

Sarah Coakley (1951-)

First, Freud must be—as it were—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. Hence, . . . *desire is more fundamental than ‘sex’*. It is more fundamental, ultimately, because desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness ‘in the image.’ But in God, ‘desire’ of course signifies no *lack*—as it manifestly does in humans. Rather, it connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God’s own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.

For it is concerned with a deeper, and more primary, question: that of putting desire for God above all other desires, and with judging human desires only in that light. Ascetic transformation, ascetic fidelity: these are the goals which so fatally escape the notice of a culture bent on either pleasure or moral condemnation. And to escape the horns of that false dilemma is necessarily a spiritual and bodily task, involving great patience and commitment. From ‘sexuality’ and the ‘self’ to participation in the trinitarian God: this way lies a long haul of erotic purgation, but its goal is one of infinite delight.

One might say, then, of human engagement with God at its most profound, that the Spirit progressively ‘breaks’ sinful desires, *in and through* the passion of Christ. And hence, at the pastoral, practical level, what I shall call the Spirit’s ‘protoerotic’ pressure, felt initially as a propulsion towards divine union, must inexorably bring also—as the Spirit of the *Son*—the chastening of the human lust to possess, abuse, and control. This breaking, stopping, and chastening is a necessary prelude to the participatory transformation of all human, and often misdirected, longings—so that they become one with God’s.

The willingness to endure a form of naked dispossession before God; the willingness to surrender control (not to any human power, but solely to God’s power); the willingness to accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer; the willingness at the same time to accept disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the ‘unconscious’: all these are the ascetical tests of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to occur.

It may now be clear why an ascetic perception of theology leads inexorably into an examination of what it could mean in theology to seek the divine ‘face’—to explore with intensity the fundamental religious desire to ‘see God’ (Exodus 24:10-11; Psalm 27:8; Matthew 5:8), yet constantly to have that desire chastened and corrected (Exodus 20:4-5; John 1:18). . . . The double pressure of the Spirit is once more felt—building up and breaking down.

This turn towards divine desire is itself transformative, not only of particular human desires, but also of the very capacity to think, feel, and imagine. What is here playfully called the ‘apophatic turn’ is not limited merely to *linguistic* negations (although, to be sure, there has to be a constant and self-disciplined reminder that what one says of things in the created realm can never be said in the same way of God). Rather, what is blanked out in the regular, patient attempt to attend to God in prayer is *any* sense of human grasp; and what comes to replace such an ambition, over

time, is the elusive, but nonetheless ineluctable, sense of *being grasped*, of the Spirit's simultaneous erasure of human idolatry and subtle reconstitution of human selfhood in God.

Finally, since Paul acknowledges openly that 'we do not know how to pray' (sc. 'what to ask for': Romans 8:26), and so we have to yield to the Spirit's 'sighs too deep for words,' it follows that prayer at its deepest level is God's, not ours, and takes the pray-er beyond any normal human language or rationality of control.

[Our dilemma]: what *are* the signs that engagement with the trinitarian God in prayer is authentically salvific and transforming, and what are the signs of the presence of a distorting and sinful false consciousness that tragically drives us in a contrary, and idolatrous, direction, and renders 'sexuality,' especially, a realm of division, pain, and strife?

At the symbolic heart of Gregory's system is a very particular kind of *loss* of control, a yielding to the unknown God in a desire without end. . . . Both [Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo], it seems, hint at a certain symbolic or analogical alignment of sexual desire and desire for God, rather than demanding a disjunctive choice between them. And both, by chance, point forward to another 'maverick' of the Christian Platonist tradition, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose distinctly daring perception (in the *Divine Names*, ch. 4) of a *divine* ecstatic yearning meeting and incorporating a responsive human, ecstatic yearning, will form the basis of my proposed contemplative Trinitarian reconstruction to come.

[T]o bring different desires into true 'alignment' in God cannot be done without painful spiritual purgation and transformation, without the power of grace, without the dizzying adventure into the ecstasy of divine unknowing. . . . Do we know when it is proper to abandon the crutches of spiritual infirmity and confidently embrace engagement with a God whose darkness is 'dazzling'? The contemplative on her knees well knows the messy entanglement of sexual desire and the desire for God.

Instead of 'God' language 'really' being about sex, sex is really about God—the potent reminder woven into our earthly existence of the divine 'unity,' 'alliance,' and 'comingling' that we seek. This in turn has profound ascetical implications, of course; for no one can move simply from earthly, physical love (tainted as it so often is by sin and misdirection of desire) to divine love—unless it be via a Christological transformation.

If one asks, 'Does this approach "leave everything as it is" in terms of the traditional naming of God?', the answer is 'Yes and no (*but above all no*).' No, first and foremost, because in the mysterious ongoing of contemplative surrender to Dionysius' 'ray of divine darkness' the psychic bags and baggage which we bring to our prayer, its hauntings by parents, lovers, and friends, good and bad, saintly and sinful, is by slow degrees retrieved, sorted, and held up for healing. Of course, this is an arduous and sometimes tortuous lifetime's endeavor.

And what is at stake here, at base, is a slow but steady assault on idolatry which only the patient practices of prayer can allow God to do *in* us: in the purgative kneeling before the blankness of the darkness which nonetheless dazzles, the Spirit is at work in this very noetic slippage, drawing all things into Christ and recasting our whole sense of how language for God *works*.