

“Behold, I am the Lord’s handmaiden, not the lords’!”

On Sarah Coakley’s Powers and Submissions

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For many years the Criterion Theatre in London gave a play called *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare in 97 Minutes*. It was – and presumably still is – a hilarious performance. The actors wizzed through all the historical plays in just a couple of minutes simply by tossing around a chopped king’s head, capturing with a few lines the very essence of John, Richard and Henrys I and II. Faced with the task of responding to a book as rich as *Powers and Submissions* in 25 minutes, I must admit to being tempted to try something similar. However, I gave up the idea of an unabridged presentation, realizing that decapitation was not an option. Some, though by no means all, the mostly male, theologians whom Sarah Coakley discusses are in fact still alive and kicking. It could too easily have been misconstrued as feminist aggression.

Instead I will take the liberty of being entirely eclectic, commenting on some of the concerns and issues that came into my mind when reading *Powers and Submissions*, choosing whatever perspective I personally find most interesting.

But before setting out on that journey I want to say thank you to the Theological Department here in Lund for giving me the opportunity to engage in a conversation with Sarah Coakley over such interesting issues as power and submission. And, of course, thank you also to Professor Coakley for the richness of her work.

Powers and Submissions contains a collection of nine essays. They have been published previously over a period of approximately ten years; even so, the essays form a whole in which Coakley pursues a question that obviously has

been close to her heart for many years. The question could perhaps be framed like this: How is it possible simultaneously to maintain the feminist theological call for equality and the strange Christian claim that true liberation comes through submission to God?

And that is of course the billion dollar question for feminist theology. All religion contains elements of submission. But submission, even within the realm of religion, has proved to be lethal for many women throughout history. And although I agree that submission to God is part and parcel of being a Christian, I have not yet come across an answer to the question of how it can be *practiced* without posing serious risks for women.

To say that is perhaps to align myself with the feminist theologians who tend to “*identify* ‘power’ with ecclesiastical ‘domination’”¹ in a way Coakley calls too “*simplistic*”. But in my opinion, things must be kept “*simple*” when dealing with power and submission so as not to obscure the issues.

My point of departure when discussing power and submission is a much less sophisticated understanding of power than what Sarah Coakley presents already in her prologue, where she writes:

Things would be simpler if there were any agreement on what human ‘power’ was in the first place ... Is power a force, a commodity, a hereditary deposit, a form of exchange, an authority, a means of ‘discipline’, a sheer domination, or a

¹ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, s. xviii. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford: United Kingdom 2002.

more nebulous ‘circuit’? Must it necessarily involve intentionality, imply resistance, suppress freedom, or assume a ‘hierarchy’? And where does it reside: in individuals, in institutions, in armies or police forces, in money, in political parties, or more generally and democratically in every sort of subtle social exchange?²

These are all valid questions, but no matter how we answer them, I would suggest that power is first and foremost a relational concept. It inevitably presupposes at least two parties, of whom one, for better or worse, has the means to make sure his will is done. Whenever I hear women say that the feminist struggle is not about taking power from men, that everyone should have more power, I never know whether to laugh or cry. Power by itself is nothing; it can not exist on its own. It is always about one party’s will holding sway over another party. It is, moreover, a zero-sum game.

We can, and need to, discuss under what conditions such an imbalance occurs and by what means. That is why the questions I quoted are so legitimate. But power always involves an inequality where the conditions for the relationship are determined by the party with power. It may be the case that Hegel’s Master and Slave are intertwined in obscure and complex ways, but it is nevertheless the Master who is in a position to relinquish his power, whereas the Slave cannot throw off his subordination without risking his life.

That is why I am a bit ambivalent, right from the start, about how Sarah Coakley constructs her argument. Her knowledge of Gregory and, for that matter, Descartes and Troeltsch, although he does not appear in this book, is truly impressive. I remember my joy when I first set eyes on her work in a feminist theological context, i.e. when I read *Swallowing a Fishbone*. Coakley is such a sound scholar – a “real theologian” who can compete with any man when it comes to first-hand knowledge of many of the big elephants in the Christian tradition. Over the years I have read too much feminist theology that does not reflect a solid theological training. At the same time, however, I ask myself again and again: In what way is a feminist argument

for equality strengthened by the fact that Coakley or I or anyone else, successfully manages to tease out from an androcentric tradition, a line or two that supports women, or equals the feminine with the masculine ... or even with the Divine?

Whom are we pleasing?

So my first question when reading Coakley’s book would be: Whom are we pleasing – in the academy and in church – by drawing on mainstream theological traditions that in a profound way can not but be understood as biased against women? This is not to say that women and feminist theologians are not entitled to the same research interests as men. Neither am I saying that Christian tradition is unimportant for the construal of Christian life today. I am simply asking about the conditions under which we are taking part in the academic game. Who decides whether or not an argument is valid?

I am well aware that Sarah Coakley is not claiming that something is true solely because it can be found in texts from one of the early fathers of the church, as in the case of Gregory, or one of the fathers of the Western philosophical tradition, as in the case of Descartes, or a nineteenth century Benedictine monk, as in the case of John Chapman. As I read Coakley, she is simply pointing out that there are things to harvest in male traditions for Christian life today, and in her reading, that goes for women, too. That might be true, although I do not always find her arguments convincing. When, for example, in the chapter on ‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity, she reads Gregory as suggesting that gender stereotypes must be overcome in order for the soul to reach a close relation to the Triune God, I do not object to that interpretation, but in my understanding such a transition remains within a discourse of male activity and female passivity.

However, that is not the main point here. It just illustrates the extreme complexity of all issues concerning gender, power and submission, especially within a religious discourse. For that reason, we must never lose sight of the question of who sets the conditions for our participation in the academic game, or for that matter the

² a.a., s. xv.

churchly game. Who decides which arguments are valid?

Submission needs to be practiced with care

That brings me to my second question, still taking as a point of departure my rather straightforward perception of power. I am intrigued by Coakley's use of the plural in the title of her book. I suppose it can be read simply as referring to her claim that there is the power of God and the power of men, i.e. at least two kinds of power – divine and human – and therefore at least two submissions. Alternatively, it can refer to all those legitimate questions concerning the “what”, “how”, “whom”, “where” and “when” of power. But if we stick to my insistence that power is always about one party imposing his will on another party, then there is only one kind of submission, namely surrendering to someone else's will. As I have already pointed out, that has proved lethal for too many women through out history. Submission is dangerous.

At the same time, as a Christian I can not but say with Augustin: My heart is restless, O God, until it rests in you. I have this yearning to submit myself to God. But I also know that it is dangerous. I live in a world where the power of God and the power of men are so intertwined that they can scarcely be disentangled. My own dissertation, *The Meaning of Gender in Theology*, has become somewhat outdated and much has happened in feminist theory since 1995. But my analysis of the Sunday high mass in Church of Sweden made it very clear that, from a Christian perspective, the foundational distinction between God and Human is constructed as a distinction between male and female, a gender divide that, through its connection to the God – human divide, is in turn construed hierarchically. I have called this symbiosis “the dual process of value reinforcement”. It can also be put as simply as Mary Daly's: “If God is male then the male is God”.

So what can be said about women's submission from a feminist theological point of view? It seems to be that we must always start by reminding ourselves that submission *is* dangerous.

Women's submission to God is therefore truly an act of faith, trusting God not to use her power in a way that will harm us. Therefore, and now I am spelling out a thought that is new also in my own thinking, so I am not sure how much weight it carries, but knowing how dangerous submission is for women, for me faithful submission has to be part of a secret love life. Although I trust the power of God not to hurt me, I do not trust the power of men (or women, for that matter). For that reason, for me as a feminist theologian, submission must never become a part of a public discourse. As a person of faith, I share Coakley's belief that true liberation comes through submission to the Divine. But as a public feminist theologian, I find it impossible to preach such a message to women.

My title for this paper is taken from one of the early Swedish feminists, Fredrika Bremer, who once started a speech by saying: “Behold, I am the Lord's handmaiden, not the lords'!” Women need to insist on this and bear it in mind. Therefore and finally, concerning what can be said about women and submission: Besides being dangerous for women, submission is a temptation. How can we serve the Lord without serving the lords, seeing that submission to God is modelled and taught by an androcentric theological tradition that sets the conditions and decides what is valid? When the Lord's word speaks to me through the words of the lords, it is tempting to yield to the will of men. After all, pleasing the lords can be much more rewarding than resisting them, as women in the academy are well aware. Submission therefore needs to be practised with care. For women this means not only being alert to male power but also being wary of giving in to our inner comfort zones. Yvonne Hirdman talks about ‘concealed subordination’, by which she means the silent agreement between men and women where women accept subordination peacefully as long as they gain not only appreciation from men, but also power over other women and men, albeit within the frame set by the man in charge. Being faithful, trusting in God, may therefore also involve resisting rather than submitting, seeing that the rewards of submission are almost everything ... except freedom.

I know, of course, that Sarah Coakley is aware of all these risks and takes them seriously. Working on this response has therefore caused me to wonder why it is that I tend to end up opposing Coakley rather than joining forces with her. Unlike Daphne Hampson, for example, I do not claim ‘autonomy’ as a must for women. Not only would such a claim exclude us from any religious discourse – what God can be envisioned alongside such a claim – it also seems to me to express an unrealistic view of what it is to be human. Dependence – and therefore incomplete autonomy – is part of being human, and that holds with or without the idea of a God. So my struggle with Coakley’s exploration of ‘submission’ as a means for feminist theology to contribute to a better Christianity (or even world) does not mean that I oppose the idea of Christian life as a life subordinate to God. But there is something about ‘submission’ that does not work for me.

Dependence rather than submission

I really appreciate Coakley’s elaboration of the development of the concept of *kenōsis*; I find it both interesting and helpful. I read her first article on *Kenōsis and Subversion* against the background of Hampson’s attack on Christianity. That is perhaps not so clear in *Powers and Submissions*. But as published in *Swallowing a Fishbone*, the essay comes through much more as a response to Hampson. And because of that, and Hampson’s concern for autonomy, I started to think about dependency. Therefore, as a third issue for discussion I would like to look at how dependency would work instead of submission for the development of a *kenōtic* theology that takes seriously the power of the Cross? Must *kenōsis* necessarily be understood as a relinquishing of power that leads to submission; could it be seen instead as an acceptance of dependency? For me this is not just a matter of words. The vulnerability associated with dependency differs from that which follows from submission. Accepting dependency entails acknowledging my need for “the other”, be it God, other humans or the whole of Creation. And what if *kenōtic* Christology conveys the message

of a mutual dependency between God and his creation? To me, that would pose other questions than those we usually ask concerning *omnipotence* and *omnipresence*, perhaps even *omniscience*. And for women *vis à vis* both the Lord and the lords, acknowledging dependence points not only towards vulnerability but also towards mutuality, responsibilities and possibilities of taking part in the conditioning of the relationship. Whereas submission, in my mind, implies surrender and passivity, dependence means *needing* something or someone and leaves room for me to take an active part in how the fulfilment of my need is to be played out.

I shall have to leave it at that for the time being. But my question to Sarah Coakley is whether or not she can see “dependence”, rather than the notion of submission, as a possible and fruitful way of exploring the “relinquishing of power” that is implied in *kenōtic* theology. Generally speaking, I believe that Swedish society – and probably most Western societies – are in need of a theology of dependence more than anything else.

And that leads me finally to bodies that matter. I love the way Coakley, in the last chapter of *Powers and Submissions*, has “courted the dangerous charge of anachronism”.³ Butler’s theories on gender are seen here, in the last chapter, as an example of the obsession with bodies that marks our time, and Coakley interprets this cultural trait as an expression of a “profound eschatological longing”⁴ to which Gregory has something to offer. I would personally never assume that questions concerning bodies and gender, or even life ever after, *as posed and understood today*, can be answered by an antique mind but that is not to say that there is nothing to learn from such a mind. I applaud the boldness of putting Butler in “sort of a dialogue” with Gregory. And I congratulate Coakley on her witty and, as I understand it, well-informed reading of Butler.

When the Reduced Shakespeare Company at the Criterion Theatre presented Hamlet in their 97-minute performance, they did so by getting the audience to act out different characters in the play. One section of the theatre was instructed to

³ a.a. s. 166.

⁴ a.a. s. 151.

represent Ophelia by standing up, waiving their hands above their heads and crying out: “My biological clock is ticking, I want a baby now!” Seeing that my time is running out, a “shorthand” version of Coakley’s view on contemporary body fixation could perhaps be a rather alarmed: My biological clock is ticking, and my body is all I’ve got! From the Gregory section in the audience we would then, in Coakley’s reading, hear a comforting whisper: Yes, your biological clocks are ticking but your bodies will be transformed.

My personal take on this would be: My biological clock is ticking, so I am dying day by day. Awareness of such *kenōsis* teaches me an absolute dependence and a need of the other, and therefore ultimately of the One who sustains us all. As Ninna Edgardh puts it, referring to Elisabeth Stuart’s theological response to Butler: “[A]ll human desire is ultimately directed towards God.”⁵

Therefore, my heart will be restless, O God, until it rests in you.

⁵ Ninna Edgardh, “*Difference and Desire – a Queer reading*”, in *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology*. Volume 48, Number 1.

Språkgranskning: Patrick Hort