

Book Reviews

Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). xxi + 365 pp. reviewed by Amos Yong¹

Coakley, the N references orris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge since 2007, has been writing and editing books on gender, the passions, and the body in critical conversation with feminist perspectives for almost the last two decades. During this same period of time, however, she has also gained renown as a patristics interpreter, with edited volumes on Gregory of Nyssa and Denys Areopagus, among other ventures. These streams are brought together in the book under review, which is projected as the first of a four-volume project in systematic theology (the other three anticipated on theological anthropology, public theology, and incarnation and Eucharist, respectively).

Why should pentecostal theologians in general and the readership of *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* be interested in the trinitarian theology of this Anglican feminist divine? A glance at the table of contents alerts such readers to the central (fourth of seven) chapter's title—"The charismatic constituency: embarrassment or riches?"—that provides an initial clue. But starting there would be a mistake, from the perspective of pentecostal-charismatic scholarship (to which I will return momentarily), since that might be one of the weakest links in the Coakleyan chain. Instead, the turn to charismatic spirituality and ecclesiology is better appreciated against the broader argument of the book. In brief, Coakley's central thesis is that trinitarian theology, rather than being only a speculative and intellectualist exercise, is best engaged through contemplative prayer in and through the Holy Spirit, and that when this embodied practice is attended to, it is observed that the dispossession, humility, and effacement

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nurtured thereby reorders human passions after the triune life of holy and desiring love.

The five “steps” in this argument (chapters 3-7) thus unfold as follows. First, that theology derives from prayer, and here Coakley shows how the patristic tradition understood Paul’s teachings about prayer in and by the Spirit in the eighth chapter of Romans—contested as such was from Tertullian and the Montanists through Origen to Athanasius and the Cappadocians—as leading from prayer embodied and en-gender-ed (no pun intended) in the Spirit to trinitarian insights and realities. Next, Coakley draws from fieldwork in the Anglican charismatic renewal she conducted in the late 1980s to further observe distinctions between charisma, feminine spirituality, desire/affectivity, and robust pneumatological trinitarianism on the one side, and institutionalization, absolutism, intellectualization, patriarchalism, and pneumatological subordinationism on the other. Third, 39 illustrations from Christian art history observe correlations between the above divides and the presence or absence of the Spirit and the Virgin Mary in the tradition’s aesthetic imagination and chart their pathway of Christian sanctification and even deification. Then, Coakley returns to Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine to observed how ecstatic and even erotic forms of loss of control lead to apophatic encounter with the triune reality for the former compared to sexual continence as central to encountering the light of divinity for the latter. The concluding chapter thus defines human desire ontologically in light of the triune life shared with the world through the gift of the Holy Spirit that in turn transforms via contemplative and purgative prayer all ideological *-isms* and idolatrous self-centeredness from the inside out and reorients them toward holistic participation and incorporation within the trinitarian life of God. Thus trinitarian theology is shown to have relational, familial, liturgical, and even political dimensions so that theological endeavor as such cannot just be reduced to cognitive ratiocination.

The preceding surely miscommunicates what is a very nuanced argument throughout. Coakley’s argument cannot be easily coopted by feminism, social trinitarianism, monotheism, LGBTQ, or any other social or

theological agenda given her capacity to cut through false and misleading binaries. From a pentecostal-charismatic perspective, however, I think Coakley's argument could have been strengthened via engagement with developments in pentecostal theology in the last two decades, particularly pentecostal-charismatic practical theologians like Mark Cartledge and his students. This was a missed opportunity since, as important as is fieldwork for dogmatic and systematic theological undertaking, ethnographic analysis ought to deploy theoretical and analytical apparatus appropriate to their objects, in this case charismatic believers and their practices. Beyond this important methodological point, pentecostal feminists like Lisa Stephenson, Jacqui Grey, and Pamela Holmes, among others, and pentecostal trinitarian theologians like William Atkinson, Frank Macchia, and especially Steve Studebaker, have been asking for the last decade plus how starting with the Spirit—foregrounding pneumatology, in other words—overcomes the binary constructs that inhibits the received theological tradition from addressing the questions Coakley takes up. Surely, attentiveness to these conversations would have removed the question mark from the title of chapter 4 in this book.

So even as Coakley's prioritization of the Spirit could have benefitted from more extensive dialogue with pentecostal-charismatic theologians, the latter can learn much from consideration of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*. The first two more methodologically oriented chapters of this book will provide even further fodder for pentecostal-feminist-systematic efforts that gets us beyond the complementarian-egalitarian-radical feminist divisions and pushes us to think more deeply about how theology in the present time requires an interdisciplinary approach that can engage at multiple—e.g., personal, social, ecclesial, and theological—levels, precisely the task for global pentecostal theology in the twenty-first century. Let us see how the pneumatological priority is sustained throughout the rest of Coakley's systematics enterprise even as perhaps through her work, pentecostal theologians will be energized to engage the wider theological discussion from their own pneumacentric (not pneumato-monistic) springboard.