



THE DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY TENTH ANNUAL  
HOLY SPIRIT LECTURE

# BEYOND THE *FILIOQUE* DISPUTES?

Re-assessing the Radical Equality of the Spirit  
through the Ascetic and Mystical Tradition

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*Power Center Ballroom*  
*Pittsburgh, PA*

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FEATURING SPECIAL GUEST



**Sarah Coakley**

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## THE SPIRIT IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM:

“The Spirit in the New Millennium: The Duquesne University Annual Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium” was initiated in 2005 in fulfillment of Duquesne University's mission and charism. As a university founded by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, it is hoped that this ongoing series of lectures and colloquia will encourage and promote significant as well as diverse scholarship on the theology of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, besides fostering scholarship on the Holy Spirit within an ecumenical context, this event is intended to heighten awareness of how pneumatology (the study of the Spirit) might be relevantly integrated into the various academic disciplines in general.

Past lectures, as well as the present text, may be accessed online at [www.duq.edu/holyspirit](http://www.duq.edu/holyspirit). You can contact us at [holyspirit@duq.edu](mailto:holyspirit@duq.edu). Radu Bordeianu, Ph.D., served as the director of Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium, 2016.

## 2016 Colloquists

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- Dr. Elizabeth Agnew-Cochran  
*Associate Professor of Theology,  
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- Dr. Eric Dart  
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- Dr. Myles Werntz  
*Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics and  
Practical Theology, the T.B. Maston Chair  
of Christian Ethics at Logsdon Seminary,  
Hardin-Simmons University*

## BIOGRAPHY OF LECTURER

Sarah Coakley is the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. She previously taught at Lancaster, Oxford and Harvard Universities, (where she was Mallinckrodt Professor of Divinity, 1995-2007), and she has been a visiting Professor at Princeton University (2003-4). She is a philosopher of religion and systematic theologian with strong interests in interdisciplinary engagement and in the reassessment of historical theology for contemporary life. She is currently at work on a four-volume systematic theology, the first volume of which has been published as *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge, 2013), which engages specifically with questions of pneumatology. Her Aberdeen Gifford Lectures ("Sacrificed Regained: Evolution, Games and God") will be published in revised book-form next year (Oxford and Eerdmans) and represent the "apologetic" off-shoot from her systematics.

Sarah Coakley is an Anglican priest of the diocese of Ely and an honorary canon of Ely cathedral.

### ABSTRACT

The project of this lecture is a bold one: it argues that the divisive problems over the *filioque* might never have arisen if the Holy Spirit's radical equality with the Father and Son had not been already implicitly undermined by the historic, conciliar treatment of the Holy Spirit as "third." But another approach had always stood over against this, one in which a priority given to the Spirit in ecstatic, charismatic or contemplative prayer resisted such subordination of the Spirit, and so cut behind and beyond what would later become an entrenched division between "East" and "West." Extending and enriching her earlier work on this theme, Sarah Coakley presses key questions about a distinctive "participative" trinitarianism in the monastic and ascetic traditions of the medieval and early modern periods, and about its contemporary ecclesiological and personal significance.

# BEYOND THE FILIOQUE DISPUTES? RE-ASSESSING THE RADICAL EQUALITY OF THE SPIRIT THROUGH THE ASCETIC AND MYSTICAL TRADITION

Sarah Coakley

## I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL CAVEATS

First, let me express my sincere thanks to the Faculty of Theology and senior members of Duquesne University for the great honor of the invitation to speak to you this evening in your distinguished series of annual lectures on the Holy Spirit, and – I trust – in the authentic Spiritan and ecumenical traditions of this university; and especially to Professor Radu Bordeianu, who has so graciously introduced me and also made all the practical arrangements for my visit; and to the assembled colloquium respondents who have gathered to discuss my lecture in the coming day. It is a very great pleasure to be with you all, and I do look forward to my interactions with you. If I wish for anything it is that what I propose may strike some chords with the historic pneumatological traditions of the Holy Ghost fathers and their own worldwide work and witness. The central thesis of my lecture this evening is a bold one, and I want to state it in its starkest form at the outset, because I shall then spend much of the rest of the time evidencing, refining, and nuancing it, whilst also – in closing – considering its potential contemporary spiritual and ecclesiological significance. What I want to argue, centrally, is that the divisive long-standing dispute between Eastern and Western Christendom over the status and place of the Holy Spirit in the doctrine of the Trinity (the so-called *filioque* problem about the “procession” of the Spirit, whether from the Father or from the Father “*and* the Son,” as in the Western interpolated version of the creed) might never have arisen in the form it did had the Spirit’s *radical* divine equality with the Father and Son not already been implicitly compromised by the historic, conciliar treatment of the Holy Spirit precisely *as “third.”* In other words, despite the church’s emphatic insistence from the later 4<sup>th</sup> century, that the Holy Spirit was absolutely equal in divinity with the “Father” and “Son,” sharing all divine characteristics with them, the contingencies of the way in which the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity had been arrived at in conciliar debate, from Nicaea through to Constantinople, plus the “linear” structure of the thinking that accompanied this (from “Father” to “Son,” and only then to the “Holy Spirit”) subliminally continued to fashion the thinking of the Spirit

as “third” in at least a logical (if not ontological) hierarchy; and this tendency was indeed already written deeply into certain major strands of the biblical testimony (the Johannine, the Book of Acts), on into the early liturgies of the eucharist, and into much pre-4<sup>th</sup> century theology. One may therefore speculatively place the origins of the eventual Western *filioque* addition to the Nicene creed (origins which, as most scholars now agree, were theologically actually as much “Eastern” as they were “Western”) as a certain *secondary* attempt to correct and palliate this fundamental problem, rather than as a starker acknowledgement of a deeper issue to be addressed.

Now this first plank in my argument admittedly involves a rather odd form of “counter-factual” historical thinking. We cannot now turn back the pages of history, and nor am I suggesting that we should do so: the historic creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople stand (indeed, it was the insertion of the *filioque* by the West into the latter *without* the mandating of another ecumenical council that has arguably caused more trouble than the theological content encoded in it). So it remains our job as theologians to *expound* these creeds, with as much critical and spiritual insight from the various traditions of the churches as we can muster. And indeed, I am by no means the first person to suggest this particular critique of the conciliar trinitarian history of the early centuries, however contentious it may still remain (Thomas Weinandy comes immediately to mind as one who also offers such a critique from a conservative Catholic position, as does Myk Habets more recently from a Pentecostal angle: both are represented in Myk Habets’ recent edited book, *Ecumenical Perspectives*<sup>1</sup>; and I shall return to these thoughts at the end of this lecture).

What is perhaps more innovative in what I have to say, I trust, and where most of my energy will be taken up tonight, is in my attempt to sketch out an *alternative* approach to the place of the Spirit in the Trinity which would not fall prey to the veiled “hierarchy” problems still encoded even in the historic conciliar traditions and – to some degree – also in the subsequent and reactive *filioque* debates. For even when the notion of the *filioque* was added to the idea of the Spirit’s procession, whether as an actual insertion into the creed, as in the later West, or in more impromptu theological reflections in Eastern thinkers such as Cyril of Alexandria, there remained an unspoken question about whether the very notion of Fatherhood as “source” or “foundation” in the Trinity *implicitly* continued to foster an unintended evocation of subordinationism, despite strong rhetorical enunciations to the contrary. Thus, in what follows, I seek to lay bare a “minority” tradition of thinking about, and responding to,

the Holy Spirit in the Trinity which also has its roots in biblical witness and which certain exponents in both East and West have remarkably manifested in a parallel fashion, and for the most part without any critical ripostes to the official creedal traditions at all on their part. Thereby, they have found their way into a rendition of the Trinity that I believe purifies it from certain implicit theological dangers of subliminal encoded hierarchalism even as they also hold it to account in terms of its own stated intentions: the *radical* equality of the “persons.” We might therefore call this a purgative and *immanent* critique of conciliar trinitarianism within this minority tradition; it takes the fundamental *homoousian* principle of the Nicene tradition and creatively wields it even against itself, because it is deeply attending to the propulsion of the Spirit. And what we shall find is that this “purgative” pneumatological tradition, as I shall call it – which springs up spontaneously in both East and West from the early years, but with certain fascinating repetitive features – often comes from quarters with interesting reforming theological characteristics in other ways, certain tendencies to a particular sort of social location “on the edge,” certain fascinations with the reform of ecclesiastical power, and certain insights into the fundamental nature of the participative human-person-in-God, especially as this participation relates to our deepest “erotic” needs and their resolution. So there is a certain social and political *locatedness* to this pneumatologically-infused, so-called “ascetic” or “mystical,” vision of the Trinity which I wish to explore, one also deeply founded in disciplined prayer and contemplation, one unafraid to tackle difficult issues of divine *and* human desire. You may begin then to see why this material could be of continuing contemporary interest to us, and not merely a somewhat arcane theological debating point for the ecumenists and the polemicists.

So far I have merely given you my bold generic thesis by way of introduction. But before I turn to present my evidences for your perusal, in the main body of this lecture, I also need to name a cluster of methodological *caveats* in relation to some pressing contemporary debates in trinitarian theology – if only to head off some potential misunderstandings of my position.

First, in presenting these witnesses from the tradition to a particular Spirit-inflected understanding of the Trinity, I am deliberately refusing the disjunctive epistemological view, common since Kant and Schleiermacher, that the inner life of the trinitarian God (the so-called “immanent” or “ontological” Trinity) is unavailable to us, completely off-limits epistemologically, while only the so-called “economic” Trinity – known through revelation and our participation in the “economy of salvation” in the church – is open for theological inspection.



The reason I am going to refuse this challenge will perhaps become more obvious in the telling of my evidences: what is witnessed to here is a form of knowing which is *simultaneously* revelatory and “apophatic” at the same time, compelling in its very mysteriousness – and this is a paradoxical category of epistemic response seemingly refused, of course, by the modern Kantian epistemological turn, but to be counted more than worthy of new contemporary philosophical defense. It can only arise, I submit, through a very clear understanding of God’s utter transcendence as creator, evidenced through the unique epistemic *oddity* of courting intimacy with the divine – and particularly in the postures of prayer. As Jason Smith puts it in a recent article illuminatingly comparing the trinitarian strategies of Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams: whereas for Schleiermacher there is nothing about the Christian life that could compel one to say *anything* about God’s inner Trinity (for he assumes it has “no generative effect on the living piety of the church”<sup>2</sup>), for Williams – in complete contrast – it is impossible even to start out on the adventure of redemption without “an invitation *into* the inner divine life,”<sup>3</sup> in all its simultaneous darkness and illumination. Such, as we shall see, is also the insight of many of the witnesses we shall summon in what follows.

However, in refusing the disjunction of immanent and economic trinities in relation to my project, I am also not simply *reducing* the former to the latter: to say with Karl Rahner that the “economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity” is to declare a point of substantial identity which had appeared threatened in some speculative scholastic treatments, but not necessarily to disallow a remaining and crucial *distinction* between the action and life of God in history and God’s eternal nature; for otherwise God could only *realize* God’s own nature within the contingencies of history. None of the voices to which I am going to appeal assume the latter position – a distinctively novel and post-Hegelian option within modern theology. Rather, their implicit claim seems to be that the Holy Spirit’s profound incorporation of them into the life of God takes them precisely to the mysterious intersection of the timed and the timeless in the incarnational space thereby opened up.

A third issue is also related methodologically. It has sometimes been assumed in the modern period that the Kantian epistemological “nescience” problem in relation to the divine could be got around by appeals to a special direct “mystical consciousness” that somehow circumvented it. On this view (which owes much to William James and his psychologizing of religious states) “mystical” experience can become a criterion of theological truth with a certain self-authenticating force to be set in contrast with the complex contrapuntal

authorities of scripture, tradition and reason. Something of this instinct seems to inform Anne Hunt's study, *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics*, a volume which I have otherwise found most illuminating for my current task, when she writes that the exploration of "mystic consciousness" (her term) is a way of *avoiding* "philosophical issues" in relation to the Trinity, and of probing to an "unmediated experience" of it. I want to clarify that this is *not* the task as I perceive it here; for not only am I dubious about the existence of something to be generalized as a universal "mystic consciousness," I am also resistant to the idea that any of the exponents on whom I shall be calling avoided the hard graft of discerning the relation of scriptural exegesis, complex, vying theological tradition, and the critical negotiation of these. To put it pointedly, it is the disciplined activity and *practice* of prayer and contemplation, in creative *interaction* with these other hermeneutical tasks, which seems to produce the pneumatological and trinitarian insights I seek to explore, not some "unmediated experience" of the Trinity which can be strained untainted out of the mix.

A final caveat is one that comes with the contemporary feminist territory which I also explore critically as a systematician and a philosopher of religion. Here it has become fashionable of late, as searingly critiqued most recently in Linn Tonstad's *God and Difference*, for theologians as diverse as von Balthasar on the one hand, or Elizabeth Johnson on the other, to find gendered messages in the very life of the Trinity itself – and thereby to detect a form of social programme for our erotic or political lives as inscribed in the immanent relations of the Godhead itself. I therefore wish to indicate here at the outset (and against Tonstad's strange misreading of my own work) that this is *not* my ambition in relation to the pneumatologically-inflected materials I here survey. For as we shall see, if there is a general lesson that emerges from their witness in relation to "gender" (as we now call it), it is that *desire* – the more significant category for the purposes of a number of these writers – belongs properly and ontologically to God, who by definition lies *beyond* all human categorizations of gender. It is then through the purification of human desire in divine (trinitarian) desire that such human categorizations of gender may come to be transfigured and changed. In other words, as I have put it elsewhere, "desire is more fundamental than gender," and the desiring, trinitarian God ultimately *ambushes* all attempts to fix and constrain gender in worldly terms. But that is to anticipate the end of the story I now seek to unfold, one in which a curious convergence of insight emerges most fascinatingly in Eastern and Western forms between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

To tell this story in the highly selective form that is manageable within one lecture, I must return first to that point in the history of formal, creedal-based patristic trinitarianism when “East” and “West” supposedly started to diverge. For that presumed divergence is part of the story I want to question. Recall: what we are looking for here are signs of a (relatively neglected) tradition of trinitarian thought deeply inflected by a primary engagement in prayer with the Spirit, and which destabilizes the presumption that what is established *first*, and normatively, is the perfect relation between Father and Son. When and where does this alternative visions challenge the “linear” or “sequential” thinking about the Godhead that had seemed so necessary a part of the early defense of 4<sup>th</sup> century “orthodoxy”?

## II. “PARTICIPATIVE” TRINITARIANISM IN PATRISTIC AND MEDIEVAL TRADITION, EAST AND WEST

This is an account I have told in its earlier stages at some arduous length in my first volume of systematics, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, and I do not wish merely to recapitulate my argument there, but rather to take it several steps further forward in the body of this lecture. However, what I do need to reiterate here is the crucial scriptural basis for the “alternative” pneumatological vision of the Trinity whose heritage I seek now to trace further. The crucial hinge is the account given by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:14-30; for in it Paul underscores what we may call (and what Eugene Rogers has also called, in his creative monograph, *After the Spirit*) the “impossibility” of prayer, that is, the authentic helplessness that Paul witnesses to in our need to abandon ourselves first to the Spirit even to know rightly “what to ask for” and so come into our own as children of God. Prayer is, on this vision, the graced entry-point through the Spirit into the conversation that is already and always going on between the ultimate source in the Godhead (“Abba,” as Paul names it here, following Jesus’s own term) and the Spirit who engenders that conversation *in us*. Prayer, in other words, is not a monologue to a distant patriarch, but the joining of a conversation which already de-stabilizes that sort of idolatrous thought-experiment from the outset. To enter into that ongoing divine, dialectical conversation, in which God (the Spirit) answers to God (Abba) in a ceaseless circle of gift and response, is to be constrained therefore into what we may call the authentic “space of Jesus” – the incarnational, embodied space of physical dying and rising, of suffering and coming glory, into which, according to Romans 8 the whole created and cosmic realm is already also being progressively drawn. Significantly, Paul names this the realm of “eager

longing,” a kind of primordial desire set on its rightful, non-idolatrous, goal of full adoption as “children of God,” those inheritors of the “glorious liberty” for which God ultimately intends us.

This Pauline biblical model, then, despite all its unfinished nature as a merely preparatory intimation of later trinitarian “orthodoxy,” sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside a later trinitarianism which grew out of a primary focus on the Father-Son relationship (as in the Gospel of John, which by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century had begun to have a certain theological pre-eminence in the life of the church). According to this other, and increasingly dominant model in the early debates — one which also founded the order of the church year according to the logic of the book of Acts — the unique and perfect relationship of Father and Son is that established order out of which the life of the Spirit and the church is only *subsequently* created: according to John, the Son then “goes away” after the resurrection in order that the Spirit may come as his substitute and continuator. On this “linear” or “sequential” account, the Spirit is always “third” and in a sense an “under-study” or replacement to what is already established in the Son. Yet this tradition, in turn, sits oddly with the equally-biblical insistence that, in the order of the economy, the Son cannot be incarnate in the first place without the “overshadowing” of the Spirit (so Luke, ch 1), nor can he be designated “the beloved Son” at baptism without the descent of the Dove (Mark 1 and parallels). In other words, as many have commented, the biblical witness presents us with no *consistent* account of the *taxis* (ordering) of the divine “persons” for later trinitarian discussion. And the political contingency of the original Nicene crisis in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century as one that focused not on the Spirit at all, but simply on the Son’s particular status vis-à-vis the Father, led perhaps inevitably to an immediate “solution” (the Creed of Nicaea) that barely mentioned the Spirit, while insisting on the “homoousian” status of the Son alone alongside the Father. The “sequential” die was therefore already cast. Only in the crucial later 4<sup>th</sup> century was the hypostatic identity and divine status of the Spirit also urged and defended.

What is really at stake here, then, theologically and politically? A great deal, as subsequent church history and theological debate would manifest. We meet the “linear” or “sequential” model once more in full flood as the Cappadocian Fathers use it to defend the coherence of the idea of a God who is simultaneously one in “ousia” (substantia) and three in “hypostaseis” (personae). For Basil of Caesarea (in his treatise on the Holy Spirit, and especially at IX.23 therein), this is clearly a matter of ascent, a unified journey with neo-Platonic evocations, in which the Spirit first grasps one and takes

one up to the level of the Son, whence one begins to be dazzled afresh by the unspeakable mystery of the Father. Gregory of Nyssa also seemingly defends this sequential approach implicitly in various writings, echoing the example of his older brother Basil, albeit with some modifications. The Trinity, he writes (in a letter previously attributed to Basil, yet clearly stylistically Gregory's), is like a chain which you pull at one end as the different elements present themselves in turn, from the Spirit back to the Father (Ep. 38); and Gregory's emphasis on the intrinsic mystery of the Godhead in his anti-Eunomian writings does not, as such, destabilize this conviction.

It is, however, in his late commentary on the *Song of Songs* that another, and contrapuntal, voice emerges in Nyssen. Freed up from the burden of insistent apologetic duty, and discoursing with equally free allegorical imagination on the text of the *Song* and its meaning for the human hope of supreme divine incorporative intimacy, Gregory startles us in *Homilies XV* with the suggestion of a "double procession" of the Spirit: the Spirit now is the "bond of glory,"<sup>4</sup> that is, the very *means* of unity between Father and Son, which is acknowledged even as it spills over into the disciples and from there to the church at large. Gregory makes this assertion, moreover, in the context of a teaching on the *Song* which insists on *progressive* spiritual maturity in prayer and Scriptural meditation as the authentic mark of discipleship. In other words, to "Receive the Holy Spirit"<sup>5</sup> in this way, *between* the persons of Father and Son, is to "leave immaturity behind" at last, to grasp what Gregory calls the true "philosophic" reasonings of an allegorical approach to the Bible, and, with that, to acknowledge the ways in which Christian selfhood finally comes to *intensify* in ecstatic desire for God rather than to set desire aside: "until that time when, since all have become one in desiring the same goal and there is no vice left in any, God may become all in all persons."<sup>6</sup> It seems, then, that in Gregory's *oeuvre* there are at least two genres for dealing with the problems of trinitarian expression: one is apologetic and focused on philosophic coherence and tending to the "linear"; the other – more significant ultimately spiritually for Gregory – is rooted in allegorical scriptural meditation and contemplation and undertaken for the training of mature Christian desire, specifically, desire propelled pneumatologically to its ultimate "blending" (his word) with Christ and his body, the church, through sharing in the place the Spirit holds between Father and Son.

Do we find anything similar in the West at approximately the same time? Not exactly, but there are certain intimations even in Augustine that suggest a certain convergence. I am, of course, not now alone in insisting that Augustine's

trinitarianism, forged not long after Gregory's, and with indirect influences from the East via Ambrose, had identical "pro-Nicene" instincts, despite its use of the celebrated "psychological analogies" which later came to be termed distinctively "Western." In the course of his disquisition on these analogies, Augustine already sketches more than once his own "double procession" of the Spirit, even though he reminds us that this procession remains "principally" ("principaliter") from the Father. What is less often commented upon, even now, is his dramatic reversal of tone at the very end of the *De trinitate*, in book XV, when all of a sudden his emphatic "apophatic" instincts shine through afresh, with an insistence that none of the analogies he has rehearsed in the earlier books will actually do justice to the subject in hand. Rather, what is central, he now says, is the primary and overflowing Gift of love *in* the Holy Spirit, an incorporative and ecstatic flow of charity "poured forth in our hearts" to mirror the reality of the divine and transform us "in the image," but also to dazzle and mystify us – as "wonderfully ineffable" or "ineffably wonderful" (XV, ch. 23). Again, in closing, he reiterates his conviction that what this spiritual insight implies is a processional flow of the Spirit from both Father and Son.

In short, although their exegetical strategies and analogies differ, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine are aligned in their witness, at least at key and distinctive moments in their texts, to a Spirit-leading, ecstatic and participative account of the conforming of the human to the true image of the trinitarian God *in us*: at this point their more speculative or apologetic techniques seem to retire into the background and a rather different discourse or genre comes to dominate, one primarily infused with pneumatological participative energy. Here is already the birth of the "indwelling Trinity" motif; and it has, as we have noted, implied speculative implications for the relational ("processional") life of God in Godself.

In many ways, then, we may see what I am calling the "minority" trinitarian materials to be discussed hereafter in their respective traditions in East and West as certain extensions or intensifications of these key – albeit somewhat fleeting – moments of insight in Nyssen and Augustine, although we must watch for important elements of variation on their themes. Moreover, Dionysius the Areopagite was to supply in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century a crucial metaphysical undergirding to the idea of such a divine ecstatic flow as Augustine describes, even though he did not explicitly frame it in trinitarian (or pneumatological) terms himself: for him, "desire" becomes an ontological force inherent to the divine life itself, an ecstatic capacity of God to go out and return, always "carried outside of himself" whilst also "remaining within himself."<sup>7</sup> The philosophical overtones

here are of course neo-Platonic (specifically, Proclean); but Dionysius makes the case that they are entirely congruent with the themes in Paul he wishes to highlight: for Paul, he says was a “great lover,” and “beside himself for God” (see 2 Cor. 5:13),<sup>8</sup> and thus the love to which he was ecstatically drawn was itself *divine* desire. Although this metaphysical account of desire was not part of the original pneumatological intensification of the idea of trinitarian incorporation which I am seeking to highlight, it was to become a particular significant *additum* for later exponents, as I shall now seek to show.

At this point our story needs to divide East and West, if only to show ultimately that there were extraordinary and unexpected coincidences of expression in both strands of development, but variations within each. I shall have to be brief here, alluding only to a few striking examples of the trinitarian *typos* we have by now identified. In each case the expression of participation in the Spirit is marked by a special emphasis on the Spirit’s incorporative outreach and the breakdown thereby of any merely messenger-bearing hierarchical rendition of that outreach from Father and Son; in each case too something other than propositional rectitude about the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly at stake: it is a *life* to be lived in, and indeed a life already living *within* one, indwellingly, rather than merely an idea to be expounded or affirmed. It will also have not escaped your notice that there is indeed a tendency in this *typos* to assert the *filioque* or something like it (and thus to probe to a new speculative ontology of the very relation of the Spirit to the other two “persons”); and at times – even more radically – to press to some reconsideration even of how to think about the Father as divine “source.” I shall return to this complicating factor to my central thesis at the end; for clearly not all manifestations of the *filioque* also bring with them any critical re-negotiation of the very notion of “Fatherhood.”

There are doubtless more exemplars that I could have chosen in the West than those I have opted to focus on here; but the French early Cistercian William of St Thierry (12<sup>th</sup> century), the Flemish Augustinian canon Jan van Ruysbroeck (14<sup>th</sup> century) and the Spanish Carmelites Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (16<sup>th</sup> century) all offer striking examples of the participative or mystical rendition of the Trinity that we have already outlined, albeit with some interesting differences of emphasis. It is notable also that, along with their interest in ascetic and contemplative exercise, all of these figures were reformers of the religious life involving them in costly political and ecclesiastical criticism and debate; it is thus worth considering whether this is a mere coincidence, which to me seems unlikely. There was evidently something about the vibrancy and depth of their contemplative practice, and the novelty

and freedom of their speech about God-as-Trinity, which was related to their boldness also in monastic or ecclesial reform. And this, I submit, is a matter of interest in relation to their potential veracity as critics of settled “orthodoxy” in their particular contexts.

William of St Thierry’s writings on the Spirit and the Trinity might be read as an intensification and further theorization of the ecstatic vein of Augustine’s trinitarianism in book XV of the *De trinitate* already outlined. In this sense his emphases are typically “Western,” if only because his emphasis on the Spirit as Love and Gift reminds us of that Augustinian “purple passage” and further expands on it. And yet – fascinatingly – William might just as well be read as the inheritor of Gregory of Nyssa’s homilies *On the Song of Songs* (whose text he probably also did know in the Greek); in Stanza 11 of his own *Exposition on the Song of Songs* he can therefore say, echoing Gregory on the same theme of “his left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me” (*Song* 2:6): “This embrace extends to man, but it surpasses man. For this embrace *is* the Holy Spirit. He is the Communion, the Charity, the Friendship, the Embrace of the Father and of the Son of God; and he himself is all things in the love of Bridegroom and Bride.”<sup>9</sup> William goes on, speaking of full consummation in union “Then, I say, it will be the full kiss and the full embrace, the power of which is the wisdom of God; its sweetness the Holy Spirit; and its perfection, the full fruition of the Divinity, and God all in all.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in his text *On Contemplating God*, William focuses intensely on the Romans 8 theme of incorporation into divine adoption by the Spirit, whilst drawing out his systematic conclusion in Augustinian vein: “so then, love-worthy Lord, you love yourself in yourself when the Holy Spirit, who is the Love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father, proceeds from the Father and the Son.”<sup>11</sup> And in his celebrated *Golden Epistle*, written for the monks of Mont Dieu, William painstakingly draws out the ascetic programme of the sorting of desires which must accompany the longed for “perfection of man in this life”: again, it is pneumatology that is at the centre of William’s thinking – the Holy Spirit which “infuses himself by way of love and gives life to everything, lending his assistance in prayer, in meditation or in study to man’s weakness.”<sup>12</sup> As Anne Hunt stresses in her own fine chapter on William, he is Augustinian in influence but not in all detail: for William, the Holy Spirit is not merely love (and gift), but love and knowledge too;<sup>13</sup> and the perfection of the human person (to be hoped for in this life, again unlike Augustine) is to be brought about specifically by the Holy Spirit and to involve participation in the very love and knowledge of the divine persons. In many ways this vision



anticipates the achieved union of the later 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelites.

Ruysbroeck, in some contrast, is a *sui generis* thinker deeply inflected by his own brand of neo-Platonic thinking (with roots in pseudo-Dionysius and others in that tradition), and in particular by his distinctive notion of *regiratio* – the “flowing back of the divine Persons into their shared unity.”<sup>14</sup> It is here that Ruysbroeck caused, and still causes, nervousness in his “orthodox” critics, and – as Rik van Nieuwenhove well shows in his fine study of Ruysbroeck – steps over a line that would never have been contemplated by the great Thomas Aquinas, for whom *regiratio* could never apply to the realm of the immanent Trinity itself. Writing in the vernacular in order to be “understood of the people,” and embroiled at times in endless disputes about heresy, Ruysbroeck’s *The Book of the Twelve Béguines*, one of his last great texts, is amongst his most daring and revealing. Here he also systematically spells out the possibility of actual union with God in this life, via incorporation in the Spirit: “Now, therefore, hear and understand [he begins Ch. X Part 2 of the *Twelve Béguines*]; To the good and inward man, who entereth within himself, free and empty of all earthly things, opening and uplifting his heart reverently towards the Eternal Goodness of God, there is thrown wide the Heaven which was shut, and from the Face of Divine Love, there blazeth down a sudden Light, as it were a lightning-flash; and in that Light there speaketh the Spirit of our Lord, in this opened and loving heart, and saith: “I am thine, and though art Mine: I dwell in thee, and thou dwellest in Me.”<sup>15</sup> Where Ruysbroeck’s account differs significantly from other writers on trinitarian “indwelling,” however, is in the assertion that the end of this process is not simply an ecstasy of the self “beyond ourselves” into God via the Spirit,<sup>16</sup> but a “fruition” of the Godhead itself in “a still and glorious and essential Oneness *beyond* the differentiation of the Persons; where is *neither an outpouring nor an indrawing of God*; but the Persons are still, and One in Fruitful Love, which is their calm and glorious Unity.”<sup>17</sup> Here, it seems, we meet a test case for the “indwelling Trinity” tradition, and an indication of how it could in some circumstances run into actual conflict with established trinitarian orthodoxy via this proposed actual *dissolution* of the “persons” into their own unity. The example is instructive. It is, to be sure, one radical way to deal with the ongoing difficulty of the precise account of the immanent “relations” and their still-lurking hierarchalization; but Ruysbroeck clearly (to my reasoning) steps here beyond what the Nicene tradition on the eternal nature of the intra-divine relations insists upon in terms of the eternal distinction of the “persons” in unity. Ultimately, then, this propulsion to Oneness appears more Platonic than strictly Christian.

The contrast with the later (16<sup>th</sup> century) Carmelite account of union in the Trinity is therefore particularly instructive. Here we approach what is probably the most sublime Western account of achieved union in this life, an account which both Teresa of Avila and her confrère John of the Cross describe in inner-trinitarian terms, yet with significant and fascinating differences of emphasis. Teresa, feigning (as ever) theological incompetence, but manifesting the greatest spiritual insight, insists that achieved union is itself a state in which one is introduced afresh, and directly, to the “the Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons”; but by passing through “an enkindling in the Spirit” one realizes anew from inside – and now not merely intellectually – that “all three Persons are one substance and one power” and yet also and simultaneously “distinct”<sup>18</sup> (the contrast with Ruysbroeck is revealing here). Indeed, says Teresa, since the “King is in his palace,”<sup>19</sup> that is, Christ has taken up permanent residence in the deepest part of one’s selfhood, there is no longer any danger of doing anything other than what is the will of God, despite the fact that – as ever – there is “tumult” and “noise” and continuous assaults from outside. Suffering does not go away in union, admits Teresa; but it no longer seems to matter, any more than do the ongoing attacks of enemies, whom now – from the inside of the life of the Trinity – one sees at last how to “love,” according to Jesus’s own distinctive demand.<sup>20</sup>

The contrast with John of the Cross’s account of achieved union in the *Living Flame of Love* is somewhat striking. For here we learn of no continuing tensions, no assaults of enemies, but rather of a sublime ascent of the self into that very space between Father and Son in the Trinity which is distinctively occupied by the Spirit. Now the soul “breathes” in that same Spirit between Father and Son: “For the will of the two is one will, and thus God’s operation and the soul’s are one. Since God gives himself with a free and gracious will, so too the soul (possessing a will more generous and free the more it is united to God) gives to God, God himself in God; ... it is conscious there that God is indeed its own and that it possesses him by inheritance, with the right of ownership, as his adopted child through the grace of his gift himself.”<sup>21</sup> The distinctive allusion to Romans 8 comes around again here, as does the underlying Dionysian metaphysic of divine desire deflected and re-deflected within the life of the Persons, inflamed — as once more — in the Augustinian tradition of ecstasy and incorporation, yet in this case with the daring assurance that this “arrival” can be fully in this life, with a final realization that the divine trinitarian presence has always been there within, awaiting full recognition. As Rowan Williams puts it in a notable article on this theme in John of the Cross,

“Thus, we [who are] incorporated into this relation to the Father, share the “deflection” of the Son’s desire towards the Father’s [own] excess of Love: we are taken [thereby] into the movement of the Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> The notion of “deflection” is significant here, for it suggests a profound ontological and mutual dynamism within the Persons – the Father too receiving as well as outpouring his divine desire – and to this radical thought we shall return in our final section.

But is there anything equivalent to this to be found to this Carmelite climax on the “indwelling Trinity” in the Eastern monastic tradition? The answer, it seems, is yes; and in a strand of tradition remarkably consonant in its emphases with this later Carmelite Western development. And yet the confluence is not altogether surprising, given that (again) the Pauline account of prayer in Romans 8, the early incorporative vision of contemplation thereby engendered, and the input of the later Dionysian metaphysics of desire, are all shared resources. I can only speak briefly here of the ascetic and contemplative traditions of the *Philokalia*, that great compendium of monastic wisdom only finally published in full form the 18<sup>th</sup> century; but it is again Rowan Williams who in a recent and important article on the spirituality and theology of the *Philokalia* has drawn attention to the pneumatological “deflections of desire” also in the thought of Maximus Confessor and Gregory Palamas, as excerpted in the *Philokalia*. Most striking here is the witness of Palamas, who – possibly under a certain influence from Augustine imported from the West – also follows the earlier Maximus in “speaking of the contemplative’s prayer as [distinctively] characterized by *eros*” (*Second Century*, #6, II; Williams, 115). Palamas then develops this idea with a certain intricacy and power in his *Topics of Natural and Theological Power*. in Williams’s paraphrase: “For the human subject to ‘mirror’ the divine [in contemplation] is not simply for the [human] *logos* to participate in the eternal Logos, but for that human *logos* to be activated by *eros*, the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, in its unending urge to immerse itself in the foundational mystery of *nous* itself, which images and participates in the eternal self-giving intelligence that is the divine Source, the Father.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the “presence of the image of the Logos in us implies the image of the Trinity as a whole,” with its own erotic mutuality engendering a continual expansion and transformation of human desire in the monastic practices of hesychastic prayer. This is, as Williams himself remarks, an extraordinary anticipation of, and parallel to, the “deflections of trinitarian desire” in John of the Cross, once again in a model of trinitarian thinking in which the pray-er is transported into the primary *eros* of God by means of the Spirit’s outreach.<sup>24</sup>

What then, and finally, are we now to make of these texts, both East and West, that I have gathered here for our perusal?

### **III. SYSTEMATIC CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT THE “ONTOLOGICAL TRINITY” – BEYOND THE FILIOQUE DISPUTES?**

I have taken you on a tour of somewhat neglected and pneumatologically-heightened emphases in Western and Eastern trinitarianism in the substance of this lecture. As I hope I have by now shown, what these texts have in common are the following traits. First, they are written by those deeply committed to the practices of prayer and contemplation and willing to discourse creatively on the primary importance of the Spirit in activating those practices in drawing them to union with the divine. Secondly, they move from there to dare to suggest what participation in such practices seems to tell them about the inner life of God in itself and the relations (or more technically, “processions”) of the divine persons; and they do this even at the cost of sometimes chafing at the edges of their contextually-presumed “orthodoxy”; in this, and in other reforming or novel proposals made simultaneously in their writings, they seemingly rely simply on the presumed authority granted to them as outstanding spiritual leaders and shapers of received tradition. Thirdly, insofar as they speak of the Trinity as actually “indwelling” the Christian contemplative, their claim seems to be that speculative insight about the relation of the Spirit to Father and Son may as much be received by looking *within* as by musing philosophically and theologically on the contents of the conciliar tradition.

What then are we to make of these particular witnesses, East and West, united at least by these three traits, albeit in a remaining diversity and complexity of expression?

I now move to some systematic conclusions. Necessarily these must be brief and succinct; and in order to stir debate I shall once more adopt a slightly stark and sharp tone, to heighten the force of what I want to suggest. I wish to make only *three* concluding points of my own, picking up some of the various gauntlets I scattered before you earlier in the *Introduction*.

1. First, I trust you may have discerned in the material I have covered a possible “alternative” means of discussion of the place of the Spirit in the Trinity from that merely of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, one that might also go beyond the hardened polemicalisms between East and West that have at times regrettably afflicted attempts at reconciliation after the various eruptions of the *filioque* dispute. The *sui generis* freedom of the voices I have discussed, both East and West, do at least suggest a point of rapprochement

that might divert us from blockages created especially by the hardened 9<sup>th</sup> century Photian insistence in the East that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the “Father *alone*,” or from more recent 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lossky-an) reassertions of supposedly thoroughgoing symbolic differences between “Eastern” and “Western” Trinitarian thinking. As will now be clear, however, my goal has not been to *palliate* these particular disputes in their own form, but to turn the tables on them — to urge a purgative spiritual programme such as John of the Cross had in mind precisely to chasten them *in the Spirit*. To discover that “East” and “West,” in their deepest respective *contemplative* assessments of the life of the Trinity, evidence certain significant parallel forms of thought — ecstatic “deflections of divine desire” within the Trinity, as Rowan Williams puts it — which overflow into human selfhood and establish that selfhood in God, goes a long way to indicating how prayer and contemplation in the Spirit may, after all, be the place of the meetings of Eastern and Western minds about the nature of God rather than the point of their divergence. As Brian Daley has put it (in an earlier Holy Spirit lecture here at Duquesne), it is then perhaps only *fear* of the transformative power of the Spirit that prevents us from comprehending this convergence, that is, fear of the very *destabilization* of previous polemical certainties which comes with the dark mystery of the contemplative act itself.

2. Secondly, however, we still need to probe to the actual technical theological issue of how best to parse and express the immanent “relations” of the Trinity, and the implications for the “procession” of the Spirit in particular, in the light also of the materials we have surveyed. And here we necessarily move to speculation which is hinted at, but not completely clarified, by the authors we have surveyed. My suggestion here, as already proposed speculatively at the end of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, is I hope now given significantly further substance by the authors here covered, but perhaps particularly by the witnesses of Gregory Palamas and John of the Cross, respectively. In significant contrast with the instructively-different “solution” of Ruysbroeck (whose end point in union seemed to be the vision of the unification of the divine persons themselves to the point of their hypostatic obliteration), this alternative insight found in the other texts we have surveyed not only reads the Father and Son as intrinsically and eternally related *in the Spirit*, but as so related through the “deflections of desire” as to render the usual meanings of “source” or “foundation” in the Father mysteriously transformed — away from all false hierarchalism and remaining covert subordinationism of the Spirit. As I put it at the end of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*: “We [now] not only

need to speak thus of the Son eternally coming forth from the Father ‘in’ or ‘by’ the Spirit, rather than merely ‘through’ or ‘from’ the Spirit [an approach also shared by Thomas Weinandy]; but more daringly, we also need to speak of the Father’s eternal reception of his status as ‘source’ *from* the other two ‘persons,’ precisely via the Spirit’s reflexive propulsion and the Son’s creative effulgence.”<sup>25</sup> The Father as “source,” I wrote in the last page of the book, has thereby here become ecstatic goal as much as ecstatic origin”<sup>26</sup> within the relational dynamics of the life of the Trinity. If this continuing use of the traditional term “source” thereby appears somewhat paradoxical, even Pickwickian, it is surely part of that mysteriously apophatic revelation that I urged at the outset characterizes these authors’ whole engagement with the Trinity in prayer. It cannot be, in other words, that there is a chain of inner-trinitarian relations that simply *ends* in the Father; for the very notion of the reciprocal “deflections of desire” belies that.

3. Third, and finally, I come to the lessons which seem to emerge from this investigation for issues of *human* eroticism and what we now call “gender.” As intimated at the outset, I see in the project of trinitarian reflection no mandate simply to read preferred personal and political messages *onto* the life of God: the Trinity is emphatically not “*our* social or political programme” (Miroslav Volf), as Karen Kilby has underscored of late, in searing “apophatic” critique of once-fashionable “social trinitarianism.” But just as the material we have surveyed does nonetheless strongly give authoritative credence – via Scriptural reflection, ascetic contemplation, critical discernment of tradition, and above all via *the logic of the very homoousianism that propelled orthodox trinitarianism in the first place* — to a vision of “relations” and “processions” as just suggested, so likewise, I submit again in closing, the insights about *divine* trinitarian purifying desire that we have found in these same sources presents a vision of desiring erotic selfhood mysteriously purged, transformed and rendered labile to the ecstatic workings of the Spirit. And if the endpoint of such a journey is to become more truly oneself (whoever or whatever that is) than one has ever before been, as the Carmelites so describe it, then this is perhaps a fit *theological* alternative to hold up as a desideratum in comparison to the cacophony of vying secular debates as to the contemporary performances of “gender.” Finally, it is the “indwelling Trinity” (the Trinity disclosing the true nature of desire-in-the-Spirit) that perfects our human selfhood in all its mystery.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Weinandy, “The Filioque: Beyond Athanasius and Thomas Aquinas: An Ecumenical Proposal,” in Myk Habets (ed.), *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the Twenty-first Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 185-197. Myk Habets, “Getting Beyond the *Filioque* with Third Article Theology,” in Myk Habets (ed.), *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the Twenty-first Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 211-230.

<sup>2</sup>Jason M. Smith, “Must We Say Anything of an “Immanent” Trinity?: Schleiermacher and Rowan Williams on an “Abstruse” and “Fruitless” Doctrine,” *Anglican Theological Review* 98 (2016), 495-512, here at 509.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> in Richard A. Norris Jr. (tr. and ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 495-497.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>7</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, “Divine Names” IV, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. The Classics of Western Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> William of St Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, trans. Columba Hart (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), stanza 11, 106-110, here at 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> William of St Thierry, *On Contemplating God*, trans. Sister Penelope (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 53-64, here at 54.

<sup>12</sup> William of St Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, trans. Theodore Berkeley (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 92-105, here at 92.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Hunt, *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Rik van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2003), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Jan van Ruysbroeck, *The Book of the Twelve Béguines*, trans. John Francis (London: John Watkins, 1913), 78-118, here at 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Teresa of Avila, "The Interior Castle," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), vol. 2, 427-451, here at 430.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 436.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, ch. 3, 438-443.

<sup>21</sup> John of the Cross, "The Living Flame of Love," in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 704-715, here at 706.

<sup>22</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Discourse," in eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135, here at 119.

<sup>23</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Theological World of the *Philokalia*," in eds. Brock Bingham and Bradley Nassif, *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 102-121, here at 118.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 333.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 334.



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