AOSIS

A grammar of trinitarian experience? On Sarah Coakley's *théologie totale*

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The Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley has attempted to think trinitarian doctrine in explicitly experiential terms. Her erotically-charged, pneumatically-centred account of salvific incorporation attempts to articulate, on the one hand, an account of the purgation of desire and the senses through ascetic practice, contemplative prayer and liturgical habituation, while also maintaining, on the other hand, the priority of spiritual appetition as being itself the route through which believers are, gradually, drawn into the trinitarian life.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study makes a contribution by critically articulating an aspect of Coakley's '*théologie totale*', a new proposal for the method of systematic and dogmatic theology, one that is centrally focused on bringing in a wider interdisciplinary focus to the practice of systematic theology.

Keywords: Sarah Coakley; trinity; desire; feminism; pneumatology.

Section: I

Sarah Coakley, an Anglican theologian and philosopher, is continually making raids on the theological 'borderlands'.[1] In doing so, she is paying homage to Donald MacKinnon, a one-time Norris-Hulse Professor – the chair she herself occupied until quite recently.[2] Her theological oeuvre indeed confirms this picture: a survey of her publications presents a significant variety of interests and methodical approaches. Her early research was centred on the history of modern theology, namely Ernst Troeltsch (1988), but today she is known for a brand of theological feminism that transgresses the divides of philosophy of religion in both 'continental' and 'analytic' guises. More recently, in a 'slow-burn' project that has been decades in the making, Coakley published in 2013 the first volume of her projected systematic theology (2013), with the second volume due soon. This theological programme has been termed by her a *théologie totale* – more on that shortly – and exhibits the diversity of her methodological approach in general, applying it here to the task of constructive dogmatics. One, for instance, sees in her work an absorption of the various 'turns' in religious studies and philosophy of religion, including the 'linguistic turn', the turn to 'embodiment', the 'emotive-affective' turn, the turn to 'lived religion', and so on. The first volume of her systematic theology draws explicitly upon patristics, material culture, iconography and ethnography, while her broader work also has a focus on the spiritual deliverances of material practice and ritual. This is infused with a good dose of analytic philosophy of religion, although with equal portion of hermeneutical suspicion regarding some of its androcentric assumptions (cf. Coakley 2002:98–105). However, her approach does not exhibit the stereotypical allergy towards so-called 'continental' approaches, as seen in the not-insignificant deference she gives to post-Freudian theories of desire, as well as the gender subversions of third-wave feminism. Nonetheless, she also sits somewhat on the edges of these discourses too, insofar as she ontologically prioritises desire *over* gender, and remains distinctively open towards a retrieval of kenosis, sacrifice and vulnerability, even as these have been castigated by other feminist compatriots. She is also committed to the continuing, albeit reimagined, project of 'systematic theology', in full awareness of its 'postmodern' fragility.

Here, as we will see shortly, she attempts to reimagine systematics as a *théologie totale* that is concerned with the expanse of human desire and its transformation into the divine image. This attempt to rethink and expand the theological *loci* may also be fruitfully compared to other developing projects in systematic theology, such as Graham Ward's unfolding 'engaged systematics'

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1. For a brief and representative summary of Coakley's approach and work, see Tonstad (2016).

2. See the references to MacKinnon on this point in Coakley (2009b).

(Ward 2016, 2022). Moreover – and indeed, another complication is at hand – she can also be placed broadly within that influence of *nouvelle théologie* and patristic *ressourcement* that sought to retrieve the church fathers and mothers as a response to neo-scholastic trends that grew in the wake of Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni patris*. This may be seen in her continual deployment of Gregory of Nyssa, for example, throughout her constructive output, even as she imbues the debates of the early church with her characteristic sensitivity regarding gender and socio-ecclesiastical concerns. And lastly, there is a golden thread running in her work that seeks to integrate constructive theology with the spiritual disciplines of liturgy, prayer, and contemplation, making an argument – reminiscent of postliberal theology, although with some important differences[3] – namely, that certain kinds of theological knowledge only become accessible through particular, regular disciplines of spiritual practice, thereby cultivating forms of what might be called *tacit knowing* (to echo Michael Polanyi) (Polanyi 1966). In her case, it is a contemporary reimagining of ascetic practice and contemplation – particularly of the non-discursive variety – which instils forms of embodied knowing which would not be learned apart from a continual enactment of such disciplines.[4]

Positively stated, in her project of a *théologie totale*[5] Coakley seeks to imagine systematic theology as a theology *in via*, one that consciously re-frames the traditional *loci* of dogmatics from the perspective of the cultivation and transformation of creaturely desire, as this forms a participation in and alignment with the primacy of God's own intra trinitarian desire, as well as God's desire for creatures (2013:308–339).[6] *Desire* is central to Coakley's reimagined dogmatics, a lineage traceable largely to the patristic influences of Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, a concept understood by her as 'the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of the human longing for God' (2013:26). It is this primal drive towards relation, knowledge and connection which animates the spiritual life, but also in her case the task of systematic theology. Theology, in the mould of 'systematics', seeks an *integrated* vision of seeing things together, rather than avoiding uncomfortable regions of human experience as being 'outside' the purview of dogmatics proper.[7] This is why questions of gender and

sexuality form a key part of the first volume, while the theme of racism forms a central part of the projected second volume. And so overall, it is this thematisation of desire, grasped in its explicitly *theological* rather than philosophically secular sense, that informs her construal of the *théologie totale*. Here she reverses the usual Freudian quip that the sphere of the divine is about sex, while for her sexual desire is, ultimately, really about God. Here she reads the later Freud's thoughts on 'sublimation' in a positive fashion, directing them into Platonic registers, insofar as the modulation of desire from proximate objects to higher goals finds some affinity with Christian readings of the Platonic corpus (2015b:29–54). By taking this route, Coakley is, of course, not advocating for an untrammelled or unreformed desire, but precisely for *ascetic transformation*, one in which desire is subtly and painstakingly remoulded through the embodied practices of the spiritual life, informed by the stages of purgation, illumination and unification (2015b:101–144). For her, systematic theologising must be accompanied by spiritual practices of 'unmastery', for it is only through something such as the 'vertiginous free-fall of contemplation' that 'a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond knowledge' (2013:43).[8] In this way, she believes, the *libido dominandi* and the will-to-power are radically subverted. In the end, intellectual strategies are insufficient for transformation: those affective, limbic and reptilian facets of human life also need to be spiritually integrated and reformed. It is for this reason that she also has a persistent fascination with Dionysian (Coakley 2008) and Carmelite spirituality (Coakley 2015a), with its experiences of 'the night of sense' and the darkening of the intellect – although with a somewhat different emphasis than the *via negativa* of postmodern theologies that strongly lean towards a linguistic 'tarrying with the negative', as seen in poststructuralist apophatics *à la* Derrida.[9] Following Gregory of Nyssa,[10] this noetic darkening is linked to the tradition of 'the spiritual senses' whereby ordinary modes of perception are gradually transformed ascetically so that God may be known 'unknowingly'. For her, it implies 'a transformation of the believer's actual epistemic *apparatus*' (2002:131), through the spiritual training of prayer, contemplation, liturgy, as well as agapeic practices, in order for us to gradually 'see' God where God is to be found[11] – such as the risen Christ among the poor and the wretched of the earth.[12] She has also more

3. Coakley is certainly influenced by many of the philosophical tendencies that underpin the Yale-School in general (e.g. Wittgensteinian theories of language, the importance of ritual practices, etc.), but she is critical of the anti-realist and Kantian presuppositions of this school, particularly when it imposes these philosophical conceits onto early Christian texts, or when it is used in a 'Schleiermacherian' way to delimit any speculation on the inner life of the Trinity; in relation to Christology and the Trinity, see Coakley (2024:66–74, 92–96 resp). On her account of practices, see Coakley (2015b:101–128, 2023:247–256), and on Wittgenstein, see Coakley (2002:141–148).

4. She is fond of requoting the statement of Talal Asad when he says that a lack of religious experience is less connected to intellectual argumentation and more a matter of 'untaught bodies' (Asad 1997:48).

5. Here explicitly echoing the Annales School's *l'histoire totale*.

6. One may add that Coakley sees such participation and relationality, after Aquinas, as constituting a *sui generis* reality, and so cannot be directly modelled or mirrored out of creaturely relationality; see Coakley (2010).

7. Or in the words of Katherine Sonderegger: '*Théologie totale* does not propose a method that remains at heart "additive." We do not simply add to doctrinal or historical theology the creaturely dimension and practice. The new world Coakley proposes, rather, is synthetic, organic, integrative…What counts as a theological argument is the integrated whole of creature and Creator, a seamless garment of human and Divine desire' (Sonderegger 2016:95).

8. For a similar suggestion, cf. Rubenstein (2003:387–417).

9. 'Apophatic theology, in its proper sense, then, can never be mere verbal play, deferral of meaning, or the simple addition of negatives to positive ("cataphatic") claims. Nor, on the other hand, can it be satisfied with the dogmatic "liberal" denial that God in Godself can be known *at all*: it is not "mysterious" in *this* sense. For contemplation is the unique, and wholly *sui generis*, task of seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly; as Christian contemplation, it is also the necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement which, in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father' (Coakley 2013:46).

10. See Coakley (2012). Also compare this to her more recent Père Marquette Lecture, *Sensing God? Reconsidering the Patristic Doctrine of 'Spiritual Sensation' for Contemporary Theology and Ethics* (2022a).

11. She says that the origin of 'the spiritual senses' in the teaching of Origen was not merely about the Platonic distaste for the body but also arose from 'the progressive transformation of the self's response to the divine through a lifetime of practice, purgation and prayer. In other words, our perception of God, and thus too our grasp of doctrinal verities, does not occur on a flat, or procrustean, bed, but is appropriately open to its object only to the extent that the faculties have been progressively purified' (2002:136).

12. On perceiving the risen Christ, see Coakley (2002:130–152, 2024:3–25).

recently sought to connect the tradition of spiritual perception to contemporary developments in virtue epistemology, and their particular application to the problems of racism, sexism and pornographic aesthetics (Coakley 2022a:53–72, 2022b).

Théologie totale, it should said, does not aim at being a totalising project, that is, in the politically repressive sense of excluding difference, marginality or overthrowing non-theological frames of reference.[13] She engages various critiques of systematic theology as being onto-theological, hegemonic and phallocentric, here arguing that the specific practices of spiritual unmastery she is proposing do fend off some arrows directed from these quarters (Coakley 2009a, 2023:42–51). It *does*, however, have the ambition of articulating a theology in which, so to speak, nothing is left out. But this is not done from the vantage of theology becoming a mastering discourse that imposes its terms of reference upon others,[14] a 'world-encompassing' language-game that absorbs reality into a ghetto of intratextuality.[15] Rather, it aims to be integrative and holistic, seeking a pluralistic methodology that evidences greater hospitality to different approaches *within* systematic theology, attending to those 'dark and neglected corners' that risk *théologie totale's* own 'destabilization and redirection' (2013:48). The kind of systematics she is proposing, while not dispensing *tout court* with the conventional *topoi* of dogmatics, nonetheless, exercises a greater freedom with regard to theological method and the taxis of content.

As has been indicated previously, central to her systematic project is a focus on the question of desire, but especially the primacy of divine desire and how creatures are incorporated into that erotic life. For her, desire has ontological primacy over questions of sexuality and gender, precisely because God *qua* God does not have a body and is beyond gender – these categories being applicable to the creaturely dimension but not to God *a se*. Coakley defines 'gender' as a *'differentiated, embodied relationship'* as expressed towards God and others (2013:53). It thereby has a theological directory that orientates it towards a Christian narrative of fall, redemption and eschaton. In this vantage, Coakley does see gender as malleable and transformable – unlike God.[16] But Coakley's more general point here is to argue that even though God is immaterial and bodiless, God's trinitarian life may be characterised as eternally and radically erotic, insofar as the Father's eternal desire and love for the Son in the Spirit also coincides with the eternal generation of the Son, and the Son's desire and adoration of the Father through the Spirit is precisely that movement by which the Father is constituted as Father from eternity, while the Spirit is the eternal gift of hypostatic love so that there is no collapse into a dyad but

always directed towards the reception and donation of another: the opening of desire and love 'outwards' within divine *ekstasis*, as seen in divine creation and incarnation. But because her theological programme is also centred on the transformation of *human* desire, the question of how this desire relates to God's own desire becomes a central theme of her *théologie totale.* In particular, she is concerned with a therapy of desire, of how creatures gradually enter into a greater communion with the divine through the purgation and epectasy of desire towards an ever-greater incorporation into the trinitarian life. Key for her, once again, are the practices of prayer, and how it is especially through prayer that the experience of the trinity becomes especially tangible for the believer – what she calls a 'spirit-led' and 'prayer-based' account in which believers are taken up into the relation of God to God through God; and it is this that forms, what we might call, a *grammar* of trinitarian experience.

One of the central problems for Coakley, and something which is key to the present essay, is the way that Coakley, on the one side, desires to demonstrate how the logic of the Trinity develops out of the Christian *experience* of prayer – and here especially non-discursive prayer. This constitutes one of the key markers of her approach overall, and her consistency on this point throughout oeuvre reaffirms its centrality – as seen from earlier forays in the 1980s (cf. 1986) until her more recent work (cf. 2013). On the other hand, Coakley would also distinguish herself from what she sees as 'Kantian' or 'Schleiermacherian' trends that advocate a too radical nescience regarding the inner life of the Trinity, because of the epistemological constraints of human knowing (2024:66–74, 92–96).[17] One could see her as exhibiting a mediating position here, insofar as she advocates a deeply experiential basis for the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity – with all the historical and epistemic messiness this implies. This is combined with a traditional emphasis on the *via negativa*, particularly in its patristic reception in Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, and is connected to her strong emphasis on the ascetic transformation of the believer's spiritual, epistemic and moral perception through a gradual purgation of the sinful distortions of desire. However, it should also be said that she is not opposed to what one might call a 'disciplined' speculation regarding the inner life of the Trinity, one that is basically 'realist' regarding our capacity for metaphysical knowledge, while also acknowledging the situatedness of such knowledge within certain experiences and practices, apart from which such knowledge may not be 'accessible'. She may be seen then as both 'postmodern' and 'realist' – in a way comparable to Radical Orthodoxy (RO), while being somewhat critical of what she sees as RO's overly 'linguistic' biases (cf. Coakley 2024:276–283).

In the following section I will unpack something of her trinitarian logic, and specially her 'spirit-led' account of it.

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13. See, for example, her commentary on why the social sciences should not be discarded for theological ends (Coakley 2013:66–99).

14. As she explains: the *totale* is 'not as a totalizing assault on worldly power, but as an attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression' (2013:48).

15. Cf. DeHart (2006:94). This is the target of Wentzel Van Huyssteen (1997) in his own post-foundationalist, critically realist theology.

16. For more on this in general, see Coakley (2002:153–167, 2013:51–58).

17. On this point, she distinguishes herself from the approach of Karen Kilby, even as she agrees with the broad critique of social trinitarianism (cf. 2002:109–129). She is critical, however, of Kilby strong anti-speculative approach, which (for her) tilts too far towards a 'Kantian' agnosticism regarding the intra-trinitarian life (Coakley 2021).

Thereafter, I will briefly turn to her Christology, because her account of ascetic transformation and trinitarian incorporation remains Christologically shaped, before then turning to a conclusion.

Section: II

The grammatical ordering of trinitarian experience within Coakley's account can be seen, in general, as a subtle explication of the *lex orandi–lex credendi* schema.[18] The entwinement of the rule of faith with the rule of prayer, insofar as they are mutually informing and explicative, remains a key aspect of her systematic project – and Anglicanism more generally.[19] What makes Coakley somewhat unique although is the degree to which she emphasises how the drama of spiritual practice may reorientate or even *rupture* textbook frameworks of Christian doctrine; hereby a certain evidentiary weight is given to the matrix of Christian prayer as providing, often simultaneously, a confirmation of creedal orthodoxy, while also often instigating surprising and sometimes unexpected reformulations of such orthodoxy – a kind of interplay of the 'mystic' and 'church' types of ecclesiology, to use the lingo of Ernst Troeltsch. Hereby, one might say that she maintains a post-Wittgensteinian emphasis on the linguistic mediation of experience while also allowing the potential for experiences to shift such paradigmatic framing. Following a realist interpretation of Wittgenstein, she understands the *grammar* of theology as being, on the one side, a *descriptive* unpacking of the rules, practices and forms of life of Christian experience, particularly within the crucible of contemplative prayer and worship, even as such formative practices, on the other, are also understood in a *prescriptive* fashion as a divine pedagogy in which we come to 'sense' reality anew through an incorporation into the triune God.[20]

Central to her re-narration of the history of Christian doctrine, and its 'resourcing' potential for systematic theology, is the way that the experience of prayer, with all its existential tumult, makes a distinctive contribution to the trinitarian logic of Christian doctrine. It is precisely such experiences, as witnessed in proto-trinitarian texts such as Romans 8, that for Coakley suggest why the experience of God takes on a distinctly *trinitarian* structure for Christians. In short, why should the Christian experience of God be counted *as* trinitarian, and not be received in, say, a unitarian or binitarian form? For her, this deconstructive implication will continue to haunt and overshadow the hermeneutics of trinitarian doctrine if we are unable to give a plausible account as to why Christian doctrine may have taken *this specific form*. On this score, it is particularly on questions of pneumatology that Coakley believes certain influential strands of modern theology go awry. In particular, Coakley is dissatisfied with approaches to trinitarian doctrine which

simply assume the divinity of the Spirit, without explicating *why* such divinity is required by a Christian account of deity; nor is she happy with accounts that make the work of the Spirit merely the subjective and explicative experience of what is given objectively and implicitly in the salvific agency of Christ. Such a schema, for her, tends to leave under-thematised the distinctive personhood of the Spirit, and elides, theologically and experientially, both Christ and the Spirit. However, she is also deeply dissatisfied with social trinitarian approaches which tend to project differing subjectivities onto the Godhead, or any account for that matter which links the experiential distinctness of trinitarian persons to specific existential states.[21] It seems for her then, on the one side, that any attempt to parse trinitarian difference out of the phenomenological medley of spiritual experience should not involve linking different affective states to the distinct hypostases of trinitarian persons – a move which tends to undermine the unity of divine being and action. On the other side, it also should avoid any account which subsumes, for instance, the agency of Spirit into the Son, which will tend to undermine the solvency of trinitarian doctrine itself, leading to the suspicion that one could just as well give a non-trinitarian reading of such experiences.

Therefore, what model does Coakley propose? What seems clear for her is that a defensible account of the trinity should begin with *pneumatology* – what she calls a 'spirit-led' approach. Here the scriptural leitmotif in her account is Romans 8 and its often-implicit reception in patristic theologies of the Spirit and Christian prayer. Many of the recurring themes of her systematic project are contained herein, such as how life in the Spirit is about being formed into the image of the Son's own prayerful response to the Father. Moreover, it is well-known in this text that it is precisely the Spirit which does the praying within us, through inarticulate longings and groans; therefore, our gradual transformation into a redeemed creation forms a trinitarian structure of incorporation, as the movement from God through God to God. For Coakley, the experience of prayer in this Pauline text is 'ineluctably tri-faceted'; therefore, '[the] "Father" is both source and ultimate object of divine desire'

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18. For what follows, see Coakley (1993, 2024:89–111).

19. See the admirable summary of this point in Cocksworth (2020).

20. Cf. Coakley (2002:131). See the discussion of Ingolf Dalferth on the contours and limits of Wittgenstein's account of religious 'grammar' in Dalferth (2005:284–287). Coakley has drawn upon this essay in her work; cf. Coakley (2002:131n.3).

21. Coakley's main target here is the tendency in certain wings of the analytic philosophy of religion to prioritise the Trihypostatic nature, purportedly characteristic of the 'Eastern' model, in relation to the divine unity of the so-called 'Latin' model. Coakley is not happy with this typology, but in addition to this she contests analytic proposals of social trinity as being insufficiently critical regarding the projection of modern theories of personhood onto the divine hypostases, here viewed as 'individual' centres of consciousness; see Coakley (2002:109–129). This standpoint also distinguishes Coakley's feminist trinitarianism from other feminist accounts of Trinity which – in the wake of Moltmann and Zizioulas's influence – seek to appropriate social trinitarianism for broader socio-political aims of gender equality and women priesthood (e.g. Catherine LaCugna, Elizabeth Johnson). Coakley has also addressed the question of women priesthood in several texts (2015a:55–84, 2024:195–215); however, she is more sceptical of mapping human relations along trinitarian lines, which she sees as tending towards tritheism and, moreover, as a departure from the patristic inspirations of trinitarian doctrine. Moreover, she is deeply critical of liberal and secular feminism, even as she remains strongly committed to many of its goals. Coakley's overall approach, by contrast, can be seen as a feminist *ressourcement* of trinitarian orthodoxy that precisely pushes against certain trends in liberal feminism that despair (among other things) over theological language of 'Fatherhood' and 'hierarchy'. She has explicitly distanced herself from 'New Catholic Feminism' on this score (Coakley 2014:599), and does not think that the language of 'hierarchy' *per se* is essentially problematic, but that its rejection may be tied to a 'Western' propensity to associate all hierarchy with power hierarchies (2013:319–321). For Coakley, hierarchy may be distanced from such forms of 'patriarchal' power, and linked to ideas of 'order' as seen in the proper ordering of desires and values – which she sees as the more central drift of Dionysian spirituality than ideas of a paradigmatic, despotic 'fatherhood' (cf. Abraham 2014).

while 'the "Spirit" is that (irreducibly distinct) enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation – that which *makes* the creation divine', while 'the "Son" *is* that divine and perfected creation' (1993:37–38).[22] It is the existential primacy of the Spirit which gives Coakley a specific vantage for re-reading aspects of *Dogmengeschichte* in ways that are important for her own constructive account.

In her reading, this Pauline pneumatology had a subterranean effect on certain accounts of prayer and charismatic authority within the early church – often touching explicitly on themes of power, gender and sexuality (cf. Coakley 2013:100–151, 266–307). For her, while there is often a confusing interplay, for example, between the agency of Christ and the Spirit among the apostolic and ante-Nicene fathers, one does see a certain ascription of particular experiences and gifts to the Spirit – such as the gift of prophecy. In her reading of Origen and Tertullian, and especially in their respective texts on prayer, she senses a fruitful taking up of the Pauline strand of a spirit-led trinitarianism. In Origen, she senses an adoption of the incorporative model of the trinity she is proposing, while also sensing a certain discomfort in Origen himself of the gendered nature of such experiences. The allusions to 'feminine' imagery of giving birth and groaning, as well as references to ecstatic inarticulation, seem to have caused a bit of disquiet in the sometimes logos-centred Origen, leading him to suggest a number of qualifications, a kind of spiritual prophylaxis to chaperone or ward off the sexualised and 'effeminising' drift of some of these experiences. For Coakley, this irruptive potential of the Spirit comes into focus in the ecclesial furore surrounding Montanism, with its strong emphasis on prophetic gifting and the sociological phenomenon of female leadership.[23] She finds similar tendencies within the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen, with the former playing an especially important role in Coakley's project more generally, especially as regards his account of spiritual desire – as in his homilies on the Song of Songs – as well as his theology of an unending *epektasis* into the divine 'darkness' of unknowing, famously explored in *The Life of Moses.* Such themes, of course, are also picked up again in the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, and are important for Coakley's own account of *divine* desire.

For Coakley, the gradual conforming of human desire to the desire of God is deeply entwined with interpersonal relations in socio-political and sexual spheres. The mixture of spirituality and sexuality was enough of a persistent source of squeamishness among many of the church fathers to imply that these realities are intertwined.[24] At the margins of the theological literature, both ancient and modern, Coakley sees that erotic love between persons is indeed connected to our desire for God, and vice versa. The Spirit, for her, as that agency which conforms us to the Son, is an 'interruptive transfiguration of [the] twoness' of gender, reorientating us in the desire of God but also other gendered desires (Coakley 2013:56–57). This is so because the 'twoness' of gendered difference is interrupted and transformed liturgically by divine desire that resists or disturbs the 'freezing' of gender binaries into inflexible poles of difference, precisely because gender itself is 'engendered' by the ever-greater difference between God and creation, which itself transcends any fixity of the created gender polarity (2015b:55–84, 2024:195–215).

The practice of theology then, for Coakley, whether it be implicit or explicit, always has some kind of interpersonal or political ramifications, which are in turn connected to how human beings are formed in their desires. Here, She is enough of an Augustinian and Freudian to know also that desires or drives may often work *against* our own stated interests or self-evaluations. Human experience demonstrates a continual liability to self-deception, whether this be in self-representations or in our representation to others. What we think we want may not coincide with what we really want, and our stated intentions may not manifest our real intentionality. This is why theological window-dressing is finally insufficient for Coakley. In order for transformation to occur, our desires will also have to be transformed. This is why the disciplines of prayer, especially of the contemplative and wordless variety, are especially emphasised in Coakley. There is indeed no single strategy for such transformation: the path of spiritual purgation is arduous, complex and multi-faceted. However, Coakley does believe that contemplative prayer, as an act of surrendering control of the ego, has long-term, deeper effects on the believer, some of which are not immediately perceptible but garnered over a life-time of spiritual discipline. The simple and repeated practices of silent waiting, resisting the temptation to set the spiritual agenda, have bodily and affective ramifications in the long run on the state of the soul. In the flow of thoughts and imaginative fancies that arise, we may see the surfacing of semiconscious or unconscious spheres of personhood, an upsurging welter of those affective regions of self that may not be engaged in the quotidian humdrum of life. Coakley connects this to the phenomenon described by Paul in Romans 8, with its picture of the cosmos groaning under the power of sin, with the believer unable even to pray coherently. Through a ceding of control within the act of prayer to the agency of the Spirit, the prayer is taken up into that trinitarian movement whereby the creature is conformed to the Son, the image of redeemed creation, in its return to the Father. Hereby human desire is

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22. This differentiation is 'logical' and not predicated on different tonalities of experience, cf. Coakley (1986:11–23). Or see her summary of Romans 8 in Coakley (1998:226): '…what is going on here is not three distinguishable types of "experience" (in the sense of emotional tonality), each experience relating to a different point of identity – "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit." This in any case would prove to be a "hunting of the snark" from the perspective of later-developed orthodox trinitarianism, because the *homoousion* principle disallows that the different "persons" should be experientially separate, or do different things. Rather, what is being described in Paul is *one* experience of an activity of prayer that is nonetheless ineluctably, though obscurely, tri-adic. It is *one* experience of God, but God as simultaneously (1) doing the praying in me, (2) receiving that prayer, and (3) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed son-ship. Or to put it another way: the "Father" (so-called here) is both source and ultimate object of divine longing in us; the "Spirit" is that irreducibly – though obscurely – distinct enabler and incorporator of that longing in creation – that which *makes* the creation divine; and the "Son" is that divine and perfected creation, into whose life I, as prayer, am caught up'.

23. One sees something of this tension in the figure of Tertullian, who while exhibiting, overall, some extremely chauvinist opinions, nonetheless came under the sway of the Montanists.

24. Think of the famous example of Bernini's *L'Estasi di Santa Teresa* where the face of Teresa of Avila, here portrayed in spiritual rapture, is virtually indistinguishable from the throngs of sexual ecstasy.

ever-so-gradually aligned through the Spirit according to the archetype of Christ, within a pattern of discipleship and kenotic unmastery, informed by the abyss of crucifixion and upheaval of resurrection. This conformation to the image of the Son and the long ascent to the Paternal Source can only be achieved through the gift and grace of the Holy Spirit, so that when we are granted the gift of prayer through the Spirit, we are being aligned ever-so-gradually and infinitely with the image of the Holy Trinity.

One of the implications of this spirit-led and reflexive account of trinitarian doctrine is the way that it tends to disrupt 'linear' renditions of the ordering of divine relations, which in turn may subsidise particular ecclesiological accounts of church hierarchy, as well as the role of gender and sexuality within this broader picture. The traditional ordering of trinitarian doctrine tends to follow the ordering of Father, Son, and Spirit where the Father is understood as the Paternal Source of Son and Spirit, while the Son is seen as the eternally Begotten of the Father, with the Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son – depending, of course, on your reading of the *filioque*. This traditional ordering of the divine persons, to Coakley's mind, however, cannot be separated from the often-implicit ecclesio-political and gendered outcomes of this taxis. Moreover, it tends, in both its Eastern and Western recensions, to privilege the dyad of Father and Son with the Spirit tagging along as an afterthought. For example, the priority of Paternal Source is often linked to preferences for particular forms of ecclesial hierarchy, order and tradition, while the Son and Spirit's sourcing in the Father may often carry 'feminised' overtones of submission or subordination. Similarly, a trinitarian theology that begins with an existential primacy of the Spirit, of the kind that Coakley is proposing, may suggest a reorientation towards forms of ecclesial practice that give greater sway to the experiential, the affective, the feminine and so on. Here Coakley is not engaging in a hackneyed reversal of trinitarian paternity for trinitarian pneumatology, which would be simply a reversal of power dynamics and not their radical subversion; rather, she is arguing that a participative and incorporative model of the kind she is proposing tends to undermine any *ontological* hierarchy within the trinity,[25] so that the Father is equally sourced by 'the Spirit's reflexive propulsion' and 'the Son's creative effulgence' so that in God both 'ecstatic goal' and 'ecstatic origin' are one and the same (2013:333–334).

By saying this, one should not read Coakley as attempting to theologically legitimise any specific *political* arrangement following from trinitarian doctrine – a tendency of social trinitarianism with which she has expressed a particular unease; rather, it is to articulate the messy entanglements of the formations of desire and theological production because no theological paradigms are innocent of political overtures. This is why systematic theology must always be *in via*,

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25.This is not to say that Coakley is opposed to the Dionysian language of *hierarchy* per se – which she reads as cultivating a proper ordering within *human* affairs – but she does deny any such intra-trinitarian hierarchy as being incompatible with Nicene orthodoxy; cf. Coakley (2013:311–322).

aware that it is not a finished product, exercising a hermeneutical suspicion regarding the ways that seemingly abstruse points of dogma may also have implications within the realm of gender, sexuality, and politics. For Coakley, *any* undertaking of theological thought and practice needs to be accompanied by spiritual and contemplative practices of unmastery and unknowing, a ceding of 'noetic control' (2013:294) as this subsidises a continual 'epistemic stripping necessary to right contemplation of the divine' (2013:309).

Section: III

The existential thrust of this trinitarian grammar, as we have seen, is the believer's experience of being led by the Spirit. However, the form and shape of the Christian modulation of desire is deeply Christological; and it is here that Coakley's vision is at its most radical and demanding, insofar as her spiritual directive is precisely for an *ascesis of desire*. The purification of desire, which she sees as incumbent for all believers and not some elite coterie, is intrinsically connected to Christology and her account of spiritual discipline. It is at this point that her departure from certain wings of theological feminism is at its starkest, even as she maintains many of the deliverances of feminist thought – secular or otherwise. Coakley is rather persistent in her deployment of the language of kenosis, vulnerability, and sacrifice, in full awareness of their unpopularity in some streams of feminist theology. Whatever the risks involved in the continuing usage of such language, Coakley believes that the kind of spiritual rigour she is ultimately proposing for a *théologie totale* requires the continuation of such practices, albeit qualified by the spiritual context in which they are put to work.

What fascinates Coakley about the Christian deployment of *kenosis* is precisely the way it, somewhat paradoxically, is able 'to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together, precisely by creating the "space" in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself' (2002:5). Rather predictably, considering what we have seen previously, Coakley sees this specific kind of self-effacement before the divine as chiefly exemplified by the Christian struggle within the contemplative life. In her most expansive treatment of the theme (2002:3–39), Coakley argues – through New Testament exegesis and a *tour d'horizon* of kenotic theology in *Dogmengeschichte* – that the target of the feminist critique of kenosis (e.g. Daphne Hampson) is not really directed to just *any* kenotic Christology, but is more precisely aimed at a specific reception of a post-Thomasius speculation on the matter. In short, there are a variety of options as regards the interpretation of Philippians 2:7, ranging from a self-emptying of the divine nature itself in the incarnation, or the giving up of certain kinds of divine or human powers, or the subversion of certain kinds of divine *and* human power through the moral paradigm of divine humility. It is only *some* of these models which may be problematic from a feminist standpoint, according to her.

Coakley argues it is really among certain British kenoticists – and some philosophical theologians in the analytic tradition – that the language of divine self-emptying becomes linked to 'masculinist' assumptions regarding gender, power, and class, so that kenosis functions as a path to assuage the liberal guilt of upper-class churchmen; or it may be tied to problematic conceptions of human agency as implying a necessary rivalry of activity and dependency – which is linked to post-Enlightenment ideas of freedom, self-determination, and 'the rational man' (2002:89–97). It is this model which some Christian or post-Christian feminists see as deeply problematic, especially when applied to women and others who experience systemic forms of disenfranchisement. But Coakley argues that if we take the concept of kenosis as providing already an implicit critique of arrogating or overweening power – a potential that Coakley traces to the Pauline pericope itself – then it will not be sufficient to give a blanket critique of all kenotic theologies as privileging masculinist forms of power, which are then problematically applied to everyone. Might not kenosis, she asks, transform the very notion of power itself so that vulnerability becomes a creative and transforming potential, and not merely a repressive submissiveness? Can the idea of kenosis be retrieved along the lines of the Pauline notion of power being made perfect 'in weakness', without continuing victimisation? Coakley does indeed think so, and that there are kinds of vulnerability and kenotic 'non-grasping' which may aid in forms of empowerment and action, and she imagines such paradoxical co-incidence as being encultured through practices of prayer, where the subject is de-centred by the non-coercive and loving attention of God, and thus expanded, not oppressively curtailed, by divine grace. Such practices for her may cultivate news forms of attention to the other, because we are being interrupted in prayer by the divine Other and energised forms of activism as one of the fruits of its practice, as seen, for example, in the disciplined, regular prayer-life of Desmond Tutu – among others.

Similarly on the theme of sacrifice, Coakley is not content to dispense with sacrificial language, and even makes strong claims regarding the way that certain forms of sacrifice in which the self is given over to God in the Spirit may actually undermine forms of 'patriarchal violence' (2024:166–192, 216–238). What may be included under the category of 'sacrifice' – especially in the wake of hugely divergent treatments in the 20th century – is so variegated that it is hard to reduce sacrificial practices to one basic idea. Such practical diversity and polyvalency means that we need to attend to how 'sacrifice' is being deployed and to what end, without denying the messiness or slippage that comes when different understandings of sacrifice 'bleed' into each other. In Christian terms, it may form, to echo Paul once again, a 'living sacrifice of rational worship' (Rm 12.1). The gift economy, upon which the practice of sacrifice may be predicated, for her does not necessitate manipulative relations or the occlusion of the feminine – because what is being purified by sacrifice is precisely the supposed taint of womanhood (e.g. childbirth, menstruation); nor is it bound

to the economy of death in which, after Derrida, the only gift that escapes the cycle of coercive relations is death itself. Rather, for Coakley, 'sacrifice-for-God' implies a specific kind of unhanding and self-effacement, a breaking open of the self that transcends the path of patriarchal recriminations and abuse, while 'sacrifice-for-the-world' only continues patterns of suppression and self-annihilation (2024:191).[26] In her reading, the categories of 'gift' and 'sacrifice' need to be held together, something chiefly realised in the Eucharist in which the sacrifice of Christ's body in the sacramental elements is received through the *epiclesis* of the Spirit, as we are broken open by the divine desire. This process of being 'broken' by the rupturing action of the Spirit, if we 'submit' ourselves to this work, will require repentance, purgation and even spiritual 'pain', because the cycles of sin are so entrenched and difficult to break. Under the order of the world governed by sin, the reception of the divine life will *inevitably* be a sacrificial one – although not to placate an irascible or manipulative deity, but rather to initiate the transformation of the *human* self through a Christic self-giving to the Father in the Spirit (2024:258–260).

All of this implies a moral and affective transformation of the believer. Without being transformed through the Spirit, our spiritual perception of Christ's identity and presence may, in some fashion, be hindered and blocked. As she stresses throughout her work, spiritual perception does not happen on a *flat plane* of experience – even among Christians (Coakley 2002:132, 2018:362–363). To perceive the divine presence, whether it be found in creation, the face of the poor, or the Eucharistic host, this requires a life-long and faithful discipline, a willingness to be cracked open by the sanctifying touch of the Spirit. Mere intellectual or moralising fiats will not bring about such transformation, but only a continual and repeated embodied habituation. It is through the *labour* of Christian rituals, that is, through prayer, contemplation, *lectio divina*, care for the poor, love for strangers – even our enemies – that the figure of Christ becomes born in us, and by which we *receive* Christ himself through the broken (Coakley 2024:239–260). This is not to reverse the *asymmetry* of grace within the divine-human relation – for indeed it is *the Spirit* which incorporates the believer into the triune life of God. However, it does imply a certain complication – a paradoxical interpenetration – of divine and human action, suggesting a kind of 'active passivity' (cf. Coakley 2018:368). For indeed, to echo Aquinas, because God is not some kind of agent acting *within* the world but rather the 'pure act' by which all things exist we should not imagine any 'competition' between divine or human action, but rather an agency which enables our very action. As the mystery of incarnation also suggests, divine and human energies may coexist without mutual attenuation or declension: the more receptive I am to God's action, the more I am opened to that created *freedom* of response to God, as this is transformed and incorporated,

26.Moreover, as biological and evolutionary science suggests, sacrifice may form a productive and creative energy within human life and the natural world more generally, suggesting that sacrificial and cooperative behaviours may be perfectly rational in themselves, and not deleterious forms of social arrangement; on this, see her inaugural lecture *Sacrifice Regained* (2009b), as well as her as of yet unpublished Gifford Lectures on the same theme.

slowly and incrementally, into Christ's *own* response to the Father through the Spirit.

The third part of this essay has been admittedly cursory, but I believe saying something about the Christological shape of Coakley's *théologie totale* is important to understand the incorporative model of the trinity she is proposing more generally. For her, our 'comingling' with Christ – to use a Nyssen metaphor (2024:47–63) – is the way in which we are gradually, over the expanse of our cosmic destiny, taken up into the eternal response of the Son to the Father through the Spirit. Hereby, the Trinity ceases to be an exterior *theorisation* but a form of experiential and practical knowledge.[27] Her project, arguably, constitutes a modern attempt to reimagine the interlacing of the practical, the perceptual, and the theological, something characteristic of Christian ascetics such as Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The formation into the image of the Son is key to the grammar of trinitarian experience, for she is suggesting that if we place ourselves before God in prayer, and allow ourselves to be broken open by the wedge of the Spirit, it is this expansion of our hearts towards the Father that gradually forms within us the shape of Christ's own desire for the Father through the Spirit, as we follow that path of an infinite, purgatory ascent towards the great land of unlikeness, and God's desire and our desire converge in their asymptotal paths.

Section: IV

In summary, Coakley's systematic theology can be distinguished by its distinctively *ascetic* tenor. One can see it explicitly as an attempt to 'democratise' asceticism as a path for all Christians, as a part of the incremental purgation of desire which she sees as a central tenet of the spiritual life. It is this aspect which marks out her methodology from other systematic theologies as well as other feminist approaches. Once again, for her, our experience of the Divine Trinity is explicitly linked to the practices of prayer whereby believers are gradually being formed by the action of the Spirit into the image of the Son in his response and self-giving to the Father. This is not to say that divine hypostases are linked to discrete 'experiences', as if trinitarian persons could be parsed out of distinctive and subjective qualia. Rather, we are dealing with *one* experience of God that develops into a triadic logic: through the practice of prayer and opening up the self to the divine reciprocity through the Spirit, the believer is being formed into the archetype of divine sonship in its return to the Father. This is a *single* experience which is nonetheless tri-faceted – a key point because Coakley is committed to trinitarian orthodoxy and the *homoousion*. This constitutes what I have been calling a *grammar* of trinitarian experience, insofar as it seeks to articulate an experiential account of the Trinity which attempts to articulate a logic of what is happening in Christian experience of prayer and longing for God (exemplified in Rm 8), one that explains why God should be named precisely *as* triune. If Christians are unable to dilate this trinitarian logic, that is the problem of *why* the Christian

God is essentially trinitarian, the suspicion will continue that one could dispense with this metaphysical picture altogether. It is exactly this problem, inspired here by her teacher Maurice Wiles, that Coakley has sought to address head on.

Coakley's pneumatologically-led approach also gives her trinitarianism its characteristic emphasis (cf. Tonstad 2016), and it is this point which connects her systematics both to patristic sources as well as modern revivals of pneumatology in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles. However, against the more 'conservative' wings of orthodoxy and evangelicalism, she is also deeply sensitive to insights of 'liberal' feminist critique regarding the continuing operations of patriarchy and chauvinism within theological and ecclesial institutions. The difference in her approach, which seeks to transcend both 'liberal' and 'conservative' options, is that she tries to connect the insights of feminist theology with a stronger emphasis on *the ascetics of desire*, which for her is the key problem for the transformation of human relations. Without the transformation of desire through the Spirit, Coakley believes we do not reach to the kernel of the spiritual problem from which gender conflict arises: the sinful desire to establish control and power – the *libido dominandi*, to use more Augustinian terminology. The transformation of desire through the Spirit, for Coakley, as we have also seen, has a distinctively *Christic* shape, as that image of redeemed creation which believers are being inched towards by the Spirit. On Coakley's reading, this picture is a deeply *kenotic* one, having implications also for the themes of vulnerability and sacrifice. While being fully aware of the theological problems that attend kenosis and vulnerability, Coakley believes that the Christological hymn of Philippians and circumscribed kenotic theology can be reinterpreted to meet the concerns of its feminist critics through a distinctive form of power-in-vulnerability and willed submission to the God who transcends all forms of worldly power, a posture that simultaneously opens up the self to the transforming action of the Spirit and to new forms of attentiveness to the world.

Certainly there are many areas in which *théologie totale* could be expanded towards other *topoi* and themes. That is the capaciousness of the approach, because it aims to be an *integrative* account that, at least potentially, includes the totality of human desires and orientations. It is a theology *in via*, a theology that is continually being opened to the surprises of the Spirit. It is, however, not a totalising enterprise, nor does it aim for an epistemic tidiness. The problems of desire of multi-faceted, and therefore theological proposals will always be entangled with questions of power, politics, gender, culture, and context. In practice, this is probably unavoidable. Therefore, the range of things to be addressed could undoubtedly be expanded. Coakley's own project is still in development, as already indicated: several noted gaps in the first volume of her systematics – such as race, class, politics, and economics – are anticipated for later volumes in the series (Coakley 2014), even as several of these questions have begun to be addressed in some of her more recent work (Coakley 2022a, 2022b). We wait to see how the

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27.See her comments in Coakley (2002:50–52). Cf. Coakley (2018).

shape of this developing systematics will adapt itself to this expanding range of engagements.

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Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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