



REVIEW ESSAY:
THEOLOGY AND THE SECULAR

David Newheiser



*“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”*

Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality, and the Self* constitutes a major intervention in the debate over the role of religion in the modern world. For understandable reasons, the place of constructive religious thought in the university is fraught; because theology has often asserted its superiority over other disciplines, it is not clear whether it can serve as an equal partner in common inquiry.¹ Against this background, Coakley strikes an irenic tone. She criticizes Christians who reject modernity altogether, arguing that Christian thought should remain in conversation with secular sources. At the same time, however, she claims that only theology is equipped to address difficulties of widespread concern – for instance, concerning gender and sexuality. Where this suggests that theology is still superior, I believe that the bulk of this book points to a more promising strategy for reconciliation.

Coakley's central claim is that God is the aim of every desire, not only the ones that are overtly religious, and her method is accordingly characterized by an appealing breadth. She draws upon visual art and communal experience as well as doctrinal writing, and she claims that those on the fringes of Christian orthodoxy offer insights that are lost to the mainstream. With refreshing creativity, Coakley refuses the prevailing “liberal” and “conservative” alternatives on a number of contested issues, most notably in relation to sexuality. In contrast to earlier feminist theologies, which either reject the language of divine Fatherhood or gender the Spirit as feminine, Coakley construes the doctrine of the Trinity as an invitation to contemplative disciplines that disrupt every dyad – male and female, us and other, God and world – by fundamentally transforming desire.

The breadth and elegance of Coakley's argument stands in tension with her conflicted stance towards the secular. On the one hand, Coakley claims that reflection on the Trinity requires attention to

¹ As I use it here, “theology” means (more or less) Christian thought; however, the issues at stake also concern constructive work in other traditions, “religious” and otherwise. “Secular” is another contested term, which I use here following Coakley in order to explore some fissures in her approach.

gender – a bold gesture that effectively blurs the distinction between piety and worldly life. On the other hand, Coakley argues that issues surrounding gender and sexuality can only be resolved by Christian thought. Where the first claim draws Christian thought into the wider world, the second sets theology over and against the secular. For this reason, although Coakley sometimes engages non-Christian sources, this comes in service to the assertion that theology succeeds where they fail.

Coakley's residual triumphalism seems intended to bolster the faithful in the face of widespread criticism (xv, 1) and to reassure a pious audience that her method does not threaten the authority of Christendom (17, 19). In my view, these aims would be better served by admitting that theology cannot claim superiority over the secular because the boundary between them is blurry. This does not mean that religious practice must be abandoned; instead, it shows that religion is knit too deeply into the modern world for it to be expunged by fiat. Where the conflict between theology and the secular is predicated upon the assumption that they are strictly distinct, I aim to suggest that Coakley's argument entails that they are intertwined in a relation of reciprocal dependence.



figure 1. Duccio di Buoninsegna, The Annunciation (1311), tempera on poplar (National Gallery, London)

Although Coakley rejects “a generically anti-secular” approach (16, *emphasis original*), she consistently insists upon a sharp division between Christian theology and secular thought.² She writes, “One does not need, as a Christian, to be either seduced by, or wholly averse to, contemporary secular philosophy in order to continue to engage with it, both critically and creatively: one might say that a *contrapuntal* relationship is what is required, but with Christian thought and practice, not secular philosophy,

² In Coakley's usage, “secular” generally carries a negative valence. She complains of “secular methodological presumptions” (17), “secular gender presumptions” (34), “secular reductive pretensions” (76), “secular presumptions” (78), and “secular reductive presumptions” (90). Elsewhere she refers to “triumphant secular ideology” (“In Persona Christi’: Gender, Priesthood and the Nuptial Metaphor,” *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* Årg 82 [2006], 153), and she laments institutions (e.g. jails) that “lost their moorings and become secularized” (“Sarah Coakley: Ministry is not easier than theology,” *Faith & Leadership*, October 23, 2012). Although the term is often associated with political structures that determine a sphere free from “religious” influence, Coakley appears to use it in a broader sense. Because there is nothing to indicate that the authors she discusses are hostile to religion, for her “secular” seems to describe modes of thought that lack an explicit affirmation of Christian fidelity.

providing the *cantus firmus*" (18; see 35-6, 88-9). A trip to the dictionary reveals that *cantus firmus* - Latin for "fixed song" - refers to a pre-existing tune upon which a polyphonic composition is based; here, I take it to imply that Christian thought and practice provides a fixed foundation that governs the use of secular sources (which are therefore secondary).³

Coakley's treatment of gender theory exemplifies her claim that theology must subordinate non-Christian sources. Coakley rejects the fundamentalist assertion that heterosexuality is normative and grants that a static gender binary is problematic (53). Because these are key tropes of contemporary theory, this suggests that Coakley is indebted to her secular interlocutors. Nevertheless, she complains that "secular gender theory" is jargon-prone (54) and "obsessional" (65), abandoning us to "the stuck, fixed, repressive twoness of the *fallen* 'gender binary'" (57). Although Coakley acknowledges that "postmodern gender theory has rightly drawn attention to the centrality of questions of desire" (80), she repeatedly claims that "only engagement with a God who has been ineluctably revealed and met as *triune* could hold the key to contemporary anxieties about sexuality, gender, and feminism" (xiv; see 10, 33, 51, 53-5, 59, 65, 273-74, 294).

However, Coakley does not substantiate her claim that theology is superior to gender theory. She claims that for Christian doctrine gender is drawn "into trinitarian purgation and transformation" (58), but she does not describe the tangible effects of this process. We are told that "the 'fixed' fallen differences of worldly gender are transfigured precisely by the interruptive activity of the Holy Spirit" (58), but Coakley does not explain what this means in practice. She insinuates that secular thought is without hope because it lacks recourse to a narrative of creation, fall, and redemption (54, 77), but she does not explain why these concepts cannot circulate outside a Christian context - as in fact they seem to do. I take it that Coakley avoids extended discussion of any particular theorist in order to accommodate lay readers, but it remains that she does not demonstrate that her characterization of the theorists she mentions is accurate. Although her position is provocative, Coakley shows neither that gender theory fails nor that Christian thought does better.⁴

Coakley objects that theologians who attend to gender "tend to import a gender theory from the secular realm without a sufficiently critical *theological* assessment of it" (34). This is a reasonable point - uncritical credulity should be criticized - but she goes on to claim that "a robustly

³ Coakley writes elsewhere, "What if...instead of starting with secular categories and using them to judge the theological, we start with the theological and liturgical categories and use them to judge the secular?" ("In persona christi," 146). I aim to suggest that, because we always find ourselves *in media res*, neither of these options is viable.

⁴ Coakley seems to have Judith Butler chiefly in mind (cf. 53-4, 59, 282), but her lengthier discussion of Butler elsewhere is similarly problematic. In an earlier article she argues that "Butler's ingenious attempts to escape the repressive net of sexual stereotypes are...ironic, if ultimately depressing, secularized counterparts of an ascetical programme of gender fluidity into the divine that Christian tradition may hold out to us" ("The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God," *Modern Theology* 16.1 [Jan 2000], 61). Coakley continues, "What [Butler] cannot assert unambiguously is that divine referent that forms the final point of meaning in Gregory [of Nyssa]" (*ibid*, 70). Because Gregory calls into question whether the divine ever serves as a referent of this kind, it is not clear whether this constitutes a genuine difference; more to the point, even if - *concesso non dato* - Butler fails to specify an eschatological horizon for personal transformation (*ibid*, 67), there is no reason in principle that she could not provide one. Coakley has not shown that Butler is, in fact, hopeless; after all, eschatological hope is not exclusively Christian.

theological...perspective on gender is required, and not one that merely smuggles secular gender presumptions into the divine realm from the outset" (34). The trouble is that there is no way to ensure that one is pure from secular presuppositions; on the contrary, Christian thought has always been formed (from the outset) by non-Christian sources. Coakley herself relies upon "ascetic Platonist Christianity" (9), a tradition which exemplifies the way theology is intertwined with supposedly separate currents of thought.⁵ In what follows I argue that Coakley's account of the Trinity, her emphasis upon contemplation, and her appreciation of the visual arts indicate that theology and the secular exert a reciprocal influence that enriches them both.



figure 2. Fra Angelico, Annunciation (c. 1440), fresco (Monastery of San Marco, Florence)

Coakley's approach is predicated upon "the primacy of...contemplation for systematics" (88), which she takes to warrant the superiority of theology over secular thought. She writes, "In the 'impossibility' of the prayer of contemplation, in which the Spirit cracks open the human heart to this new future, divine desire purgatively reformulates human desire. It follows that all the other problems of power, sex, and gender with which contemporary theory struggles so notably cannot be solved...without such prior surrender to the divine" (59). However, this does not follow from that: even if the Holy Spirit transforms desire through contemplation, that does not entail that intentional surrender to God is a prerequisite of progress. On the contrary, Coakley's own account suggests that neither contemplation nor the Spirit's initiative can be restricted by the shibboleths of a particular tradition.⁶

As Coakley notes, the New Testament suggests that the Spirit is elusive. Coakley writes, "Theology's reason also remains in contrapuntal discussion with secular philosophy and science; for it

⁵ Coakley goes so far as to claim that Platonism and Christianity converge (316), and she describes their relation as a marriage (30, 333) - though, admittedly, she may have in mind a partnership in the archaic style, with Christianity in the role of *paterfamilias*.

⁶ To elaborate: if one accepts Coakley's premise that every desire is ultimately directed toward God, then it follows that reorienting one's relation to God is the key to addressing problems relating to earthly desire. However, as I argue below, although Coakley sometimes privileges the religious over and against the secular, her argument suggests that relation to God does not require self-aware comportment toward God, thematized in the terms of Christian theology.

cannot rule out the possibility that here, too, it will need to learn something by which it may be changed (again, the Spirit 'blows where it will')" (89). This allusion to John's Gospel implies that the Spirit may work outside an explicitly Christian context; it is therefore illegitimate for Coakley to counterpoise "theology's reason" with "secular philosophy and science." Coakley claims that theological reason is unique insofar as the Spirit expands it "beyond its normal, secular reach" (25; see 16), but her argument entails that the Spirit may expand "secular reason" as well.

Coakley relies upon Romans 8:26: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (NRSV). Coakley comments that, because no one knows how to pray properly, "prayer, at its deepest, is God's, not ours, and takes the pray-er beyond any normal human language or rationality of control" (115; see 55, 128, 173). However, if prayer exceeds the rational intellect, it would seem that divine initiative can extend beyond those who use the language of Trinity. Coakley insists, "This practice is neither an élitist nor an arcane act, as might be feared: it is an undertaking of radical attention to the Real which is open to all who seek to foster it" (88). But there is nothing intrinsically Christian about "radical attention" - after all, as Coakley says, it is "open to all." Although Coakley claims that contemplation justifies the superiority of theology, she nevertheless suggests that (like the Spirit) it may be widespread.

In addition to acts of prayer that are overtly religious, what Coakley calls "*practices of un-mastery*" (45) come in many forms: nurturing a new love, absorbing a beautiful object, enduring an unexpected disappointment, and so forth. Coakley associates contemplation with "the voluntary silence of attention, transformation, mysterious interconnection, and... *resistance*" (84), but many contexts require precisely this discipline. To take one example, intellectual community within the university depends upon practices of disciplined attention. Education becomes transformative through the interplay of alert silence and patient engagement; although the classroom is not a "religious" space, at its best it fulfills the characteristics that Coakley attributes to contemplative prayer. That is not to say that these activities are entirely equivalent, nor that all "spirituality" is identical - the embodied particularity of specific traditions matters in many ways. The point is simply that the disciplines of contemplative attention that Coakley describes are more diverse than she admits.



figure 3. Richard Hamilton, *The Passage of the Angel to the Virgin* (2005-7), digital montage

Coakley claims that theology requires “appropriately apophatic sensibilities” of the kind exemplified by Dionysius the Areopagite (45; see 312); in my view, these sensibilities undercut Coakley’s assertion of theological privilege. In Greek, *apophasis* signifies something like “unsaying;” according to Coakley it consists in “a full and ready acknowledgement that to make claims about *God* involves a fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing” (44).⁷ This account of *apophasis* fails to account for the fact that claims about God often provide pretext for asserting all-too-human power. Where such idolatry presents itself as an act of submission, Dionysius insists that even self-critique does not ensure that one is in the right.⁸ Coakley closely associates apophaticism and contemplation, claiming that “it is the actual *practice* of contemplation that is the condition of a new ‘knowing in unknowing’” (45). In my reading, however, Dionysian *apophasis* renders Christian discourse and practice radically uncertain.⁹

This follows from Dionysius’s account of the interplay between divine and human desire, which is Coakley’s central concern. According to Dionysius, the world is the loving overflow of God’s own self; it is for this reason, he says, that “the names for [God] are fittingly derived from the sum total of creation.”¹⁰ Because the exuberance of theology outstrips the theologian’s ability to guarantee its coherence, the character of theological affirmation converges with Dionysius’s claim that everything must be negated of God: “As Cause of all and as transcending all, [God] is rightly nameless and yet has

⁷ Coakley writes that contemplation is “destabilizing to settled presumptions” (48) and, relatedly, that it is characterized by the seepage of the unconscious (e.g. 342). This is a suggestive idea, but Coakley limits the possibility of disruption insofar as the practitioner is assured that they have access to God.

⁸ I agree with Coakley that *apophasis* is ethically significant, but I think its ascesis is more stringent than she acknowledges. Coakley writes that “there can be no intrinsic guarantee of an effective apophatic reminder in any attempt to speak truly of God – unless such reminders are *practised*” (46). But for Dionysius even the most conscientious practice cannot ensure that *apophasis* has preserved theology from temptation.

⁹ Although some interpreters of Dionysius attempt to circumscribe his negativity in order to exempt Christian practice from critique, I think this reading is untenable. See David Newheiser, “Ambivalence in Dionysius the Areopagite: The Limitations of a Liturgical Reading.” In *Studia Patristica XLVIII*, edited by J. Baun, A. Cameron, M. Edwards, and M. Vinzent, 211–6. Leuven: Peeters, 2010.

¹⁰ *The Divine Names* 1.7 596D, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 56.

the names of everything that is.”¹¹ According to Dionysius, theology cannot limit its vocabulary to what seems appropriately pious, nor can it claim privileged access to God, for the divine is beyond both affirmation and negation. Christian theology and secular thought are therefore in the same situation – both fall short of the divine in precisely the same way.

This provides a theological justification for the uninhibited use of secular sources in Christian thought. One of the most striking features of Coakley’s approach is that she believes that the arts are a crucial site for theological reflection; she writes, “There is a revelatory *irreducibility* about visual symbolism that will not simply translate without remainder into the verbal” (191). Once again, Coakley’s method is subtle and expansive, motivated by the recognition that understanding is not exhausted by doctrine. However, where Dionysius insists that theology must make use of everything in speaking of God, Coakley seems strangely constrained: all but one of the 39 images she discusses are explicitly Christian, and only three are modern. Because she claims that “art does not simply illustrate doctrine” (191), it is surprising that she focuses almost exclusively upon pieces that depict a predetermined (and intentionally Christian) idea. If, as Coakley says, interpretation is not limited by “the so-called ‘original’ meanings of these artworks” (195), it follows that theology need not restrict its attention to “theological art” (191).

Coakley’s metaphor of *cantus firmus*, whereby she asserts the priority of theology over the secular, inadvertently demonstrates this point, for the *cantus firmi* of medieval sacred music were often drawn from secular songs. One jaunty tune, *The Armed Man*, inspired more than thirty masses. The laity of the 15th century (when such masses flourished) were keenly aware of the martial resonance of Christian worship; with the ongoing crusades reverberating in the background, the mass was viewed as a battle between Christ and Satan. By incorporating a popular melody, composers drew sacred life more tightly together with the secular world.¹² Where Coakley implies that the theological *cantus firmus* is strictly distinct from secular sources, the actual practice of medieval music exemplifies the way in which the secular infiltrates the heart of theology.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.* In my view, Dionysian *apophasis* consists neither in negation, per se, nor in certain religious practices (as Coakley would have it); instead, *apophasis* juxtaposes theological affirmation and negation (which are unrestrained and equal in extent) in order to indicate that God cannot be captured, whether in discourse or practice.

¹² See Craig Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004, 163ff.

¹³ If I am right that theology and the secular are mutually dependent, a better metaphor for their relation is found in the contemporary practice of sampling, whereby fragments of various recordings are repurposed in another (without ascribing primacy to any one fragment). (For instance, Girl Talk’s “[This is the Remix](#)” is composed entirely from samples drawn from around forty different songs.) Coakley writes appreciatively of Origen of Alexandria (e.g. 129-40): this technique echoes his practice of allegorical interpretation.



figure 4. Richard Hamilton, *The annunciation* (2005), inkjet digital print

The arts vividly illustrate the Dionysian principle that, just as no thing can capture the divine, every thing can contribute to Christian thought. For example: Richard Hamilton's *Passage of the Angel to the Virgin* (figure 3) painstakingly recreates the architectural frame of Fra Angelico's 15th century *Annunciation* (figure 2), including the pillars, capitals, and small barred back window. In both paintings the light falls from left to right, and in both Mary casts a shadow while the angel does not. The figures are similarly positioned, with similar postures; in both, Mary and the angel incline toward each other, though Hamilton has altered the position of their hands and eyes. The flat palette and photorealistic style of Hamilton's image has a demystifying effect that is reinforced by the fact that, like Fra Angelico, he omits visual reference to the Holy Spirit (compare figure 1). But where Fra Angelico's angel is apparently male, Hamilton's is obviously female, for both of his figures are naked.

By stripping the scene to two vulnerable figures, Hamilton accentuates the difficult position into which Mary is put: "And when she saw him, she was troubled" (Luke 1:29). Mary sits exposed before the angel's definitive statement (more command than request): "thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son" (Luke 1:31, KJV). By blurring the angel's legs, Hamilton underscores the precipitous haste with which the angel appears (without prelude): "And the angel came in unto her" (Luke 1:28). But Hamilton's angel is female as well, which undermines the unilateral male initiative that is implied when the translator opts to gender the angel as "him" (see again figure 1, complete with brandished rod). Although Hamilton himself disavowed the religious resonance of this image,¹⁴ his disruption of familiar iconography draws attention to latent dimensions of the biblical text.

Just as Hamilton recontextualizes "sacred" sources, the "secular" character of his work does not preclude a theological reading. In *The annunciation* (figure 4) Hamilton once again alludes to the Fra Angelico fresco, albeit more obliquely. The window to Mary's left again recalls the barred window in Fra

¹⁴ Hamilton says of this piece, "From my point of view, there is no religious aspect to it at all. If I thought these would be seen in that light, then I would think it unfortunate. I have no religious interests whatsoever" (quoted in Michael Bracewell, "Richard Hamilton: I don't have to care what people think!" *Art Review* Jul/Aug 2007).

Angelico's version, complete with background foliage. In Hamilton's image, the gold of Mary's halo has become a head of curly blond hair while her eyes echo the blue of Mary's garment.¹⁵ A lone light shines on Mary's torso, which recalls the beam that represents the inseminating arrival of the Holy Spirit in classic depictions of the scene (see figure 1). In place of the angel, a telephone announces the message - though in this case Mary is allowed to speak. Once again, Hamilton suggestively reframes the biblical story, but here there is a striking difference: this scene is set within a second, which depicts the first hanging on a gallery wall.

Because the neutrality of the modern space contrasts starkly with the warmth of the older image, it could seem that Hamilton's *annunciation* departs decisively from Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. However, the fresco is also found in austere circumstances - on the wall at the top of a staircase in Florence's San Marco monastery. Although a monastery is not the same as a museum of modern art, both are generally unembellished save select aids to contemplation. Hamilton's *annunciation* thus suggests that its viewers engage in an act that is analogous to the meditation of monks.¹⁶ As I argued earlier, insofar as both "sacred" and "secular" artifacts can occasion the "radical attention to the Real" that Coakley calls contemplation, the divide between them dissolves.



figure 5. Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid* (c. 1657), oil on canvas

Although Hamilton's image does not require a theological reading, it is replete with theological significance. This applies equally to works that make no explicit reference to religious motifs. For instance, Vermeer's *Milkmaid* (figure 5): One may imagine that this is Mary in the moment before the angel arrives. The milk she pours prefigures the Spirit that will be poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17), the

¹⁵ In an attentive article to which I am indebted, Fanny Singer describes other, subtler points of contact between the two images: "Richard Hamilton's *The annunciation*," *Print Quarterly* 25.3, Sep 2008, 267-77.

¹⁶ In my view, all art invites contemplative engagement, but this is sometimes especially obvious: for instance, in Bill Viola's [Ocean Without a Shore](#), Marina Abramović's [The Artist is Present](#), Tadao Ando's [Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth](#), and Lech Majewski's [The Mill & the Cross](#).

Son who will empty himself (Philippians 2:7), and the mother who will nourish her child.¹⁷ The pitcher she bears alludes to her womb, and the bread sitting on the table recalls “the bread of life” (John 6:35) and his body, “broken for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24). Approached in a spirit of contemplation, image and text illuminate each other unpredictably.

I have argued that the strict distinction Coakley draws between theology and the secular is at odds with the momentum of this admirable book. As Coakley observes, there are those who would like to expel constructive religious thought from the public sphere (17). Some Christians are tempted to respond by asserting that they have the answers that secular thought lacks, but this is unlikely to convince those who are primed to find Christianity aggressive and unconvincing. Coakley commends “ongoing *interaction* with modern and postmodern secular philosophy – as a final apologetic exercise, as a challenge to the internal analytic clarification of the Christian faith, and as a commitment to pragmatic, justice-seeking ends” (17-8). But these are not the only options. Instead of viewing secular thought as a useful sparring partner, it is possible to acknowledge that theology inevitably depends upon secular sources while, conversely, secular thought constantly draws on Christian motifs.

In my view, Coakley’s argument entails that, although one can make an ad hoc distinction between theology and the secular, there is no division between them, for each infiltrates the other.¹⁸ Individuals can claim a religious identity (or not), but concepts and symbols echo across a wide range of contexts, and they may be repurposed in a variety of ways. This provides a compelling justification for the continued importance of constructive religious thought: when even the iconoclasm of contemporary secularizers stands within a theological heritage, it is clear that to understand our world one must be theologically literate. This does not mean that “secular” concepts and institutions are “really” Christian, but it does indicate that constructive reflection on Christian thought is widely useful, and not only for the faithful. As Coakley shows, our self-understanding would be poorer without it, and we would lack a reservoir of creativity that inspires artists and theorists regardless of their own religious commitments.

¹⁷ I owe this insight to Sylvia Clark, my guide in these matters. I also owe her this poem: “As long as the woman from Rijksmuseum / in painted silence and concentration / day after day pours milk / from the jug to the bowl, / the World does not deserve / the end of the world” (Wisława Szymborska, “Vermeer,” translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh and Stanislaw Baranczak, collected in *Here*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, 55).

¹⁸ Scholars such as Talal Asad and Hussein Ali Agrama show that the categories “religious” and “secular” are historically constituted, with shifting significance in different times and places (Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty and the Rule of Law in Egypt*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For my part, I do not suppose that my claim concerning the relation between theology and the secular holds universally. My argument is intended as an immanent critique of Coakley’s account, which concerns the character of Christian thought – here and now. As for Coakley, although she is sympathetic to those (such as John Milbank) who deny the reality of the secular, she seems to recognize that it is impossible to simply will away its existence (73).