


RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Draw me after you’: Toward an erotic theosis

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Abstract

In this article I propose an erotic theosis as a fruitful possibility for conceptualising our final participation in union with God in the beatific vision and for imaging said participation on earth. Particularly, I propose a synthesis of recent work from Oliver Crisp on theosis with that of Sarah Coakley on sexual desire as an especially helpful way in which to conceive of our ever-deepening participation in God’s love. Further, this synthesis uses contributions from Erin Dufault-Hunter on the intersections of sexual desire and ethics as a catalyst for its recommendations.

Keywords: desire; divinisation; Sarah Coakley; Oliver Crisp; Erin Dufault-Hunter; theosis

In discussing heaven and God’s goodness in the second book of his eschatological trilogy, Jerry Walls writes that ‘the notion of heaven is not a mere appendage on the main body of Christian doctrine. Rather, it pervades through and through.’¹ That is to say, participation in the consummate goodness of God in the beatific vision is not merely of doctrinal import as a bookend to our systematics, but in fact weighs heavily upon our behaviour and attitudes preceding the eschaton. As we seek to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48), our future participation in God’s blessedness without restraint serves as both motivator and model; we strive to love as God loves now in preparation for our living in God’s love eternally. However, imagining what it might mean for us to exist in such a state, much less to in some way work towards it at present, is notoriously difficult.

The resurrection of Jesus as a bodily event, and the somatic language Paul deploys in discussions of the heavenly (e.g. in 1 Cor 15:35–55) instil hope that, though it may be substantially different in certain respects, our experience of God’s beatitude is, in some sense, to be a bodily one. But other New Testament texts indicate that our bodily language, even the most intimate language of sexual congress and pleasure, is not wholly adequate to describe the ‘great mystery’ (Eph 5:32) which is the union of Christ and the church. While any descriptions of the heavenly are affected by the limits of our imaginations, it seems to me that temperance ought to be observed here rather than prohibition. That is to say, *some* sort of accessible, relatable description of what it actually *means* to be a participant in God’s life is needed. After all, Jesus calls us into co-labouring with him in the ministry of uniting persons in ever-increasing magnitude

¹Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (New York: OUP, 2002), p. 33.

to divinity not as servants but as friends, as ones to whom his work has been made known (John 15:15). As such, analogies for the *telos* of such work are necessary if our co-labouring is to be intelligible enough for us to accomplish it.

Therefore, I propose a kind of erotic theosis² as a fruitful possibility for conceptualising our final participation in union with God in the beatific vision and for imaging this participation on earth. Particularly, I propose a synthesis of recent work from Oliver Crisp on theosis with that of Sarah Coakley on sexual desire as an especially helpful way in which to conceive of our ever-deepening participation in God's love. This synthesis uses contributions from Erin Dufault-Hunter on the intersections of sexual desire and ethics as a catalyst for its recommendations, being both theotic and erotic in the following ways: it is theotic in that it deals with participation in the ancient language of divinisation; it is also erotic not in its being driven by merely the sensible pleasures of sexuality but in its openness to conceiving theosis in such terms to both enliven and explicate the doctrine. In bringing these two lines of thinking together, this model serves to fill a gap in the burgeoning discussions of theosis among western theologians by making clearer the meaning of participation in the divine nature by human persons, and by doing so in terms widely intelligible across shared human experience.³

Throughout his *Analyzing Doctrine* Crisp presses variously towards generous, systematic accounts of a number of core Christian doctrines. Particularly intriguing among these efforts is his penultimate chapter dealing with salvation as participation via theosis. He writes that theosis is about our 'coming to approximate ... the way in which the divine nature is manifest through the human nature of Christ in his glorified, ascended state'.⁴ However, what this manifestation means is 'conceptually fuzzy'.⁵ Examining the biblical data regarding the matter, Crisp concludes that 'a plausible doctrine of theosis will be one that takes seriously the need to provide an account of participation that is more intimate than the most intimate human relationships (as per Eph 5), that is unitive in nature, but that falls short of a loss of the human individual in the divine life'.⁶ While he judges rightly that a plausible account must regard participation in the divine life as *more* intimate than our closest human intimacies, it seems to me that we can be well served in using such language nonetheless. What must be accomplished by a model of theosis meeting Crisp's criteria is just that, if it is to make use of the language of sexual intimacy, it must do so with a trajectory aimed beyond sexual experience and desire as they exist presently.

Particularly potent among contemporary discussions of sexual desire, pleasure and loving intimacy with God and neighbour is Coakley's expansive work. She notes that there is, largely, a presumption 'that *physiological* desires and urges are basic and

²I am grateful to those who offered helpful feedback at the AAR Christian Systematic Theology session, during which an earlier version of this paper was presented.

³It might well be asked why the erotic ought to be chosen here rather than alternatives like the affection-based account that Simeon Zahl offers. Here I reply simply that my own interest is more in rehabilitating and redeploying this thornier language of the erotic than others. I do not contend that such language is the *best* or that it is *necessary* to effectively explicating the doctrine. I merely believe it to be especially potent and so aim here to test what might be possible with it. For Zahl's account, see: Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (New York: OUP, 2020).

⁴Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), p. 204.

⁵Ibid, p. 200.

⁶Ibid, p. 216.

fundamental in the sexual realm; and to this is often added a second presumption: that unsatisfied (physical) sexual desire is a necessarily harmful and “unnatural” state.⁷ In other words, it is not uncommon to simplistically reduce the whole of the erotic into ‘actual genital sexual activity’.⁸ This we do without questioning whether there might be a desirous substratum underpinning such activities to root them in something deeper and grander (or asking whether such roots might actually impinge on our attitudes towards them). We must, as Erin Dufault-Hunter draws out from Coakley’s writings, be cognisant that ‘a *desiring* God creates *desiring* humans, and so all appetites – including the powerful realm of sexual yearning – can be received as arenas for training in love of the God who longs for our fidelity’.⁹ Such desires are not *absent* in Christ but rather *transformed* by him so that we can experience them in their fullness. Dufault-Hunter continues that this transformation is desperately needed as

our unwillingness to stare down our erotic desires and question their significance for our life with God prevents us from developing friendships ... instead of witnessing to fidelity in Christ, it belies a profound worry that, somehow *eros* will control, overtake ... and thus friendships such as those Christ forged with Mary Magdalene become impossible.¹⁰

Retrieving a richer sense of desire (including sexual desire) of the sort Coakley proounds and Dufault-Hunter elaborates aids us in plotting out a sense of the theotic, making what is conceptually fuzzy in the doctrine clearer while maintaining that reverential mystery with which deeply engaged lovers of any sort are familiar.

Defining theosis

At the outset of his discussion of salvation as fundamentally consistent in participation, Oliver Crisp notes that ‘there is a thriving cottage industry devoted to the exposition and application of the doctrine [of theosis] in Western as well as Eastern theological traditions’.¹¹ This industry has outlined doctrines of theosis in the works of all manner of theologians.¹² However, in such efforts there is an issue of which we ought to be wary. For, as Daniel Keating asks, ‘if everyone from Augustine and Aquinas to Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Edwards is found to be teaching some form of the doctrine of deification, has the meaning and force of this ancient and (mostly) Eastern doctrine become reconfigured beyond recognition?’¹³ The primarily constructive work of Crisp’s account means that

⁷Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p. 7.

⁸Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 86.

⁹Erin Dufault-Hunter, ‘“Sex is Really about God”: Sarah Coakley and the Transformation of Desire’, in Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi and Jordan Wessling (eds), *Love, Divine and Human: Contemporary Essays in Systematic and Philosophical Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), p. 219.

¹⁰Ibid, pp. 232–3.

¹¹Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 199. In this essay the terms ‘theosis’, ‘divinisation’ and ‘deification’ will be taken to be equivalent, but theosis will be preferred throughout.

¹²For a few interesting examples, see: Kyle Strobel, ‘Jonathan Edwards and the Polemics of *Theosis*’, *Harvard Theological Review* 105/3 (July 2012), esp. pp. 270–8; William T. Cavanaugh, ‘A Joint Declaration? Justification as Theosis in Aquinas and Luther’, *Heythrop Journal* 41/3 (July 2000), pp. 265–80; R. Lucas Stamps, ‘Baptizing *Theosis*: Sketching an Evangelical Account’, *Perichoresis* 18/1 (March 2020), esp. pp. 109–12.

¹³Daniel A. Keating, ‘Typologies of Deification’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17/3 (June 2015), p. 267.

he avoids this particular pitfall, but an eye must be kept on the nature of the term in its ancient origins to ensure an understanding of theosis whose robustness is sufficient to place it within historical theological continuity with other proponents of the doctrine.

Among such proponents, from the ancient (e.g. the Cappadocians¹⁴) through the recent (e.g. Vladimir Lossky¹⁵), the consensus view is that theosis constitutes the ultimate end and highest good for human persons as creatures returning to their Creator. Such is achieved via means which, in some sense, entail participating in God's being.¹⁶ Of course, nobody, eastern or western, alleges that theosis entails our becoming divine in the same way in which God is divine; as Crisp writes, 'human beings are not transmuted into additional deities according to the doctrine of theosis, which would be a metaphysical bootstrapping of a monumental sort'.¹⁷ Orthodox thinkers have tended to employ distinctions between the divine 'essence' and 'energies' in explicating this point – the former being inherent in the Trinity, shared perichoretically and incommunicable outside the Godhead; the latter also being inherent and shared within the Godhead, but additionally, capable of being communicated to and participated in by creatures.¹⁸ This distinction is often a difficult one to grasp, and so Crisp offers that 'perhaps what is meant is something like this: here are communicable attributes God possesses that he may share with creatures like humans. Humans may exemplify these attributes and may come to express those attributes in ways that reflect the divine life in important respects'.¹⁹ That is to say, that which God *is* in being can only be approached apophatically, but there are some features of what God *does* which can be related to creatures and in which we may participate.

Crisp articulates his own definition of theosis as follows:

Theosis: The doctrine according to which redeemed human beings are conformed to the image of Christ in his human nature. By being united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, redeemed human beings begin to exemplify the qualities of the human nature of Christ and grow in their likeness to Christ (in exemplifying the requisite qualities Christ's human nature instantiates). This process of transformation and participation goes on forevermore. It is akin to a mathematical asymptote.²⁰

While the nature of divinity is fundamentally unknowable by us in itself, something of divinity *is* communicable via the incarnation of the Trinity's second person. This is because of the divine nature's union with a human nature like our own. We can, therefore, come to participate in the divine nature in a significant sense without it in any way being the case that we become participants in that nature in the same way as the persons

¹⁴See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), esp. pp. 232–4.

¹⁵E.g. Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Iain and Ighita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), pp. 110–15.

¹⁶Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 7. See also Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (eds), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2006), pp. 1–8.

¹⁷Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 201.

¹⁸Boris Bobrinskoy, 'God in Trinity', in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 55. Crisp takes up this point as well, but uses the language of 'essence' and 'nature': Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, pp. 201–2.

¹⁹Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 202.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 216.

of the Trinity are, or that we simply lose our individuated human identities by being subsumed into God.²¹ We do so because Christ has mediated something of his divinity via his humanity and thereby enabled us to take part in a divine–human union of our own (albeit of a different stripe). Key to the definition of theosis above is the particular way in which Christ makes it such that we can begin to exemplify the qualities of his human nature.

A classic example here is that of an iron placed into a blazing fire: the iron takes on certain qualities of the fire (e.g. burning hotness, glowing redness, persistent heat), but in no way does the iron take on wholesale the nature of, or otherwise become, fire. Crisp provides his own, more modern, example to illustrate this point in the form of a Wi-Fi router (or ‘wireless hub’, in his terms). In setting up the analogy, Crisp begins by taking up Eleonore Stump’s Thomistic definition of love, according to which love consists in two necessary parts: a desire for the good of the beloved and a desire for union with the beloved.²² This is the love God has for all creatures and which we ought to have for God and neighbour.

To that end God seeks union with his beloved creatures. We see this supremely in the case of Christ, where a divine person unites himself to a human nature in order to bring about human reconciliation with God ... Christ is a kind of metaphysical bridge between divinity and humanity ... he is like a wireless hub, that connects us as fallen human beings to God. Just as my personal computer is connected to the internet by means of radio signals that are transmitted from the hub to my computer and from my computer to the hub, which is hardwired to a cable connection that links it to remote servers, so fallen human beings may be connected to the hub that is Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.²³

This example is drawn from earlier work in *Analyzing Doctrine* on what he terms ‘the Christological union account’ of the incarnation.²⁴ On this account, if God desires union with human creatures, then ‘God must take the initiative and unite himself with one of these creaturely natures, assuming it and thereby generating an interface between divinity and humanity so that human beings may have a conduit by means of which they may be united to God’.²⁵ There are particular changes which might be effected in us as creatures via this conduit, similar to the way in which one computer linked to another via the internet might have files transferred to and from it, have programs

²¹This topic is also taken up at some length in recent exchanges between Thomas Flint and R. T. Mullins. See Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, pp. 209–15. For Flint and Mullins, see R. T. Mullins, ‘Flint’s Molinism and the Incarnation is too Radical’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 2015), pp. 1–15; Thomas P. Flint, ‘Orthodoxy and Incarnation: A Reply to Mullins’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 4 (May 2016), pp. 180–92; R. T. Mullins, ‘Flint’s “Molinism and the Incarnation” is Still Too Radical – A Rejoinder to Flint’, *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5 (April 2017), pp. 515–32. Cf. B. A. Gerrish, *Christian Faith: Dogmatics in Outline* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), ch. 21.

²²Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), ch. 5, esp. pp. 90–2. For her work on the way in which this love interfaces with the person and work of Jesus more specifically, see Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), chs 4–5.

²³Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 206.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 124–30. See also his earlier work on a union account of the atonement: Oliver D. Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), ch. 7.

²⁵Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 125.

run or ended, and so forth by another computer which has appropriate access to it. We might imagine that through this conduit God removes harmful aspects of our creatureliness (e.g. the stain of original sin) and adds beneficial ones (e.g. grace), similar to how one might use remote desktop functions to access a computer bloated with malware, remove said malware and then enable security protocols to help prevent its return. We can see, then, how the union of divinity and humanity in Christ might make theosis possible for human persons; all one would need to do is be appropriately connected via the 'hub' in order for God to begin enabling the exemplification of qualities which were either absent or deficient previously.

However, this analogy is rather sterile.²⁶ Crisp himself notes this fact in writing that it 'seems to fall short of the sort of participation defenders of theosis envisage in the case of the union between Christ and the redeemed'.²⁷ Yet no fuller analogy of participation is forthcoming in Crisp's reflection on theosis. The account lays out a strong-boned skeleton for depicting the metaphysical reality of our participation in the divine nature through Christ (and the work of the Spirit),²⁸ but it does so without being able to put much in the way of flesh onto the bones.²⁹ That is to say, we come to see here more of the intellectual *what* of theosis than of the practical, lived *how* of theosis, and both are necessary to a substantial development of the doctrine. Crisp observes that 'the organic analogies in places like Ephesians 5 that present a relation between Christ and his body (the church) more intimate and mysterious than that between spouses indicate something of what it is that is still lacking'.³⁰ I contend that the ultimate insufficiency of something like sexual intimacy's ability to describe the full meaning of theotic participation does not mean that it is wholly ineffectual. In fact, it seems to me that the language of sexual desire is uniquely equipped to clarify the 'fleshy' dimension which is relatively lacking in Crisp's account of theosis at present.

Coakley on desire

Enfleshing theosis as is intended here requires drawing from a deep well of theological reflection on the nature of desire. Thankfully, such a well has been dug for us through the work of Sarah Coakley. Within her writings on desire, it is possible to delineate at least three discrete, yet fundamentally related, senses of the thing: desire *simpliciter*, erotic desire and ascetical desire. The last of these three may strike some as a bit oxymoronic, but an adequate survey of what Coakley means in bringing together the desirous and the ascetical reveals this not to be the case. While a fuller treatment of all three senses of desire exceeds what is possible here, a brief survey of them is necessary in order to elucidate the relatedness of godliness and sexual desire.

Beginning with desire *simpliciter*, Coakley writes that this is

²⁶This issue remains in a more recent reflection of his on theosis (though in a less constructive context): Oliver D. Crisp, 'T. F. Torrance on Theosis and Universal Salvation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74/1 (Mar. 2021), pp. 12–25.

²⁷Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 207.

²⁸A facet of Crisp's understanding of union with God which is made clearer in Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed*, chs 8–9. It is worth noting that Crisp has recently made some fairly significant revisions to the particulars of this account, but none of these changes impact the issue at hand here. See Oliver D. Crisp, *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), part 3.

²⁹Helpful in what seems to be missing here is what Keating calls the 'ethical' dimension of theosis, as well of the work of Normal Russell upon which he builds (see nn. 13–14 above).

³⁰Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 207.

an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness 'in the image'. But in God, 'desire' of course signifies no *lack* – as it manifestly does in humans. Rather it connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God's own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.³¹

And so desire in itself is not, per Coakley, something we can properly describe in the common terms of 'grasping' for something which we lack and think we must possess.³² In defining desire more broadly she writes that it is 'the physical, emotional, or intellectual longing that is directed towards something or someone that is wanted'.³³ What might it mean to characterise the intra-trinitarian life as one of longing, given that God already exists in a state of utter perfection? Perhaps it means something like this: God's being is characterised by loving communion between the Godhead's persons and the desire for that love's eternal continuance.

Though working from within a different philosophical framework as a Thomist, Stump's descriptions of desire and love are instructive here. As we have seen, she takes love to be a unity of two particular desires: a desire for the good of the beloved, and a desire for union with the beloved.³⁴ With this in mind, Stump writes that

the presence of a desire does not imply the absence of the thing desired. The fulfillment of a desire is compatible with the continuance of the desire. When both the desires of love are fulfilled, the lover finds joy in the beloved, but he does not cease desiring what he now has, namely, the good of the beloved and union with her.³⁵

If we understand the loving communion which typifies the intratrinitarian relations in a sense like Stump's then we are enabled to see how desire could be ontological in the sense which Coakley is after. That is to say, we can see that perhaps what it is for God to just *be* desire in a meaningful sense is for God to ever have and delight in God's own trinitarian union.

Of course, any attempts to describe the Godhead in itself are fundamentally speculative. And so, it is worth asking what heuristic purpose this likely controversial proposal is supposed to serve? According to Coakley, its purpose is to ground our further reflections on the realities of embodied, human desires – particularly the notoriously thorny area of erotic desire. For Coakley, much of its thorniness has to do with our simplistic reduction of the erotic to 'actual genital sexual activity'.³⁶ She elaborates that 'the unavailability of this confrontation seems ... to arise from the profound entanglement of our human sexual desires and our desire for God'.³⁷ This claim may strike some as confusing, even sacrilegious, but it is by no means a new one.³⁸ For

³¹Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 10.

³²Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 47–78.

³³Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 346.

³⁴Eleonore Stump, 'Love by All Accounts', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 80/2 (Nov. 2006), p. 28. See also n. 22 above for its more recent elaborations.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 86.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸E.g. she notes Origen's trepidation regarding the sort of prayer commended in Rom 8:26, as there might be 'in any form of prayer that deliberately gives away rational mastery to the Spirit ... possible

Coakley *erōs* is not to be contrasted with *agapē* but rather (and following her readings of Origen, Gregory Nyssen and pseudo-Dionysius) the former is our embodied sense of longing which is derivative from God's ontic longing.³⁹

Drawing from Nyssen in particular, Coakley writes that he

has the (to us) strange insight that desire relates crucially to what might be called the 'glue of society'. The 'erotic' desire that initially draws partners together sexually has also to last long enough, and to be so refined in God, as to render back to society what gave those partners the possibility of mutual joy: that means (beyond the immediate project of child-rearing and family) service to the poor and the out-cast, attention to the frail and the orphans, a consideration of the fruit of the earth and its limitations, a vision of the whole in which all play their part, both sacrificially and joyously.⁴⁰

We might find the claim that such things lie somehow in the realm of the erotic peculiar, but she presses that the reason for this sense has much to do with the fact that we 'have so much individualized and physicalized desire that we assume that sexual enactment somehow exhausts it'.⁴¹ Instead, Coakley's broader sense of *erōs* pertains to that which draws us in our fleshy forms out of ourselves and into fellowship with others, ultimately pointing towards our Creator when rightly oriented.

The caveat 'rightly oriented', however, is of desperate importance for Coakley. There is a need for virtue to guide our exercises of desire, and it is the fact of this need that delimits what I have termed her sense of 'ascetical desire'. After all, and as 2 Peter 1:4 commends, our becoming partakers in the divine nature will require our escape from 'disordered desire' (*epithymia*). In Coakley's schema this escape is purgative in nature, and this purification occurs manifestly in the act of contemplation. Notably, for her contemplation is not the domain of practised mystics alone but is actually accessible to relative novices,⁴² for contemplation at bottom is a 'silent waiting on the divine in prayer'.⁴³ Therein we 'cease to set the agenda' as we 'make space for God'.⁴⁴ Elsewhere Coakley avers that

confusion between loss of control to that of the Spirit and loss of *sexual* control'. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 127.

³⁹Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, pp. 47–51; *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, pp. 313–15. As defined by Coakley *agapē* is 'love that is unselfish, fulsome, and in principle universal (as enjoined in the teaching of Jesus)' (Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 345). It is worth stating here that neither I nor (so far as I can tell) Coakley mean to write asexual persons out of the soteriological story. Recall that the contention is not that erotic desire is ontological, but that there is a *deeper desire* for the other's good and union with them from which the erotic is derivative. It is *that latter desire*, and not erotic desire itself, which is located within the Godhead, and so whether one actually experiences sexual desire or not has no bearing on their soteriological status.

⁴⁰Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 6.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²See her work to draw this sense of contemplation out from Dom John Chapman in Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), ch. 2.

⁴³Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 34. Thought and not *only* wordless prayer is contemplative. It is the sort from which she has particularly benefited, but she is quite explicit elsewhere that 'any form of prayer that willfully hands itself over to God, whether in silence and darkness or in relative verbal incoherence and delight (as in some forms of charismatic prayer) has the character of "contemplation" in its widest sense'. Sarah Coakley, 'Response to my Critics in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 26/1 (Oct. 2014), p. 25.

⁴⁴Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 34.

this is 'a deepened prayer into which all Christians are called and invited sooner or later in their journey'.⁴⁵ The reason for this inevitable draw towards the contemplative is because of both its and the Christian journey's fundamental character as transformative.

To cede 'space' in this way is to 'accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer'⁴⁶ which 'requires a positive and participative intention to will God's will for one at this moment, and to accept (just for *this* moment) that whatever is befalling one is indeed God's will'.⁴⁷ In so doing we can, over time, become familiar with a kind of 'epistemic stripping'⁴⁸ in which we are drawn out of ourselves and our presuppositions about the right ordering of our wills (among other things) into God's perfect will.⁴⁹ Putting the matter straightforwardly, Coakley writes that '*contemplation reorders the passions*. Contemplation involves great risk: it implies a loss of repressive control, but at the same time it engenders reordering of the passions such that "control" finds new and significant coinage as *right* direction and purification of the passionate nature.'⁵⁰ Desire submitted to God in such a way can be called ascetical both because Coakley thinks it, like contemplation, is open to the relative novice in its being simply 'a programme of discipline and self-denial',⁵¹ and because in it we 'start from the presumption of the need, in a fallen world, to chasten and purify *all* our desires before God'.⁵² In taking up our desires up in this way – not with white-knuckled grasping which fears what they might do, but with a loose grip that is open to God's leading – we find a way out of the binary of 'libertinism and repression' which opens up new ways of thinking about such things as sexual desire.⁵³

Toward an erotic theosis

With Coakley's sense of desire briefly outlined, let us now return to Crisp's definition of theosis, which is in need of some enlivening:

Theosis: The doctrine according to which redeemed human beings are conformed to the image of Christ in his human nature. By being united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, redeemed human beings begin to exemplify the qualities of the human nature of Christ and grow in their likeness to Christ (in exemplifying the requisite qualities Christ's human nature instantiates). This process of transformation and participation goes on forevermore. It is akin to a mathematical asymptote.⁵⁴

In redeploying the Coakleyan pieces laid out above, I intend to make two specific proposals about the usefulness of sexual language to discussing theosis: first, that *agapē* is a discrete communicable attribute of the sort Crisp is after and *erōs* (rightly ordered) both points and calls us to it; second, that sexual language serves as a metaphor drawing us into that which is more mysteriously incommunicable in theosis. As such, the erotic

⁴⁵Coakley, 'Response to my Critics in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*', p. 25.

⁴⁶Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 19.

⁴⁷Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p. 49.

⁴⁸Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, p. 309.

⁴⁹In what this consists will, of course, depend on the fuller account of theology proper to which one holds.

⁵⁰Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, pp. 342–3.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁵²Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 133.

⁵³To borrow from the title of ch. 5 in Coakley, *The New Asceticism*.

⁵⁴Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, p. 216.

theosis which this piece is to begin constructing elucidates human transformation in God through imagery borrowed from some of the most intimate forms of interpersonal joining possible for humans, but it also retains a strong sense of the distinction between Creator and creature, even as the former calls the latter home.

Looking to the first of the two proposals, we can see such communicability chiefly in the person of Jesus. In her theo-ethical reflections upon Christ's life, Erin Dufault-Hunter (guided by Coakley's work) describes how we find that, after his baptism, he

remarkably ... cannot passively receive an affirmation of his identity as king-heritor nor merely mentally assent to what such intimacy with God will mean. An enspirited body like all humans, Jesus must *practice* resistance to what might seem natural if bent way [*sic*] of responding to appetites by exercising the muscles of self-restraint in conditions of genuine stress.⁵⁵

Such is the work of Jesus during his temptations on her reading of the synoptic Gospels. Dufault-Hunter asks that we 'consider how each of the temptations requires a retooling and aiming of basic human drives ... The reason these are genuine temptations and not playacting is that the devil taunts with the desire's usual path to seeming satisfaction.'⁵⁶ Each of these drives is good, but the incarnate Lord's witness to trust in God through his exercise (or non-exercise) of them during his temptations reveals the way which they are to be prevented from going astray.

Moreover, if our desires are God-given as an entailment of the embodied existence God intends for humanity, then there is no escaping them. Rather, we are to become allied to them in the fullness of their glory when we give them in fidelity to the God who can be trusted to return them to us renewed and remade. Dufault-Hunter notes how Christ's celibacy shows us how 'all our appetites are not theoretically or abstractly transformed. As in the temptations, they are exposed, and we are given opportunities to practice how to fulfill them in the desert of our own earthly wandering.'⁵⁷ For her, the ability of Jesus to enter into remarkably intimate relationships with those around him without being subject to the cultural expectations of an eldest son in his day (i.e. to marry, produce offspring and so forth) reveals how 'in Christ's transformed desires, we see that our own end (married or unmarried, virginal or not) is marked by a freedom to embrace others without self-consciousness, to choose indulgence or restraint not because others demand it of us, but because sharing of divine *agapē* requires it.'⁵⁸ Both Coakley and Dufault-Hunter draw from Gregory Nyssen's intriguing *On Virginity* to make this sort of point.

This work has puzzled some, given 'the fact that Gregory was almost certainly married at the time of his writing of it'.⁵⁹ Therein, he utilises an agricultural metaphor to describe *erōs*:

Imagine a stream flowing from a spring and dividing itself off into a number of accidental channels. As long as it proceeds so, it will be useless for any purpose of agriculture ... But if one were to mass these wandering and widely dispersed rivulets

⁵⁵Erin Dufault-Hunter, "Sex is Really about God", p. 227.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 227–8.

⁵⁷Ibid, p. 228.

⁵⁸Ibid, p. 229.

⁵⁹Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, p. 29.

again into one single channel, he would have a full and collected stream for the supplies which life demands ... Whenever the husbandman, in order to irrigate a particular spot, is bringing the stream there, but there is need before it gets there of a small outlet, he will allow only so much to escape into that outlet as is adequate to supply the demand, and can then easily be blended again with the main stream.⁶⁰

This is the same Gregory who warns elsewhere that ‘aberrant use of our faculty of love becomes the principle and foundation of an evil life’,⁶¹ so there is no sense of naivety here about the potential dangers of erotic desire (spiritual or otherwise). Of this risk he is well aware, and so he further writes near the end of the above passage that the husbandman’s ‘long hours of his prayers will secure the purity which is the key-note of his life’.⁶² It is through prayerfully laying our desires before God that they are brought near to the refiner’s fire (Mal 3:2–3), but not to be destroyed. Instead, they are purified so that they may be channelled rightly to the originator of that metaphorical stream which Gregory depicts, our Creator.

It is in this way that *agapē* is a communicable attribute on an erotic theosis via the purgative reformation of *erōs*. Christ acts as both an explanatory and metaphysical bridge here. In him the curtain is pulled back on our desires, including the deep-seated yearnings of the erotic, such that we can see them as they really are – disordered and directed towards ends which are not ultimately fulfilling, but not incapable of reform. When we let slip our grip upon them in prayerfully submissive contemplation, then we find God returning to us neither the same things which were handed over nor something entirely different. They are the same desires wrapped in the same flesh which they rested within at first, but they now have been redirected (even if only by a small increment) into a fuller, more collected stream of divine desire. Put differently, we ‘funnel our appetites so that they become intensified, so that we gradually join in God’s love of those around us without fear and distraction’.⁶³ And so *erōs* signposts the way to *agapē* when it is released from the guidance of our flawed, finite wills and to the direction of God’s perfect will.

What could this self-relinquishment look like for us? Perhaps it could look like the defeat of what Dufault-Hunter calls ‘Viagra culture’.⁶⁴ Deploying this term in her humorously titled ‘The Downside of Getting It Up’, she depicts how, on the one hand, pharmaceutical advancements which have permitted men to sustain erections when they might have otherwise been less able to do so can ‘facilitate a robust, fun sex life’ which would not have been possible before their introduction.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the injection of a teenaged-boy-style virility into a bedroom has ‘sometimes resulted in physical pain or discomfort for partners, especially those who are older, including not only soreness after prolonged or frequent sex but lower pelvic pain and a form of “honeymoon cystitis” or bladder infections and, in some cases, tearing of

⁶⁰Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On Virginity’, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Select Writings and Letters*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), chs 7–8.

⁶¹Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Stuart G. Hall (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), VIII.

⁶²Gregory of Nyssa, ‘On Virginity’, ch. 8.

⁶³Dufault-Hunter, ‘“Sex is Really about God”’, p. 230.

⁶⁴Erin Dufault-Hunter, ‘The Downside of Getting It Up: How Viagra Reveals the Persistence of Patriarchy and the Need for Sexual Character’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32/1 (Summer 2012), p. 58.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 59. She writes here of a particular lived experience relayed to her in the course of this study.

the vaginal wall'.⁶⁶ In such cases, the husband shows disregard for his partner and, in Gregory's terms, permits a reckless stream to flow which does not irrigate but floods.

Defeating Viagra culture via erotic theosis would not mean denying that the sexual intimacy one desires is a possible good to the couple. Instead, it would mean taking this desire into a contemplative state in which God can reveal how it might be used in guiding one back to God's own desirousness. Dufault-Hunter records that a 'woman, forty-eight years old, commented that the character of her husband of twenty years morphed on Viagra, becoming "predatory" and "demanding" after taking it at a dinner party'.⁶⁷ These sorts of expressions of erotic desire, wrongly channelled to the detriment of one's partner and disparagement of such desire's lovingly unitive purposes, can be changed over time in prayerful submission to God. That is to say, the one who takes their deep yearning to God and humbly offers their flesh to its Maker can find a drawing of both back into that very same God not for obliteration but transformation. God communicates that of God's own being which can be relayed to us in such moments to leave us different than we had been before.

Such changes are not merely behavioural, however. Within and beneath them lies a more mysterious reality which is not directly communicable but is nevertheless real. Here the metaphorical role played by erotic theosis emerges. Recall that what we are after on the present definition of theosis is transformation of our human nature such that it instantiates qualities like those exhibited in Christ's human nature. In making this point, Crisp presumes the doctrinal authority of the first seven ecumenical councils and so, in keeping close to his original formulation of theosis which is being elaborated here, I will do the same. As such, we have not only such points of theological data as the Chalcedonian definition, but also latter elaborations on the hypostatic union's entailments.⁶⁸ One such entailment is Christ's having two wills in virtue of his respective divine and human natures. Given the *sui generis* status of the God-man there is a necessary amount of mystery in how such a thing is to be conceived, and no metaphor can be expected to exhaustively describe what occurs with respect to the inner life of Christ's person. That said, this doctrine (promulgated at the Third Council of Constantinople) seems to be one which is particularly open to at least some further clarifying through erotic metaphor.

While, per Coakley, the erotic is not here understood to be reducible to the genital, specifically coital imagery has particular potential here. Within it we find a drawing of lovers to one another which sits at the most intimate of levels. We see such a thing pictured in the Song of Songs as its lover entreats her beloved, 'draw me after you; let us make haste' (1:4). Somatic language of tasting, touching, caressing and so forth is replete within the Song,⁶⁹ and, as J. Cheryl Exum points out, 'the fact that the poet

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 59.

⁶⁸The specifics of what said data consist in and how they are to be interpreted or used are not uncontroversial in themselves. For the sake of brevity, suffice it to say here that I am operating within a similar 'apophatic' framework to that proposed in Sarah Coakley, 'What does Chalcedon Solve and What does it Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian "Definition"', in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds), *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 246–64. Cf. Donald Fairbairn, 'Interpreting Conciliar Christology: An Overview in the Service of Analytic Theology', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 10 (November 2022): pp. 363–381.

⁶⁹Though, importantly, not only within the Song. See e.g. Christine Roy Yoder, 'The Shaping of Erotic Desire in Proverbs 1–9', in F. LeRon Shults and Jan-Olav Henriksen (eds), *Saving Desire: The Seduction of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 148–63.

does not identify the lovers facilitates their identification with all lovers'.⁷⁰ Indeed, the Song is a rather unabashed celebration of the erotic; a celebration which, though variously pigeonholed into being entirely allegorical or pertaining only to human sexuality, represents 'the mystery of divine communion with fleshly human love'.⁷¹ This heartfelt call, 'draw me after you', which echoes from the lover to the beloved can also, positioned within the proper interpretative framework, help us to imagine what it is that occurs within us through theosis.

On a Chalcedonian understanding of the incarnation, Jesus is both 'truly God and truly man ... in two natures without confusion', and so those respective wills which are derived from each nature are likewise perfectly conjoined without confusion.⁷² In a different but not wholly dissimilar sense, in sexual union two partners truly become one as well and, in optimal circumstances, join their distinct wills in pursuit of the common goal of mutual fulfilment. The utter ecstasy of sexual congress found in the pursuit of orgasmic experiences, both as giver and recipient, mirrors dimly (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) the absolute good which is growing in ever-deepening fellowship with God. As with the laborious (though worthwhile) ascent in virtue which is necessary to drawing nearer to God, our faculty of sexual desire requires intentional training in order for it to manifest itself rightly. Dufault-Hunter describes how 'our culture provides us with ample opportunities for training our mind-body for greedy taking, for fearful grasping at erotic pleasures that then drive our relationships',⁷³ but in contrast to this 'the good life means becoming generous receivers of God's good gifts'.⁷⁴ Sexual desire is a good so powerful that there is a strong risk of its thorough misuse that must be guarded against, but not necessarily in the fearful abstinence some might encourage. Moreover, its imagery can help us to imagine what sort of transformation God is calling us to throughout our lives, as our wills become ever more aligned with God's own will.

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis writes in *The Great Divorce* that

there is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels. It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas that you make demons, but out of bad archangels.⁷⁵

It has been my aim here to, at least initially, show how we might take the language of the erotic, so mighty that it has often been made into a demon, and show its better strengths in service of explicating the doctrine of theosis. In so doing, I began with Crisp's recent work to set theosis in western systematic perspective, clarifying what

⁷⁰J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 95.

⁷¹Dufault-Hunter, "Sex is Really about God", p. 221.

⁷²'The Definition of Chalcedon', in Henry Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: OUP, 1970), p. 51.

⁷³Erin Dufault-Hunter, 'Chastity's Helping Hand? How Masturbation Can Serve Virtue', in Jerry L. Walls, Jeremy Neill and David Baggett (eds), *Venus and Virtue: Celebrating Sex and Seeking Sanctification* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), p. 170.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵C. S. Lewis, 'The Great Divorce', in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2002), p. 522.

has often been a muddy concept to many. However, there is a particular sterility in the way he explicates theosis which I have sought to elaborate in more fleshy tones through both Coakley's systematic work and Dufault-Hunter's further ethics-motivated reflections. Through their writings we can understand the ways in which the erotic is not only a good, God-given dimension of human desire, but also the manner in which sexual desire, inasmuch as it is oriented towards the good, inherently draws us towards our Creator as well as our fellow creatures. After examining such theo-ethical approaches, I then turned to a wedding (pun intended!) of the theotic and the erotic so that the latter might inform our descriptions of the former in ways broadly intelligible to most human persons. As such, this brief proposal of an erotic theosis serves to fill a gap in contemporary discussions of the doctrine, particularly among Western theologians, in its willingness to embrace the power the language of the erotic bears. Nevertheless, we here keep in mind that even the highest, most profound and richest experience of holistically trained sexual desire and union pales in comparison to what humanity experiences in intimacy with divinity.