

# Being George Eliot: An Impossible Standpoint?

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*“Coakley is the George Eliot of Theologians.”*<sup>1</sup>

This claim, made by Mark Oppenheimer, has sat uncomfortably in my memory for many years now, punctuated by a perpetual question mark. Oppenheimer was most likely referring to the way prose operated in Coakley’s work, but the ambiguity, or rather the irony, of this analogy has stuck. Eliot, of course, chose to conceal her gender. It was a means to an end, a way to penetrate the literary community of the Victorian era; a choice she felt would allow her work to be taken seriously and shield her from the puritanical gaze. It was a successful strategy for Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot’s legacy is secure alongside the great writers of Western literature. But this is hardly an uncomplicated ascription, perhaps demonstrated by the lasting confusion surrounding Virginia Woolf’s famous declaring of Eliot’s *Middlemarch* to be “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.”<sup>2</sup> In Coakley’s case, writing systematic theology as a woman

1. Mark Oppenheimer, “Prayerful Vulnerability,” *Christian Century* 120, no. 13 (2003): 26.

2. Virginia Woolf, “George Eliot,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 November 1919. Regarding the

has become an identity marker, a way in which her work is praised and critiqued. She has been celebrated for her “erudite, challenging and eirenic theological voice,”<sup>3</sup> her work being described as a “connoisseur’s piece,”<sup>4</sup> while simultaneously being critiqued for her academic *Fachsprache*,<sup>5</sup> an ongoing issue of concern for feminists debating the use of exclusive language in the field.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this evaluation seems to depend on assumptions regarding what constitutes a serious systematician, or a solemn feminist. Why would a feminist even bother pursuing the systematic field, upholding the center at the cost of voices from the margins? Can’t Coakley see that this is simply reifying an oppressive ideology of “theology proper”? In some sense the Oppenheimer quote is fitting. Does Oppenheimer praise Coakley because she has penetrated the “men’s club”? Is her prose duly admirable, her scholarship rigorous enough for her to escape the easy dismissal often afforded so-called “contextual” theologians? The ambiguity around Coakley’s work, especially upon the publication of the first volume of her systematic theology, creates an intersection of competing standpoints. And while Coakley’s work is gaining a wider audience in some pockets of the theological world, it also points to a collision of disciplinary trajectories. In gathering such a broad range of theoretical concerns, and naming them theological issues (*théologie totale*), Coakley remains vulnerable to the critique of failing to execute any approach “rightly.” In this collection of essays, scholars explore Coakley’s multifaceted contribution to contemporary theology, and explore the many questions her work raises within and beyond the systematic field. It is hardly surprising that Coakley’s work—traversing sociology, anthropology, science, medicine, philosophy, spirituality, and liturgical studies—has found itself to be a dialogue partner in a variety of academic conversations. And yet Sarah

debate around Eliot’s status as a feminist, see June Szirotny, *George Eliot’s Feminism: The Right to Rebellion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

3. Gavin D’Costa, “Book Review of ‘Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender,’” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (2004): 330.

4. Esther Reed, “Christ Without Absolutes (Book Review),” *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1999).

5. David Louth, “Book Reviews,” *Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 3 (2004).

6. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology, Controversies in Contextual Theology* (London: SCM, 2007), 132.

Coakley is a systematic theologian. It is precisely her conception of systematic theology—*théologie totale*—that causes this interdisciplinary collision.

For Coakley, then, systematic theology is the integration of those theoretical concerns that are often considered outside the purview of the systematic theologian:

However briefly, or lengthily, it is explicated (and the shorter versions, have, in Christian tradition, often been as elegant, effective and enduring as the longer ones), systematic theology attempts to provide a coherent and alluring unfolding of the connected parts of its vision.<sup>7</sup>

It is the “allure” of this proposal that strikes the reader with a sense of Coakley’s magnetic understanding of structure. Coakley recognizes the inherent pull of life’s matter(s) into the larger Christian scheme, clearly demonstrated in the breadth of sources she appeals to, her provocative methodology, and her defense of systematic theology in the face of contemporary dismissal.

Contemporary theology often finds itself engaged in the debates of continental theory (or more specifically psychoanalytic/psycholinguistic theory). However, Coakley has taken the unusual step of promoting an ongoing relationship with analytic philosophy of religion, while simultaneously prompting a return to patristic theology and what she describes as the “contemplative matrix.”<sup>8</sup>

If it be objected that this strategy is so objectionably taking up the master’s tools, I can only reply that these tools are so powerful and significant already that the demands of Realpolitik drive me to handle, redirect, and imaginatively negotiate their usage.<sup>9</sup>

To medicine, anthropology, art criticism, and the sociological

7. Sarah Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 47, no. 1 (2009): 4.

8. A title that Coakley ascribes to Part II of her essay collection; see A. Denise Starkey, “Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender (Book),” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (2004).

9. Sarah Coakley, “Feminism and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” in William J. Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford Handbooks in Philosophy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 517.

fieldwork that is significantly developed in volume one of the systematics, we see an astonishing range of sources engaged by the theologian. Already in Coakley's early treatment of Ernst Troeltsch, she utilized Basil Mitchell's definition of the "cumulative case" argument;<sup>10</sup> the idea that a theological thesis arises from accumulated points and not from isolated "knockdown" ideas. Against the backdrop of Coakley's entire corpus, we see a similar picture emerging.

And yet this leads to a particular, and certainly polarizing, methodology.<sup>11</sup> The contemplative position assumed by Coakley is considered to be the proper subjective stance for all theologians, regardless of contextual priority. This is not to suggest that Coakley sidesteps so-called contextual agenda. Rather she places gender and race<sup>12</sup> (most prominently) firmly at the center and refuses simply to accept the tag of "context" placed on similar fields of study. Coakley's unique stance is to assert that theology begins with contemplation and not the contextual experience, a point of significant distinction, suggests Rachel Muers.<sup>13</sup> Coakley's bold assertion is that contemplative practices are truly transformative and empowering, and therefore give rise to the prophetic voice and act.<sup>14</sup>

Coakley's endeavors have always been, after all, pointing toward the systematic process. As we point to the individual strategies and achievements of her *théologie totale*, we must recognize that such features find their place only in relation to the larger systematic project. This project, as a coherent and alluring scheme, is itself the real goal toward which she has been working. Thus whatever isolated

10. Sarah Coakley, *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103. Max Stackhouse commends Coakley in this regard. Max L. Stackhouse, "Christ without Absolutes (Book Review)," *Theological Studies* 50, no. 4 (1989).

11. This approach is noted and welcomed by Andrew Louth who laments the "Balkanizing" of much Christian theology. Of Coakley's status as a feminist, Louth says: "Coakley writes as a feminist, but what she has to say deserves a much wider audience, just as her reading extends much more widely." Louth, "Book Reviews," 367.

12. This distinction is made in anticipation of *Divine Darkness and Epistemic Justification: An Essay "On the Contemplative Life," volume 2 of her systematic theology; an essay that will focus on race as a fundamentally epistemological category.*

13. *Ibid.*, 122. Rachel Muers, "Book Reviews," *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 9, no. 1 (2002): 123.

14. Margaret Daphne Hampson, *Swallowing a Fishbone?: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1996), 110, 11.

contributions the scholar believes Coakley might offer are already enmeshed in this frequently denounced project of systematics. In short, Coakley's most important prophetic contribution to theology/theory of any kind is nothing else than the renewal of systematic theology.

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How Coakley's work will be received and appraised is yet to be seen, especially as we await a further three volumes of her systematic theology. It is a dauntless enterprise, one in which Coakley assumes no easy position. But this is, of course, the challenge of theological writing. Or as George Eliot suggested in her first publication: "Religious ideas have the fate of melodies, which, once set afloat in the world, are taken up by all sorts of instruments, some of them woefully coarse, feeble, or out of tune, until people are in danger of crying out that the melody itself is detestable."<sup>15</sup>

15. George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 258.