

## 'Christian Worship and Desire: Examining a Neglected Nexus'

Sarah Coakley (Australian Catholic University and Oriel College, Oxford)

Christ Church Oxford Summer School, August 26th, 2020

\*

This talk opens up a discussion about how 'desire' operates in the workings of prayer and worship, and how we should think of its enduring significance in the particular context of contemporary church and culture. It begins by 'searching the Scriptures' to elicit the ubiquitous importance of desire for God in the biblical witness (especially in the Psalms), and in the teaching of Jesus and the Pauline letters. It goes on to reflect on the marked contemporary 'sexualization' of desire, and on the more pervasive 'commodification of desire' (for sex, goods, money, success, and fame) in the world of web-based advertisement, soft-pornography, social media and visual culture. It then turns to early Christian ascetic and monastic traditions to chart the way in which prayer and worship of a sustained kind educed detailed wisdom about the afflictive dangers of the 'negative passions' (false desires) and the need to re-order and re-orient desire to God through habits of prayer, praise and simple attention to Christ. It ends with a reflection on how the minister/priest participates in, and potentially modulates, the play of desire in the eucharist and other acts of worship, and how this brings both moral danger and spiritual opportunity. It is concluded that theological reflection on the ordering of desires is a spiritual and ascetic task of particular significance for contemporary Christians, and one that should not be dislocated from public worship and prayerful preparation for it.

\*

Introduction: The Scriptural Basis for Prayer and Worship as Motivated by 'Desire'

I *The Commodification of Desire in Contemporary Culture: Sex, Power, Money and Belongings*

II *Charting the 'Ordering' of Desires: The 'Negative Passions' and the Crucible of Prayer*

III *The Minister as Focus of Desire: Dangers and Spiritual Discernment*

Conclusions and Remaining Questions: *Desire and Its Transformations in Worship*

\*

### Select Bibliography

Cavanaugh, William T., *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2008)

Coakley, Sarah, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge, CUP, 2013)

\_\_\_\_\_, and Paul Gavrilyuk (eds.) *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge, CUP, 2011)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015)

- Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Virginity', in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, vol. 5 (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1995), 343-71
- Laird, Martin, *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness and Contemplation* (New York, OUP, 2011)
- Nygren, Anders, *Agape and Eros* (London, SPCK, 1939)
- Palmer, G.E.H., Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, tr. and ed., *The Philokalia*, vol 1 (London, Faber and Faber, 1979)
- Smith, James K. A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2009)
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2013)
- Squier, Timothy, 'Participation, Communion, and Desire', *Liturgy* 20 (2005), 67-73
- Turner, Victor, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell, NY, Cornell UP, 1967)
- Ward, Graham, *Cities of God* (New York, Routledge, 2000)

\*