

January 1st, 2015

Eucharistic Undoings: Ecstatic Participation and Divine Incorporation in the Spirit

Natalie S. Johnson
Seattle Pacific Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/spseminary_etd

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Natalie S., "Eucharistic Undoings: Ecstatic Participation and Divine Incorporation in the Spirit" (2015). *Seattle Pacific Seminary Theses*. 1.
https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/spseminary_etd/1

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Seattle Pacific Seminary, 2009 - at Digital Commons @ SPU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Seattle Pacific Seminary Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SPU.

EUCCHARISTIC UNDOINGS:
ECSTATIC PARTICIPATION AND DIVINE INCORPORATION IN THE SPIRIT

"Eucharistic Undoings"

BY: NATALIE S. JOHNSON

SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

EUCCHARSTIC UNDOINGS: ECSTATIC PARTICIPATION AND DIVINE
INCORPORATION IN THE SPIRIT

BY: NATALIE S. JOHNSON

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (CHRISTIAN
STUDIES), SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

2015

Approved by: x 
Brian Bantum, PhD
Associate Professor of Theology

Date: 7/27/2015

Program authorized to offer degree: Seattle Pacific Seminary

x 
Dean of the School of Theology

Date: 7/28/2015

Or

✓ Associate Dean of the School of Theology

Introduction

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” – Genesis 1:26-27

“There is no longer... male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” – Galatians 3:28

Sarah Coakley, in the prelude to *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, explains that her project is written

in the fundamental conviction that no cogent answer to the contemporary Christian question of the trinitarian God can be given without charting the necessary and *intrinsic* entanglement of human sexuality and spirituality... the questions of right contemplation of God, right speech about God, and right ordering of desire all hang together.¹

Central to her approach to systematic theology is the practice of a deep sort of prayer, one that relies upon the transformative power of the Holy Spirit through contemplative attention and response. In her reading of the patristic fathers, she sees an undeniable connection between deep prayer and erotic propulsions. This deep prayer “veritably magnetizes the soul towards God, yet often with the simultaneous danger of this attraction to divine love with human sexual loves that, in a fallen world, may well tend to sin or disorder.”² It is the Holy Spirit, Coakley claims, that both enflames these desires in the pray-er and purges them of sin and distortion, “chastening the human lust to possess, abuse, and control,”

¹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

as a means of cleansing human desires and aligning them with divine desire.³ In this way, she gives logical and experiential priority to the Holy Spirit in her approach to the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for issues of gender, sexuality, and desire.

Submitting to the Holy Spirit, however, can be a risky posture and undertaking; it risks having one's certainties disrupted and destabilized, opened to new possibilities that once seemed theologically impossible and incoherent. It risks upsetting the balance of power and authority in Church leadership. It risks destabilizing the seemingly "fixed" and "rigid" meanings and expressions of what it means to be men and women made in the image of God. It risks discovering that there is something more fundamental than sex and gender and the particular roles and functions that humans have deduced from biological differences, namely, desire for God. However, this does not render sex and gender meaningless for Coakley. Rather, sex and gender are intrinsically part of what it means to be differentiated, embodied beings. Yet, it is a differentiation that finds meaning primarily in relation to God, and only secondarily in relation to others.

Coakley relies heavily on Gregory of Nyssa to expose the ways in which gender is a "fluid" category. Nyssa employs gendered language to describe one's

³ Ibid., 15.

spiritual ascent to God in ascetical prayer and the particular “posture” one has toward God.⁴ One of the challenges that this reliance creates for Coakley is that it tends toward “spiritualized” or “internalized” gender categories, leaving the body without any final meaning. Gender, it seems, is only significant as it relates to one’s contemplative posture before God. Her concept of “gender fluidity” needs something else to bring it back into embodied life and therefore to have meaning for the here and now of human being.

The thesis of this project is that a eucharistic understanding of gender and sexuality is needed to give Coakley’s notion of ascetical attention to God and participation in the divine life significance for the body. It is in the sacrament of the eucharist, constituted in the Holy Spirit, that the intersection between individual incorporation into the divine life becomes most practically and obviously social, where the Trinity is experienced not as a divine model to be emulated but as the interpenetration of human and divine in a single communion. To get at this, the first section will treat Coakley’s understanding of the Trinity, what she terms a “Spirit-leading, incorporative” model based on Pauline theology, primarily Romans 8. This will be contrasted with another contemporary theologian, Wayne Grudem, and his understanding of the eternal

⁴ See *The Life of Moses and Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, and the implications this has for his understanding of gender and gendered relationships.

The second section will follow Coakley's lead in her book, *Powers and Submissions*, and engage with secular gender theory, particularly that of Judith Butler in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, as a way to explain the nature of the gender fluidity that Coakley recognizes in the early church fathers' writings on desire and sexual relations, especially that of Gregory of Nyssa. This section will also include, however, a look at Butler's later work in *Undoing Gender*, to push back on Coakley's work and expose what I believe it needs to have bodily significance.

Section three deals with this proposal by presenting John Zizioulas' understanding of personhood as the ultimate ontological category and the distinction he makes between the biological and ecclesial hypostases. Alexander Schmemmann will also be introduced in this section, particularly his understanding of the eucharistic liturgy as *movement* and the implications this has for understanding the relationship between the Church and the world, leading to the final section, which will offer my own concluding remarks about the implications for gender, and the significance it has for embodied life.

Section 1: Trinity, Ascetics, and Sexual Desire – Coakley’s Spiritual Nexus

Introduction

Central to Sarah Coakley’s project in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, is the thesis that trinitarian thought, ascetical practices of prayer, and theological reflection on sexual desire and its relation to desire for God form a forgotten spiritual nexus that must be recovered if proper thinking about God and human being is to take place. At stake in this retrieval is a trinitarian theology that releases God from the hierarchical ordering of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and from the tendency toward using God as a divine model upon which to base social and familial relationships. Coakley’s book, the first installment in her systematic theology, critiques certain biblical approaches to the Trinity that focus primarily on the Gospel of John (especially the Logos Christology in the prologue and the primary Father-Son relationship in its theological narratives), and the chronological distinction made in Acts between the Ascension and Pentecost to expound upon the divine relations.⁵ Furthermore, she criticizes certain systematic theologies that present a “flattened” account of the development of trinitarian doctrine that focus on the early church fathers’ apologetic discourses and treatises on technical trinitarian language to the

⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 111.

neglect of the same writers' ascetical practices of prayer and theological reflection on human sexuality and desire.⁶

Coakley claims that "the problem of the Trinity cannot be solved without addressing the very questions that seem least to do with it, questions which press upon 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."⁷ This leads her to employ a methodology that appeals to a broad range of patristic texts, as she examines the church fathers' writings on God, prayer, and sexual desire side-by-side.⁸ Her methodology allows her to make the argument that the textbook-typical, linear model of the Trinity is not the full picture of the development of trinitarian doctrine.⁹ Linear models have a

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ The purpose of this project is not to examine Coakley's methodology but to engage with her conclusions and the implications they have for our understanding of sex, gender, and relationships. This section will not, then, examine her use of sources, but will instead offer a summary of her conclusions and the implications that she draws for the spiritual nexus of trinitarian theology, prayer, and sexual desire. The aim of this is to underscore the primacy of divine desire as a means of destabilizing difference and hierarchy both within the Godhead and within human relationships. It will be argued that Coakley's work provides a solid foundation, and beginning point, but needs more than an appeal to ascetical practices to show the practical implications for the ways that bodies relate to one another in the midst of the eschatological "now and not yet." This critique will be taken up more fully in section 3, where I will suggest that a eucharistic theology and practice is a necessary supplement to Coakley's emphasis on ascetical practices as a means of purgation and transformation.

⁹ One "linear" model that Coakley critiques are those who examine the development of trinitarian thought and doctrine while neglecting patristic writings on pneumatology and sexuality. For instance, Origen's theological treatise *On First Principles* is not reviewed alongside his *On Prayer* and *Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Nyssa's arguments on trinitarian language are

tendency to apply the Nicene ordering of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Godhead as a hierarchical structure. This has, historically, then been applied to the ordering of human relations, particularly in the subordination of women to men. Coakley's work seeks to correct this problem by highlighting "certain neglected patristic texts, and [collocating] texts not usually brought together, in order to expose a narrative of an explicitly prayer-based access to the workings of the divine."¹⁰ This approach produces what she refers to as the "Spirit-leading, incorporative model" of the Trinity in which desire is found to be ontologically primary to God and, therefore, provides the "resources" for "a vision of God's trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them."¹¹

Coakley claims that this incorporative, reflexive model of the Trinity has the capacity for purging the idolatry of patriarchal hierarchy within linear models of the Trinity. In addition, it has the capability of destabilizing the

not studied alongside his *On Virginit*y and *The Life of Moses*. For examples of "typical textbook" accounts, see G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008) and Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1994). In another sense, the "linear" model of the Trinity can also refer to trinitarian theologies that base their understanding of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit primarily on John's Gospel, which privileges a "Father-Son dyad" and inherently leans toward (if not fully embraces) a hierarchical ordering of Persons (Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 101, note 1). This model will be engaged below when Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is examined.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“fixed” categorical binaries of human gender and sex of biological essentialism.¹²

It does this by giving logical and experiential priority to the Holy Spirit, who works to purge and chasten human desires and longings to align them with the desires of God, which are imaged in the life of Sonship given us in Jesus Christ. When systematic theology contemplatively approaches reflection on the trinitarian nature of God, Coakley claims, it exposes the idolatrous desire of mastery and domination through its submission to the primary power of the Holy Spirit.¹³

Before moving on to give an account of Coakley’s incorporative model of the Trinity, it will be helpful to offer a definition of the “trinitarian problem” along with a contemporary example of what she refers to as a “linear” model of the Trinity and the ways it informs one’s understanding of gendered relations for humans created in God’s image. This will be accomplished by critically examining Wayne Grudem’s understanding of the trinitarian relations and what

¹² Ibid., 309-310. It is important to note here the difference between “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality.” In Coakley’s “Glossary of Technical Terms and Names,” she defines “sex” as “one’s biological identity as male or female (or ‘intersexed’)” which is “often compared with *gender* (but the distinction is rendered problematic in postmodern gender theory, given the social ‘constructions’ of gender which occur even in identifying a person’s ‘sex’” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 351). “Gender” is defined “in common parlance” as “one’s identity as ‘male’ or ‘female’ considered in relation to cultural norms, or ‘constructed’ through them” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 347). Finally, “sexuality” is understood to be “a modern word with wide evocations, ranging from those of sexual ‘orientation’ of erotic desire through to actual physical intercourse” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 351). The distinction between “sex” and “gender” will be further elaborated in what follows, and will be taken up more fully in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that “biological essentialism” sees “sex” as the basis of “gender,” and, in theology in particular, the “God ordained” design of human being and relation in sexual complementarity.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

he calls biblical complementarity of the sexes in his *Systematic Theology*.¹⁴ After a presentation of Coakley's incorporative model based on Romans 8, this section will conclude with a discussion of the ontology of desire and the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in aligning human desires and longings with divine desire.

Subordination in the Godhead and Sexual Complementarity

In the third- and fourth- centuries, theologians and apologists were forced to consider and define the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit due to the heretical pressures of modalism, Arianism, adoptionism, and subordinationism. Since both the New Testament¹⁵ and the apostolic writers¹⁶ use binitarian and trinitarian formulas to speak about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the "trinitarian problem" was not easily settled. If God is One, how can Christians claim allegiance to Christ as Lord? Is the Son eternally begotten of the Father? Or was there a time when the Son was not? Was Jesus simply a man anointed with divinity by God? Or was he perhaps divine, only appearing to be

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁵ For binitarian formulas, see: Rom 1:7, 8:11; 2 Cor 4:14; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:20, 6:23; 1 Tim 1:2; 1 Pet 1:21; and 2 John 1:13. For trinitarian formulas, see Matt 3:16-17, 28:19; Mk 1:10-11; Lk 1:35, 3:22; John 1:1,3, 32; 14:25-26; Acts 7:55; Rom 8:14-17; 1 Cor 6:11, 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 3:11-14; Heb 9:14, 10:29; 1 Pet 1:2.

¹⁶ Clement, "First Epistle of Clement to Corinth," 42, 46, 58; Ignatius, "Epistle to the Ephesians," 9, 18; "Epistle to the Magnesians," 5, 7, 13; "Epistle to the Philadelphians," 1, 9; "Epistle to the Smyrnaeans," 12; Polycarp, "Epistle to the Philippians," 12; "Epistle to Diognetus," 1; Barnabas, "Epistle of Barnabas," 1, 6, 19; Didache," 7

human? How ought we to understand the place of the Spirit in relation to the Father and to the Son? Why, finally, did the church fathers establish “three” as the divine number?

These questions continue to form the basis of the “trinitarian problem” today, as theologians attempt to rearticulate the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and provide practical implications for the doctrine of the Trinity in new ways. The patristic fathers that contributed to the development of the Nicene faith proclaimed that Father, Son, and Spirit were all equal yet distinct, and together they are the One God. However, the heresies that threatened the early church have continued to tempt theologians in their descriptions of the divine relations (if not in name, at least in implications). Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* provides a case in point for the temptation toward subordinationism.

Grudem affirms the Nicene claim that God is three persons, each person is fully divine, and that there is One God.¹⁷ However, he subordinates the Son to the Father, and the Spirit to the Father-Son dyad, since the Father begets the Son, and the Father and the Son send the Spirit.¹⁸ Each person of the Trinity relates differently to creation and therefore occupies a different place in the divine

¹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 244. With regard to the Father begetting the Son, Grudem states, “the nature of that ‘begetting’ has never been defined very clearly, other than to say it has to do with the relationship between the Father and the Son, and that in some sense, the Father has eternally had a primacy in that relationship.”

hierarchy. For Grudem, this is exemplified in the work of redemption: the Father planned redemption through the cross and then sent the Son. The Son obeyed, went, and died; after his resurrection and ascension, both he and the Father sent the Spirit in order, "to apply redemption to us."¹⁹ The movement of divine "work" in this model is linear. Orders are given and carried out in a linear fashion, through the hierarchical chain of command, and the work of each divine person is accomplished in a chronological order.

The structure of authority in Grudem's understanding of the relationship between the divine persons is what he expects to find in human families: the "father directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directives of the father."²⁰ Since the Holy Spirit is obedient to both the Father and the Son, Grudem suggests that the Holy Spirit's role within the Trinity is the same as a child's in a human family.²¹ He uses the familial analogy to underscore his insistence that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are ontologically equal, but that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate in role. Their subordination is not temporal or confined to the economic Trinity, since the

¹⁹ Ibid., 249.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 257. An ironic, and unintentional implication for what Grudem claims here is a sort of "queering" of the relationship between Father and Son, in which the love they share between each other "produces" and relegates the Holy Spirit to role of their offspring. While Grudem would certainly take issue with this, it helps to highlight the fact that even in the most dedicated of biological essentialists, "gender" takes on a much more fluid definition than their proposed "fixed certainty" of the meaning of male/female.

functions of those roles are the outworking “an eternal relationship between the three persons, one that has always existed and will exist forever.”²² In this argument, a hierarchy of roles and functions secures the individual distinction of persons in the Godhead.

One of the problems with understanding the Trinity in this way is that “creates” God in the image of the supposed “basic unit” of community (i.e. the family). Grudem takes a (particularly modern) understanding of family and kinship and applies it analogously to the divine relationships, reinforcing his patriarchal understanding of human relationships, and dogmatizing the modern notion of the nuclear family and the particular gender roles associated with it. This turns the Trinity into a hierarchical social model (ironically by applying a social model to God) upon which to base human relationships.

Another problem with Grudem’s Trinity is that the identification and distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit is reduced to their particular roles in the divine economy of salvation. In other words, their particularities as persons are defined solely based upon their functional roles in creation, redemption, and consummation, yet applied to their eternal, imminent relationships. This

²² Ibid., 250. Grudem claims that both parts of the phrase, “equal in being but subordinate in role,” are necessary to “a true doctrine of the Trinity. If we do not have ontological equality, not all the Persons are fully God. But if we do not have economic subordination, then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently, we do not have three distinct persons existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for all eternity” (Ibid., 251.)

suggests that the only way for differentiation to have meaning is if that which is different is assigned a particular function.²³ Thus, role distinction is crucial for Grudem's understanding of the "unity and diversity" within the Godhead, which becomes the foundation for understanding the *imago dei* in human beings and the meaning of their gender differences, seen most clearly in a marriage relationship that produces offspring.

In the family, the husband's role parallels God the Father's role in authority and direction, the wife's role parallels God the Son in obedience to the husband, and the child(ren)'s role parallels God the Spirit in obeying the directives of the parents. Thus, for Grudem, man (i.e. the "male") is the pinnacle of humanity. Grudem claims that this is evident in the designation of humankind by the word "man" in Scripture (based on Gen 1:26; 5:1-2). "The fact that God did not chose to call the human race 'woman,' but 'man,' probably has some significance for understanding God's original plan for men and women."²⁴ He extrapolates this "original plan" through a reading of Genesis 1-3, with particular attention paid to the meaning of the "likeness" and "image" of God. "Man," made in the "image of God," means that "he" is like God in moral reasoning, as a

²³ Thus, the difference between males and females only makes sense in light the particular functions they serve. The basic, ontological basis for this distinction is the biological reproductive system. For those who subscribe to particular gender roles, then, this idea of functional sexual difference is the basis for understanding gender and creates the boundaries of masculine and feminine norms. In this view, gender is inextricably bound to biological sex.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 440.

spiritual being, in his mental capacities, and in his physical body. Though Grudem admits that God is not “physical,” human bodies play a significant role in imaging God, because they have “been created as suitable instruments to represent in a physical way our human nature, which has been made to be like God’s own nature.”²⁵ This is especially clear in human beings’ ability to procreate, which reflects “God’s own ability to create human beings who are like himself.”²⁶

Since humans were created male and female, Grudem suggests that each sex was endowed with particular divine characteristics that complement each other, and that, when taken together, reflect the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). This means that men and women reflect the divine image through “harmonious personal relationships,” particularly in sexual relationships between a husband and a wife in which their union “exemplifies Christ’s union with the church.”²⁷ Grudem believes that men and women share ontological equality, just as the persons of the Trinity do, but like the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they exist within a hierarchy of differentiated roles and functions.²⁸ This differentiation in role and function was God-ordained from the beginning of creation (rather than a product of the fall). God established the authority of males by creating and

²⁵ Ibid., 448.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 455.

²⁸ Ibid., 456.

speaking to Adam first, and then giving Adam the authority to name other creatures, including the woman made from his side.²⁹ Eve was created as an inferior helper, and when the serpent approached her first, it undermined the “pattern of male leadership that God had established in the marriage.”³⁰ Male leadership is then reestablished by God when Adam is confronted first after the fall, which, Grudem suggests, is later reinforced again in the NT by Paul when he claims that through Adam, all humans are counted as sinful (1 Cor 15:22; Rom 5:15).³¹

Therefore, in redemption, it is not freedom from hierarchy or male domination that one would expect; rather, “we would expect that in Christ, redemption would encourage wives not to rebel against their husbands’ authority and would encourage husbands not to use their authority harshly.”³² The distortions created by sin in gendered relationships have to do with women trying to usurp their husbands’ authority, and men using their authority in harsh ways.³³ The more spiritually mature one grows, the more he or she will rejoice in these God-ordained roles: husbands are to love their wives, while wives are to be

²⁹ Ibid., 461-462.

³⁰ Ibid., 463.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 464.

³³ Grudem also notes two kinds of “passive” distortions, in which men become so considerate of their wives’ feelings and input that they become “wimps” in the relationship, allowing the women to make all of the decisions. Likewise, women can become so passive in their submission to their husbands’ authority that they make no contribution making decisions for the family (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 467).

subject to their husbands (note: “husbands are never told to be subject to their wives”).³⁴

Grudem sees a close connection between the life of the family and that of the Church, and therefore prohibits women from exercising any sort of authority over men in a congregational setting.³⁵ He argues that giving women leadership roles in the Church will “inevitably bring pressures toward greater female leadership, and toward abdication of male leadership, within the family.”³⁶ Since men were created to be in authority, any man who abdicates his authority and any woman who claims to have authority are living contrary to the image of God in which they were created.

The understanding of the *imago dei* that Grudem presents has a couple of challenges. Frist, the idea that only the biological, sexual complementarity of men and women, united in sexual intercourse and marriage, can fully participate in the image of God would imply that no individual person is made fully in the image of God. This has implications for those who remain single and celibate (whether by choice or not).³⁷ Gender complementarity sets up heterosexual

³⁴ Ibid., 466.

³⁵ Ibid., 937.

³⁶ Ibid., 940.

³⁷ Grudem anticipates this challenge and addresses it by looking at Paul’s words to the Corinthians about remaining “as one is” with regard to singleness and marriage, and concedes that if one were to give up marriage as a means of advancing the kingdom through evangelism, creating “spiritual children” (as Paul did through his evangelism and discipleship), the humans who remain single can still participate in the divine image (though it is unclear if this individual

marriage as the highest expression of the divine image, and those who do not (or cannot) participate in it, inherently lack the fullness of God's image.

Second, his expositions of "man" and "helper" in Genesis 1, 2, and 5 are not supported by the Hebrew grammar and syntax. The designation of "man" (male) as authoritative representative for humankind ('*adam*) is inaccurate; we should understand the term as a collective noun for all of humankind, not in a gendered way that designates biological males as the representative sex.³⁸

Furthermore, there is a word play happening here in the Hebrew with '*adam* and '*adamah*, signifying an interdependent relationship between the two. Man ('*adam*) was made out of the earth or soil ('*adamah*); thus, '*adam* is better understood as *earthling* (or, more literally, "the earthly one") than as "man," and is intended to underscore the material (earth) out of which "man" (earthling) was created, and thus has nothing to do with the superior role of biological males.³⁹ Furthermore, Grudem's definition of the word *ezer* (helper), even as he admits to its application to God in various OT texts, claims that "help" signifies that which is

can do so fully) [Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 455]. Ironically, it would seem that Grudem's logic on this point could, unintentionally, provide a counter-argument for his heteronormative understanding of the sexes and family life – if Paul's work of "building" the Church produced "spiritual children," how would this be any different for a same-sex Christian couple who chooses to adopt and bring their children up as Christians? Would they not also be producing "spiritual children" by discipling their children?

³⁸ Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 161.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 156, 164.

given from one in an inferior position.⁴⁰ Because of this, Grudem can claim that woman was made for man, not man for woman. This suggests that women are purely functional in relation to men; their worth, as (part) of the image of God is determined primarily through women's ability to perform the function of their fundamental biological difference (bearing children) and their obedient submission to male headship. The Hebrew word *ezer*, however, does not actually suggest a subordinate or inferior role, but simply denotes "indispensable companion."⁴¹

Grudem's understanding of the Trinity, and his proposed idea of eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, and the Spirit to the Father and the Son has direct bearings on his understanding of gendered relationships. The differences in role and function within the Godhead correspond to the differences between men and women, creating a linear relationship centered in authority and obedience. Since the Father is at the top of the divine hierarchy, and since biologically male individuals share a parallel status in the created realm, men exist at the top of the human hierarchy. The extent of participation in the divine life is limited, in this linear view, to a direct imitation of the ordered

⁴⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 461-462. Thus, Grudem argues that when Scripture applies the word to God, it simply means that God chooses, in his freedom, to act in an inferior way.

⁴¹ "Genesis," in *The Net Bible*, t156. <https://net.bible.org/#!/bible/Genesis+2:18>.

relationships of the Trinity, and the procreative functionality of the sexes.

Relationship itself is mechanistically reduced to function.

The Incorporative Model of the Trinity and the Disruption of Gender Binaries

Sarah Coakley's presentation of the "incorporative model" of the Trinity destabilizes the fixed, rigid hierarchical relationships of the Godhead and humankind in Grudem (and other linear models) by insisting that trinitarian reflection ought to begin with the Holy Spirit. Her biblical basis for doing this is found in Pauline theology, particularly in Romans 8. The outworking of this model in human being and relationship is further elaborated by her reading of the patristic fathers that contributed to the development of the Nicene creed, and their work on (and practice of) ascetical prayer and their theological understanding of desire.

In Romans 8, Paul offers a (nascent) approach to trinitarian theology in the way he describes the believer's incorporation into divine life, beginning with the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8:9), whose presence signifies our adoption as children of God (Rom 8:14) by testifying with our spirits that God is our Father (8:16). It is the Spirit who aids us in our weakness and failure to pray as we ought, by interceding for us with "sighs too deep for words," according to the will of God

(8:26).⁴² Prayer, then, is not so much about an individual communicating with a monadic God, but “rather, a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays... It is the sense (admittedly obscure) of an irreducibly dipolar divine *activity* – a call and response of divine desire – into which the pray-er is drawn and incorporated.”⁴³ The particular kind of prayer that Coakley believes is necessary to recognize and welcome this reflexivity of the Spirit is ascetical (specifically contemplative or charismatic). These are bodily practices of submission and attention to the Spirit, and the means by which we present ourselves – and all our longings – before God for judgment, redemption, and, ultimately, transformation.⁴⁴ The Spirit is the one who enflames the longings of the human, by interceding for us, by witnessing to our spirits, by propelling our desire to seek God. In the contemplative act, as we submit to the priority of the Spirit and offer God all our desires, the Spirit transforms them and aligns them with God’s desire in order to conform us to, and perfect us in, the life of Christ. In this view, “The ‘Father’ is both ‘source’ and

⁴² In contrast, Grudem claims that the “sighs too deep for words” are human sighs (rather than divine), which the Holy Spirit then translates and makes “effective” (*Systematic Theology*, 332). Humans both initiate prayer and request their desires, sometimes in full knowledge that they’re not sure what exactly to ask for, because they are too weary and burdened in a fallen world (which leads to sighs and groans); thus, the Holy Spirit’s job is to interpret those sighs and groans to the Son who mediates our prayers to the Father (Ibid., 1078-1079). This essentially makes the Holy Spirit an agent of the human pray-er, as the Spirit takes what we are unable to effectively articulate and translates those desires to the Jesus our mediator.

⁴³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 46. Coakley defines Christian contemplation as “the necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement, which in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father.”

ultimate object of divine desire; the 'Spirit' is that (irreducibly distinct) enabler and incorporator of that desire in creation – that which *makes* the creation divine; the 'Son' is that divine and perfected creation."⁴⁵

Paul contextualizes the expanse of prayer in a cosmic setting, indicating that the whole of creation is "caught up," is incorporated, into the divine life of Sonship through the Spirit; all of creation is transformatively brought into union with the divine. The Spirit, here, is not simply reduced to the adoptive outreach of the Father toward humans, for the very notion of "Son" is stretched, released from its restriction to Jesus' earthly life as well as its connotation to Christ's mystical body. Instead, Sonship in Romans 8 is "expanded even further to include the full cosmological implications of the incarnation, the whole creation 'groaning' to its final Christological telos in God."⁴⁶ On this view, the Spirit is not only the point of entry for creation into the divine life but its means of transformation as the Spirit chastens, purges, and ultimately conforms creation to its divinely ordained telos.

Historically, in what Coakley dubs, the "Troeltschian 'church-type,'" the incorporative model was viewed with suspicion and led to the rejection of some theologians as heretics. This was the case with Montanism, a "prophetic, Spirit-centered movement" that was eventually condemned in Rome. Coakley quotes

⁴⁵ Ibid., 114.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Eusebius' description: "The Montanist prophet, it was said, 'spoke in ecstasy,' moving from 'voluntary ignorance' (perhaps a deliberate emptying of the mind?) to 'involuntary madness of soul.'"⁴⁷ The implications for critics of such a Spirit-centered movement were both political, in that its adherents could challenge ecclesial authority on the basis of a new ("more than Christ") revelation, and sexual, in that it challenged and destabilized social gender roles and conceptions.⁴⁸ What institutional Christianity seemed to fear about a Spirit-leading model of the Trinity was a certain loss of control in doctrinal certainty and authority and in social and sexual ordering. Implicitly at stake, then, is a particular balance of power, which has sometimes, as in the case of Grudem, come to be explicitly imposed upon ecclesial and societal structures.

For Coakley, Romans 8 provides a narrative of the incorporative and transformative work of the Holy Spirit. It is the indwelling Spirit that not only enables our participation in the divine life, but is the means of our transformation, conforming us to the perfection of the divine life of Sonship.

What she is concerned with in this emphasis on prayer is a recovery of the "pre-modern" "spiritual senses tradition," which saw a progressive development of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Spirit-centered movements disrupted gender norms in two ways: first, through offering leadership roles to women and recognizing them as equally capable of receiving the Spirit and the concomitant spiritual gifts; second, in using "feminine" descriptors for the soul in its ascent to the divine life in the Spirit.

the spiritual senses in ascetical practices.⁴⁹ This kind of prayer involves a specific and particular submission to the Spirit (i.e. “a certain loss of control”), in which the very categories of human certainty (both in our perceptions of God and in our understanding of human being) are disrupted and destabilized as we enter, via the Spirit, into a “realm beyond words.”⁵⁰ Ascetical practices of prayer challenge the epistemic conditions for experiencing God, recognizing the Spirit, and seeing the risen Christ; in other words, asceticism is the practice through which the Spirit transforms the “epistemic sensibilities of those being progressively reborn in the likeness of the Son.”⁵¹ Thus, what Coakley deems the “realm beyond words,” characterizes two very specific things.

First, it signifies the silent, non-discursive prayer required for contemplation, the kind of prayer where one submits to the Spirit’s divine power and presence in expectant waiting. This kind of prayer welcomes and receives the “inherent reflexivity of God,” the interruption of the Holy Spirit to human monologues, and postures the pray-er to receive the chastening and transformation of the Spirit.⁵² In contemplation, the Spirit takes the pray-er to a place where human words no longer make sense, nor are they adequate for the content of one’s contemplation. Thus, we let go of our control over words and

⁴⁹ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 131.

⁵⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 126.

⁵¹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 131.

⁵² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 56.

their meanings, and submit instead to the illumination and truth of the Spirit.

Ascetical practices of prayer are part of our *kenotic* act of “self-emptying,” not as a negation of self, but as a “regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine,” which “is ‘internalized’ over time in a peculiarly demanding and transformative fashion.”⁵³

This contemplative process underscores the theological claim of the creature’s utter dependence upon God, in that the very act of prayer itself is dependent upon a prior activity within God. This is, in Coakley’s words, “a dependence unlike any other, for in it, what is experienced as noetic blankness is theologically explained as ‘that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all.’”⁵⁴ The contemplative is aware that even her desire to seek after the face of God is itself founded on a heart that has been enflamed by the Spirit and is dependent upon the continuing presence of the Spirit to direct and guide her, and to inform her of the content of her contemplation.

In the recognition and acknowledgement of one’s utter dependence upon God, we are brought to the second significant point about the “realm beyond words,” which suggests a certain apophatic dimension in our knowledge of God,

⁵³ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 34. Coakley admits that this particular rhythm is already ritually and symbolically inscribed in baptism and eucharist. In section 3, I will push back against this notion that the sacramental rituals “merely” symbolize this rhythm. The liturgical movement of the eucharist is a particular, bodily “performance,” just as ascetical practices of prayer, and provides a safeguard against internalizing and privatizing gender categories.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

and, relatedly, in our knowledge of human being. The contemplative understands that being “caught up” into the divine life entails a particular “blinking” of the mind, a point at which all human, finite knowledge and understanding must fade away in the face of the infinite expanse of God. “God is the source and sustainer of all being, and, as such, the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the ‘blinking’ of the human ambition to knowledge, control, and mastery.”⁵⁵ Contemplation, therefore, is not a “seeking after God” that entails mastering particular propositional facts about God’s being, but instead is the entry into a kind of “knowing in unknowing.”⁵⁶

The prior activity of God experienced in contemplative prayer leads to a direct human encounter of the *Threeness* of God. In the Spirit, we are progressively taken up into the life of Sonship, purged of all that is contrary to it, and returned to the Father, the source of our Spirit-infused desire, thereby bringing us into greater union with God. It is the Spirit who, in the contemplative’s quiet, prayerful submission, “painfully darkens [her] prior certainties, enflames and checks [her] own desires, and so invites [her] ever more deeply into the life of Christ.”⁵⁷ The Spirit interrupts and destabilizes the boundaries of human knowledge and certainty, precisely in the human’s

⁵⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 44-45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

encounter with that which makes God *irreducibly* three. In contemplation, the pray-er realizes that the Spirit is not an excessive “third wheel” to the intimacy of Father and Son, but 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.”⁵⁸

The incarnation is, therefore, a *cosmological* interruption; in the Spirit, Christ crosses “the ontological twoness of the transcendent God and the created world. In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not re-establish 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.”⁵⁹ Thus, the Spirit destabilizes even our human certainties of the ontological distinction between God and the world, not by obliterating the distinction, “but by reinvesting it with participative mystery.”⁶⁰

This intrinsic Threeness of God, argues Coakley, is vitally significant for our particular “gendered twoness,” since the image in which we are made is the image of the trinitarian God. In the Spirit, the boundaries of the gender binary become fluid, not as a “third gender” but as an open-ended, malleable

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 331

differentiation that is subject to the transformative force of divine desire, and is reconstituted in relation primarily to God.⁶¹ Thus, gender, in this sense, has more to do with one's posture before God, and less to do with the "natural" or biological endowment of the body. The disruption effected by the Holy Spirit suggests a trajectory of redemption for (fallen) gender binaries that renders the distinction between male/female much more fluid and frees gendered differentiation from its "fixed" and "repressive twoness,"⁶² as "we are drawn to place our binary 'certainties' into the melting pot of the crucible of divine – not human – desires."⁶³ This trajectory of redemption coincides with Coakley's last point about what prayer in Romans 8 involves, namely, the teleological end toward which creation is tending.

All of creation is being transformed, propelled in the Spirit toward its ultimate end in union with God. This is highlighted in the "gendered" picture of prayer that Paul uses, where the whole of creation yearns, as a woman in labor, "for its 'glorious liberation.'"⁶⁴ The Spirit, dwelling within us and "interceding" on our behalf, is the force within us that propels us toward this union with God, setting all aspects of human existence within the eschatological trajectory of

⁶¹ This idea of "gender fluidity" will be taken up more fully in the next section, where Coakley's understanding of "gender" becomes an interior category of spiritual ascent in particular, ecstatic (and "gendered") posturing of the human toward God.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 58

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

creation. It is on this basis, Coakley argues, that at the heart of all human longing and desire, “every erotic propulsion,” is the Spirit’s reflexive activity of returning divine desire to its source and object, the Father, all the while purging us as we are conformed to the likeness of the Son.⁶⁵ The convergence here of trinitarian thought/experience, prayer, and desire forms what Coakley calls an “ontology of divine desire.” Here, “divine desire can be seen as the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation.”⁶⁶

An Ontology of Desire

Desire, for Coakley, is thus an ontological category that is primary to God; in humans, desire is the “precious clue woven into our human existence as a reminder of our rootedness in God.”⁶⁷ Ontologically primary to God, desire

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁷ On a philosophical level, this statement is difficult to contend with if one follows Plato’s understanding of “desire” (or, *eros*) as spelled out in the Symposium. In the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon, Socrates claims, “that what desires, desires what it lacks, or does not desire if it does not lack” [Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 200a-b.]. Many theologians would take issue, on this basis, of desire being ascribed an ontological category primary to God, because it would indicate that God desires out of a particular lack, making creation necessary for God’s existence and fulfillment. Coakley touches on this by claiming, “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.” [Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 10]. Coakley hints at a definition of desire in which God freely longs, out of abundance and plenitude, for that which God created to become part of God’s life in communion. I want to suggest that human eros only signifies lack in its “fallen” state, and that lack as a categorical necessity for eros is purged in the Spirit’s work of conforming humans into the likeness of the Son. Eros, in this approach, is not to be eradicated in human beings, but is to be purged of its possessive, abusive, and controlling (fallen) tendencies, freeing humans to desire out of the abundance of the divine life into which they are being incorporated. If desire is primarily

becomes a category that is more fundamental than gender *and* physical sex, underscoring primarily a differentiation between Creator and creature, and the total dependence of the latter on the former.⁶⁸ Selfhood is thus “reconstituted in the triune God, in such a way that misdirected desire (sin and blindness) is radically purged and chastened. Desire, on this view, is the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of the human longing for God.”⁶⁹

To suggest that desire (eros) is primary to God, is not the same as suggesting that God is desire (eros). Carter Heyward, a feminist liberation theologian and Episcopal priest, suggests that eros is the divine power shared in right relationship through mutuality and justice.⁷⁰ For Heyward, the issues of relational power imbalances and social injustice stand at the heart of the “fallen” human condition, and redemption from these is found in restoring love, particularly erotic love, in mutuality. God is equated with this erotic, relational power.⁷¹ Heyward’s use of “eros” in relation to God is not strictly about sexual liberation or sexual love, but connotes the idea of eros as that which gives birth

ontologically divine, it remains a key component of human identity as a mark of the divine image in which we are made.

⁶⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 52. This point will be taken up more explicitly in the next section as we deal with the categories of sex and gender, and their significance in the meaning of the body.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁰ Carter Heyward, *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 34.

⁷¹ Heyward’s understanding of *eros* as “power” is influenced by Audre Lorde’s depiction of *eros* as “life-force” and “creative energy,” the power behind “sharing deeply,” which undergirds one’s capacity for joy [Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 75-79].

to the divine. "God is becoming our relational power insofar as we are giving birth to his sacred Spirit in the quality of our lives in relation, the authenticity of our mutuality, the strength of our relational matrix. It is a paradox: God is becoming our relational matrix insofar as we are the womb in which God is being born."⁷² Heyward's work seeks to define "a religious tradition with roots in a God that *is the love we actually experience through those who love us.*"⁷³ For Heyward, then, God is not ontologically "other" than creation, nor a distinctive divine "being" apart from relationship. God is reduced to the creative power shared between people in their efforts to right injustices within their relationships. Therefore, it is not so much that God is love, but that love is god.

While Coakley and Heyward would likely agree that divine desire is something in which human beings participate, the sources of that desire are diametrically opposed to one another. Where Heyward sees the "birth" of divine eros (and therefore the birth of God) taking place in human relationship, Coakley suggests that desire is primary to the Trinitarian God as that which is extended to creation, by the Holy Spirit, enflaming desire within human creatures primarily as a desire to seek God. Here is the significance of ascetical prayer for Coakley. In our fallen condition, our human longings and desires are wrought

⁷² Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 24.

⁷³ Carter Heyward, "Lamenting the Loss of Love: A Response to Colin Grant," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24n1 (1996), 23-28, *emphasis mine*.

with distortions and are often misdirected, yet they are tangled together with Spirit-infused divine desire. Contemplative prayer “is itself a progressive modulator and refiner of human desire: in its naked longing for God, it lays out all its other desires – conscious and unconscious – and places them, over time, into the crucible of divine desire.”⁷⁴ Erotic desire “is thus drawn into an inexorable tether with all other desires, and judged by its approximation, or lack thereof, to the purity of divine charity.”⁷⁵

Only desire that has been chastened by the Holy Spirit and purged of its abusive, controlling, and possessive qualities⁷⁶ is properly oriented toward the “Other.” For Coakley, this is realized primarily in one’s orientation toward God, which makes the significance of gender an internal, “spiritual” category,⁷⁷ and makes divine desire (God’s desire for creation to fully participate in the divine life) more fundamental than human categories of gender or sex (or any other categorical binary we impose upon human existence). Furthermore, when human desire is understood as rooted in divine desire, and when that desire is

⁷⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 52.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ That which makes “lack” a categorical necessity for desire in the Platonic sense.

⁷⁷ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 136-141. Coakley primarily uses Origen and Gregory of Nyssa to recover the idea of “spiritual senses,” in which the contemplative ascent is “gendered,” feminizing the soul in progressive stages until it is finally open and receptive to the divine in its union with God. Though Origen and Nyssa have differing opinions about the relationship between the “spiritual senses” and the “natural” or “physical senses,” “we should note that the gender implication of the privileged use of the allegory of the Song of Songs is that of the ‘Bride’ (feminine), when suitably prepared for the nuptial embrace of the Bridegroom, becomes the supreme knower and recognizer of Christ” (138).

experienced in the reflexive activity of the Holy Spirit in ascetical prayer, the typical patriarchal hierarchy inherent in linear models of the Trinity is destabilized and a radical *equality* of divine relations comes into focus. The Spirit's *primary* power disrupts our fallen understanding of authority and hierarchy. Coakley explains:

When humans come...into *authentic* relation with God as Trinity through the Spirit, their values and orders of 'hierarchy' change; they are not *imitating* God, thereby, but rather being radically transformed by ecstatic participation in the Spirit. So what is being broken here is the idea that a false patriarchal hierarchy in the Trinity should be emulated by a false patriarchal hierarchy in the church or world.⁷⁸

If our ecstatic participation in the Spirit through bodily practices of prayer leads to the purging of our certainties of divine and human existence, and if, in this purgation, humans are transformed in the divine life of Sonship, where does this leave gender and sex? Coakley suggests that gendered difference matters primarily in relation to God and within the matrix of divine desire. Yet, this leaves open the question of how humans, as gendered beings, ought to relate to one another and how, in practical terms, the disruption by the Spirit of

⁷⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 322. Coakley continues, "But what is also being broken, more challenging to the 'liberal' mind, is any idea that by magicking the idea of 'hierarchy' away altogether there can be an enforced feminist rearrangement of God and the world. God, qua God, cannot be cut down to ontological size to fit a false feminist fear of divine transcendence. In short, we cannot get this vision of powers and submissions right by political or theological manipulation or fiat; we can only get it right by *right* primary submission to the Spirit, with all the purgative costliness that involves." This submission, for Coakley, is seen primarily in one's submission to the Spirit via ascetical practices of prayer.

“gendered twoness” ought to be understood in terms of bodily life. The next section will grapple with Coakley’s proposal for the significance of gender in embodied relationships and “gender fluidity” as established in the eschatological trajectory of human participation in and union with God.

Section 2: Disrupting Gender Binaries – Judith Butler and Eschatological

Longing

Introduction

If Coakley is correct in her assertion that desire is more fundamental than sex and gender, what is the theological significance of sexual and gendered differentiation? Do gender and/or sex even matter? Christians usually look to the *imago Dei* for the meaning of sexual difference. Since God made humankind in the divine image, sexual differentiation, it is thought, must have something to do with that image. Thus, Grudem (above) can claim that each specimen of the species contains fixed, complementary elements of the divine image.⁷⁹ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, on the other hand, suggests that God (as neither male nor female) “incorporates both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits into an irreducibly social nature,”⁸⁰ which is then signified in those particular traits in humans (still as complementary traits), but not necessarily “fixed” as natural categories.

Phyllis Bird has suggested that any connection between human sexual differentiation and the divine image based on Genesis 1 is a misinterpretation of the relationship between v 26 and vv 27-28. These stand not as parallel

⁷⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 440-450 and 454-460. In this case, women possess the “feminine” traits of submission and obedience exemplified in the Son, and men possess the “masculine” traits of authority and dominion exemplified in the Father. (See also Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr. “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. by John Piper and Wayne Grudem ;Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 95-112.)

⁸⁰ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 41.

statements, but as two distinct and independent statements. The divine image mentioned in v 26 has specifically to do with the position, status, and task of humankind in relation to the rest of creation; their likeness to God is their superiority to non-human creatures and the earth, over which they are to exercise care, stewardship, and oversight.⁸¹ The further definition of humankind as male/female is not a function of their status in the created order. They are like God in their position, but they are unlike God (and therefore like creation) in their sexual differentiation. The meaning of sexual differentiation in Genesis 1 is tied explicitly to the blessing and command to procreate; a blessing and command they share with the rest of the natural world, placing it firmly within the realm of the biological.⁸²

Placing procreation purely in the biological realm precludes the use of this text to suggest that gendered differentiation is fulfilled in marriage; it is simply about the biological propagation and sustainability of the species. Bird further argues that this blessing and command is limited; it is not an absolute, universal,

⁸¹ Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 145. She states, in v. 26, "there is no message of shared dominion here, no word about the distribution of roles, responsibility, and authority between the sexes, no word of sexual equality. What is described is a task for the species...and the position of the species in relation to other orders of creation."

⁸² *Ibid.*, 149. The creation of male and female "says nothing about the image which relates *adam* to God, nor about God as the referent of the image. Nor does it qualify *adam's* dominion over the other creatures or subjugation of the earth. It relates only to the blessing of fertility, making explicit its necessary presupposition. It is not concerned with sexual roles, the status or relationship of the sexes to one another, or marriage. It describes the biological pair not a social partnership; male and female, not man and wife."

and perpetual command to “fill the earth.” It is, rather, “a word for beginnings.” In the parallel passage of Psalm 8, the superior place of humankind in the order of creation is affirmed, but this time without the connection to God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply.”⁸³

Thus, for Bird, sexual differentiation in Genesis 1 has nothing to do with the divine image. Instead, the divine image characterizes the species as a whole – each individual person, male or female, is characterized by the fullness of God’s image; there is no “split” that assigns God’s “masculine traits” to men and God’s “feminine traits” to women, nor is there any message of social ordering in the relationship between the sexes. Furthermore, as Miroslav Volf points out, to even suggest that God has masculine and feminine traits is to “ontologize gender in God,” by taking “a particular understanding of femininity or masculinity” and then projecting “it onto God” in order to use “that projection [to] shape our social practice.”⁸⁴ This is precisely what Grudem has done.

If sexual differences cannot be explained by the divine image, however, what sense are we to make of them, especially if Bird is correct in her assertion that the command to procreate is no longer in effect and therefore no longer provides the meaning for sexual difference in the here and now? The question is

⁸³ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁴ Miroslav Volf, “The Trinity and Gender Identity” in *Gospel and Gender* (ed. by Douglas A. Campbell; New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 161.

complicated even further in light of Paul's statement to the Galatians that in Christ, there is neither male nor female. Daniel Boyarin, in *A Radical Jew*, interprets Paul's claim to mean that humans lose all marks of bodily differentiation when they are incorporated *into* Christ. In other words, being "in Christ" produces the erasure of sexual difference,⁸⁵ which will finally be fulfilled in the consummation of all things when the eschatological people of God are revealed.⁸⁶ Though Boyarin admits that this poses a challenge for embodied life prior to the eschaton (since, for Paul, the erasure of difference implies sameness⁸⁷ and historically meant that women were to become androgyns in the superior image of maleness⁸⁸), the goal toward which humankind is moving is one where sexually distinguishing marks of the body will be erased. Gordon Fee, on the other hand, argues that Paul's claim, "In Christ, there is no...male or female," has particularly to do with the irrelevance that social structures have upon the eschatological end toward which creation is moving.⁸⁹ In the end, Christ destroys the hierarchical, social boundaries between persons and groups (though not their physical particularities); there is no longer any significance attached to social

⁸⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 22-23.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁹ Gordon Fee, "Male and Female in the New Creation: Galatians 3:26-29" in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (ed. by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis; Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2005), 178.

markers of distinction (whether ethnic, socioeconomic, or gender) in one's relationship to God.⁹⁰ Yet again, we are left with the question of how sex and gender matter. Is the only way to view human bodies and their gendered expressions through the lens of a future insignificance?

Coakley suggests that there is another way to engage theologically with the body and its relationship with gender. "Here gender 'matters' primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship* – first and foremost to God, but also to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human's role as made in the 'image of God.'" ⁹¹ Thus, contra Phyllis Bird, Coakley sees a direct connection of gender to the divine image (though the content, meaning, and significance of that connection is not spelled out). Her theological view of gender is rooted in the creation, fall, redemption narrative, which, for Coakley, gives it an eschatological meaning, grounded in Christ's incarnation and resurrection, making gender ineradicable (contra Boyarin), but not unchangeable.⁹² As relational beings, humans will continue, even at the eschaton, to be particular sorts of "differentiated" beings; however, set within this eschatological framework, gender is something that can (and must) be

⁹⁰ Ibid., 184-185.

⁹¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 53.

⁹² Ibid., 54

capable of being redeemed and sanctified, and therefore labile and open to change.⁹³

This section will focus on Coakley's primary meaning of gender as that which differentiates creatures from the Creator, underscoring her insistence that divine desire is more fundamental than sex and gender. Before getting to this point, however, it is necessary to take a detour into secular gender theory to elaborate further on the gender fluidity that Coakley finds so significant in one's posture toward God. This will happen through an examination of Judith Butler's understanding of *gender performativity* and the eschatological longing that Coakley finds in it. This section will continue with Coakley's understanding of gender within that eschatological framework, before concluding with another look to Butler as a means to expose the ways in which Coakley's work must be expanded to give her understanding of gender bodily significance.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Second wave feminism made a particular distinction between "sex" (the biologically given) and "gender" (the socially constructed) as a way to release the body from biological determinism – the idea that "feminine and masculine roles and behavior follow as a natural consequence from the biological differences

⁹³ Ibid.

between female and male bodies.”⁹⁴ With gender dislodged from the restraints of the physical body, gender expectations “for behavior appropriate to men and women” could “change and shift in multiple directions.”⁹⁵ Over time, however, feminists began to scrutinize the stability of this claim by questioning the “‘natural’ quality of the distinction between the sexes.”⁹⁶ Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville explain, “In various ways different thinkers showed that the natural realm never comes to us in an uninterpreted or transparent form. What may seem to be the natural division of the sexes itself is the product of a certain history.”⁹⁷ Butler entered into this conversation with a proposal of what she called “gender performativity,” a discursive construct of embodied language that “‘does what it says,’ or produces the reality it names.”⁹⁸

Butler uses Simone de Beauvoir’s claim, “one is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman,” to suggest that gender “is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”⁹⁹ She claims that it is through repeated stylizations of the *body* (“bodily gestures, movements, and

⁹⁴ Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, “Judith Butler – In Theory” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatrical Journal* vol. 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531. Online: <http://jstor.org/stable/3207893>, 519.

enactments of various kinds") that gender is instituted as an "illusion of the abiding gendered self."¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, she suggests that these constituting acts inherently conceal the process of constitution, leaving human actors primarily unaware of their force, creating the illusion of "natural gender" or sex.¹⁰¹ For Butler, it is impossible to speak about a "blank" sexed body onto which "gender" is imposed, for the very identification of a body as sexed is to already assume a particular meaning of that body. Gender, in her view, is both the cultural significance of the sexed body through various acts *and* the means by which that significance is regulated through the cultural perception of adherence to those social norms.¹⁰²

Gender as performance contests the idea that it is a "free-floating"

attribute that can be chosen at will, but it also challenges the biological as its

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 520. For Butler, "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics. This implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known; indeed, gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex" (Ibid., 527-528).

¹⁰² Ibid., 523-524. Butler states, "When Beauvoir claims that woman is an 'historical situation,' she emphasizes that the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts one's body, the 'act' or performance that one's body is, but also the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived. Indeed, if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender."

ground. Sex itself becomes a gendered category, where gender designates “the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.”¹⁰³ Gender is, therefore, a particular process of becoming through “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, sex is not a “static description of what one is” but instead is “one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”¹⁰⁵

Does this concept of a constructed body leave the physical without any significance of its own, lost to the whims of constructed linguistic rhetoric, and doomed to perpetual pessimism toward anything different from the male/female binary, as Martha Nussbaum has charged?¹⁰⁶ Not quite. Butler argues for “a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and*

¹⁰³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10-11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45. “This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established;” thus, gender “is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (*Ibid.*, 178).

¹⁰⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2. To illustrate this point, she uses the question typically asked of expecting parents: “is it a boy or a girl?” Once the child is named “girl,” the child is “girded,” she is “brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of the norm” (*Ibid.*, 7-8).

¹⁰⁶ Martha Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody.” *The New Republic Online* (1999). Online, <http://www.tnr.com/index.mhtml>.

surface we call matter."¹⁰⁷ Gender, not the body, is produced via performance; but since there is no way of conceiving of the body without gender, the boundaries demarcated through the performance create the fiction of a stable identity. Matter itself is not irrelevant in this process; but to assume a particular "undeniability of 'sex' or its 'materiality'" prior to the process of materialization is to already impose boundaries upon it, to mark that which is excluded, to present a particular version of it, and, thereby, to establish a "stable and oppositional heterosexuality."¹⁰⁸ Yet, Butler does not, in this proposal, call for the obliteration of gender norms; rather, she is calling for their reconstitution, for the recognition of the excluded, precisely within those norms.

How can it be possible to reconfigure the meaning of gender if it is impossible to start with a blank slate? It is important to note here that the body (the "subject" who is the "I") is not "passively scripted with cultural codes."¹⁰⁹ The body engages pre-existing gender conventions, appropriates them through various levels of assimilation and contestation, both reinforcing and destabilizing the norms in the process.¹¹⁰ Butler explains,

As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened as the constructive instabilities in such

¹⁰⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions," 526.

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 10.

constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which 'sex' is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of 'sex' into a potentially productive crisis.¹¹¹

The ironic implication is that the very means of destabilizing the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix exist within that matrix already. Butler states, "It is important to emphasize that although heterosexuality operates in part through the stabilization of gender norms, gender designates a dense site of signification that contain *and exceed the heterosexual matrix.*"¹¹² Indeed, it is the existence and performances of those who exceed the heterosexual matrix that open the possibilities for gender to a spectrum of reality by calling the boundaries of the norms themselves into question through subversive performances. These possibilities are "not [opened] through strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 238; *emphasis mine*.

¹¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 44. See also p. 189: "To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the 'I' that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself." It must be stressed here that this process of reconstitution takes time;

Butler's work has exercised "an uncanny degree of influence," in the contemporary quest for the liberation of gender from the fixed rigidity of the binary system by offering "the prospect of an escape from stereotype, the hope of an elusive personal transformation beyond normal human expectations and restrictions."¹¹⁴ This, Coakley suggests, begs the question of the telos of these transformations, a question that Butler never actually answers,¹¹⁵ but which provides the clue to the "eschatological longing" that Coakley sees in her work.

¹¹⁶ The theory of gender performativity seeks to "denaturalize" sex and gender in a way that opens them to future possibilities through "labile [and] fluid transformation."¹¹⁷ Coakley hears in the transformative nature of gender performance an echo of an ancient "ascetical program of gender fluidity into the divine."¹¹⁸ To uncover the source of this echo, Coakley introduces Butler to

it is not possible to simply overthrow the cultural perceptions of gender by renaming them and then expecting changed performances in a single sweep. Rather, subversive performances take time to work out as viable cultural possibilities, and therefore take time to reconstitute boundaries.

¹¹⁴ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 161.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 154. For Coakley, the hint she finds in Butler is indicative of the contemporary obsession over the body and its meaning. "No one can have failed to notice the obsession with the 'body' that has gripped the late-twentieth-century popular imagination; yet this very phenomenon bears all the marks of our current deepest *aporias*, fears, and longings" (Ibid.). Coakley continues, "Devoid now of religious meaning or the capacity for any fluidity into the divine, shorn of any expectations beyond the grave, it has shrunk to the limits of individual fleshliness; hence our hope seems to reside in keeping it alive, youthful, consuming, sexually active, and jogging on (literally), for as long as possible" (Ibid., 155).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 159.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. She continues, "Moreover, it is the yoking of 'practice' (Butler's 'performance') and theory that also strikes a note of spiritual reminiscence: change cannot occur by mere thought,

Gregory of Nyssa, whose own “gender theory, like Butler’s, does not claim to *obliterate* the binaries that remain culturally normative, but seeks – also like Butler – to find a transformative way through them.”¹¹⁹

Coakley begins her introduction of Nyssa with a discussion of his understanding of the resurrection body.¹²⁰ Based on his reading of the seed metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15, he believed that the body “is labile and changing in this life and is on its way to continuing change into incorruptibility... For Gregory, however, change does not necessarily signal decay, but can on the contrary mark the endless transformations ‘from glory to glory.’”¹²¹ What he envisions as the eschatologically glorified body is a return to androgynous beings, a vision he sees by reading Genesis 1:27 through the lens of Galatians 3:28.¹²² Yet, in a similar vein with Butler, this does not make gender irrelevant. Rather, gender takes on spiritual meaning as one engages in the ascetical practices that open a person to the source of one’s transformation into glory, the divine. These practices are, like Butler’s performances, repeated over time. They represent “a life-long ascetical program, a purification and redirection of *eros*

but is precisely the project of arduous exercise – an exercise *against* the grain of the predominant cultural assumption, the assumption, that is, of heterosexual ‘marriage and giving in marriage.’”

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 162.

¹²¹ Ibid., 163.

¹²² Ibid. Nyssa’s reading of the creation narrative pictures the first humans being non-sexed at creation; “en route” to the fall, God split the non-sexed into bi-sexed beings. Since there is no “male or female” in Christ, Nyssa believes that the resurrection body will be “de-genitalized.”

towards the divine, a final withdrawal from the whirligig of marriage, child-rearing, the quest for social status and financial security."¹²³

According to Coakley, Nyssa's employment of gender in his ascetical program offers three points of connection with Butler. In *The Life of Moses*, Nyssa works out a particular process of spiritual progress, using Moses as a "'type' of the contemplative's quest for God."¹²⁴ In this ascent, "Gregory charts a symbolic gender reversal" where the novice ascetic assumes the masculine posture of pursuing, while the more spiritually mature ascetic assumes the feminine posture of openness and receptivity.¹²⁵ Nyssa's rehearsals of typical gender norms, however, are offered alongside the "insistence that gender is fluid and volitional."¹²⁶ The use of "such disjunctive gender binaries apply as points of reference primarily...for mere beginners on the slope of Moses' mystical ascent."¹²⁷ The gender references have far less bearing on those who have already been making the transformative ascent for some time and have begun to assume the de-sexed bodies of the resurrection. This is "the 'eschatologically oriented' feature of Gregory's complex theory of personal (and gendered) transformation into the divine life,"¹²⁸ which roots the meaning of gender within the unfolding

¹²³ Ibid., 162

¹²⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 285.

¹²⁵ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 127.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 164.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

creation, fall, redemption narrative, and “places the performances of gender in a spectrum of existential possibilities *between* despair and hope.”¹²⁹

Second, the transformation experienced in ascetical prayer does not dispose of gender categories. “Rather, as advances are made in the stages of virtue and contemplation, *eros* finds its truer meaning in God, and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of ascent.”¹³⁰ Ascetical practices are, in a sense, ascetical gendered *performances* that reestablish the meaning of the particular “gender” by recognizing the divine as its source of reconstitution. Whereas Butler’s performances lack an organizing *telos*, Nyssa provides it in “that divine referent that forms the final point of meaning..., what [Rowan] Williams thematizes as ‘that fundamental *eros* for the endless God that binds the polyphony of our intentionality into some sort of unity.”¹³¹ Unlike Butler, the gender performances of ascetical prayer “are not primarily intended as acts of resistance to worldly oppression.”¹³² Instead, ascetical performances are acts of

¹²⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 54.

¹³⁰ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 165. Coakley explains, “the increasingly close relation to Christ marks... a shift from active courting of Christ as ‘Sophia’ to passive reception of embraces of Christ as the bridegroom.”

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 54. While ascetical performances may not be acts of resistance, “they will give courage for such!” (*Ibid.*)

submission “to a unique power – and, as such, are of course already ‘gendered,’ in a particular and unique sense denoting relationship with God.”¹³³

The last point of connection that Coakley makes has to do with death, a topic Butler speaks little about; “yet death, as Gregory well sees, is the most incisive test of a person’s life... death for Gregory is merely a passage into further ‘bodily’ – albeit de-genitalized – life,” suggesting that the “continuum between this life and the next is almost complete.”¹³⁴ Humans will not gain a brand new existence in the resurrection, free of their particular histories, free of the marks that represent “suffering confronted and overcome: ‘[memorials] of the divine intervention, the result and the occasion of perpetual turning toward God through the action of grace.’”¹³⁵ This does not, it would seem (contra Nyssa), preclude the resurrection of the gendered body that has been the site of exclusion, violence, and oppression. “Gender...is ineradicable (I am always, even after death...a particular sort of ‘differentiated, relational being’); but gender is not unchangeable... In this sense, gender may be seen not merely as a locus of

¹³³ Ibid., 54-55. Coakley explains, “What makes *this* gendering ‘different’ from worldly gender, then, is its being rendered labile to the logic and flow of trinitarian, divine desire, its welcoming of the primary interruption of the Spirit, and its submission to the contemplative unknowing so that the certainties of this world (including the supposed certainties of fallen views on gender) can be remade in the incarnate likeness of Christ. Gender (embodied difference) is here not to be eradicated, note, but to be transformed; it still ‘matters,’ but only because God desires it to matter and can remake it in the image of his Son” (Ibid., 55).

¹³⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

oppression,” as in Butler, “but just as much as the potential vehicle of embodied salvation.”¹³⁶

In Coakley’s estimation, gender relationships between humans are of secondary concern to the particular gender performance one enacts in relation to God, a concern never fully developed. While her understanding of gender, like Butler’s for secular gender theory, has the potential and force to destabilize the particularities of the heterosexual matrix, it also runs the risk of internalizing bodily categories to such a degree that one is still left with the question of the body’s significance, and tends toward a privatization of gendered meaning. The body, in Coakley’s work, is either a site of purgation (the “materialization,” to use Butler’s word, of the stripping, chastening, and realigning of human desires) or a site of embodied salvation (the “materialization” of the “future” resurrected body, albeit on a continuum of time that makes little distinction between “this” and the “next” life). The theoretical work of Coakley could be just as vulnerable to criticism of disembodied meanings of gender that have been lobbed against Butler. Except in Coakley’s case, it would be a charge of re-substantiating a Platonic-split between spirit and matter that would render matter meaningless. Furthermore, the primary emphasis on desire and love for God to the neglect of desire and love for others, tends toward an individualistic and privatized

¹³⁶ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 54.

understanding of participative relationship with the divine, a sort of “me and my God” spirituality. Nevertheless, she hints toward a social significance for her development of contemplative prayer and the experiential priority of the Spirit that, if developed, would safeguard against a purely “spiritual” understanding of gender and provide a more substantial meaning for the body in relation to other humans.

This “hint” begins with Coakley’s understanding of the work that “silence” does in contemplative prayer. Rather than being a “shutting down of resistance to,” or an escape from, “human abuse and horror,” silence is “rather the incubator for the strength and courage to resist it.”¹³⁷ In the silent, expectant waiting on God, the pray-er is apprehended by the Spirit,¹³⁸ invested with divine life and empowered to live into it. Furthermore, as human desire is purged of sinful, misdirected, and distorted tendencies and aligned with divine desire, one becomes more aware of those for whom God’s heart breaks. Indeed, Coakley argues, “the ascetical practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised and marginalized ‘other.’”¹³⁹ This is so because of the reconstituting activity and presence of the Holy Spirit, who

¹³⁷ Ibid., 326.

¹³⁸ This apprehension is not “a violent assault or unwanted imposition” (see Coakley, *God Sexuality and the Self*, 113, no. 14). Though seeking God through ascetical practices is, surely, a result of the enflaming and alluring reach of the Spirit, there is still an act of the will to accept and to cede to the power and primacy of the Spirit.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 47.

causes us to transgress boundaries in participative mystery, which has implications for the boundaries that sustain the social world in which we exist. The “practical self-emptying” of contemplative acts through *willed* ceding to the Spirit “inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomforting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy.”¹⁴⁰ This necessarily has a bearing on the contemplative’s agency and determination to live into the divine life, constituted by divine love, in response to promptings of the Holy Spirit particularly in the human community in which one exists. Ironically, it is Butler’s later work in *Undoing Gender* that pushes back on Coakley to help expose what is needed to bring this “attentiveness” into embodied attention.

“Undoing Gender,” Desire, and Agency

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler pushes her own theoretical proposal of subversive performances of gender into the social world by “focusing on the question of what it might mean to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life.”¹⁴¹ This book focuses on the ways in which discursive categories function within the lived (i.e. bodily) experiences of those who exceed the heterosexual matrix.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

Building on her earlier work, Butler develops the idea of gender performances as improvisational acts that happen within the cultural constraints of gender norms within the social context. "What I call my 'own' gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author."¹⁴² Again, it is not that the social construct of gender exists alone in this matrix; the body, as the process of materialization, both acts and is acted upon within those terms. For, "it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings."¹⁴³ To be a body is to be given "over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life."¹⁴⁴

The emphasis that Butler underscores here presses against Coakley's internalized categories of gender to expose the need for completing the vertical trajectory of desire and love for God back into the realm of the horizontal, of a purified desire and love for neighbor. As we are drawn into the divine life, as our desires are purged and aligned with God's desire, and as we are united to the

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 21. Butler continues, "Indeed, if I seek to deny the fact that my body relates me – against my will and from the start – to others I do not choose to have in proximity to myself..., and if I build a notion of 'autonomy' on the basis of the denial of this sphere or a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then do I precisely deny the social and political conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy?"

Body of Christ, there is no longer a question of being “bound” to others “against our will.” Union *is* the divine teleological goal, the trajectory of all of creation, and so the “social nature” of human being, which is reconstituted in union with God, is therefore expanded and reorganized. The “Otherness” to which we are bound transgresses the exclusiveness of “natural” human relationship.

Another argument that Butler makes that helps to push Coakley’s understanding of gender into the social realm has to do with the relationship between gender and desire. “Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself.”¹⁴⁵ This leads Butler to ask after the content of gender’s desire. “To speak in this way may seem strange, but it becomes less so when we realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms.”¹⁴⁶ The ultimate concern of gender, she says, is “desire for recognition” within the social frame in which we exist (one that “we do not fully choose”), which “means that the ec-static

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

character of our existence [the mode of being outside or beside oneself¹⁴⁷] is essential to the possibility of persisting as a human."¹⁴⁸

Again, we can see correlations to Coakley's work in the fundamental nature of desire and ecstatic participation. Where Coakley grounds this in the incorporative reach of the Spirit, Butler's understanding of the relationship between desire and gender underscores its sociability and the ecstatic nature of human relationships. However, another important connection here emphasizes the primacy of desire's constitution in God. When Butler suggests that "our very sense of personhood is linked to desire for recognition,"¹⁴⁹ she presents another echo of a theistic understanding of gender and desire. In the process of coming to know God through ascetical practices and contemplative attention, one finds that to "know God is unlike any other knowledge, indeed it is more truly *to be* known and so transformed."¹⁵⁰ The ultimate recognition we can receive is from God, and this recognition is offered by way of the Spirit, who dwells within us and testifies to our spirits of our newly constituted reality as children of God. However, our reconstitution in God is also a reconstitution in our relationships with other creatures. As our desires are purged and aligned with God, we no longer seek to fulfill desires because of an inherent lack. Rather, eros is transfigured and we

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 44.

begin to desire for the other out of the abundance and fullness of the divine life in which we participate. This suggests that our desires are no longer governed by “the flesh,” but by the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

A final note on Butler will suffice to push back on the tilt toward internalized and privatized bodily categories in Coakley to set up my proposal of what is *theologically* needed to return the significance of gender to embodied existence. Butler seeks to upend a concept of autonomy that is not itself constituted in the social matrix. An individual does not have the capacity to create viable possibilities of being outside the confines of the conditions of one’s constitution.¹⁵¹ It is impossible to “choose” a gender or a sexuality that is not already plausible within the social context in which one acts. “Conversely (and as a consequence), it turns out that changing the institutions by which humanly viable choice is established and maintained is a prerequisite for the exercise of self-determination. In this sense, individual agency is bound up with social critique and social transformation.”¹⁵²

Coakley does employ agency as a means of defining the pray-er’s role in the process of spiritual progress, but again it is seemingly confined to the vertical plane. However, through the practice of ceding and responding to the Spirit,

¹⁵¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

both in spirit and in body, the way one's body interacts in its social context will necessarily change. In ascetical practices of prayer, the believer's identity is reconstituted through ecstatic participation in the Spirit, thereby renegotiating the boundaries of his or her identity. This reconstitution does not happen by destroying the boundaries of one's social identity, but transformatively reinvests them with "participative mystery." This means that what seem like relational impossibilities in our social world become radical possibilities in the Spirit.

Since Butler's work is concerned solely with the secular realm, it cannot provide the final, theological meaning of embodied existence, even if it can help expose the points that Coakley's work must be pushed in that direction. I find that in Butler's work, *Undoing Gender*, there is another echo of another Christian performance, the Eucharist, that, I argue, is needed as a constructive counterpart to Coakley's understanding of gender in order to safeguard it from being relegated purely to a "spiritual" or "internal" category. The Eucharist is the central performative act of the Church, a bodily enactment or performance that "produces the reality of what it names."¹⁵³ To tease this point out, the next section will examine the work of John Zizioulas and Alexander Schmemmann.

¹⁵³ Armour and St. Ville, "Judith Butler – In Theory," 2.

Section 3: The Telos of Human Being – Zizioulas and Schmemmann

Introduction

If, as Coakley claims, gendered bodies might become “the vehicle of embodied salvation,” how ought we to conceive of the ways our bodies relate to one another as (progressively) redeemed bodies? To get at an answer to this question, it is necessary to introduce Coakley’s argument to Zizioulas’ understanding of personhood as the primary ontological category and his eucharistic ecclesiology, as well as to Schmemmann’s understanding of the eucharist as movement.¹⁵⁴ Once this is accomplished, we can turn, in our final section of this thesis, to a proposal of how bodies matter in our particular contexts and existence.

Zizioulas – Personhood and Freedom

At the start of his book, *Being as Communion*, John D. Zizioulas writes, “The Church is not simply an institution. She is a ‘mode of existence,’ a *way of being*. The mystery of the Church, even in its institutional dimension, is deeply bound to the being of man [sic], to the being of the world, and to the very being

¹⁵⁴ It must be noted that neither Schmemmann or Zizioulas deals with questions of gender or sex in relation to their eucharistic theologies, so a straightforward “expansion” of Coakley’s work is not possible. Yet, there are parallel themes between their work and hers, which I believe, when taken together, can more adequately explain the significance of bodies in our eschatological age between “now and not yet.”

of God.”¹⁵⁵ These bonds are developed in light of his commitment to the ontological primacy of “person” in God’s existence. Significant for our study is the implication this has for human being, and the constitutive nature of participation in divine existence.

Zizioulas turns to the Cappadocian’s concept of “cause” in the being of God, which understands “person” as the “ultimate ontological category” of God’s existence.¹⁵⁶ God exists as God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because the “Father as a *person* freely wills this communion.”¹⁵⁷ Since the “one God is not the one substance but the Father, who is ‘cause’ both of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit,” then “the being of God is ascribed to His [the Father’s] personal freedom.”¹⁵⁸ Zizioulas goes on to argue that “the only exercise of freedom that can be expressed in an ontological manner is love,” which signifies that “God ‘subsists’ as Trinity.”¹⁵⁹ This means that love is not a property that derives from God’s substance, “but is constitutive of His substance, i.e. it is

¹⁵⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 41. Interestingly, the priority that Coakley gives to the Holy Spirit in her theology reinvests the term ‘source’ with new implications for the relations in the so-called imminent Trinity. She states, “there can be in God’s trinitarian ontology no Sonship which is not eternally ‘sourced’ by the ‘Father’ *in the Spirit* (in such a way, in fact, as to query even the usual and exclusive meanings of Fatherly ‘source’)” and “more daringly, we would also need to speak of the Father’s own reception back of his status as ‘source’ from the other two ‘persons,’ precisely via the Spirit’s reflexive propulsion and the Son’s creative effulgence. Here, in divinity, then, is a ‘source’ of love unlike any other, giving and receiving and ecstatically deflecting, ever and always” (*God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 333).

¹⁵⁹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 46.

that which makes God what He is, the one God.”¹⁶⁰ This means, “the ontology of God is not subject to the necessity of the substance. Love is identified with ontological freedom.”¹⁶¹ Since divine freedom is found in God’s “mode of existence” rather than God’s substance, then humans have hope for becoming “authentic” persons by being “hypostatized” in the Spirit and reconstituted as participants in the divine communion.¹⁶² This would suggest, as Coakley does, that the fulfillment of personhood in human creatures can never be “accomplished” by imitating the social construct of the divine, but rather only through a reconstitution of being through *participation* in the divine life via ecstatic participation in the Spirit.

Understood in light of the Trinity, the concept of personhood for human beings is grounded in the desire to “exist as a *concrete, unique, and unrepeatable* entity.”¹⁶³ Thus, the person must be a “hypostasis” (i.e. a “concrete, unique, unrepeatable person”) of the “substance” (humankind). In this sense, “personhood is the total fulfillment of being, the catholic expression of its nature.”¹⁶⁴ In humans, this pursuit for fulfillment leads to a search for personal identity that necessarily denies others as it seeks to establish individuality.

However, if allowed to run rampant, this desire would lead, says Zizioulas, to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 44.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 47.

utter chaos, and so, “uniqueness is relativized in social life, and man [sic] becomes...a useful ‘object,’ a ‘combination,’ a *persona*.”¹⁶⁵ This “two-edge sword” illustrates the tragedy of the human being, since death is the result of the human’s “inability to ensure his[/her] absolute identity in the world. Death becomes tragic and unacceptable only when [the human] is regarded as person, and above all as hypostasis and unique identity. As a biological event death is something natural and welcome, because only in this way is life perpetuated.”¹⁶⁶

If humans are to survive as persons, then, as “concrete and unique” identities, they must do so based on something other than the biological sphere. Pointing to Matthew 22:32, Zizioulas explains, “God constitutes the affirmation of being as ‘eternal life’ and is not ‘God of the dead, but of the living.’”¹⁶⁷ Survival as persons is only possible by way of salvation, of a change in “the constitutional make-up of the hypostasis.”¹⁶⁸ This reconstitution, for Zizioulas, signals a distinction between what he terms, the “biological hypostasis” and the “ecclesial hypostasis.”

The biological hypostasis is constituted by one’s conception and birth, and hinders the person from “affirming itself as freedom and love” because it suffers from two passions: biological instinct, or the laws of ontological necessity, and

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 53.

individualism.¹⁶⁹ Both of these tragically lead, as noted above, to death. A person is born “as a result of an ecstatic fact – erotic love – but this fact is interwoven with a natural necessity, and therefore lacks freedom. He is born as a *hypostatic* fact, as a body, but this fact is interwoven with individuality and with death.”¹⁷⁰ The tragedy here is not that an individual does not become a person because of what constitutes him or her as a biological hypostasis. Rather, the tragedy is the attempt to become “a person through it and failing.”¹⁷¹

The implications of what Zizioulas says here have to do with where we find and secure our identity. Is it to the sphere of the biological, to that which makes us “part” of the human race/species? If so, then attempting to establish our identity in gender/sex is, in part, trying to become a person through it. This does not mean that gender becomes inconsequential or irrelevant; rather, it means that gender is in need of redemption, and its meaning is only understood in terms of the new, regenerated hypostasis constituted in God. It makes gender, as Coakley argues, a secondary issue to the primacy of one’s relation to and posture toward God, but also something that is ultimately redeemable and therefore transformable.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

This new, regenerated hypostasis is what Zizioulas refers to as the ecclesial hypostasis. This is not a “spiritual” hypostasis that destroys or makes irrelevant the biological, particularly the “two basic components of the biological hypostasis” – the body and eros. Rather, they are transformed, they “change their activity, adapt themselves to the new ‘mode of existence’ of the hypostasis.”¹⁷² The ecclesial hypostasis is characterized by a new “kind of relationship with the world which is not determined by the laws of biology.”¹⁷³ No longer is the human bound by biological boundaries, markers, and categories; familial language is given ecclesial meaning, freeing humans from relationships constituted by biological identity. “This means that henceforth [the human] can love...*unconstrained* by natural laws,” and is able to transgress the exclusivism of the biological hypostasis in which the “natural” takes precedence over the “unnatural,” the stranger, the other.¹⁷⁴ The ecclesial hypostasis is free to love not as adherence to a moral law, but because the new hypostatic constitution (i.e. new birth) “has made him[/her] a part of a network of relationships which transcend every exclusiveness.”¹⁷⁵ What Zizioulas argues here could be seen as a converging point for Butler’s and Coakley’s work. Just as the cultural terms we use to demarcate boundaries of identity are open to new

¹⁷² Ibid., 53.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

constitutive acts and performances that expand those boundaries and reinvest them with new meaning, being progressively reconstituted in the Spirit draws new lines of boundaries for human identity, which are progressively purged of exclusive tendencies through ascetical performances on the continuum of sanctification and perfection.

Coakley insists that gender has an eschatological telos, a goal toward which it is moving. Zizioulas' work helps to tease this point out even further in his own insistence of the ecclesial hypostasis' grounding in the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God. "Man [sic] appears to exist in his ecclesial identity not as that which he is [i.e. the biological hypostasis] but as that which he *will* be; the ecclesial identity is linked with eschatology, that is, with the final outcome of his existence."¹⁷⁶ The only historical and experiential correspondence to the reality of the ecclesial hypostasis is, for Zizioulas, the eucharist, understood first and foremost as "an assembly." It is the "only historical context of human existence where the terms 'father,' 'brother,' etc., lose their biological exclusiveness and reveal, as we have seen, relationships of free and universal love."¹⁷⁷ It is this understanding of the ecclesial hypostasis that is needed in conjunction with Coakley's work in order to ground her understanding of gender in embodiment; the Church, gathered at the table of communion is

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 59.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

constituted as one body, in the Spirit, and precludes the exclusivism of the biological hypostases.

The eucharistic community is constituted by the future, by its eschatological end, and therefore is not just “an assembly in one place, that is, a historical realization and manifestation of the eschatological existence of man [sic]; it is at the same time also *movement*, a progress towards this realization.”¹⁷⁸ This suggests that the ecclesial hypostasis is “not of this world,” but “belongs to the eschatological *transcendence* of history and not simply to history.”¹⁷⁹ This means that the person revealed as an ecclesial hypostasis has her “roots in the future and is perpetually inspired, or rather maintained and nourished, by the future.”¹⁸⁰

For Alexander Schmemmann, the “movement” that Zizioulas refers to is emphasized in the liturgy, the “ministry” and “mission” of the Church. It is the movement of the liturgy that constitutes not just the Christian’s but the world’s ascent into the Kingdom of God.¹⁸¹ Similar to Coakley’s emphasis on the Spirit’s incorporative work through the contemplative’s prayer, Schmemmann understands that the eucharist – the “assembly of the Church,” the ascent to the throne of God and the partaking of the banquet of the kingdom – is

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 62, *emphasis added*.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973).

accomplished *in and through the Holy Spirit*.¹⁸² However, the inclusion of the world in this ascent provides a reach into the social world of our existence that Coakley only hints at.

In *For the Life of the World*, Schmemmann begins his exposition of “sacrament” with the claim that the world was created as food for humankind, and as such, as communion with God. “The world as man’s [sic] food is not something ‘material’ and limited to material functions, thus different from, and opposed to, the specifically ‘spiritual’ functions by which man is related to God. All that exists is God’s gift to man, and it all exists to make known to man, to make man’s life, communion with God.”¹⁸³ When God blessed all of creation, it became the “sign and means” of God’s “presence and wisdom, love and revelation.”¹⁸⁴ Seen through this lens, gender is not inconsequential to “spiritual matters.” It is one of the means through which we come to know God, to participate in the divine life, and to embody the reality of the divine kingdom.

The food motif that Schmemann develops as an introduction to his understanding of sacrament ultimately leads him to suggest that the human “is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God.

¹⁸² Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 36.

¹⁸³ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 14.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

All desire is finally a desire for Him.”¹⁸⁵ Here, we see another correlation with Coakley’s work and her claim that desire, that human longing, is ultimately the “precious clue” woven into our existence to remind us of our createdness and dependence on God. Desire that is not directed toward God is ultimately misdirected, tinged with sin. For Schmemmann, this is precisely what “original sin” is; not disobedience but the cessation of hunger for God, the refusal to realize the eucharist, to take the material of the sacrament (i.e. the world) and transform it into life with God, “filling it with meaning and spirit.”¹⁸⁶ Redemption, then, is not so much about rescuing humans but about completing God’s intentions. Redemption is about God revealing Godself to humankind as that to which their hunger had been driving them all along.¹⁸⁷

Ascetical practices of prayer, as Coakley suggests, sustain this process of redemption; through them, the Spirit continually “tugs” on the heart of the contemplative, enflaming his or her desires and redirecting them toward God, the ultimate source and object of desire, all the while chastening them and purging them of sin. Schmemmann presses against and expands Coakley’s thoughts here by insisting that in the new life inaugurated by Christ, “life in all its totality” was returned to humankind, “given again as a sacrament and

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 19.

communion, made eucharist."¹⁸⁸ Because of this, the Church is constituted as the "sacrament of Christ's presence in the world."¹⁸⁹ For Schmemmann, Christians stand as witnesses of this new life, a new life marked by the end of all of the world's false hope, joy, and satisfaction and the beginning of a "new, all-embracing joy" that, consequently, cannot be defined or analyzed, but can only be entered into.¹⁹⁰ "The Eucharist is the entrance of the Church into the joy of its Lord. And to enter into that joy, so as to be a witness to it in the world, is indeed the very calling of the Church, its essential *leitourgia*, the sacrament by which it 'becomes what it is.'"¹⁹¹ The Eucharist, to use Butler's language, is the performance, the iteration of a new possibility, of a heavenly reality in the world in which we exist, making what God wills in heaven manifest on earth.

Schmemmann suggests that the eucharist is best understood as a "journey or procession. It is the journey of the Church into the dimension of the Kingdom... the risen life of Christ," a sort of "fourth dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life."¹⁹² Like asceticism, entry into this dimension is not "an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world."¹⁹³ It was Coakley's

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹² Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 27.

insistence that “ascetical practices of prayer are the indispensable means of a true attentiveness to the marginalized and despised ‘other,’”¹⁹⁴ but it is the eucharist that provides the vantage point to see the other, not as an excluded impossibility but as a new and radical possibility. The eucharistic ascent, like asceticism, disrupts our normal categories of understanding; unlike asceticism though, the eucharist places us concretely “in the world” as witnesses to a life “not of this world.”

Eucharist as liturgy, as movement, begins when individual members “leave their homes” and gather together; in the assembly, the Spirit transforms these individual Christians into “the Church of God.”¹⁹⁵ The Orthodox liturgy begins, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...” Here, the destination is announced; and it is not a symbolic destination, for the congregational “amen” indicates the Church’s agreement to “follow Christ in his ascension to His father, to make this ascension the destiny of man [sic].”¹⁹⁶ The congregational response to standing before the glory of God in the Kingdom is to proclaim “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal.” The name “holy” designates two things: that “God is the Absolutely Other, the One *about* whom we know nothing, and that He is the end of all our hunger, all our desires, the inaccessible

¹⁹⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 47.

¹⁹⁵ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 27.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

One who mobilizes our wills, the mysterious treasure that attracts us."¹⁹⁷ In this encounter, we come to realize, second, that "there is really nothing to know but Him."¹⁹⁸

The next movement of the liturgy is into the Word; the celebrant offers peace to the congregation, the same peace established by Christ between God and the world, and makes the liturgy of the Word sacramental. The "human words of the Gospel" are transformed into the Word of God, and the hearers are transformed into a "receptacle of the Word and a temple of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹⁹ Again, the congregation responds to this transformation, but this time does so through offering to God "the totality of our lives, of ourselves, of the world in which we live,"²⁰⁰ as a sacrifice of praise and adoration, in recognition and remembrance of Christ's offering and sacrifice.²⁰¹

So far, this movement has correlated with much of what Coakley's ascetical ascent has provided. A key difference is that this ascent, the eucharistic ascent is done as an assembly. This is vital for the implications of the exchange of the kiss of peace, the next performance of the eucharistic act. The kiss, or passing, of the peace is crucial, because the Church must be the revelation of love:

"without this love nothing is 'valid' in the Church because nothing is possible.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 34.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 36.

The content of Christ's eucharist is Love, and only through love can we enter into it and be made its partakers."²⁰² As partakers, the content of our eucharist is thanksgiving and praise, and so it is "meet and right to give God thanks and praise," for this constitutes the "very form and content of the new life that God granted us when in Christ He reconciled us with Himself."²⁰³

Here, the eschatological reality of the "now and not yet" is seen clearly; the Church has made entrance into the kingdom of God, has seen that which is to come as that which God has already "endowed us with;" it is the foretaste of reconciliation and joy. Yet, it is not a "chronological" reality alone, in which past is separated from present and future. "This future has been given to us in the past that it may constitute the very *present*, the life itself, now, of the Church."²⁰⁴ Thus, when the liturgy moves us to "remembrance," it is not a recollection of a past, historical event. All previous movements lead logically to this act, to the confession that all thanksgiving, all praise is for Christ, in whom all "thanksgiving, all remembrance, all offerings" are fulfilled,²⁰⁵ but they are fulfilled in a life of which we now partake, in a love that transcends the boundaries of time and ontology, a Pentecostal life in the Spirit. "To be in the Spirit means to be in heaven, for the Kingdom of God is 'joy and peace in the

²⁰² Ibid., 36-37.

²⁰³ Ibid., 39.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 40-41.

Holy Spirit.' And thus, in the Eucharist, it is [the Spirit] who *seals* and *confirms* our ascension into heaven, who transforms the Church into the body of Christ and – therefore – manifests the elements of our offering as *communion in the Holy Spirit*.²⁰⁶

Before the Church can partake of the communion, one vital task remains: intercession for the world. "The bread on the paten and the wine in the chalice are to remind us of the incarnation of the Son of God, of the cross and death. And thus it is the very joy of the Kingdom that makes us *remember* the world and pray for it. It is the very communion with the Holy Spirit that enables us to love the world with the love of Christ."²⁰⁷ In this point, Schmemmann's understanding of the eucharistic movement gives the final push to Coakley's ascetical program out into embodied life. As the sacrament of unity, the Eucharist allows us to see the world "in Christ," a vantage point that allows us to see the world as it is, rather than from our own limited perspectives. "Intercession begins here, in the glory of the messianic banquet, and this is the only true beginning for the Church's mission... Intercession constitutes, thus, the only real preparation for communion. For in and through communion not only do we become one body and one spirit, but we are restored to that solidarity and love which the world

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 44.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 44.

has lost."²⁰⁸ Here, in intercession, the Church's role as witness to a new life is revealed, a life where the impossibilities of joy and fulfilment are made possible in true being, and it is consummated in the eating and drinking. The boundaries of separation are no longer obstacles to our witness; having been nourished by the very being of God, by the eschatological reality of the life to come, God has "made us *competent...*, competent to be His witnesses, to fulfill what he has done and is ever doing."²⁰⁹ It is a competence to embody new possibilities of existence, to push against the boundaries of the world's certainties, informed and nourished in the eschatological reality of an existence purged of exclusivism.

In the language of Zizioulas, it is the ecclesial hypostasis that bears witness to the eschatological reality of true life. The ecclesial hypostasis draws its being "from the being of God and from that which it *will* itself be at the end of the age. It is precisely this which makes the ecclesial hypostasis ascetic."²¹⁰ Asceticism allows for the hypostatization of the person precisely, as Coakley says, because the ascetic engages in the practices that allow her, progressively, to embrace her utter dependence upon God and the eschatological reality that she is being transformed into, thereby letting go, through painful stages of purgation, of her dependence upon the "natural." As Zizioulas affirms, "asceticism does not

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 45.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 46.

²¹⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 62.

deny 'nature' but frees it from the ontological necessity of the biological hypostasis [i.e. death, individualism, and exclusion]; it enables it to *be* in an authentic manner. Without the ascetic dimension, the person is inconceivable."²¹¹ However, asceticism alone is not enough; by itself, it leads to isolation and irrelevance, left without an embodiment of the new life it seeks. This is why it needs the eucharist, the communal ascent to the kingdom of God, and the commission and empowerment to be witnesses to it in the world. In "the end the context of the manifestation of the person is not the monastery; it is the eucharist."²¹² It is here, in the eucharist, where the body is finally given its concrete meaning as its particular hypostasis, "liberated from individualism and egocentrism."²¹³

If, as Coakley argues, the body is the site of purgation, the ascetical testing ground of fidelity and conformity to the life of Sonship, then in the eucharist it is given a new social meaning, a positive one of relation, as "a supreme expression of community – the body of Christ, the body of the Church, the body of the eucharist."²¹⁴ While asceticism may be an "indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized 'other,'"²¹⁵ the eucharist "completes" this attention because it *embodies* the transgression of the boundaries

²¹¹ Ibid., 63.

²¹² Ibid., 63.

²¹³ Ibid., 64.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 64.

²¹⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 47.

that excludes. It connects the vertical and inward movement of ascetical contemplation with the horizontal and outward movement of our eschatological existence, uniting us in a profound way so that that we can love others with an unconstrained love that breaks apart the biological tragedies of exclusion and individualism.

Gender matters, therefore, not as a natural category, bound to a rigidly fixed definition, but as a boundary belonging to the biological, one that we must constantly renegotiate as the Spirit purges us of exclusiveness, of domination, mastery, and control. It does not matter because there is anything about being a man or a woman that is inherently godlike, but because it is one of the vehicles through which we learn to embrace the eschatological reality that we are becoming. To this point, we will now turn in the conclusion of this project.

Section 4: Conclusions

Though Coakley does not explicitly set out to make her understanding of gender a purely internal or spiritualized category, her reliance on Gregory of Nyssa causes her theological anthropology to tilt in that direction. What gender performances look like in that place “*between* despair and hope” is never fully fleshed out. She leaves open the possibility of gender beyond the binary, but never “names” those possibilities as embodied possibilities. This seems to leave the meaning of gender in the here and now open-ended without any means of imagining a specific embodiment of it. This is why it was necessary to introduce Coakley’s argument to Zizioulas and Schmemmann. Zizioulas’ understanding of the ecclesial hypostasis (in Coakley’s terms, the ascetic) does not destroy the biological hypostasis, the particularities of the person, but rather reorients those particularities and delineates new boundaries of relatedness as a result of being reconstituted in the Spirit. The biological (and therefore social) boundaries that separate us as sexed and gendered beings become reinvested with participative mystery, freed from exclusionary tendencies so that *free*, unconstrained love can be embodied.

This is, primarily, enacted in the eucharistic community, the Church, who stands as both witness and example of a new possibility of life, one that is both constituted by and being conformed to the eschatological reality of full union

with God. This union is not about a union of “two” (me and my God), but one that breaks apart the boundaries of the false, autonomous individual. The Spirit not only unites us as individuals to God, but with each other as members of the one Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13). The same Spirit dwells within each of us, investing us with divine life and constituting our oneness. Yet, our particularities are not obliterated in this union, for the same Spirit that unites us also protects our integrity as unique, concrete, and unrepeatable entities, but does so in a way that progressively refines the boundaries of those particularities rather than reinforcing them as “fixed” or “given” categories of existence (1 Cor 12:14-27).

However, the radicalness of the Spirit’s purgative power means that the distinction we typically make between the Church and the world must be informed by the participative mystery that the Spirit invests into the human certainties of this binary. This by no means suggests that such a distinction should be erased or obliterated. Rather, it suggests that we need to submit to the power of the Holy Spirit, to let go of our desire to control and to master, in order to allow the boundaries of that distinction to be purged of exclusiveness. If, as Coakley argues, the eschatological trajectory we are on is cosmic in size, then the goal for *all* of creation is union with God and our task as participants in the divine life is progressively to embody the inclusiveness this implies.

Thus, gender matters not because it is an ontological necessity but because it is part of the context in which we live. As bearers of the divine image, it matters that we, as “gendered” beings, perform gender as ecclesial hypostases, subverting the fallen categories (and their inherent, social expectations) by transgressing the very boundaries that limit them *precisely from inside those categories*. Schmemmann’s understanding of the eucharist as movement, as separation, ascent, entrance, descent, and return, pushes us outside of the boundaries of the Church and back into the world, into the place of our embodied existence as disruptive forces to the world’s certainties and impossibilities. The fact that this movement is done repeatedly, that the eucharist is not a one-time sacrament, suggests that this journey takes us to ever new heights that constantly re-delineate the boundaries of inclusion.

Embodying gender *is*, as Coakley claims, of secondary importance to the primacy of our differentiated posture toward God; but it is not secondary because of the “superiority” of the so-called “spiritual realm.” It is secondary because only when one’s desire is rightly oriented toward God can the love we have for God be made manifest in our love for and relationships with others. This means that enforcing strict, rigid gender roles is a prerogative of the biological hypostasis, a prerogative that tries, in vain, to establish and secure individuality by excluding what is not “naturally” bound to the individual. So it

is not that gender, as secondary, is irrelevant; this is the force of what Butler contributes. Gender is relevant because it is only within those strict, rigid gender roles that it is conceivable to embody what the biological imagines as impossibility. It is the context in which the gendered posture we have before God becomes an embodied posture toward the human other, an open and receptive posture that is progressively purged of the violent ways we in which we exclude in order to protect our own viability.

Therefore, the characteristics and functions we have assigned to the “masculine” and the “feminine” are not fixed within those boundaries but are opened, by the interruption of the Spirit, to new configurations and meanings. This understanding of gender fluidity is not calling for the “deconstruction” of the terms in such a way that it obliterates them or those who currently exist within the terms’ accepted framework. Rather, it is a call for those who exceed the boundaries of the binary to be named: to speak, to act, to be an embodiment of a new possibility, in order to expand the boundaries of its content and reinvest it with new meanings, because it is impossible to imagine these new possibilities without their subversive examples.

The body as a site of purgation, then, is not to be understood as distinct from the body as a site of a future “embodied salvation.” The distinction between purgation and salvation is not strictly linear or chronological in nature, as if they

were two separate points in time; rather, together they are a process of sanctification, of transformation “from glory to glory” in which the new creation is progressively revealed, embraced, and embodied. Our bodies, our particularities, *are* the sites of purgation, as Coakley claims. They are the materialization of the purgative, Spirit-constituted process by which we are transformed; by which we are stripped of all exclusionary tendencies; cleansed of all distorted expressions of desire that seek to control and dominate, to manipulate and master; the process by which the boundaries of our identities are progressively reconstituted on a continuum of perfection as the cosmic interruption of the incarnation is fully born within us. Our bodies are not arbitrary or meaningless; they are the materialization, the very embodiment, of our participation in the divine life, and therefore, the embodiment of our salvation and the cosmic inclusiveness of divine desire.

Bibliography

- Armour, Ellen T., and Susan M. St. Ville. "Judith Butler - In Theory." In *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, edited by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, 1-12. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Barnabas. "Epistle of Barnabas." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 159-183. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Bird, Phyllis. *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* (John Hopkins University Press) 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519-531.
- . *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Clement. "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians." In *Early Church Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 23-51. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Coakley, Sarah. *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- . *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- "Didache." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 191-199. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Fee, Gordon. "Male and Female in the New Creation: Galatians 3:26-29." In *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, edited by Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, 172-185. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2005.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.
- Heyward, Carter. "Lamenting the Loss of Love: A Response to Colin Grant." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, no. 24, n. 1 (1996): 23-28.

- . *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.
- Ignatius. "Epistle to the Ephesians." In *Early Church Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 59-68. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Ignatius. "Epistle to the Magnesians." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 69-75. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Ignatius. "Epistle to the Smyrnaeans." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 99-105. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Ignatius. "The Epistle to the Philadelphians." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 91-97. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, 75-79. Westminister: John Knox Press, 1994.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The New Republic Online*. 1999. <http://www.tnr.com/index.mhtml> (accessed March 2015).
- Ortlund, Raymond C., Jr. "'Male-Female Equality and Male Headship'." In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, 95-112. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991.
- Plato. *The Symposium*. Translated by R.E. Allen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Polycarp. "Epistle to the Philippians." In *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth, 119-124. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Prestige, G.L. *God in Patristic Thought*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
- Rusch, William G. *The Trinitarian Controversy*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.
- Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973.
- . *The Eucharist*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987.
- Siecienski, A. Edward. *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Studer, Basil. *Trinity and Incarnation*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T CLark, 1994.
- Torrance, James B. *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1994.

Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World*. Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990.

Volf, Miroslav. "The Trinity and Gender Identity." In *Gospel and Gender*, edited by Douglas A. Campbell, 155-178. New York: T&T Clark International, 2003.

Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. London: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.