Nicene orthodoxy as a kind of patriarchal plot – or a suppression of a more subtle, if élite, engagement with 'gnostic' wisdom. Rather, my proposal is both more modest and more complex. It is to set the story of the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity within a constellation of considerations – spiritual, ascetical, sexual, social – which the dominant modern textbook tradition has tended either to ignore, or to sideline, in favour of its more purely cerebral account of the intellectual issues, along with the imperial

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political backdrop. But it is just as much to query, and correct, some of the more simplistic and reductive *reactions* to that text-book tradition, as well.

So my approach involves the highlighting of certain neglected patristic texts, and the collocation of texts not usually brought together, in order to expose a narrative of an explicitly prayer-based access to the workings of the divine. This form of access, I argue, not only begged trinitarian shape from its inception, but *simultaneously* raised insistent questions about the relation of sexual desire and desire for God. My thesis is that this nexus of association (between trinitarian thought, prayer of a deep sort, and questions of 'erotic' meaning), caused sufficient political difficulty to press the prayer-based approach to the Trinity to the edges of the more public, conciliar discussion of the doctrine, even in the patristic period itself, and further marginalized it as far as modern histories of dogma were concerned.

But by the end of the book it will be argued that the critical retrieval of this spiritual nexus today has great potential theological importance. It provides the resources for the presentation of a contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire* – a vision of God's trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them. It indicates how God the 'Father', in and through the Spirit, both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son. Here ethics and metaphysics may be found to converge; here divine desire can be seen as the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation. Moreover, this ascetic approach brings its own distinctive solution, finally, to the ongoing feminist problem of divine naming: the right language for God is not something to be 'fixed' at the outset by mere

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political fiat, but is part and parcel of the programme of the ascetic transformation of desire (Chapter 7).<sup>1</sup>

## THE MEANING OF 'DESIRE'

Before I go any further in this account I must say something important about the very category of 'desire' in this book, and its relation to words more commonly utilized in contemporary debates about religion and sexual ethics: 'sex', 'sexuality', 'gender', and 'orientation'. When people talk about 'sex' and 'sexuality' today, they often presume that the first and obvious point of reference is sexual intercourse or other genital acts. (This is especially true in North America, I have found, where the word 'sexuality' has more of these overtones of actual physical enactment than in Britain.) The presumption, then, is that *physiological* desires and urges are basic and fundamental in the sexual realm; and to this is often added a second presumption: that unsatisfied (physical) sexual desire is a necessarily harmful and 'unnatural' state. From such a perspective, priestly or monastic celibacy is indeed monstrous – a veritable charade, necessarily masking subterfuge and illicit sexual activity. A popularized form of Freudianism is often invoked in support of this latter view about the 'impossibility' of celibacy. But this is odd; because Freud himself – who changed his mind more than once about these matters in the course of his career – never taught that social harm comes from what he called 'sublimation'. On the

<sup>1</sup> For this reason I must beg feminist readers not to prejudge my reasons for continuing to use the language of 'Father' in the trinitarian context. In my view, neither the straightforward obliteration of 'Father' language, nor the 'feminization' of the Spirit (or indeed of the Son), constitute in themselves satisfactory strategies in the face of the profound feminist critique of classical Christian thought forms and patterns of behaviour. These problems can only be met satisfactorily by an *ascetic* response which attacks idolatry at its root. These conclusions are finally drawn in Chapter 7 below.

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contrary, he argued that sublimation is entirely necessary for civilization to endure. Chaos would ensue otherwise.

Freud's own views about desire ('Eros', in his later work) became, in the course of his life, more attuned to the Platonic view of desire that he had earlier eschewed. However, he never himself subscribed to the view, expressed classically in Plato's dialogue the *Symposium*, that 'erotic' desire has a propulsion to the eternal form of 'beauty', and that one must therefore spend one's life in an attempt to climb back up the ladder of (progressively purified) desire to that divine realm where the full 'revelation' of beauty may occur.<sup>2</sup> Freud, in rejecting the God of classical Jewish and Christian monotheism, of course rejected also the possibility of such a *divine* meaning in 'Eros'. But early Christianity, in contrast – at least those strands of it heavily influenced by forms of Platonism – was enormously drawn to the *Symposium's* vision of 'desire'; and from the second and third century onwards it began to discourse on this matter intensively. Although it could find little or nothing in Jesus's teaching about *erōs* as such, it did not read his views on love (*agapē*) as in any way disjunctive from the Platonic tradition of *erōs*. And what it did inherit from Jewish scripture, and then from the earliest rabbinic exegesis of scripture, was a fascination with the symbol of sexual union as a 'type' – indeed, in the *Song of Songs* the highest type – of God's relation to Israel or Church.

The entanglement of this Platonic tradition of 'desire' with the emergence of ascetic forms of Christian life enjoining celibacy on its members, however, has made it a strand of thinking that is particularly problematic, not only for contemporary 'sub-Freudianism' (as I may perhaps dub the 'sexual teaching' of the secular newspapers and glossy magazines), but more especially for contemporary feminism. If

<sup>2</sup> *Symposium*, 210 A–212 C.



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'desire' is *really* about desire for God, and involves some sort of 'purification' of physical expressions of sexual love, how can Plato's programme not involve a kicking away, at some point in the ascent, of the ladder that connects the divine to everything classically associated with the 'woman': materiality, physical desire, marriage, childbirth? Is not this tradition of ascetic Platonist Christianity arguably the one most *inimical* to feminist concerns? And is it not equally – if not more – problematic for the contentious contemporary issue of homoeroticism, which the Platonic text both assumes, and then rises 'above'?

It is nonetheless the central project of this systematic theology as a whole to give new coinage to this tradition of Christian Platonism, but to re-evaluate it and re-express it in ways that meet and answer some of the most difficult challenges that contemporary culture presents to the churches. Not the least of these challenges is the demonstration of the way in which the wisdom of this tradition is as applicable to those who are sexually active as to those who are not – whether 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual'. There is no denying, then, that such a re-expression of this tradition is required, even as it raises its own implicit critique of a contemporary erotic malaise. My primary patristic interlocutors in this volume, as I have already intimated, are Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine; to them is added (later, in Chapter 7) some borrowings from the distinctive metaphysical framework of the early sixth-century Christian Platonist, Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>3</sup> But for the purposes of this

<sup>3</sup> It should be added that each volume of this systematic theology concentrates on a different period of the classical Christian tradition. As volume II of this systematics will reveal, it is finally the view of desire proposed by the sixteenth-century Carmelites (Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross) which most significantly informs the systematics as a whole; but since their own thought was profoundly informed by the patristic heritage that is under scrutiny in this book, the effect of looking at the *epistemic* significance of their thinking in volume II will build cumulatively on what is discussed here.

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contemporary systematic project, I have to make these authors speak afresh; and the undergirding ideas are these.

First, Freud must be – as it were – turned on his head. It is not that physical 'sex' is basic and 'God' ephemeral; rather, it is God who is basic, and 'desire' the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source. Hence, in a sense that will be parsed more precisely as this book unfolds, *desire is more fundamental than 'sex'*. It is more fundamental, ultimately, because desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness 'in the image'. But in God, 'desire' of course signifies no *lack* – as it manifestly does in humans. Rather, it connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God's own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.

It follows that, if desire is divinely and ontologically basic, not only is human 'sex' to be cast as created in its light, but 'gender' – which nowadays tends to connote the way embodied relations are carved up and culturally adjudicated – is most certainly also to be set in right subjection to that desire. In short, the immense cultural anxiety that, in a secular society, is now accorded to 'sex' and 'gender' (and to their contested relations) can here be negotiated in a different, theological light. Not that 'sex' and 'gender' do not *matter*; on the contrary, the profound difference that incarnation makes to Christian Platonism will prove that they do indeed so 'matter', and deeply so. But it is not in the way that contemporary secular gender theory would (almost obsessively) have it. Such an obsession, I dare to suggest, resides in the lack of *God* as a final point of reference. As for 'orientation', too (another modern verbal invention): what orientation could be more important than the orientation to *God*, to divine desire? That is why this particular