

BOOK REVIEW

Sarah Coakley, *The Broken Body: Israel, Christ and Fragmentation* (Hoboken, NJ and Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2024), Challenges in Contemporary Theology, pp. xlii + 294, £22.99 (pb). ISBN 9781405189231
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These essays, which display Sarah Coakley's extraordinary range and theological panache, form a companion volume to her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (2002) in the same series. They arrive as something of an auspicious detour for those awaiting the next volume of her systematics. Coakley is a consummate essayist. Her first volume of systematics, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On The Trinity'* (2013), despite its more sustained argumentation, is still of an Anglican tenor, being a series of forays into doctrinal development, philosophical clarification and ethnographic demonstration all adding up to something persuasively coherent.

These essays are perhaps more academic in tone; there is less lived ecclesiological reflection. They present a series of clarifications (what is the Chalcedonian Rule for? what is the value of the historical Jesus debates?), interventions (what have we got wrong about kenosis? what muddles are we in about the gender of the person at the altar?) and novel contributions (why does Moses wear that veil? do Jews and Christians share a trifold account of prayer?). Whilst some of these represent the theologian doing some more workaday reparative work, and others are startlingly novel and creative approaches to hoary topics, they all move debates on constructively.

The prologue bravely sets out to bring the array of essay topics into some form of unity, which is achieved by dividing them into sections. The first is about seeking the identity of Christ, the second treats Israel and Christ and the third looks at the Eucharist, desire and fragmentation. Rather than a cumulative logical argument, the book presents us with a range of themes and approaches that work up into a constellation rather than an argued position. And so it should be for what claims to be a prolegomenon to a future Christology. Yet, although that is the stated aim, it feels as if the book almost belongs to the Spirit. And so it should be for a theologian as dedicated to Trinitarian reflection as Coakley.

The essays are activated by an eschatological reserve and a historical consciousness, mediated by the Spirit. That is, the Spirit, whom Jesus is never without, is interrupting and breaking open our expectations and categorisations, holding open a door into the divine as it gathers us together into a future when God is all in all. The essays analyse ‘what can, and cannot, be said in the task of Christology (out of a ‘proper silence’), and what therefore remains the necessary arena of divine revelatory mystery, indeed the unfinished business – at least from our human perspective – in any authentically Spirit-filled response to the crucified and resurrected Jesus’ (p. xvii). We are temporal creatures whose responses to Jesus’ question *Who do you say that I am?* are brokered by the Spirit who prays in and through us and who draws us into a fullness which, from our perspective, is yet to be. This eschatological reserve is applied by Coakley variously throughout the volume: to Gregory of Nyssa’s account of kenosis as a progressive transfusion of the divine into the human; as a guard against supersessionism in which we cannot think Christianity’s future without Israel’s future; or to ecclesiology where the Spirit guides us into the full and perfect unity of the *totus Christus*.

If the essays are indeed more academic in tone, there is nonetheless an emphasis on theology in the first- and second-person. The essays attest to a theology of encounter and relational knowing, a theology of revelation and prayer. To answer Jesus’ question is to enter into relationship. Coakley reprises her interest in the apophatic, discussing what she calls an apophatic consciousness under the Spirit’s ‘interruptive propulsion’ (xxxiii). This is not merely a linguistic or philosophical unknowing but something fully mystical, the result of the creature’s deepening participation in the life of the Creator, with both the glorious transcending of our creaturely limits in Christ and the divine interruption and redemption of our human failures. One of the more creative essays finds points of contact in the structure of Jewish and Christian prayer as a reflexive conversation of God speaking to God – in which the pray-er participates – whilst longing for the fullness of the presence of the Messiah. For Coakley, despite the historical brokenness of the relationship between the faiths, we find some path to walk together by attending to the way we pray, sharing in the provisionality of our present hope, whilst never covering over the differences in our articulations of the same. Neither does Coakley shy away from the corollary of mystical theology, that need for proper disciplining of the self and the community, an *ascesis* that will sometimes involve suffering with and in Christ.

Other themes recur. There is the inescapability of humanity’s gendered life. Gender is never evaded but neither is it given some totemic focus. For Coakley, gender is troubled and transfigured, but not annihilated, when it is figured in the context of divine desire. Desire is thus rendered theologically and never as a theorist’s abstraction. Coakley also shows repeatedly that Christian philosophical theology and metaphysical elaboration are an aid to faithful and prayerful reflection and not a distraction. Several essays also return to questions of sacrifice and gift (whether with respect to the binding of Isaac, the Eucharist or atonement). Here the argument is sometimes necessarily telescoped but we are promised a fuller treatment in the forthcoming *Sacrifice: Defunct or Desired?* Finally, there is also a repeated signal that our prayerful life is also a life of service. And, to understand who we are as a Church who serves, is to receive Christ from the poor. Theological ethics

is not paternalist but a participation in a more radical divine economy of giving and receiving Christ in the Spirit.

This is a remarkable set of essays that perform what they argue as stale topics are broken open and given new direction. Here, a robustly metaphysical, Trinitarian theology shows the creative and fruitful possibilities of an orthodoxy grounded in a Spirit-born and Spirit-opened relationship with Jesus.

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