

# Response to Sarah Coakley

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Thank you so much for a very inspiring lecture. You have put a thought-provoking question before us: Is there a future for gender and for systematic theology? No doubt, this is a seminal question to pursue, since gender studies and systematic theology each are facing their own challenges and a good relationship between the two does not come naturally for many representatives of either field. In fact, gender theorists and systematic theologians have often been quite dismissive of each other, and in many places they continue to be so. At the same time, both these areas of research and teaching are troubled by difficulties.

Gender theory has not exactly failed, but not really succeeded in convincing the theological and ecclesial establishment of its value and relevance, and maybe even less of its urgency. In some respects, gender studies appear to be in a situation comparable to that of ecumenism – the enthusiasm of the fresh starts of the post-war and post-Vatican II era has widely vanished, and some achievements have been renounced.

Systematic theology, in turn, has been facing significant resistance from various directions. I will mention only three of them. Postmodern sensitivity has questioned the legitimacy of any system: systems are perceived as totalizing, hierarchical, intolerant, Western, eurocentric, suppressive – you name it. Systematic theology has internalized much of that assessment in its critical appraisal of onto-theology. Second, in the academic context of religious studies, systematic theology is time and again charged with being biased, confessional or otherwise wanting in regard to the scientific standards of separating the descriptive from the normative. Finally, even among theologians in general – priests and students – systematic theology is far from being

recognized as a stimulus and presupposition for creative and constructive theological thought and for the ministry of the church. Having taught both German and systematic theology I recognize a common pattern: systematic theology is often perceived of as the grammar of theological language, and students more often than not come with the prejudice that grammar is difficult, abstract, boring, impossible to understand and invented for the sole purpose of having you make mistakes. In other words, systematic theology is not automatically seen as an asset, let alone as a necessary tool to bring the wealth and beauty of a language to flourish.

With this background in mind, I share Sarah Coakley's ambition to facilitate a good future for both gender studies and systematic theology. Her plan for making that future happen entails a claim that is bold indeed: *only* systematic theology can respond adequately and effectively to gender studies, and *only* gender studies including the political insights gained by it, can re-animate systematic theology for the future.

In principle I don't mind following her along this way of reasoning. However, I must also flag for a little bit of scepticism toward the "onlys" – I think that fruitful developments tend to be more complex and pluralistic than the word "only" would suggest. For example, I would include a more general transdisciplinarity, such as the dialogue between theology and science, among the potentially re-animating processes for systematic theology.

In this context, I also need to clarify that my own definition of systematic theology differs somewhat from Coakley's. She defines systematic theology as an integrated and coherent presentation of Christian truth. I define it as critical and self-critical reflection on the contents and

effects of religious traditions, in our case Christian traditions. Coakley's definition minds and cares explicitly for the qualities of a system as a whole, while mine focuses more on the process of reasoning, its situatedness and the significance of a system's ruptures rather than its integrity. Given this point of departure, I must admit to being intuitively inclined to feel resistance to an enterprise that goes by the name of *théologie totale*, even with the qualifier that "totale" here does not mean "totalizing" in a political sense or in the philosophical sense of the Western Enlightenment.

Nevertheless, this said, I do not think that our definitions of systematic theology are mutually exclusive. Rather, they focus on a tension that could be beneficial for the future of theology. I see this tension as the corollary of the insight that intense focus on ruptures runs the risk of leaving us with fragmentation only and that too much emphasis on an integrated system runs the risk of not doing justice to alterity. Within the framework of this beneficial tension I am therefore willing to embark with Coakley on her project of exploring a robustly theological, trinitarian perspective on gender, appropriately founded in bodily practices of prayer. The program is exciting: Systematic theology should not just import secular theory but submit it to deliberate theological refinement. As in all dialogues, mutuality is required, although not always taken for granted. A secular context tends to expect systematic theology to listen and learn rather than to consider and contribute – turning mutuality into a reality yet to be claimed.<sup>1</sup> Theology, in turn, needs transformation through bodily practices of contemplative prayer, according to Coakley. In this respect, gender is both assisting transformation and subject to transformation, since this kind of prayer will transform all desires, including sexual desire.

We can currently observe a growing interest in religious and existential questions in Western secularized countries, while at the same time self-proclaimed humanists are attacking both obscure and more enlightened strains of spirituality with the same vitriolic aggression. This context

certainly calls for the critical and self-critical reflection on the contents and effects of religious traditions which systematic theology can supply. Without it, religious traditions will be left with a lack in both intellectual honesty and constructive and creative thinking. But we also need convincing, intellectually sound and physically wholesome theological practices. Without these, we would fail the marks of existential honesty and spiritual credibility. Coakley's program holds the promise of responding well to these needs, inviting positive consideration and thorough discussion.

She suggests that ascetic contemplation be seen as a remedy against the charges pressed against systematic theology. Silence is part of what Coakley presents as the major novum she is laying before us. It certainly sounds like a novum when launched in a Western European university setting. Yet, we know that in a wider context, this way of doing theology is not without parallels. It reminds me of Eastern Orthodox theology and its striving for the unity of thought and liturgy as a communion of mystery and rationality; Eastern Orthodox theology has included embodied practice of prayer even without being touched by modern Western gender theories.

Coakley rightly draws our attention to the apophatic dimension in classic Christian thought. With this, I agree fully and wholeheartedly. Even in the most brilliant theological concept there remains an apophatic surplus. That is why, to say it in Coakley's words, to know God "is more truly to *be* known, and so transformed." Repeated, lived, embodied and suffered contemplation leads to what she ingeniously calls the "un-mastery" of our knowledge as an act of grace and divine transformation that lifts theologians beyond the desire to manipulate, control or condemn. Besides and beyond being a subject of knowledge, God remains "dizzying mystery". If this approach can combine all the riches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition with the achievements of Western theology and gender studies while avoiding the weaknesses of all three, it holds great promise indeed.

The sceptic, however, will raise two concerns at this point. First, if systematic theology without contemplative and ascetic practice is void, as

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Antje Jackelén, "What Theology Can Do for Science." *Theology and Science*, 6/3 (2008). 287-303.

Coakley claims, does this then entail that “real” theology can be done by practitioners of the faith only? Experience suggests that theology done by non-believers very well can fly, even though it may have difficulties in landing, as it were. Systematic theology as a *theologia regenerantium* will – I am afraid – come across as an unwarranted narrowing of a field that needs to be broad and diverse. Furthermore, the advancement of this theological profile is likely to jeopardize the character of systematic theology as an academic discipline pursued in the setting of a secular university. There is an added value to being part of a secular academic setting, which I would hesitate to put at risk. Can’t systematic theology be a theology *in via* or maybe better, a *theologia viatorum*, even without express contemplative and ascetic practice? (But then, of course, I am a Lutheran believing and trusting in God’s work in both ‘kingdoms’!)

Second, how will a *théologie totale* avoid falling prey to a new monism? Can we ever retreat behind the insight that we need *theologies* rather than one theology in our attempts to say something intelligible and credible about that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all? I believe that the apophatic surplus pertains not only to theological thinking, but also to ascetic practice; the latter cannot serve as an altogether reliable means of proper humility, epistemic and otherwise. For even ascetic practice is not immune to cataphatic expansionism; in and of itself it is not a safeguard for maintaining the apophatic surplus.

Surely, the point of ascetic contemplation cannot be to create a guarantee against totalizing assaults. The point must be that there are no such guarantees, only attempts at practices that can keep systematic theology *in via* – moving with and through every level and type of religious apprehension and expression and developing a special preference for the dark and neglected corners of theological exploration, as Coakley puts it. Therefore, the appeal that systematic theology always must remain unsystematic is really much more than a play with words.

Un-mastery hence appears to recommend itself as a criterion for an adequate systematic theology in our days, since time and again we have realized that it is precisely the attempt at

mastery that has led systematic theology into directions that are neither viable nor desirable. But how exactly can one account for un-mastery? Is there a way of measuring the level of success in un-mastery? This does not seem an easy question to answer: it tends to be more complicated to assess undoing than doing, because to an inexorable extent, the undoing is dependent on the doing.

Since I don’t feel in a position to solve this issue, I will follow Coakley in her turn toward what she identifies as the root of the problems facing systematic theology, namely “unredeemed desire.” Lifting up desire as the driving force and connecting our desire for God with all other desires is an exciting turn – even in Lund, where we have travelled a long way since the days when eros was all-bad and agape was all-good. Theologians cannot deny it: All too often, desire has ended up together with sin, chaos, disorder and evil things in opposition to God – and thus left theology either speechless or moralizing in the face of much desire. Grounding sexual desire in divine desire takes things in a different direction. The claim is that divine desire always transcends human desire and transforms it without turning longing human beings into – with a quote from Anders Nygren “a tube, which by faith is open upwards, and by love downwards ... merely the tube, the channel through which God’s love flows.”<sup>2</sup> Contrary to Nygren’s agapeic cosmos of tubes, the messiness of desires is well worth theological engagement. Disentanglement is hardly a realistic option, but handling the messiness certainly is a qualifying piece of work for systematic theologians.

The question of the relationship between sexual desire and desire for God, by the way, is by no means new – of which the tragic love story of the great theology teacher Abelard and the bright Heloise is a famous case in point. Reading the letters the two lovers exchanged nearly 1000 years ago, as they were separated from each other by the walls of a monastery and by the castration of Abelard is moving: Heloise’s testimony of her unfulfilled longings, her confession that she longingly thinks of physical love

<sup>2</sup> Anders Nygren. *Agape and Eros*. London: SPCK, 1953. 735.

in the middle of holy mass, and her struggle with a God whom she cannot love spiritually because she has been bereaved of the experience of human love.<sup>3</sup> Abelard's long and somewhat wooden theological explanations, meant to help her reach a state of sublime harmony, barely conceal his own emotional investment behind a thin veil of male self-composure; he desperately tries to make the case that the tragedy that hit them was just divine punishment for the sake of their salvation. It is hard to present this attempt as a model for sound systematic theology, let alone good pastoral care.

In attitudes toward entanglement and messiness I see an affinity between Coakley's approach and one of the favourite terms I have used in my own work, namely *differentiated relationality*. One may say that the grounding of our human desires in divine desire brings into fruition the differentiated relationality that marks creation; it does so by opening up secular gender theory existentially (offering an alternative to heteronormativity), eschatologically (turning gender into a vehicle of embodied salvation), and theologically (expanding and transforming twoness).

Creating openness is the relevant common pattern here. Openness also is the very hallmark of the Holy Spirit – as Coakley beautifully puts it: “The Spirit, then, is what interrupts the fallen worldly order and infuses it with the divine question, the divine lure, the divine life.” I have wondered for a long time why it is that systematic theology in general so often has neglected the Holy Spirit, turning it into a link between the two main characters of the Trinity, either as a static bond or busy running errands between the Father and the Son and possibly the world. It seems that the order of the articles in the Creed have blinded both theology and the pedagogy of faith communication to the fact that there are other possibilities than always starting with the Father/Creator, then moving to the Son and finally lumping the Holy Spirit together with all the rest. I am still looking for a convincing theology and pedagogy of faith that starts with the Holy Spirit – making the point that it is the Holy

Spirit who is at work in the most dramatic crossing of borders that can be imagined: the incarnation as the transgression of the border between God and world.

What Coakley is suggesting amounts to a theology that resembles an ellipse. Its two focal points are: the Trinity as a threefold openness on the one hand and contemplation as the crucible that moulds closed systems into the dynamics of a differentiated relationality on the other. She envisions that this will allow for the sought-after un-mastery by way of dispossession, which serves as a presupposition for true subversiveness in gender theory.

Expressed in more general terms, this is a program for a theology that brings mystery and rationality into communion, offering nourishment that is appealing both intellectually and spiritually. Is that what we need?

Let me close by answering this question with a reference to a novel by Paulo Coelho, namely his *The Witch of Portobello* (2007), which I think captures the blend of our context quite well – a mixture of intellect, spirituality, desire, gender and asceticism.

The main character of the novel is born in Sibiu, Transylvania by a Roma mother. She is adopted by a wealthy Lebanese couple. After a childhood in Lebanon she comes to London as a refugee. Well established there, she works as a real estate broker in the Middle Eastern desert landscape. Athena, as she calls herself, is a pilgrim, albeit of a special kind. As a believer she is rejected by the established church; she is excommunicated when she gets divorced. The intelligent and gifted young woman then slides into an alternative spirituality: dancing sessions leading to trance, dramatic initiation rites, clairvoyance, and a meshing of identity with the so-called ‘great mother’. Established Christian teaching comes across as being a lot more about opposing and prohibiting things than about affirming people and desires. It is portrayed as both intellectually and spiritually dissatisfying. Witchcraft presents itself as an attractive alternative: it promises freedom beyond all rational, spiritual and gendered straitjackets.

I think the Brazilian author Coelho portrays the European wrestling with its intellectual and spiritual heritage quite well. We need to ac-

<sup>3</sup> James Burge. *Heloise & Abelard. A New Biography*. Harper San Francisco, 2006. 205.

knowledge that making things intellectually fit is necessary, but not sufficient. In the end, intellectual coherence will only reach halfway. People want and need to see that things fit spiritually, too. Athena, an intelligent person, enlightened about her desires and in search of wholeness, will find much traditional systematic theology repellent. Will she feel better served by Sarah Coakley's program? There is a fair chance that the answer is yes; for she would understand what it means that "final 'erotic' fulfillment demands ... asceticism ... a submission of 'desire' in which gender binaries are curiously upended, and the self at its deepest level transformed and empowered by the divine."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Coakley. *Powers and Submissions*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2002. 167.