Why the world needs Sarah Coakley

Coakley's kind of theology requires more than claims. It needs prayer.

by Sarah Morice Brubaker in the November 22, 2016 issue

Sarah Coakley. Photo © Stephen Bond.

Let us imagine a truly dreadful possibility. What if there had been no Sarah Coakley, theologian? (I should stipulate that in this alternate history Sarah Coakley is not written out of existence but merely finds some other fulfilling form of labor.) To be

sure, this seems unlikely. According to interviews, Coakley knew she wanted to be a theologian by age 12. But let us imagine that through some catastrophic mishap Coakley's prodigious theological talents had been effectively squashed early on.

In this dire reality, there would have been no *Powers and Submissions*, no *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*; no *God, Sexuality, and the Self* . We would have none of the edited volumes that Coakley has shaped, nor the graduate students whose work she has helped to guide. The 2012 Gifford Lectures would have been given by somebody else. How might theology be different?

Academic theology might well have produced someone formally similar to Coakley, but I dare say that person would be less interesting. To be sure, Coakley's work stands at such appealing intersections that its appeal can tend to seem inevitable. Of course the spiritual senses can provide a way out of contemporary theological cul-de-sacs. Of course it is worthwhile for theologians to consider transformative desire, particularly if we want to say something thoughtful about bodies instead of scolding or ignoring them. Of course theology will need to avail itself of the best of other disciplines and should result in a vision for life rather than just a set of claims. Judging from the regard in which Coakley's work is held, these are the kinds of moves that many people want contemporary theology to make. They are certainly more invigorating than either cranky nostalgia or fatuous individualism, to mention two of the more shopworn theological options.

Yet we ought not to mistake appeal for predictability. These were not obvious areas to work in until Coakley did so. If they seem obvious to us, it is only because Coakley argues for them so persuasively. Had there been no Sarah Coakley, theologian, someone else might have been prompted by similar theological longings, but it is hard to imagine that the work itself would have been so creative or so beautifully rendered. Now that Coakley has published the first of her projected four-volume systematics—*God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*—her considerable influence will surely grow, much to the benefit of anyone with a stake in theology.

For Coakley, contemplative Christian practice goes hand in glove with feminist theological method. According to Linn Marie Tonstad, who interviewed Coakley for a chapter in *Key Theological Thinkers*, Coakley's "characteristic preoccupations" emerged when she was a Georgia Harkness Fellow at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1970s. Already immersed in both scriptural studies and philosophical theology,

Coakley began participating in daily Eucharist and practicing contemplative prayer. In the process Coakley internalized the notion that theology is done by bodies—rather than, say, incorporeal minds that somehow manage to get words onto paper. This attention to bodies provided a point of contact with feminist thought, the need for which was apparently made clear enough at Oxford. In a profile by Matthew Reisz for *Times Higher Education*, Coakley recalls that she spent two "very painful" years at Oxford in the early 1990s, where she encountered maddening assumptions that "I couldn't really do the job but had been appointed to look nice."

Attention to bodies continues to drive Coakley's deep engagement with feminist thought. But her feminism is not unfiltered liberal feminism. For Coakley the desideratum of theology is not autonomy or self-mastery, even for those to whom it has been unjustly denied. Rather, theology's desire, and humanity's desire, is for God. And desiring God means practicing unmastery, relinquishing control, and emptying oneself—all theological themes that, Coakley acknowledges, can make other feminist scholars nervous.

In a world where women continue to struggle simply to have their claims about their own lives taken seriously, lauding "unmastery" seems to hand misogynists an easy out. *Now now, ladies!* one can hear them saying. *Don't you know that God is more pleased by unmastery and self-denial than by asserting yourself? Why even this lady theologian says so! Now hush.* (And indeed, one sometimes wonders whether a few of Coakley's more conservative admirers believe as much, perhaps more than they realize.) But if such a critic would not accept Coakley's terms, neither would she accept theirs. For Coakley will not concede that it is a bad wager to yield to God through prayer, even in the midst of suffering. To freely submit to God is to make oneself available for transformation by the One who refuses to be controlled or contained by any social structure, including patriarchy.

It would be easy to make this claim badly. One could, for example, ignore the fact that "free submission" is a tall order. If I do not really know myself, and if my desires are shaped by forces I cannot detect and never agreed to, then how shall I ever know that I have submitted freely to God? In the turbulent dark waters of my psyche there are certainly many chunks of patriarchal flotsam. Maybe I get a self-gratifying thrill out of being submissive, in ways I fail to understand and therefore mislabel as "pious." For that matter, how can I even be sure that the God to whom I submit myself is the one who will transform my desires and has the potential to transform

the world? How do I know I am not submitting myself to an idol?

Coakley handles this objection easily enough: of course I am submitting to an idol, at least at first. Being transformed by prayer takes time, and it involves a lot of waiting. (That, incidentally, is one of the reasons Coakley will not accept a disjunction between systematic theology and spiritual practice. The kind of systematic theology she is undertaking—*theologie totale*, in her parlance—needs to avail itself of more than claims. It requires prayer. This is perhaps the most astounding aspect of Coakley's theology. If prayer does nothing, then Coakley's theology does not hold. I am not sure which is more remarkable: the fact that this is true of Coakley's theology, or the fact that it is not true of more systematic theologies.) During that time of waiting, the Spirit is changing me, drawing me toward the first person of the Trinity by transforming my desires. Those transformed desires, in turn, enable my ongoing consent to this ongoing submission. As the Spirit reveals to me the God for whom I long, I freely yield myself more and more completely.

In *Powers and Submissions, The New Asceticism,* and *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, as well as in many articles and essays, Coakley meditates on the gendered aspects of such transformation. Unlike theologians who want to fix the gender dynamic—by contrasting "feminine" creation with a "masculine" Godhead, for example, or "feminine" receptivity with "masculine" activity—Coakley shows that divine desire proves the gender binary to be labile and slippery. In prayer, in liturgy, and in the ascetic life, masculine signifiers transform into feminine ones and vice versa. The very gender binary winds up being interrupted time and again by the Spirit, who—as triune Person—is the consummate interrupter of binaries. Gregory of Nyssa is Coakley's constant companion here, joined by such diverse figures as Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, and Clement of Alexandria.

If the remaining three volumes of Coakley's systematics consisted of nothing more than variations on these themes, they will be worth reading. However, Coakley has lately given us teasers that her next volumes will contain sustained consideration of race and class in addition to gender. Judging from the précis she provided in a recent talk, these arguments promise to be quite exciting indeed. That talk, delivered in March 2016 as part of Princeton's Annie Kinkead Warfield lecture series, is titled "Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation." In it Coakley stipulates that any disentanglement of race and gender is an artificial one, for in reality "they intersect all the way across and down." Yet their histories and deployments have not been the same, and as such, each warrants its own

discussion.

In much the same way that she reconstructs the category of “submission” in order to subvert its dreadfully gendered history, Coakley plans to reconstruct that racialized category “darkness.” Darkness, like submission, has been used to reinforce systems of oppression—not least in the epistemologies coming out of the Enlightenment, the very name of which lets us know how its chief thinkers regarded darkness. But darkness has other theological meanings which align beautifully with Coakley’s overall approach. Theological darkness can name, and has named, a kind of noetic yielding to God: a dispossession of one’s own longing for intellectual stability, so that one can be more fully conformed to Christ.

This is not to suggest that there is any sort of essential correlation between “dark” ways of knowing and people whose bodies have been coded as “dark” by modern hierarchies of race. Such a claim would leave the construct of whiteness altogether intact, whereas Coakley intends to subvert it. It is to say, though, that such contemplative darkness can, according to Coakley, subvert the modern category of race in life-giving ways. So, too, can the spiritual disciples who sustain such darkness.

Coakley does not come up with these ideas having spoken to no people of color whatsoever. She does not simply muse about how race seems to work, having considered its conceptual machinery and read many books on the subject. Instead, Coakley bases her theology on what she calls “field work.” Coakley’s work has always shown deep regard for the spiritual lives of people who are not professional theologians with impressive CVs. But in her recent work, this theme comes through even more strongly.

The forthcoming volumes of Coakley’s systematics promise a treatment of race drawn from her pastoral work with prisoners, many of them men of color (as well it should, given the degree to which our racist society manages dark persons by putting them in prison). Surely a theology meaning to challenge Enlightenment forms of knowledge cannot proceed by standing at a safe distance and musing about the lives of people one has not met. To the extent that Coakley, a white woman, allows her theology to be transformed—by the Spirit through prayer, and by incarcerated men of color through her relationships with them—she goes further than many white theologians. If I may say so, this white theologian appreciates the reminder and the example.

That, oddly enough, brings us to another aspect of Coakley's thought: her theological conversation with the sciences. If my reading is correct, Coakley's thoughts on evolution, far from being a departure from her other work, share the same basic commitments as the aspects of her theology already discussed.

Recently Coakley has sought out dialogue with evolutionary theory, offering theological riffs on such notions as sacrifice, altruism, selfishness, and so forth. Like many of Coakley's other theological moves, this one invites controversy. Coakley acknowledges as much in the first of her Gifford Lectures, which she opens with a consideration of Adam Gifford himself. "It is often said," Coakley remarks, "that Gifford intended natural theology to be altogether abstracted from the complications of Christian revelation and grace," a sort of "flat plane" where science, philosophy, and theology can meet in an "uncontentious quest for truth." To say that this notion is outdated is an understatement; virtually no theologian wants to be seen as holding this position anymore. Indeed, theology's allergy to science has become a problem in its own right, according to Coakley, with an entire generation of theologians having been trained without any real understanding of science. This limits the scope and imagination of those people who still care enough about theology to try and do it, while leaving everyone else to conclude that science entails atheism.

For Coakley, this condition simply will not do. For lack of a shared understanding of human flourishing, we human beings are tearing each other apart, often literally. Therefore, the theologian "is morally compelled to adopt such an apologetic task." That apologetic task involves engaging in dialogue with evolutionary theory—itself in a state of upheaval, on Coakley's account—while maintaining a discipline of prayer. One engages in this conversation not because one hopes to hear a biologist say something that sounds vaguely Christian, and thus secure for theology some legitimacy it was believed to lack. Rather, one engages in this apologetic task because to do so is to open oneself up to the Spirit. "I strategically dispossess myself to the Spirit's blowing where it will into all truth; just as, in prayer each day, I try to practice that same dispossession to the Spirit's calling of me more deeply in the life of Christ, bracing myself for the bumps and lurches and surprises I have been led precisely by scripture to expect."

Understandably, this approach raises the hackles of some who are concerned about theology's prophetic capacity. A particularly lucid statement of this worry is found in Amy Laura Hall and Kara Slade's article in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, "The Single

Individual in Ordinary Time: Theological Engagements with Sociobiology.” The authors are understandably concerned that such a strategy could “mistake our work for God’s work,” thereby leading to an “over-emphasis on human responsibility for collaborating in ventures presuming to mark evolutionary progress.” Presumably this worry will either be confirmed or addressed in the remaining volumes of Coakley’s systematics. On my reading, though, Coakley’s dialogue with scientists is not to be understood first and foremost as a position in a theological debate. Rather, her dialogue with evolutionary biologists is akin to her dialogue with incarcerated men of color. Both involve talking to those from whom one has been told to seek protection.

And here again, Coakley’s work returns to the indispensability of contemplative prayer. Does theology need to be protected? Do Christians need to be very careful whom they talk to? On the one hand, certainly. In a world marked by sin, my desire for God can so easily be misdirected, and there are plenty of people and corporations eager to help me misdirect it in the way that benefits them most. One must proceed with care.

On the other hand, it is Coakley’s audacious claim that what “protects” theology is not its skill at hunkering down. It is prayer. By dispossessing oneself through prayer, the theologian may trust that no lasting harm will come from listening to other people. To the contrary, the Spirit is ready to transform me into someone who can listen to anyone, parse their words, love them, and learn about God and humanity from them—albeit in ways that neither they nor I would ever expect.

A version of this article appears in the November 23 print edition under the title “Theology through prayer.”