

# Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?

## On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task

SARAH COAKLEY

'Is there a future for gender and (systematic) theology?' One might well wonder, and that for more than one reason. On the one hand, 'feminist theology' of the 1970s and '80s is widely seen, now, as having effectively exhausted its ecclesiastical potential (a matter we could discuss); and gender studies, manifestly alive and kicking in contrast, is predominantly secular and often actively anti-theological in tone. Not for nothing, therefore, has Pope Benedict XVI recently issued a charge against it. My answer to my own question, however, will - of course - be 'yes': there *is* a future for gender and systematic theology; but to get to how and why, I shall first have to rehearse a number of (very good) reasons why it is often held these days that systematic theology is itself a doomed undertaking; and why its classic blindness to questions of power, gender and sexuality makes it seemingly oxymoronic positively to promote a *systematic* theology engaged with such issues. So what I shall be arguing today is something - perhaps - a little surprising. My claim will be that *only* systematic theology (of a particular sort) can adequately and effectively respond to the rightful critiques that gender studies and political and liberation theology have laid at its door. And *only* gender studies, inversely, and its accompanying political insights, can thus properly re-animate 'systematic theology' for the future.

Now the combination of these particular two sides of my argument is admittedly unusual. It is customary, as just noted, for post-modern gender theorists (insofar as they have dealings with matters of religion at all) to be extremely sceptical about the project of 'systematic theology'. It is perhaps even more common, conversely, for systematic theologians to be dismissive, even derogatory, about theologians interested in feminism or gender (consider Pannenberg, Jüngel, Jenson, Gunton). It is rare indeed - although not

completely unknown - for male systematic theologians of any stature to take the category of gender as even a significant *locus* for discussion; and when they do, they tend to import a gender theory from the secular realm without a sufficiently critical *theological* assessment of it (consider von Balthasar and Moltmann). I shall be concerned to show why this false disjunction between systematic theology and gender studies needs not so much to be overcome, but rather to be approached from a different, and mind-changing, direction. A robustly theological, indeed precisely *trinitarian*, perspective on gender is required, not one that merely smuggles secular gender presumptions into the divine realm at the outset. It is the very threeness of God, I shall argue, transformatively met in the Spirit, which gives the key to a view of gender that is appropriately founded in bodily practices of prayer. That 'particular sort' of systematic theology I propose, then (and here is the major *novum* I lay before you), must involve the purgative contemplative practice of silence as its undergirding point of reference - an ascetic activity which is peculiarly equipped to search and transform, over the long haul, the arena of sexual (and indeed all other) desires. It thus involves an understanding of theology in progressive transformation - *in via* as we might say - and one founded not in any secular rationality or theory of selfhood, but in a spiritual practice of attention that mysteriously challenges and *expands* the range of rationality, and simultaneously darkens and breaks one's hold on previous certainties. A theology that starts from, and continually returns to, this practice is one that in no way can sidestep the urgent exigencies of questions of desire, but one that also knows the dangers of any merely mindless activation of them. This is, as I have described my method elsewhere, a 'total theology' (*théologie totale*, in the spirit of the French

Annales school *'l'histoire totale'*); not because it is 'totalizing' in a political sense we shall shortly discuss - *au contraire* -, but because it attends, contemplatively, to every level of a doctrine's instantiation and outworking, and every manifestation of that doctrine's range in the realm of human expressions and the academic disciplines.

So much by way of brief introduction. I want to move now to the first major undertaking of this paper - a brief examination of the three most significant contemporary critiques, as I see it, of the very idea of 'systematic theology'. Note that for these purposes I propose to define 'systematic theology' thus: it is an *integrated* presentation of Christian truth, however perceived (that's what 'system' here connotes); *wherever one chooses to start has implications for the whole, and the parts must fit together*. However briefly, or lengthily, it is explicated (and the shorter versions have, in Christian tradition, often been at least as elegant, effective and enduring as the longer ones), 'systematic theology' attempts to provide a coherent and alluring unfolding of the connected parts of its vision.

### Why is systematic theology distrusted?

Why, then, is systematic theology deemed contentious in our own post-modern age, even as it - paradoxically - enjoys a notable period of revival? Why is 'order' so often perceived as a front for abuse, and 'system' as an assumed repression?

Three, often interlocked, contemporary forms of resistance to systematic theology can readily be identified, and cumulatively they might seem to be powerful. No one here will be unfamiliar with these critiques, and so I shall outline them only briefly. After I have done so, I shall return to the issue of desire which animates my systematic project, and show how these problems connect to it.

The first resistance to systematic theology resides in the philosophical critique of so-called 'onto-theology': it claims that systematic theology falsely, and idolatrously, turns God into an object of human knowledge. The second resistance arises from the moral or political critique

of so-called 'hegemony': it sees systematic theology (amongst other discourses that provide any purportedly complete vision of an intellectual landscape), as inappropriately totalizing, and thereby necessarily suppressive of the voices and perspectives of marginalized people. The third resistance is the French feminist critique, arising from a particular brand of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought. It accuses systematic thinking (of any sort) of being 'phallogocentric', that is, ordered according to the 'symbolic',<sup>1</sup> 'male' mode of thinking which seeks to clarify, control and master. It is thereby repressive of creative materials culturally associated with 'femininity' and the female body, which are characteristically pushed into the unconscious.

I shall need to look briefly at each of these stringent criticisms in turn, but with a particular eye to assessing how they might be answered with the aid of the insights of my contemplative *théologie totale*. For let me suggest that the very act of contemplation - repeated, lived, embodied, suffered - is an act that, by grace, and over time, precisely inculcates mental patterns of 'unmastery',<sup>2</sup> welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the 'other', and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of sexual desires and desire for God. The vertiginous free-fall of contemplation, then, is not only the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge; it is also the necessary accompanying practice of a theology committed to ascetic transformation. When one looks at the three resistances to systematic theology I have just outlined, one can already note how revealingly themes of knowledge, power and gender are entangled and woven into these three objections. One begins to glimpse why it is that issues of sexuality, desire and gender cannot by mere *fiat*, or simple denial, be dissociated from the claim to be able to con-

<sup>1</sup> Meaning, in Lacan's use of this term, something like 'clear', 'analytical', 'demonstrable'.

<sup>2</sup> I coin this term deliberately, to distinguish it from Milbank's and others' 'non-mastery'. The desire not to 'master' cannot be summoned by mere good intention or fiat. It is a matter, I submit, of waiting on divine aid and transformation, a transcendent undoing of manipulative human control or aggression.

tinue the task of systematic theology. It is no good *denying* the force of our three critiques. One cannot simply look away.

### Answering the charges against systematic theology: a response from the perspective of *théologie totale*

1. That systematic theology should be perceived as necessarily engaged in a false reification of God, first, is the accusation made when systematics is seen as implicated in a form of ‘onto-theology’. But what exactly does this accusation mean? The charge of course goes back to Heidegger’s claim that Greek philosophical metaphysics was already engaged in an inappropriate attempt to explain or capture the divine, the ultimate Cause, and so to reify, and banalify, ‘being’; and, further, that classical and scholastic Christian theology, in its dependence on Greek metaphysics, unthinkingly extended such a trait into its projects of philosophical and systematic theology. Even Thomas Aquinas - as we well know in these halls - has been (falsely) accused of such an ‘onto-theological’ error.

But the mistake in the charge itself, of course, is that it has failed to understand the proper place of the apophatic dimensions of classic Christian thought itself. Once there is a full and ready acknowledgement that to make claims about *God* involves a fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing, a form of unknowing more fundamental even than the positive accession of contentful revelation, the ‘onto-theological’ charge loses its edge. Indeed, one might say it becomes a mere shadowboxing. For ‘God’, by definition, cannot be an extra item in the universe (a very big one) to be known, and so controlled, by human intellect, will or imagination. God is, rather, that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all; God is the source and sustainer of all being, and, as such, the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the ‘blinking’ of the human ambition to knowledge, control and mastery. To know God is unlike any other knowledge; indeed, it is more truly to *be* known, and so transformed.

So, if the ‘onto-theological’ charge misses its mark, is its accusation simply ‘much ado about nothing’? Not at all; for its concerns rightly chide those forms of theology which show an inadequate awareness of the *sui generis* nature of the divine, and of the ever-present dangers of idolatry. In short, systematic theology without appropriately apophatic sensibilities is still potentially subject to its criticism. The question then presses: what constitutes such an ‘appropriately apophatic sensibility’? Can this be gained simply by taking thought (or, rather, by taking thought and then negating it)? Or is it that this first accusation against systematic theology has rightly isolated a deeper problem than that of mere intellectual or semantic hygiene - that is, the modern problem of the dissociation of theology from *practices* of un-mastery?

It is here that one of the key dimensions of my proposed *théologie totale* becomes crucial. As I have already suggested - and this is clearly a bold claim - systematic theology without contemplative and ascetic practice is void; for theology in its proper sense is always implicitly *in via*. It comes, that is, with the urge, the fundamental desire, to seek God’s ‘face’ and yet to have that seeking constantly checked, corrected and purged. The mere intellectual acknowledgement of human finitude is not enough (and in any case is all too easily forgotten); the false humility of a theological ‘liberalism’ which re-makes God as it wishes under the guise of ‘Kantian’ or neo-Kantian nescience is equally unsatisfactory; it is the actual *practice* of contemplation that is the condition of a new ‘knowing-in-unknowing’. It must involve the stuff of learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition. 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*

(Kaufmanian) sense.<sup>3</sup> 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.

The first, 'onto-theological', objection to systematics therefore does still have continuing point, even as one answers it. It serves as a reminder that the problem of idolatry is an enduring one, and that it can never be dealt with by mere mental *fiat* or a false sense of intellectual control. It draws attention, too, to the fact that not all theology adequately reflects on its apophatic duties: insofar as it fails in them, it is indeed implicated in 'onto-theological' temptation. Finally, it hints therefore also at the need to make important distinctions between different levels, or types, of approach to doctrinal truth. That is, there are different ways in which doctrines can be purveyed, whether by symbolic power, indirect allusion, or analytic clarity; but not all of these remind one effectively of the apophatic necessity in any attempt to speak truly of God. One of the rightful requirements of systematic theology, then, is for it to indicate what sorts of 'forms' it is using, and for what purpose, and how such forms relate to intentional practices of un-mastery. Only thus can one consciously guard against the 'onto-theological' danger.

2. The second charge against systematic theology is less to do with technical issues of speech about God, and more about falsely generalizing strategies of power. The social theorists who have decried 'hegemony' (I am thinking of Gramsci, Foucault, and behind them Nietzsche) are rightly calling attention to ways in which powerful discourses, especially ones that aspire to a total picture, can occlude or marginalize the voices of those who are already oppressed, or are being pushed into a state of subjection. 'System' here tends to connote 'systemic' oppression, deep-seated political violence or abuse; 'hege-

monic' discourses – consciously or unconsciously – seek to justify such oppression. Does systematic theology do this too?

The short answer, again, is that it certainly can do, and most manifestly has done in many contexts in Christian tradition. Liberation theology, in all its guises, witnesses to the felt perception that classic, official church theology (systematic or otherwise) has often failed in any sustained theological response to problems of social and political oppression. And that 'gender', 'race' and 'class', amongst other categories related to such oppression, are still matters not generally discussed in systematic theology, is a telling comment on the state of the undertaking. So long as such topics are excluded *a priori* from systematic theology's *loci* for discussion, or pushed aside as irrelevant to theological truth, the charge that they are being occluded from theological sight will continue to have point.

But the method of *théologie totale* is again of crucial significance here, and this for at least two reasons. First, the ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized 'other'. It is easy, from a privileged position, to be morally righteous about justice for the oppressed, whilst actually drowning out their voices with the din of one's own high-sounding plans for reform. Likewise, there is much talk of the problem of attending to the otherness of the 'other' in contemporary post-Kantian ethics and post-colonial theory;<sup>4</sup> but there is very little about the intentional and embodied practices that might enable such attention. The moral and epistemic stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation is a vital key here: its practised self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomfiting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy.

Secondly, the method of *théologie totale* (as I have already hinted) is not only founded in ascetic practices of attention, but rooted in an exploration of the many mediums and levels at

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind here the early work of Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Yet there is very little religious interest in post-colonial theory, which is ironic given its claim to speak for deeply religious populations.

which theological truth may be engaged. It is in this sense that it deserves the appellation *totale*: 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. Thus it is devoted precisely to the excavation and evaluation of what has previously been neglected: to theological fieldwork in a variety of illuminating social and political contexts (not merely those of privilege, in fact especially not); to religious cultural productions of the arts and the imagination; to neglected or side-lined texts; and to examination of the differences made to theology by such factors as gender, class, or race [all these relate to chapters in my forthcoming systematic project]. In short, *théologie totale* makes the bold claim that the more ‘systematic’ one’s intentions, the more necessary the exploration of such dark and neglected corners; and that, precisely as a theology *in via*, *théologie totale* continually risks destabilization and redirection. In an important sense, then, this form of systematic theology must always also remain, in principle, *unsystematic* – if by that one means open to the possibility of risk and challenge. This playful oxymoron (‘unsystematic systematics’) applies just to the extent that the undertaking renders itself persistently vulnerable to interruptions from the unexpected – through its radical practices of attention to the Spirit.

3. And that point forms a natural transition to the third, and last, charge made against systematic thinking: that it is intrinsically ‘phallogentric’ (that is, that it operates intellectually in a mode symbolically linked to the male body); and that it is inherently repressive of ‘feminine’ imagination, creativity, or of the destabilization of ordered thinking that may arise from the unconscious. This objection will make little sense unless one is familiar with the thought-forms and presumptions of French post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory; and thus one’s immediate response to this last critique must be that it precisely *begs the question* of one’s assumed theory of gender (an issue I am about to tackle in the last part of this lecture). However, there is something irreducibly important at stake in this charge: it concerns the embodied nature of all theological thinking.

For this last critique starts from the assumption that there is a distinctively ‘feminine’ mode of reflection (the ‘semiotic’ in Lacanian terminology), which is linked to the female body and female sexuality, and incapable of capture – without destructive ‘phallogentric’ distortion – in *clearly enunciated* forms. To attempt systematics in such forms would thus be an intrinsic offense to ‘feminine’ sensibility, and would crush the creative destabilizations that are unique to the realm of the semiotic. This particular understanding of the gender divide, we might note, can come in more-or-less hardened forms of dogmatism. The more subtle exponents of this school of thought by no means intend an essentialist view of gender (which would link female bodies inexorably and normatively to certain kinds of creative, but non-analytic, thought). Instead, feminist writers such as Luce Irigaray wish to draw attention to the undeniable cultural dominance of ‘male’ thinking, and its repressive and distorting effects on both women and men: if the so-called ‘feminine imaginary’ is accorded no worth, they argue, then psychic life remains distorted and stultifying for all.

The main problem with this line of thought, however, is that it risks reinstating the problem it seeks to resolve. If the gender division is so strongly bound to genital shape and symbolism, and so disjunctively construed, then a pessimistic ideology tends to dominate: the so-called ‘feminine imaginary’ can never, it is averred, be brought into effective play in the realm of existing systematic discussion. Instead it has to found its own, distinct, form of discourse. It is as if such pessimism, and such dogmatized gender dualism, re-consigns the ‘feminine’ to an eternal marginalization, ironically recreating the conditions of powerlessness from which it arose. Semiotic explosions may become the only means of redress: at best they are the deliciously subversive *ripostes* of the marginalized (noises off, as it were), but never harbingers of actual psychic or social change.<sup>5</sup> Systematic theology, on

<sup>5</sup> I present this critique in more detail in ‘Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion’, in ed. W. Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, OUP, 2005), 494-525. But here I am more forcefully driving home the point that any attempt to fix our three problems by purely human or

this view, remains an irredeemably 'male' undertaking.

But it is to address such a false disjunction as this that the contemplative method of *théologie totale* is, once again, attuned. As the latter part of my lecture will now seek to display, it is possible to acknowledge the full *theological* significance of bodily and gendered difference (in a sense to be discussed), but to avoid the stuckness of a theory in which the so-called semiotic realm fails in any substantial or transformative impact on the systematic. For the contemplative method of *théologie totale* of course already welcomes what is here called the semiotic at more than one level: it welcomes it in the very act of contemplation, in which practices of unknowing precisely court the realm of the unconscious; and it welcomes it in the arts, as a way into those levels of doctrinal truth, via the imagination and aesthetic artifacts, that more drily intellectual theology often misses. What this third critique of systematics has so rightly seen, then - that gender and bodily difference cannot be irrelevant to systematics - is capable of a different response than the dismissive one that it itself envisages.

### The tangled root of desire

I have now surveyed the three major contemporary objections to systematic theology, fully acknowledging their force. But I have also suggested that a contemplative approach to systematics, by virtue of its very practices of un-mastery, is alone capable of addressing the deeper issues raised. Indeed, if I am right, it can change the terms of the debate in such a way that seemingly irresolvable dilemmas in secular approaches to these problems may be fruitfully addressed.

For we now see that these three objections to the task of systematic theology turn out to have a shared, or at least tangled, root. Each presumes that the systematician idolatrously *desires* mastery: a complete understanding of God, a regnant position in society, or a domination of the gen-

secular powers tends either to re-summon the temptation to false mastery, or to relegate the abused and unrecognized back to the alternative realm of the 'semiotic'.

dered 'other'; and each presumes that the same systematician will thereby abuse his knowledge, his power, or his 'male' mode of thinking, for purposes of intellectual, social or sexual dominance. The deeper issues, then, involve the insidious entanglement of knowledge, power and gender. But their shared root, let me now suggest, is the yet deeper problem of *desire*. It is the idolatrous desire to know all that fuels 'ontology'; it is the imperious desire to dominate that inspires 'hegemony'; it is the 'phallogocentric' desire to conquer that represses the 'feminine'. To speak theologically: *unredeemed* desire is at the root of each of these challenges to the systematic task. It is to this deeper problem that we must now attend.

I said at the beginning of this paper that systematic theology cannot credibly go on without urgent attention to matters of desire, sex, sexuality and gender. I am now in a better position to say why this might be so, and how these particular issues might themselves be ordered and rooted - in the category of desire itself. On the one hand (the theological side of the matter), the contemplative task, which rightly sustains systematics, is itself a progressive modulator and refiner of human desire: in its naked longing for God, it lays out all its other desires - conscious and unconscious - and places them, over time, into the crucible of divine desire. (Sexual desire, from this contemplative perspective, is thus drawn into an inexorable tether with all other desires, judged by its approximation, or lack thereof, to the purity of divine charity: the ontology of divine desire, we might say, is more fundamental, because uncreated, than the realm of created, human, longings, which nonetheless ultimately owe their existence to God.) On the other hand (the cultural side of the matter), the tumultuous obsessions of a secularized and sex-saturated culture, and the current political intensities of debates over gender and same-sex desire, make it imperative for the systematician to give theological thematization to these divisive and contested topics.

So, as a hinge to the last part of the paper, I now want to place before you my specifically *theological* hypothesis about gender; and it is this. Not only is divine desire more fundamental than human sexual desire, I argue, because it is

its ultimate incubus, source, and refiner; but also, and by the same token, that same divine *desire is more fundamental than gender*. The key to the secular riddle of gender can lie only in its connection precisely to the doctrine of a desiring, trinitarian God.

### Why does gender matter?

But wait a minute, before we go any further: what *is* gender, in any case, and why does it matter? To contemporary secular theorists of gender, first, it matters intensely, of course, since for them it is the powerful symbolic means by which culture slices humanity normatively into *two* (and only two), and thereby imposes, by continually repeated rituals of reinforcement (both conscious and unconscious), an oppressive and restricted form of life on those who do not fit the binary alternatives. Gender is – on this view – implicitly linked to oppression. Only ‘performative’ acts of public dissent from the so-called ‘gender binary’ may hope to shift its cultural hold.<sup>6</sup>

To biblical fundamentalists and conservatives, by contrast, and especially to the anti-gay lobby, gender ‘matters’ no less intensely: not only is ‘heterosexuality’ read as normatively prescribed by the Bible, but a particular, subordinationist, understanding of the relation of female to male is seen to follow as well.

There is another possible theological approach to gender, however, which by no means decries biblical authority, indeed still takes it as primary; but it sets the exegesis of complex scriptural texts in full relation to tradition, philosophical analysis, and ascetic practice. Here gender ‘matters’ primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship* – first and foremost to God, but also, and from there, to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human’s role as made in the ‘image of God’ (Gen. 1.26-7). Gender ‘matters’ to systematic theology, too then, insofar as it is a crucial dimension of its *theological* analysis of the human: to fail to chart the

differences and performances of gender would be to ignore one of the most profound aspects of human experience, whether it is felt as joy or as curse. Where this approach differs from secular gender theory, let me now suggest, is in three crucial areas which transform its capacity to deal with seemingly insoluble dilemmas for the secular realm of discussion.

Whereas secular gender theory argues, and agonizes, about how it can shift and transform cultural presumptions about gender that are often unconsciously and unthinkingly replicated, a contemplative theology *in via* has at its disposal, first, theological concepts of creation, fall and redemption which place the performances of gender in a spectrum of existential possibilities *between* despair and hope. What one might call the fallen, ‘worldly’ view of gender relations is open to the future, and to change; it is set in an unfolding, diachronic narrative both of individual spiritual maturation and of societal transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, and correlatively, a theological view of gender thereby also has an eschatological hope, one that it sees not as pious fiction or wish-fulfillment, but as firmly grounded in the events of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. Gender, in the sense just given, is ineradicable (I am always, even after death - assuming I believe in that possibility - a particular sort of ‘differentiated, relational’ being); but gender is not unchangeable: it too is *in via*. What is fallen can be redeemed and sanctified - indeed rendered sacramental by participation in Christ. In this sense, gender may be seen not merely as a locus of oppression but just as much as the potential vehicle of embodied salvation.

Third, then, and most importantly, gender is understood differently for a contemplative asceticism precisely because it claims through its

<sup>6</sup> Such is the view of ‘heteronormativity’ found in the work of Judith Butler.

<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere (in ‘Deepening “Practices”’: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology’, in eds. D. Bass and M. Volk, *Practising Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2001), 78-93) that gender is characteristically viewed differently at different periods of personal maturation, and even more at different phases of spiritual maturation if transformative ascetic practices are undertaken. Secular gender theory attends all too little to this diachronic complication.

practices of devotion to encounter and embrace a holy *reality*, a reality revealed as three (yet thereby transformative of any two)<sup>8</sup>. What contemporary gender theory jargonistically calls ‘performativity’ and ‘ritualization’ – whether as reiteration of a repressive gender régime, or as a ‘destabilization’ of it – finds its *theological* counterpart in the *sui generis* ‘performances’ of contemplation. These performances, however, are not, primarily intended as acts of resistance to worldly oppression (although I believe they give courage for such!); and nor are they therefore merely human strategies of resistance. Rather they are acts of ‘submission’ to a unique power-beyond-human-power – and, as such, are of course already ‘gendered’, in a particular and unique sense – gendered in relationship to God. What makes *this* gendering ‘different’ from worldly gender, then, is its being rendered labile to the logic and flow of trinitarian, divine desire, its welcoming of the primary interruption of the Spirit in prayer, and its submission to contemplative unknowing so that the certainties of this world (including the supposed certainties of fallen gender) can be re-made in the incarnate likeness of Christ. Gender (embodied difference) is here not to be eradicated, note, but to be transformed; it still ‘matters’, but only because God desires it to matter and can remake it in the image of his Son.

## Gender, the Trinity and Incarnation

Threeness and twoness. Let me reflect a little more at the close of this paper on the symbolic significance of these numbers for Christian doctrine, but also for gender. I can only spell out baldly here a thesis that may seem unfamiliar and strange, but which again takes its cue from the particular vantage point of the practice of ‘un-mastering’ prayer.

I have argued elsewhere, and do again in more detail in my forthcoming systematics, that prayer (and especially prayer of a non-discursive sort, whether contemplative or charismatic) is

the only context in which the *irreducible* threeness of God becomes humanly apparent. It does so because – as one ceases to set the agenda and allows room for God to be God - the sense of the *human* impossibility of prayer becomes the more intense (see Ro 8. 26), and drives one to comprehend the necessity of God’s own prior activity in it. Strictly speaking it is not I who autonomously pray, but God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the ‘Father’. There is, then, an inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God; and insofar as I welcome and receive this reflexivity, I find that it is the Holy Spirit who ‘interrupts’ my human monologue to a (supposedly) monadic God;<sup>9</sup> it is the Holy Spirit who finally thereby causes me to see God no longer as patriarchal threat but as infinite tenderness; and it is also the Holy Spirit who first painfully darkens my prior certainties, enflames and checks my own desires, and so invites me ever more deeply into the life of redeemed Sonship. In short, it is this ‘reflexivity-in-God’, this Holy Spirit, which makes incarnate life *possible*.

So when, from this perspective in prayer, I count three in God, the Holy Spirit cannot be a *mere* ‘third’. The Spirit cannot be an add-on, an ‘excess’, or a ‘go-between’ to what is already established as a somehow more privileged dyad (the ‘Father’ and ‘Son’). Instead, the Holy Spirit is intrinsic to the very make-up of the Father/Son relationship from all eternity; the Spirit, moreover, is that-without-which-there-would-be-no-incarnated-Son at all, and – by extension - no life of Sonship into which we, too, might enter by participation. The Spirit, then, is what interrupts the fallen worldly order and infuses it with the divine question, the divine lure, the divine life.

So this irreducible threeness in God cannot be insignificant for the matter of gendered twoness, since the human is precisely made ‘in God’s (trinitarian) image’, and destined to be restored to that image. It must be, then, that in this fallen world, one lives, in some sense, *be-*

<sup>8</sup> I shall explain the relation of ‘three’ and ‘two’ in the next section. The metaphysical realism in my approach is important: it is not we who fix this problem of fallen gender; rather, it is God.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to underscore that this ‘interruption’ does not bludgeon or suppress the human, but ‘comes to our aid’.



*tween* twoness and its transfiguring interruption; so one is not, as in secular gender theory, endlessly and ever subject to the debilitating falseness of fallen gender, fallen twoness. In contrast, in Christ, I meet the human One who, precisely in the Spirit, has effected that interruptive transfiguration of twoness. He has done so by crossing the boundary between another ‘twoness’ more fundamental even than the twoness of gender: the ontological twoness of God and the world. In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not re-establish the boundary as before, but nor – significantly – does he destroy it; rather, we might say that he ‘transgresses’ it in the Spirit, infusing the created world anew with divinity. And just as, in the Spirit, he crosses that ontological twoness transformatively, but without obliteration of otherness, so – I now suggest, and analogously – the interruptive work of the trinitarian God does not *obliterate* the twoness of human gender, either, but precisely renders it subject to the labile transformations of divine desire. Whatever this redeemed twoness is (and there are remaining mysterious dimensions to this question), it cannot be the stuck, fixed, twoness of the *fallen* ‘gender binary’.

So one might say that there are two different sorts of ‘difference’ that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity (Trinity and Incarnation) hold before one, as symbolically and theologically relevant for the ‘differences’ of gender. One is the ‘difference’ of the three in God – different but *equal*, a difference only of relation and not of distinct activities or powers. The other is the quite different ‘difference’ between God and the world, a fundamental line of ontological difference that has been crossed and overcome in the Incarnation, yet also not obliterated. The Christian tradition has, of course, been constantly tempted to figure the difference of gender straightforwardly on the latter difference: to align ‘masculinity’ with God and ‘femininity’ with the world (and so to subordinate women to men, whilst tacitly undermining their status as fully redeemed). More recently, some feminist theology (one thinks especially of Elizabeth Johnson here) has attempted – in reaction – to model gender on the former difference – straightforwardly to *emulate* a trinitarian ‘equal-

ity-in-difference’. The position proposed here is that neither of these more familiar alternatives is possible, nor even obviously mandated by the complex authorities of Scripture and tradition. Rather, in the case of human gender there is a subtle transformation of both models caused by their intersection: the ‘fixed’ fallen differences of worldly gender are transfigured precisely by the interruptive activity of the Holy Spirit, drawing gender into trinitarian purgation and transformation. *Twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by threeness.*

This is *not*, I must strongly underscore in closing, a theory of a ‘third gender’, or a theory either of the insignificance, or of the obliteration, of gender. On the contrary, it is a theory about gender’s mysterious and plastic openness to divine transfiguration.

## Conclusions: Is there A Future for Systematic Theology and Gender?

We now know why my answer to this question is ‘Yes’. Not only *is* there a future, but there *must* be; without it systematic theology evades, or represses, some of the most troubling personal and political issues of our day and renders theological anthropology arid and disembodied. But – as I have argued I hope persuasively today – our thoughts about gender must be recast in the light of the logic of the trinitarian and incarnate God, and remoulded in the crucible of contemplation. In the ‘impossibility’ of the prayer of dispossession, in which the Spirit cracks open the human heart to a new future, divine desire purgatively reformulates human desire and the problems of gender are mysteriously recast. It follows that all the other problems of power, sex and gender with which contemporary theory struggles so notably cannot be solved, I dare to say – whether by human political power, violent *fiat*, or even subversive deviousness or ritualized revolt – without such prior surrender to the divine.

Some other related writing, for reference:  
Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge, CUP, forthcoming, 2009/10)

\_\_\_\_\_, co-ed. with Charles M. Stang, *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, also available as *Modern Theology* October 2008)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Pleasure Principles: Toward a Contemporary Theology of Desire', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* Autumn 2005, 20-33

\_\_\_\_\_, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002)

\_\_\_\_\_, 'Fresh Paths in Systematic Theology: Sarah Coakley', in ed. Rupert Shortt, *God's Advocates* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 67-85

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