

AUTHOR:¹Yohanes Krismantyo Susanta <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9473-3189>²Yeremia Yordani Putra <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9250-0544>**AFFILIATION:**¹Institut Agama Kristen Negeri Toraja, Indonesia²Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Amanat Agung Jakarta, Indonesia**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**

yohanessusanta@gmail.com

DATES:

Published: 12 December 2022

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Susanta, Y.K & Putra, Y.Y., 2022. The Trinity, Sexuality, and Gender In Sarah Coakley's Thought. KOERS — Bulletin for Christian Scholarship, 87(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.87.1.2538>

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022. The Author(s).

Published under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The Trinity, Sexuality, and Gender In Sarah Coakley's Thought

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the thoughts of Sarah Coakley who tried to enter into dialogue with the concepts of the trinity, sexuality, and gender. According to Coakley, the root cause of sexuality and gender lies in desire (eros). Coakley made a strong critique of Sigmund Freud's thinking. If it was Freud who said the desire for God was really about sex, on the other hand, Coakley asserted, sexual desire was always about the desire for God. Coakley approaches the reality of the Trinity and relates it to the problem of human desire through contemplation. The practice of contemplation provides clues about how one can transcend existing gender and sexuality stereotypes. The contemplation that is at the heart of Coakley's thinking plays a very important role in approaching the Trinity, and from there he addresses issues of sexuality and gender.

Keywords: Trinity, Sexuality, Gender, Feminist, Sarah Coakley

1. Introduction

A hot topic of discussion within the feminist theological community is the issue of sexuality and gender in Christianity. One of the many feminist theologians who share concerns and provide constructive ideas on this struggle is Sarah Coakley. Coakley is a systematic theologian, a feminist, and an ordained Anglican priest at the Church of England. He has served as the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity (2007-2018) at the University of Cambridge. Coakley expressed his concern in the opening section of his book, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, saying, "Institutional Christianity is in crisis about sexuality"(Coakley, 2013:1)

Coakley is known as a feminist theologian who is intensive in dealing with issues of sexuality and gender. Coupled with his interdisciplinary expertise, he can enter into dialogue with many classical and contemporary thinkers. What makes Coakley such an interesting thinker on the theological academic platform is his eccentric and creative approach, particularly how he formulates a new form of systematic theology. Coakley is very allergic to all forms of false dichotomy (Hilkert, 2014:575). This effort is systematically manifested in its theological construction which places the Trinity, sexuality, and gender as intertwined realities.

This paper further shows Coakley's construction in framing the three different realities. The orientation question in this paper is, "How can the Trinity be contemplated concerning human sexuality and gender?" However, before conducting this research, it is necessary to briefly describe the mapping of Coakley's theological context in the 20th-century feminist theological thought. This paper will end with an assessment of Coakley's thinking in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.

2. The Rise of Feminist Systematic Theology as a Context for Coakley's Theology

One of the important projects to have become a focus for feminist theology is the construction of the relationship between gender and systematic theology. This project is often seen as a retrieval of a doctrinal framework for feminist theology. It is expressed by Jana Marguerite Bennett that feminist theologians in the late 20th century tend to discuss certain doctrinal issues in the form of chapters or essays, by asking specific questions about gender that are following the doctrine being discussed (Bennett, 2019:277). The research and reflection of feminist theologians in this project are aimed at revising the basic approach to doing theology. They challenged presuppositions and methodologies previously used to highlight classical theological topics (Turner & Cooke, 1984:125).

It can be said that the joint monumental work of this project is a book entitled *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (LaCugna, 1993). This book contains a systematic study of doctrine in each chapter, with a focus on how Christian doctrine affects gender-specific issues (Bennett, 2019:277). Several feminist theologians are known for dedicating their thinking to gender correlation and systematic theology, including Kathryn Tanner, Katherine Sonderegger, and Sarah Coakley. Although these three feminist theologians differ in their approach, they share a common point of departure for their theology.

Firstly, they strongly oppose any talk about God being identified in humans, because "A god who is too much identified as one of us is a god in danger of being made an idol" (Bennett, 2019:282). Secondly, they interpret the mystery of God's presence amid human life. Bennett revealed that the three theologians agree in seeing the mystery of God's presence among humans directly influencing how humans meet and live with each other (Bennett, 2019:286). Thirdly, they consider what response man should make in the face of the mystery of God's presence, and from that derive the purpose of theology itself. For the three theologians, the goal of theology is prayer and has an impact on the struggles of the Christian life, one of the targets of the struggles that will be raised in this paper, namely the issue of sexuality and gender.

Another important aspect of the approach in developing theological discourse is used by the three feminist theologians in the Christian tradition. They believe that by looking back at the Christian tradition, they will find a source of wisdom to revitalize theology in contemporary situations (critical retrieval). It is stated by Nicola Slee that Christianity itself is a collection of dynamic and fluid life stories which, if properly understood, are always open to change, even radical and subversive changes (Rees, 2011:301). The three theologians on many occasions took the thoughts of several church fathers for their respective theological constructions. Tanner uses elements of Athanasius' thought in building his Christological doctrine (Bennett, 2019:279). Sonderegger approaches several questions posed by Thomas Aquinas, regarding the oneness of God (God's unicity) and God's perfections (Bennett, 2019:280). While Coakley uses the exegesis comments of Origen, Gregory of Nisa, and Augustine in reading the text of Romans 8, as well as his reflections on prayer (Hilkert, 2014:577).

3. The Links Between the Trinity, Sexuality and Gender

Based on the explanation of the context above, it is clear that Coakley's main approach is to try to connect systematic theology with various questions about sexuality and gender, especially the relation of these two things to the doctrine of the Trinity. This relation is stated by Coakley, "the problem of the Trinity cannot be solved without addressing the very questions that seem least to do with it, questions which press on the contemporary Christian churches with such devastating and often destructive force: questions of sexual justice,

questions of the meaning and stability of gender roles, questions of the final theological significance of sexual desire" (Coakley, 2013:2). Even Coakley gave a very convincing and bold statement, "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"(Coakley, 2013:59).

Coakley looks deep into the root cause of sexuality and gender lies in desire (eros). Coakley gives his reasons why desire is his theological locus, showing how dangerous it is when human desires are misdirected and manipulated. A misguided desire will lead to destructive excesses both theologically and socially. In this case, Coakley said, "it is the idolatrous desire to know all that fuels 'onto-theology; it is the imperious desire to dominate that inspires 'hegemony'; it is the 'phallogocentric' desire to conquer that represses the 'feminine'"(Coakley, 2013:51–52).

Coakley's initial intentions regarding desire can be seen in the harsh critique he made of Sigmund Freud's thinking. Coakley stated, "Freud must be as it was turned on his head. It is not that physical 'sex' is basic and 'God' ephemeral; rather, it is God who is basic, and 'desire' the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul however dimly of its created source"(Coakley, 2013:10). According to Hilbert, Coakley's statement is a strong reversal of Freud's claim that "desire for God is really about sex," on the other hand Coakley asserts, "sexual desire is always about desire for God"(Hilbert, 2014:576). In other words, Coakley wants to restore divine meaning to the reality of sexuality which Freud has openly rejected (Coakley, 2013:8).

According to Coakley, sexuality and gender need to be understood as truly related to God, and about the deep desire, we feel for God. This gives clues about what humans are looking for, namely "about the final and ultimate union that we seek"(Coakley,1998:230). Coakley emphasized the importance of viewing humans as sexual persons whose deepest desires can only be fulfilled in their relationship with God. This is where Coakley states in her dictum that the discussion about the 'right ordering of human desire' cannot be separated from the 'right speech about God'(Coakley, 2013:2). Therefore, the big goal of the Coakley project is to present a trinitarian ontology of desire, namely a vision of the nature of the Triune God as the source and destination of human desire (Coakley, 2013:6). The God we want is, in Godself, a desiring trinitarian God: the Spirit who welcomes us, whom we heart and lead us to the divine source ('Father'), transforming us Christlikely as we were taken (Coakley, 1998:230).

How does Coakley approach the reality of the Trinity and relate it to the problem of human desire? This question points to the most fundamental aspect of Coakley's approach, namely contemplation (Coakley, 2013:47–48). For Coakley, talking about the Trinitarian God cannot be separated from talking about contemplation. Here lies Coakley's unique approach, which is not to analyse, describe, and explain the Trinity, but to approach experience and contemplation. Coakley explains his definition of contemplation, "prayer or communing with God that does not use ordinary propositional language, but rests in silence or near silence; distinguished by Christian theologians from meditation: prayerful reflection on Scripture"(Coakley, 2013:346).

Coakley believes that contemplative prayer provides a very open matrix for reflection on the Trinity. Even Coakley's Christian contemplative prayer is inherently trinitarian (Coakley, 1998:223). Therefore, Coakley's understanding of the Trinity is also inseparable from his exegesis efforts on prayer-based texts, one of the texts that Coakley focuses on is Romans 8. Coakley borrows Origen's reading (in his treatise on prayer, *De Oratione*) on the relationship between prayer, the Trinity, and sexuality in Romans 8. To understand the interrelationship of these three aspects, it is first necessary to emphasize the priority and primacy of the Holy Spirit in understanding the nature and purpose of prayer (Coakley, 1998:228).

Coakley makes clear his view of who the Holy Spirit is:

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 (Coakley, 1998:56).

Coakley flattened all forms of the hierarchical creeds of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Bennett revealed that the special role of the Holy Spirit in Coakley's thinking is a form of resistance to the indifference to the Holy Spirit so far. Because according to Coakley, indifference to the Holy Spirit will reaffirm patriarchal forms of the church, allowing a hierarchical church that ignores or abuses women, and most importantly, injures who God is (Bennett, 2019:280).

Contemplation is a form of "practices of un-mastery", or "willed submission to the Spirit" (Coakley, 2014:593) Coakley states that contemplation involves great risk, meaning that a person will lose repressive control over others (Coakley, 1998:343). All human power that seeks to marginalize each other will be stripped away. This discipline of contemplation is something that is 'disturbing' and even odd, especially to anyone who has been trained to "master." When a person contemplates, at that very moment every desire to control that person is removed and invited to kneel before the mystery of the Trinity. But at the same time, it will lead to a rearrangement and purification of desires, so that 'control' finds the right direction (Coakley, 1998:343).

In a moment of contemplation, the Holy Spirit will take one beyond 'worthless human reasoning' into a realm of unspoken mystery (see 2 Cor. 12), where 'spiritual prayer' arises in the 'heart' (Coakley, 1998:228) In other words, in the act of prayer there is a willingness to show permission for the Spirit to usher us into realms beyond the bounds of human normality, although in Origen's case there is no suggestion that the Spirit ultimately undermined the significance of the rational realm (Coakley, 1998:228) The experience with the Holy Spirit in contemplation leads one to experience and accept, what Coakley calls "reflexivity in the divine", a moment of non-stop exit and return of God's desire (Coakley, 2013:56) Coakley describes his experience with it:

I find that it is the Holy Spirit who 'interrupts' my human monologue to a (supposedly) monadic God; it is the Holy Spirit who finally thereby causes me to see God no longer as patriarchal threat but as infinite tenderness; but 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 redemption in Christ (Coakley, 2013:56).

The practice of contemplation provides clues as to how one can go beyond existing gender stereotypes, ending and gradually breaking down all previous certainty and dogmatism about gender (Coakley, 2002:37). Coakley also interprets the work of the Holy Spirit in three dynamic actions: (1) The Holy Spirit is seen as a Spirit who disturbs the fallen earthly order and infuses it with divine questions, divine attraction, divine life (Coakley, 2013:56) (2) The Holy Spirit opens the human heart, which with divine desire reformulates human desires purgatively (Coakley, 2013:56) (3) The power of the Holy Spirit to reformulate and direct our worldly thinking about gender (Coakley, 2006:139)

In Coakley's view, this contemplative practice before the Trinity through the Holy Spirit affects the perspective and attitude in looking at gender. "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" (Coakley, 2013:56). Coakley sees neither the opera ad intra nor the opera ad extra of the Trinity as any desire to try to establish a boundary. Coakley describes the opera ad extra Trinity in the event of the incarnation of Christ providing a major interruption to the gender binary opposition:

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 fundamentally even than the twoness of gender: the ontological twoness of the transcendent God and the created world. In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not reestablish 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 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, repressive twoness of the fallen 'gender binary' (Coakley, 2013:56–57).

For Coakley, the Trinity is seen as the ultimate gender binary interrupter. As a result, we no longer allocate the binary "masculinity" and "femininity" to different "people", nor to their relationships, but we enter into the circle of divine desire (which is beyond the reach of human understanding and categorization), which will draw us little by little into the "likeness" of the "Child" (Coakley, 2006:140). In other words, the gender binary becomes unstable and slippery (Coakley, 2006:141).

Based on Coakley's explanation, the life of sexuality and gender leads to a reflection of the image of the Trinity. Coakley also provides Trinitarian principles that should be embodied in sexual relations, namely (1) fundamental respect for each other, (2) equality of exchange, and (3) mutual ecstasy of attending on the others desire as distinct, as others (Coakley, 1998:231). These three principles are in opposition to all acts of sexual abuse and control against women. Coakley quotes Luce Irigaray, "itself intrinsically trinitarian; sexual love at its best is not 'egological', not even a 'duality in closeness', but a shared transcendence of two selves toward the other, within a 'shared space, a shared breath'" (Coakley, 1998:231).

4. Preliminary Assessment of Coakley's Thought

What is commendable about Coakley's thinking is the originality and distinctiveness of his approach. As a feminist theologian, he tries not to be bound by the norms of feminist theology in general, instead, Coakley develops a holistic approach. What is most obvious through Coakley's thinking is his attempt to break down the dichotomy of thinking, especially about God and sexuality. In contrast to all attempts to divide God and sexuality in a different box, Coakley opens the barrier and integrates the two realities. Coakley also boasts that Christianity itself has both creative and liberating sources, particularly to address issues of sexuality and gender.

Coakley sees the issue of sexuality and gender as not merely an area of visible phenomena, but one that is fundamentally rooted in human desire. Therefore, to address the issue of sexuality and gender, it must first address the issue of desire (eros). Herein lies the significance in Coakley's thought that sees the relationship between human desires and God's desires. This point is a bold step because Coakley rehabilitated the meaning of desire which had been viewed negatively when compared with the meaning of agape. Anders Nygren, according to Coakley, is responsible for distracting the overly negative meaning

of eros and is placed under agape (Coakley, 2015:84–88) This can certainly spark further discussion about the relationship between eros and agape. Coakley's point about desire also provides an affirmation about humans intrinsically possessing telos. Human telos leads to God, namely human desires that are continuously purified in God's desires. So that human desires can be purified by God, then contemplation becomes Coakley's offer. Contemplation becomes a kind of incubator for human desires.

The contemplation that is at the heart of Coakley's thinking plays a very important role in approaching the Trinity, and from there he addresses issues of sexuality and gender. Coakley's great achievement at this point is that contemplation is not only interpreted in terms of individual contemplation but also has an impact on social order. In other words, via contemplativa leads someone to via assets, both for victims and perpetrators in the context of issues of sexuality and gender. From the side of the victims, they are encouraged not to remain silent in the face of all forms of sexual exploitation, stereotypes, and gender binary. From the doer's side, every impulse to dominate and manipulate others is interrupted. They are called to willingly put off evil desires, and put on desires that value the lives of others more.

In addition to the points of strength, there is a note that can be made on Coakley's thinking. Coakley tends to use linear logic when he understands desire as the root of sexuality and gender problems, and contemplation becomes a 'cure' for these problems. Coakley does not assume and leaves room for other possibilities. Is there any other possibility? In addition to paying close attention to the formation of desire through contemplative practice, it is also necessary to pay attention to how to form one's right thought formation. Thought formations are no less trivial than desire formations because wrong thoughts will lead one to wrong decisions and actions. Right thought formation can be achieved at least by building a critical dialogue based on biblical truth.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Coakley provides creative and fresh theological insights for use in approaching issues of sexuality and gender. Coakley's most powerful call to Christian theology is to break down all forms of dichotomy, especially between God and sexuality. Through Coakley's thinking, Christian theology is challenged not to be trapped in a dry discussion that does not contain an imperative element to fix life. Christian theology should provide recommendations for human life, especially for those who are struggling with issues of sexuality and gender.

Bibliography

- Bennett, J.M. 2019. 'Telling the Old Story in Gendered Keys: The Theological Revivals of Katherine Sonderegger, Kathryn Tanner, and Sarah Coakley', *ATR*, 101(2), 277–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861910100206>.
- Coakley, S. 1998. 'Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality', *ATR*, 25(2), 223–232.
- Coakley, S. 2002. *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Coakley, S. 2006. 'Trinity and Gender Reconsidered', in M. Volf & M. Welker (eds.), *God's Life in Trinity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Coakley, S. 2013. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* New York: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.12124_7.
- Coakley, S. 2014. 'Response to Reviewers of God, Sexuality, and The Self', *Modern Theology*, 30(4), 591–599.
- Coakley, S. 2015. *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and Quest for God*, London: Bloomsbury Continuum. <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12132>.

- Hilkert, M.C. 2014. 'Desire, Gender, and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley's Feminist Contemplative Theology', *Modern Theology*, 30(4), 575–581. <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12134>.
- LaCugna, C.M. 1993. *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* San Francisco: HarperOne.
- Rees, J. 2011. 'Sarah Coakley: Systematic Theology and the Future of Feminism', *Pacifica*, 24, 300–314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1030570X1102400306>.
- Turner, P. & Cooke, B. 1984., 'Feminist Thought and Systematic Theology', *Horizons*, 11(1), 125–135.

Authors' contributions

While the idea for the paper was that of Yerima Putra's, the contribution of each author was 50:50. Both authors jointly integrated perspectives and finalised the manuscript.