

SARAH COAKLEY – A SYMPOSIUM

GÖSTA HALLONSTEN

This issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* contains the papers given at the Sarah Coakley symposium held at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University on April 15th 2009. The order of presentation during the symposium is followed. By courtesy of Dr. Coakley we are able to include also her responses to the papers given by other contributors to the symposium. Hence, the issue could be read, not only as an introduction to Sarah Coakley's theology, but as a witness to the reception of her theology in Sweden as well.

The symposium was supported by the Andreas Rydelius foundation and by the Birgit and Sven Håkan Ohlsson foundation.

Introduction to the symposium

Two Cambridges dominate the academic career of Sarah Coakley: Cambridge U.K. and Cambridge, Massachusetts, the site of Harvard University. She studied at both places and earned her doctorate at Cambridge, U.K. After teaching positions at the University of Lancaster and Oriel College, Oxford, Sarah Coakley was appointed professor of Christian Theology at Harvard Divinity School in 1993. From 1995 she was the Mallinckrodt professor of Divinity at Harvard, only to return to her original Cambridge as Norris-Hulse professor of Divinity in 2007. In 2006 she was awarded a Doctorate in Theology, *honoris causa*, by the Faculty of Theology, Lund University.

On a personal note, I would like to mention that I first met Sarah Coakley and her husband James F. Coakley, when my wife and I visited Britta and Krister Stendahl at their home in Boston in 2003. The decease of Krister Stendahl last year and the founding of a Krister Stendahl chair of theology of religions at this faculty have reminded us of the extent to which our compatriot was known and appreciated throughout the world. That Krister Stendahl was an important figure in the promotion of Christian Theology at the rather secular Harvard University is clear to me. He was also behind the appointment of Sarah Coakley to Harvard Divinity School and supported her all along. This symposium should therefore be seen also as a tribute to his memory.

What are the characteristic features of the theological work of Sarah Coakley? To most of us clearly feminism and gender theology has acted as the main entrance to her thought and this is clearly adequate. One might refer here to her widely read *Powers and Submissions. Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford, Blackwell 2002). Yet, a *caveat* should be put forward immediately. Professor Coakley cannot easily be classified as a feminist theologian in the "traditional" sense. And also, wherever you enter into her writings, you will rather soon encounter different strands of theological thought that according to conventional wisdom could not as easily be combined as the Anglican priest and theologian Sarah Coakley do this. Yet, the famous comprehensiveness of the Anglican tradition is combined here with German *akribia*, resulting in a thoroughly systematic effort to think through Christian faith from a great variety of perspectives – the *théologie totale* that professor Coakley will refer to in today's lecture. In this connection it is especially striking that Sarah Coakley wrote her dissertation on the German liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch, the title of which is *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford, O.U.P. 1988). As she has told Rupert Shortt in the interview book *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd 2005) she had been influenced in her youth by the debate on John Robinson's famous *Honest to God*, and by the liberalism that reigned at Cambridge in her undergraduate years. Yet, the fascination with Troeltsch was not only dictated by the honest historical questioning of Christian doctrines by this great German scholar. As she concedes in the interview, the

troeltschian approach as a matter of fact did not leave much of the Christ of faith. In Troeltsch, though, she found also a fascination with ‘mysticism’ and an emphasis on the social and cultural forms of Christian doctrine. Those topics run all through the story of Coakley’s theology. What is so striking, further, in this systematic theologian, is the emphasis on prayer, especially contemplative prayer, and also on practice as a locus for doing theology. Desire, this basic theme of Christian mystic tradition – known especially through the interpretation of the Song of Songs – figures prominently in professor Coakley’s theology. Desire is what characterizes human beings in relation to each other and especially in relation to God (see e.g. “Pleasure Principles: Toward a Contemporary Theology of Desire”, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2005). The ‘erotic’ language of mystic theology is indispensable in voicing what goes on in contemplative prayer, in the submission of human beings to the Creator. Un-anticipated things tend to happen in this connection, however: God suddenly appears as the desiring lover seeking out the human soul at every cost. The vulnerability that so often has been associated with the female and human in contradistinction to the male and divine turns out to be a characteristic feature of God. Gender stereotypes are being transformed here, human beings also undergo transformation, and the very concept of God that is so often taken for granted is being transformed. Prayer, desire, transformation – Sarah Coakley’s engagement with Christian mystics from Gregory of Nyssa to St. Therese of Avila and John of the Cross is a fascinating, recurring theme throughout her theology.

This can be seen even in her contribution to the volume *Pain and its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture* (co-ed. With Kay Shelemay, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University press 2007). Her article is entitled: “Palliative or Intensification? Pain and Christian Contemplation in the Spirituality of the Sixteenth-Century Carmelites” (pp.77-100). This engagement with interdisciplinary work is a prominent feature in her academic work. In addition to the book on Pain she has edited conference volumes on *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge, C.U.P. 1997), *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford, Blackwell 2003) and *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford, Blackwell 2009). In preparation are further volumes like: *Spiritual Healing: Science, Meaning and Discernment* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 2009) and *Evolution, Games and God: The Principle of Cooperation* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 2009/10). The latter volume is the result of a research project together with the Austrian biologist Martin A. Nowak and sponsored by the Templeton Foundation (cf. “God and Evolution: A New Solution”, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Vol. 35, No. 2 & 3, 2007). To continue along those same lines, the bibliography of professor Coakley entails a vast number of articles, which shows the many-sided interests and knowledge of this theologian. Having training in analytic philosophy, it comes as no surprise that she has been involved in discussions with Richard Swinburne, William Alston, i.a. on such topics as e.g. the resurrection of Christ (“Response to William Alston”, in eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins, *The Resurrection*, Oxford, O.U.P. 1997) and the understanding of trinitarian theology (“‘Persons’ in the Social Doctrine of the Trinity: A Critique of Current Analytic Discussion”, in eds. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins, *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Oxford, O.U.P. 1999). She has also treated analytical philosophy of religion from a feminist perspective, a task for which she is exceptionally well prepared (cf. “Analytic Philosophy of Religion in Feminist Perspective: some Questions”, in *Powers and Submissions*). Looking at her website of Cambridge University you realize that the emphasis of Sarah Coakley’s present teaching and research interests is clearly on philosophical theology and the role of philosophy in systematic theology. I dare not continue mention all fields in which she holds an expertise or every issue that figures in her writings.

Coming to a close of this rather fragmentary presentation of the theology of Sarah Coakley I’d like to return to gender theology and to the central role of the doctrine of the Trinity in her thought. The first volume of four in her designed systematic theology, which is expected to be published this year, is entitled: *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’*. This title hints at two prominent features of the theological work of professor Coakley. First, she affirms the common interest of

all feminist theologians of whatever brand towards "a critical analysis of the patriarchal bias of the traditional Christian symbol system" ("Feminist Theology" in eds. James C Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought: Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, Minneapolis, Fortress 2000, p. 438). She continues: "Once this is acknowledged, no retreat is possible: there is simply a choice between a range of differing methodologies..." (ib.) Although one might concur to Mark Oppenheimer that "Sarah Coakley reconstructs feminism" (<http://www.religion-online.org>), the emphasis is as much on feminism as on reconstruction. Yet, and this is the second point I wanted to underscore, Sarah Coakley not only reconstructs feminism, she retrieves Christian tradition - or possibly we should say reconstructs it - in an intriguing way that entails a good deal of turns and moves that will surprise readers of any sort. After all, the claim of our distinguished guest is to develop a *théologie totale*. Hence the fundamental question of today's lecture "Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?" On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task".

For a full bibliography of Sarah Coakley's published works see:
<http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/faculty/coakley.html>