

Prayerful vulnerability: Sarah Coakley reconstructs feminism

by [Mark Oppenheimer](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

Sarah Coakley came to Harvard in 1993, hired as part of then-dean Ronald Thiemann's plan to bring more religiously committed faculty to Harvard Divinity School. (Jon Levenson, an Orthodox Jew, was hired at about the same time.) If Thiemann wanted someone who embodied the soul of Anglicanism—both its theological commitments and its style—he could hardly have chosen better. Coakley is quite English, and therefore quite unlikely to raise her voice. Her clothes are as well tailored as her sentences. Her theological interests—patristics, feminism, the Trinity, charismatic prayer—bespeak the Anglican ability to love both tradition and the freewheeling questioning of it.

Her work has had a growing influence, and she is embarking on a four-volume systematic theology which will be the first major systematics attempted from a feminist perspective. A more unusual niche may be that of priest-scholar at Harvard, where once a week the recently ordained Coakley celebrates an ecumenical Eucharist (following the Anglican rite) that regularly draws about 25 students and faculty, sometimes as many as 60. In the role of teacher and pastor, she feels closest to her Anglican roots.

Anglicanism should not be confused with its American branch, Episcopalianism, Coakley says. "I began the ordination process in 1998," Coakley told me as we sat in her small office at Harvard, appointed with a Persian rug and a plush red sofa. ("It was too small to be a library, so I turned it into a boudoir.") "I had to decide whether to offer myself as an Episcopalian or an Anglican.

"I think Anglicanism has many faults, but also strengths. One of its strengths arises from its own muddle. What arose from the conflict between Henry VIII and the pope was a church that had to honor both Catholic and Protestant Reformed tendencies. Now in our postmodern condition, the incoherence in Anglicanism that has been scoffed at as a joke can instead be seen as a tendency to sit at a table with someone

with whom you disagree and find a way to get along.

“Anglicans know they’ll have to bring together people who fundamentally disagree—from almost-Calvinist Protestants to high-in-the-sky Catholics. At its best, Anglicanism really does moderate between extremes. It unites a strong Reformed sensibility with a strong Catholic sensibility. It shows a postmodern respect for difference. I’m an Anglican not because I enjoy incoherence. I’m an Anglican because of respect for the tradition of the priest-scholar.”

Born to a family of lawyers, Coakley decided at age 13 that she wanted to be a theologian. “I think many people have an intensely religious puberty,” she told me. “It was a time of spiritual intensity and burgeoning intellectual questioning.” She read from her mother’s bookshelf the letters of Evelyn Underhill, an Anglican spiritual director of the 1930s and 1940s who wrote in a mystical vein about prayer and contemplation. She also read John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, a “1960s rational purgation and critique of what Robinson saw as an idolatrous and outmoded view of God.”

After high school at the Black Heath School, founded in the 1860s by protofeminists “to produce women who could beat men at their own game,” Coakley entered Cambridge, where she studied with Robinson and “chucked out prayer and the ritual dimension” of faith. Robinson defeated the Underhill of her adolescent reading; the rational triumphed over the mystical.

Until she came to Harvard in 1973 on a fellowship. In the new-world Cambridge, Coakley sang in the ecumenical Harvard University choir and participated in the Eucharist at the regular weekday service celebrated by the Cowley Fathers, an Anglican order with roots in the Oxford movement of the 1830s. “I rediscovered the Anglo-Catholic tradition with them,” Coakley said.

Coakley and her husband, Chip, a Syriac scholar, took jobs at the University of Lancaster, where she finished her dissertation on the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (hardly anybody’s idea of an Anglo-Catholic). That unpredictability and catholicity of interests was common at Lancaster in the 1970s. Lancaster was home to England’s first “religious studies” department, in the sense that theology was taught there from a critical rather than a confessional perspective. John Milbank, the theologian of “radical orthodoxy” who now teaches at the University of Virginia, was there. So, too, were scholars of Islam and Buddhism.

Teaching Christianity disinterestedly, as a subject for inquiry rather than as a faith commitment, was tonic for Coakley, whose own Christianity was deepened by the Lancaster approach, as well as by the school's democratic atmosphere: "It was such an equal place. There was this small coffee room, and everybody would come in, the staff, too. There was this cleaning lady who would come in smoking fags and say things like, 'Who's this Derrida?'"

Coakley's most important articles have been collected in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Blackwell, 2002). It's not an easy read, not as a whole nor in its various parts. She tosses off Greek terms and German concepts with such aplomb, in intricate prose, that even on the page her voice resounds with a toff's accent. If theologians like Gordon Kaufman and Stanley Hauerwas are plainspoken Americans, reared on Strunk and White, then Coakley is the George Eliot of theologians, whose theology always comes in the most syllables possible.

In the thicket of verbiage are two main clearings, general themes that reappear. The first is that feminist theory is a powerful tool not always well used. The second is that prayer needs to be a central category of theology.

Feminist theology has for 30 years been concerned with overturning the misogynist assumptions of the Bible and the Christian tradition, from Paul to Augustine to the present. In this critique, the church fathers have been regarded as men of a sexist time whose work presumed the inferiority of women (as well as woman's responsibility for the introduction of evil into the world). While never denying that Christian feminism should play a corrective role, Coakley also believes that it can be used constructively to provide a new appreciation for certain early church figures.

Sexual taboos have long been used to argue that women should be silent or modestly attired or even cloistered, lest they tempt men. Because lustful sin, carnality, has been seen as "female," then a denial of the carnal is "male." Such a denial elevates the "male" sphere of reason over the "female" spheres of emotion, sex, irrationality—anything that the serpent might have loosed in Eden because of Eve's sin. Coakley wants to apply a feminist insight—that the dichotomy of rationality versus irrationality, logos versus carnality, has been conceptualized in terms of gender—to the Trinity and to its early explicators.

Some of the church fathers then appear different—more feminine?—when we consider not just their misogynist statements but also their resistance to the

hegemony of stark reason. Instead of just calling them sexist, Coakley suggests, we might use the tools of feminist discourse to see how they allowed an erotic element into their understanding of the Trinity, thereby subverting the male mode of passionless thought.

In her article “‘Batter my heart . . .’: On Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity,” Coakley sets out three “axioms” of her approach to the Trinity. First, Coakley argues,

visions of God as the Trinity see the inner trinitarian relationships (that is, the relations between Father, Son and Spirit) as a prototype or charter for right relationships tout court. Thus . . . if ‘the personal is the political’ (to use the familiar feminist slogan), then no doctrine of the Trinity, however construed, can be wholly devoid of political, spiritual and sexual implications. . . . The task of a Christian feminist, then, will be to ferret out those connections and implications, and, if necessary, criticize and redirect them.

Coakley is saying that any vision of the Trinity that lacks a political and sexual component—both of great concern to feminist theologians, liberation theologians and the like—is a false or at least sorely lacking description.

What are the sexual implications of the Trinity? The question leads to her second axiom: “An analysis of Christian prayer, especially relatively wordless contemplative or charismatic prayer, provides an acutely revealing matrix for explaining the origins of trinitarian reflection.” More specifically, a feminist reclaiming of Romans 8, which describes how the Spirit prays in us to God the Father, may yield a new and fruitful understanding of the Trinity, one that begins not with the mystery of how the Son could partake of both Divine Father and human substance, but with the Spirit, in the guise of praying.

By beginning with the Spirit, we can rediscover charismatic, passionate prayer in the Trinity, which again shifts the emphasis away from scholasticism (male) and toward embodied, even erotic, experience (female). Paul writes that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom. 8:26). Here is a place to look for an understanding of the Spirit—the obscurest part of the Trinity for most Christians.

In “Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity,” Coakley writes that “it is the perception of many Christians who pray either contemplatively or charismatically . . . that the dialogue of prayer is strictly speaking not a simple communication between an individual and a distant and undifferentiated divine entity, but rather a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through one who prays.”

If Coakley is correct to view the Trinity in that light, seeing the Spirit as a prayerful medium for communication with the Father and Son, then she must also be right that the one who prays should always allow for the possibility of her prayer turning charismatic, under the influence of the Spirit. And thus the third axiom, the overtly feminist move in Coakley’s theology of the Trinity: she thinks that “the Church had politico-ecclesiastical reasons for preventing this vision of God, with its prioritization and highlighting of the Spirit, from getting too close to center stage.”

Emphasizing the Spirit could release the Christian from the rational constraints of logos, and that could lead to heresies like second-century Montanism, a movement based on prophetic utterances rather than dispassionate theologizing. The early church, then, may have suppressed theological traditions that seemed to make room for ecstasy and prophecy. A rational church was a safer church.

Coakley is happy to admit that her argument is speculative. Why did the church fathers refuse to discuss the Trinity the way Coakley wishes to discuss it? Especially when, as she notes, Gregory of Nyssa and Origen, in works like their “startling and erotically daring commentaries on the Song of Songs,” expressed affinities that seemed to undermine the primacy of Logos? We will never know. But feminist hermeneutics have always been better at raising new questions than at answering them. The question here—“To understand the Trinity, why not begin with prayer?”—is fresh and powerful.

Coakley’s feminist approach has led her to the more controversial suggestion that concepts like “submission” and “vulnerability” have been attacked too categorically by feminists. While it is true that the exalting of vulnerability has been used to push women into a demeaning self-abnegation, there is another kind of vulnerability, an empowering, Christian vulnerability, which ought not be sacrificed on the cross of leftist academic fashion.

She defends vulnerability by pointing toward its usefulness in prayer. In “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,” she argues that the “paradox of power and vulnerability” is best exemplified by “this act of silent waiting on the divine in prayer. . . . Such prayer may use a repeated phrase to ward off distractions, or be wholly silent; it may be a simple Quaker attentiveness, or take a charismatic expression (such as the use of quiet rhythmic ‘tongues’).” Such solitary, contemplative prayer leaves you naked and expectant, and it necessarily involves risk—which may be why it’s more difficult to imagine men participating in it.

“But whilst risky, this practice is profoundly transformative, ‘empowering’ in a mysterious ‘Christic’ sense. . . . If, then, these traditions of Christian ‘contemplation’ are to be trusted, this rather special form of ‘vulnerability’ is not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silencing. (If anything, it builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice.)”

Coakley adumbrates a feminist corrective to feminism: power can come from vulnerability—from prayerful vulnerability, which is not, say, submission to a Mother Superior. This formulation is vintage Coakley: she takes a feminist concern—the vulnerability of women—examines it with the scholastic tools of an Anglican scholar, and finally arrives at a conclusion sympathetic with the whole range of Anglican devotion, from charismatic prayer to a more cerebral, Quaker-style attentiveness.

Coakley’s approach has the advantage of locating feminist interpretation within a specific religious tradition, observes Amy Plantinga Pauw, who teaches theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. “The unmasking of the false universalism of ‘women’s experience’ in the so-called ‘third wave’ of Christian feminism has complicated appeals to the ‘liberation of women’ as the goal of feminist theology,” Pauw says. “Liberation of which women, and from what?” By infusing her feminism with an identifiably Anglican set of concerns (patristics and ecclesiology, for example), Coakley points the way for black Baptist feminists or Pentecostal feminists to do work that elevates their own traditions.

Most important is Coakley’s reminder that such prayer “builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice.” At first, that seems a bit of an add-on, but Coakley is deeply interested in how prayer can transform not just the self, but society. (“The idea that St. Teresa was just having a private orgasm is a [William] Jamesian idea.”) Her theological investigations have a pastoral component, one that introduces her to

more actual Christians than many theologians get to meet.

Coakley's projected four volumes are on, respectively, the Trinity, the "positive side" of a Christian anthropology ("What does the human life look like if you're on the road to the beautiful vision?"), the negative side of a Christian anthropology (sin and atonement), and finally Jesus Christ. "You need to be clear on God and man to be clear on Christ. He's the most mysterious problem."

In this project, Coakley is attempting to write a *théologie totale*, in homage to the French *annaliste* school of historians who used varied disciplines—economics, sociology, philology, history—to answer historical questions. "For every question I investigate," Coakley said, "I use a novel method, like artistic criticism, or [sociological] fieldwork." Each book, for example, has a "pastoral investigation."

The first volume will incorporate her findings among Anglican charismatics, based on work she did for the Church of England's Doctrine Commission. The second and third will draw on the semester she spent teaching silent contemplation to young black criminals in a Boston jail. These theological tactics pay homage to her early love of Troeltsch, with his concern for social "types" and their relation to different sorts of theological forms. "I'm trying to see how various forms of trinitarianism (and antitrinitarianism) flourish in different social and ecclesial settings."

Teaching imprisoned blacks to be silent could sound suspiciously like teaching women to be "vulnerable"—and might draw objections from the same crowd. "Many would say, 'She's teaching oppressed people how to live with their oppression,'" Coakley said. "But there's a dignity in learning to live with their own inner noise in a situation where they're being constantly abused. There's nothing more powerful than sitting in silence with 40 men in jail with all the commotion around you."

Coakley was not the first Christian to figure out that power comes from powerlessness, but it is a lesson that seems curiously remote from our times, one that demands fresh repetition. By saying that English charismatics and imprisoned criminals may be the stuff of theological reflection, and by tying their prayer to the Trinity, the Trinity to Romans 8 and Romans 8 to Origen, Coakley mixes old wine in some very new jugs.

Charles Hefling, an Episcopal priest who teaches theology at Boston College and who in the mid-1970s sang with Coakley in the Harvard choir, identifies a common thread running through all of Coakley's interests, from Troeltsch to Gregory to the practice

of the priesthood: “Sarah, like Troeltsch, is interested in religion, in its practices and how they shape both thought and feeling. To use a term from Newman . . . it is through the devotional, ‘spiritual,’ prayerful practice of Christianity that one has a ‘real apprehension’ (as contrasted with a merely ‘notional apprehension’) of what doctrinal statements are all about.”

Coakley’s scholarship is too sound, and her manner too congenial, for her to have sworn enemies. But she would have little claim to a prophetic, priestly voice if she did not make some people uncomfortable. David Ford, Coakley’s fellow student at Cambridge and now a professor there, observes that Coakley’s views upset “those among her fellow feminists who have written off mainstream Christian faith and churches; theologians who either are unhappy with her way of bringing together systematic theology and contemplative prayer or who consider that the thoroughness of her engagement with philosophy and other disciplines makes her too ‘liberal’; and secular thinkers who are surprised by such an intelligent, sophisticated and ethically convincing presentation of Christian faith.”

That list of antagonists makes Coakley a significant figure in the theological landscape, especially at a school like Harvard. Deeply informed by the disinterested “religious studies” approach to religion, she remains committed to theologizing on behalf of the church. She is concerned that Harvard does not appear to share that commitment. “The rhetoric is that we’re still engaged in the formation of clergy,” she observes, but she worries that the school is moving further toward the religious-studies model. It’s possible that Coakley’s weekly Eucharist, as well as her kind of Christian scholarship, will become marginal to the university. If so, they will be all the more significant for the church.