

The Schaff Lectures 2020, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Sarah Coakley (University of Cambridge), Sin, Racism and the Challenge of Contemplation: A Theological Proposal

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Lecture II: Reconsidering the Fall: Desire Gone Awry and Its Consequences

This second lecture returns to the Genesis Fall narratives, giving special attention to the place of desire in them, the representation of gender and ‘otherness’ (in the form of the talking serpent, half beast, half man), and the manoeuvres of projective blaming that arise from the Fall. It is argued that the indispensable role of the ‘myth’ of Genesis 3 (‘myth’ understood as *deeper* truth rather than un-truth) lies both in its capacity to mediate ‘contradictions’ in the divine plan, and to remain open to creative new readings. But these need to be assessed with theological discernment. Returning to the chief patristic conversation partners in *God, Sexuality and the Self* (Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine), it is argued that the divergence between them on the rendition of ‘original sin’ is more apparent than real, but that Augustine’s literal historicization of Adam has had a variety of negative consequences, not least in relation to modern evolutionary science and to readings of sex, gender and ‘race’/racism. With ‘desire’ now put at the heart of the re-reading of the Fall, sin is redefined as ‘desire missing its (true) mark’ (or ‘misaggregated desire’); and a correlative account of the *Imago Dei* is also essayed, focusing on rightly-directed desire (for Christ, in the ‘mystical body’). It is urged finally that various secular replacements for the concept of sin cannot do the ‘work’ that ‘sin’ irreplaceably does; but that the exposure of modern racist renditions of sin leads us back to the challenge of the contemplative task in the quest to purge projective anger and responsive resentment from life in the ‘body of Christ’ (Howard Thurman as representative).

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Introduction: Disambiguating ‘Darkness’ – Back to the Fall

I The Fall as ‘Mythology’: Early Christian Variations and the Problem of Augustinian ‘Literalism’

i. The ‘mediation of contradiction’ in myth; ii. Divergences in patristic interpretation of the Fall: contrasting Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine

II Return to ‘Desire’: Its Place in the Fall Narrative and in the Concept of *Imago*

i. What did Eve desire (what was the nature of her sin)? ii. What is ‘sin’ and how could the ‘image’ be restored? iii. Who (ultimately) was to blame?

III Why Secular Analogues Cannot Replace the ‘Impossible Contradictions’ of ‘Sin’

Projected ‘darkness’ as false resolution: the disturbing case of ‘The Negro a Beast’ (Sin as Racism)

Coda and Conclusions: Coming Back to ‘Race’/Racism

‘Luminous Darkness’ and the Disinherited – A Way Forward with Howard Thurman?

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