



# CiS Student Essay Competition 2021

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**This essay is my own original work.**

## How can science-engaged theology help the Church in its mission?

### 0. Introduction

Sarah Coakley offers a winsome exposition of one potential aspect of a science-engaged theology in her 2012 Gifford Lectures.<sup>1</sup> She interrogates the gospel principle of the selfless, sacrificial activity of the one for the good of the many from the perspective of evolutionary biology, and finds this principle written into the unfolding development of the created order. She terms this principle, ‘cooperation’, and defines it elsewhere thus: ‘a form of working together in which one individual pays a cost (in terms of fitness, whether genetic or cultural) and another gains a benefit as a result’.<sup>2</sup> Coakley explains that science can offer a vision of this kind of intentional sacrificial activity for the sake of the whole, which can be seen – in retrospect – to have coloured the entire process of evolution from bacteria upwards. Theology, she goes on to argue, needs the graced capacity not only to cooperate with but to further this vision. This paper teases out the impact of this vision on the Church’s mission in three directions: the way in which certain historical developments might narrated and negotiated; the Church’s role in the public sphere; and worship as the public face of the Church.

### 1. Historical developments

Coakley’s vision of a science-engaged theology might help the Church to jettison the kind of misguided presentism which narrates historical developments in a way that suggests they are simply presently-held ideas ‘in fancy dress’, to use Catherine Belsey’s memorable phrase.<sup>3</sup> For example, the apparent ‘war’ between the disciplines of science (in particular, evolutionary biology) and theology (in particular, the doctrine of creation), as expounded by some New Atheists, neglects the number of ordained scientists in the history of the disciples, as well as the fact that the Church’s initial reception of evolutionary biology was considerably more positive than is sometimes suggested in the contemporary debates.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a culture of complacent amateurism about scientific matters has existed in the Church for too long, and this has been a severe impediment to her witness to the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Coakley, S. (2017), *Gifford Lectures*, Oxford University Press. The lectures collected together in this volume were originally delivered in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Nowak, Martin A. & Coakley, S. (2013), *Evolution, Games, and God: The Principle of Cooperation*, 3, Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Belsey, C. (2014), *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, 2, Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Peacocke, A. (2004), *Evolution: The Disguised Friend of Faith*, 22, Templeton Foundation Press.

## **2. Public sphere**

Equipped with this vision, the Church might also be able to offer a credible voice in the public sphere. For instance, this kind of science-engaged theology arguably possesses the resources needed to critique the social Darwinism associated with some contemporary appeals to 'herd immunity' in the news, which amount to nothing more than the survival of the fittest in society. Coakley's recovery of sacrificial activity might resource the Church to fulfil her function in the prophetic mode – forth-telling (as opposed to foretelling) the truth, and safeguarding the most vulnerable in society. That society can only truly flourish when it genuinely cherishes all of its inhabitants, in their individuality and in their interdependence, is an important insight the Church has to offer the world; hence the Church cannot truly flourish in her mission until she, too, treasures not only those who have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, but all the inhabitants of the world – and, indeed, the entire created order. The pandemic has exposed that society does not adequately reward those who do the heavy lifting in society for the common good (the frontline workers of various stripes). The Church needs to lead by example in this regard; for the Church's mission is nothing less than to demonstrate that each and every individual matters in her eyes, and – more importantly – in the eyes of Christ.

## **3. Corporate worship**

Coakley's vision has implications for the Church's worship too, which is her public face in the world; the Church's worship is the primary expression of her faith and theology. William Daniel helpfully draws attention to the way the Church understands 'liturgy' (popularly but erroneously) as 'the work of the people', and suggests that a better understanding might be, 'the work of the one for the sake of the many'.<sup>5</sup> Daniel's serious discussion of what liturgy is, and how it is so easily mistaken for what it is not in an almost Pelagian way, is significant: this transformed understanding of 'liturgy' ties the sacrifice of thanks and praise offered by the Church in her Eucharist to the once and for all sacrifice of God offered in Christ. However, this 'liturgy'—this work done on behalf of people—extends beyond those participating in the Church's corporate worship, and includes the work done for unseen communities beyond them. A service sheet printed with the words, 'Our worship is ended; our service begins', gets to the heart of this: the gathered community receive the sacramental body of Christ in the Eucharist, and become the ecclesial body of Christ – nourishment for the world they are sent out into with God's blessing.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel, W. (2020), *Christ the Liturgy: Divine Agency and Human Action*, 3, Angelico Press.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Interrogating the Church's mission – in terms of her understanding of history, her approach to the public sphere, and her corporate worship – from the perspective of the gospel-evolutionary principle of 'cooperation', as expounded by Coakley, reveals the Church's true identity – what should be its true colours. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced ecclesial communities to ask, and to face, fundamental questions about who they are (ecclesiology), and what they hope to achieve (missiology); it has also taught them that they must learn, in some way, to dwell within constraints without always assuming that human beings have the will and the resources needed to overcome them. As soon as the Church has asked these challenging questions of herself, and allowed the possible answers indicated by Coakley's vision to shape the hearts and minds of her members, perhaps then she will be free to live out and to demonstrate God's way of being human in the world today.