

## Prayer, Christoformity, and the Author: New Sites of Discussion for Theology

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**This is the accepted version of the following article:**

Rogers, E. F. (2014), Prayer, Christoformity, and the Author: New Sites of Discussion for Theology. *Modern Theology*, 30(4), 552-560. doi: 10.1111/moth.12130,

which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/moth.12130>.

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### **Abstract:**

You should read this book<sup>1</sup> —and assign at least part of it in class (the most quotable quotes cluster, usefully, in the gorgeous Prelude)—because there is really nothing else like it. It really is an essay “On the Trinity.” And it really does contribute to the sexuality debates without attempting to solve them in their current terms. Meanwhile, the plates alone will justify the price. I find myself reverting to Coakley's view when students ask about the Trinity “why three?”—even when I have set out to say something else. You know how, as a teacher, you watch the students' eyes to see whether they have understood? You hear yourself abandoning the pat answers, the ones you might like for your colleagues to hear, and trying other things, just to get a purchase on that uncomprehending look in students' eyes. The understanding doesn't dawn until you give some version of Coakley's account. And then, whether you like it or not, you have something to defend, modify, or criticize, but in any case, and usually for the first time, you have something *from* which the students can go on. I say this not from lack of experience, but as someone who has written a whole book on the Holy Spirit.

**Keywords:** Theology | Christianity | Prayer

### **Article:**

You should read this book<sup>1</sup> —and assign at least part of it in class (the most quotable quotes cluster, usefully, in the gorgeous Prelude)—because there is really nothing else like it. It really is an essay “On the Trinity.” And it really does contribute to the sexuality debates without attempting to solve them in their current terms. Meanwhile, the plates alone will justify the price. I find myself reverting to Coakley's view when students ask about the Trinity “why three?”—even when I have set out to say something else. You know how, as a teacher, you watch the students' eyes to see whether they have understood? You hear yourself abandoning the pat answers, the ones you might like for your colleagues to hear, and trying other things, just to get a purchase on that uncomprehending look in students' eyes. The understanding doesn't dawn until

you give some version of Coakley's account. And then, whether you like it or not, you have something to defend, modify, or criticize, but in any case, and usually for the first time, you have something *from* which the students can go on. I say this not from lack of experience, but as someone who has written a whole book on the Holy Spirit.

You should also read this book, if you have openly or secretly read the manuscript. It has been circulating, *samizdat*, for ten years or more. It reminds me of the Preface to the *Monologium*, in which Anselm credits the pressure of eager readers and the proliferation of incomplete copies in deciding at last to make one version final.

For I know that in this book I have not so much satisfied those who entreated me, as put an end to the entreaties that followed me so urgently. Yet, somehow it fell out, contrary to my hope, that not only the brethren mentioned above, but several others, by making copies for their own use, condemned this writing to long remembrance.<sup>2</sup>

The quality of Coakley's book has been so Anselmian—so full of desire and understanding—that that has been her manuscript's experience, too.

“[T]his book,” reads Coakley's disclaimer, “notably does not aim to solve the problems [of the sexuality debates] in the terms currently under discussion” (1). There is a sense, however, in which the book opens the way for a solution by renewing its terms. It dictates not a sexual ethics, but the formal outline of an adequate *trinitarian* language.<sup>3</sup>

That's because, oddly enough, “the problem of the Trinity cannot be solved without addressing the very questions that seem [to have] least to do with it, questions which press on the contemporary Christian churches with such devastating and often destructive force: questions of sexual justice, questions of the meaning and stability of gender roles, questions of the final theological significance of sexual desire” (2). The conviction that opposites really do illuminate each other sounds like Jung, who does come up casually elsewhere in the book (194). The reason for this *coincidentia oppositorum* is not Jung, however, but the conviction that God made human beings for Godself even before God made them for one another. Therefore the God-given desire for God is, in Coakley's wonderful word, “protoerotic” (14), whereby the Spirit characteristically both inflames desire and checks it. Coakley sees “a vision of God's trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them. It indicates how God the ‘Father’, in and through the Spirit, both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, in the likeness of his Son. Here ... divine desire can be seen as the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation” (6).

The means of this transformation is the Spirit who presses upon us in prayer, especially contemplative prayer of a deep and wordless sort. This prayer, according to Coakley, reaches into the roots of desire and therefore both brings up and transforms human desires as well. This return to Origen's *On Prayer* and the desert Fathers raises a number of questions. Most of them, I

suppose, wonder whether the Spirit can really cope with the barriers that people erect. (I make this statement of disbelief tongue partially in cheek.)

I number the points, not to order, but only to distinguish them.

1. Let me anticipate the answer to all the questions in advance. The appeal to prayer makes a special case of the appeal to experience.<sup>4</sup>(Is it a unique one? This is worth considering.) The question of how to discern or achieve rightly ordered desire is not answered, therefore, by appealing to “the crucible of prayer” (2) *as such*—but by its fruits. And behold, the fruits are very good. “Prayer” is the move (or “ploy,” in the Coakleyan word) to claim the moral high ground. “ ‘Orthodoxy,’ as mere propositional assent, needs to be carefully distinguished from ‘orthodoxy’ as a demanding, and ongoing, spiritual *project*, in which the language of the creeds is personally and progressively assimilated” (5). Regular denials of expected charges—reminiscent of politicians who inoculate themselves by predicting what “my opponents will say”—will nevertheless hardly prevent those charges from coming. “How different [is this prayer] from any sort of exercise in narcissistic self-cultivation”? (19, n. 6) she asks—and doth perhaps protest too much. Yet most of us hardly dare to claim the high ground; it is the place of sacrifice, even if with Abraham we may find ourselves there. Here the gambit works. It might have backfired, but it does not. By the grace, and with the fruits of the Spirit, it succeeds.
2. By “prayer,” Coakley means contemplative rather than petitionary prayer, especially of a deep and wordless sort. Despite the reasonable expectation that such prayer should lead to self-dispossession, it can sound Pelagian: the theologian must, with the necessity of obligation, undertake such a practice in order to justify her theological results: “a particular set of bodily and spiritual practices (both individual and liturgical) are the *pre-condition* for trinitarian thinking of a deep sort . . . Simply put, and conversely: if one is resolutely *not* engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation and worship, there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one” (16). Well, admitting that it works well here, the question still needs posing, do we want to re-import moral tests for our leaders? I would have thought a Spirit-led theology would stress rather this: that the Spirit, who blows where it wills, is free, as Victor Preller used to say, to “seize the mind of a believer before it seizes her heart,”<sup>5</sup> or indeed to teach all sorts of movements to pray which we may not at first, or ever in this life, recognize as prayer—including study (ST I.1.6). Precisely if the Spirit prays for us in sighs too deep for words, many contemplative activities, reading, writing, talking, listening, might count as prayer, including being lifted up on the prayers of others, which raises the possibility of collective prayer that does or does not include ourselves and may or may not take place at the same time. Just if prayer is Spirit-led and distinct from our self-seeking, all these self-forgetful and other-initiated types of prayer would seem to matter, too, without of course denying the value of ascetic practices of one's own. I would prefer to put it like this: Asceticism is not a Pelagian task that must be

done first before one may theologize. Rather, theology necessarily changes the self by orienting it to God and others, if it is the Spirit who is moving the theologian. The Spirit is free to use ascetics and libertines, if Jesus' tax collectors and prostitutes are any guide. Right at the beginning of the book, we read that it helps explain "how one might set about coming into relation with such a God in the first place." Yet in the first place—in the logic of grace—one does not quite "set about" it, but the *Holy Spirit* might so move one, and might even move one—*tolle, lege!*—to pick up and read this book.

3. Very important, and superior to my own account in *After the Spirit*—if only I had read this in time:

the Spirit may just as much be encountered as that which *checks* human desires, and stops their triumphalism; the apparent failure of prayer "in the Spirit" for a desired human outcome may prove to be the pressure towards a truer and deeper perception of the unity of Spirit, Father, and (cruciform) Son. ... [T]he Spirit progressively "breaks" sinful desires, *in and through* the passion of Christ. And hence, at the pastoral, practical level, what I shall call the Spirit's "protoerotic" pressure, felt initially as a propulsion toward the divine union, must inexorably bring also—as the Spirit of the *Son* the chastening of the human lust to possess, abuse and control. (14–15)

Brilliant, but this raises the central question: what is to prevent women and gay people from being, in pray-ers less advanced than Coakley, the constant symbolic subjects of the chastening? If the goal is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, that still leaves open the question of who's who. We need a sharp sense of the individual and the collective here, so that both the prophet can chastise the group and the *sensus fidelium* can restrain its leaders. The question of who is praying and with whom remains, even if "the Spirit" becomes the primary answer to both questions. You would think that a book on sexuality and prayer would have more to say about the monastery, where both prayer and a queer sexuality (i.e., celibacy) are practiced together in *community*. But that's the sort of conversation that *God, Sexuality and the Self* exists to inspire.

The model, as we know from Coakley's other writings, is John of the Cross. But John of the Cross does not, of course, emerge all by himself. He emerges with the whole Carmelite order. Even Teresa of Avila has vastly more sedimented practices of religious community and spiritual direction to go on than the Anglican Communion, or even most parts of the Catholic Church can command. The emergence of deep prayer in which women and sexual minorities are safe to be frank about the sexual urges and images that come up—in which the Spirit is free to develop them in ways not limited to those of the past—depends on a community of pray-ers and spiritual directors that is rare and hard to imagine. Perhaps the Society of Saint John the Evangelist could handle it. Perhaps some Dominican and Jesuit communities, and not others. Certainly not the charismatic communities that Coakley interviews. This is not a criticism. It is a challenge to us readers: just if we take seriously Coakley's charge to make contemplative prayer a source of life for the church in the sexuality debates—just if the Spirit is working through her on us—then how

shall we make material this movement of the Spirit in concrete communities of pray-ers and spiritual directors who are up to the discernment? It's not impossible, but one thinks of Mark Jordan's rueful chapter ("The Pope Converts") about how the Spirit sends a vision to the Pope and all the cardinals about how to change the church, but no one, even inwardly convinced, can manage to speak up about it in public.<sup>6</sup> Jordan's chapter does not refute Coakley's charge, but it points out that the Spirit must change social conditions as well as individuals. The Spirit can change things slowly and quietly with a still, small voice, or dramatically and almost violently in Paul on the road to Damascus, but the politics could take centuries to change. Perhaps Coakley's charge is one to found a new, lay order of pray-ers, third-order Anglican Carmelites.<sup>7</sup>

This involves rethinking the desires of those male authors afraid of the human objects of their desire—the heterosexual women and homosexual men whom they divinize and fear. ("Ein solcher Engel ist schrecklich.") As Coakley says herself, "If 'desire' is really about desire for God, and involves some sort of 'purification' of physical expressions of sexual love, how can Plato's programme not involve a kicking away, at some point in the ascent, of the ladder that connects the divine to everything classically associated with the 'woman': materiality, physical desire, marriage, childbirth? Is not this tradition of ascetic Platonist Christianity arguably the one *most inimical* to feminist concerns ... and homoeroticism, which the Platonic text both assumes, and then rises 'above'?" (9)

4. The ensuing discussion would also need to say something about the *interference* of petitionary and contemplative prayer. Many devout gay men and lesbians have petitioned for years that their sexual orientation would go away. That is a lot of prayer practice to un-learn. Some of them have had spiritual directors to reinforce it. What is to become of them in contemplative prayer practices that encourage desires to come up? This calls for the greatest wisdom; where is it in great supply? Even when it is on offer, who can hear it? As a Ph.D. student at Yale, I attended Julia Gatta's course in spirituality for a single day. "Most people come to a spiritual director for self-control," she said: "I teach them self-abandonment." The observation was so frightening that I never went back. It is rare to hear, and even more difficult to learn, with Paul Evdokimov, that "It is possible that the most ascetic act is not self-renunciation, but total self-acceptance."<sup>8</sup>
5. Great credit is due for the charismatic chapter, actually fieldwork among charismatic Anglicans for the Church of England Doctrine Commission. Like many of us whose thoughts keep surfacing no matter what the context, Coakley finds the prayer-style of Romans 8 among them. Coakley must acknowledge that charismatic Christianity has much to offer her theology, if only because its view of Romans 8 turns out so strikingly in accord with her own—which gives one to wonder whether the charismatic informants all had Origen to go by before, or only as or after Coakley so inspiringly interviewed them?

6. In short, the Spirit brings the human being *into* the intra-Trinitarian relation between the Father and the Son, so that the human being cries “Abba, Father!” and finds herself somehow *within* the trinitarian embrace, in *Son*-position (which would be why we pray “in Jesus' name”). This is what I hear myself saying to students even when I intended to say something else. And yet for all its power with respect to the Third Person, this picture raises a question about the Second. A certain functionalism comes not amiss in the work of the Spirit: the Spirit is (in my words) “the one who initiates human beings into the divine life,” or (her words, my stress) “*that which* propels the pray-er towards union” (14). To be fair, that kind of functionalism you could also find in Basil of Caesarea; given the impossibility of grasping the Spirit, I don't think it's a problem; indeed, more of a solution. But what if the Second Person too should become a function: the Son is *that which* the Spirit works among human beings, christoformity-in-us. There is little in *God, Sexuality and the Self* to resist such a reduction. Does the incarnation of the Word in *Jesus of Nazareth* play a critical role, or is it just a signal instance of the making christoform that the Spirit always works? Granted this model is good for women and other human beings who (because of the weakness of the spiritual vision of others) do not *look* the part of Jesus and are hereby allowed to be just as christoform as privileged men. But is the christology to be all eschatological, all in what the Spirit will work, and not historical, in what the Spirit has already conceived? Perhaps Coakley will say that only after we train our eyes to see Christ in our neighbor are we really able to see Christ anew in Jesus. But more conservative readers will find it thinner than it really needs to be. This raises the stakes for the promised christology: *Christ without Absolutes* revisited.<sup>9</sup>
7. The penultimate issue I want to raise is that of the theological working of other disciplines. The marvelous thing about this book is that its *théologie totale* treats extra-theological disciplines (history, social science, biology of sex and gender) with a touch at once firm and light. We never have the feeling of undigested data, statistics, or theory. There is no jarring change of genre. Everything is serenely integrated.<sup>10</sup> There is a vision of the whole. Everything belongs to God's world, one truth; nothing threatens, nothing doesn't belong. This is a marvelous achievement in the sexuality debates. Part of it has to do with keeping (say) data and theories of sexuality firmly in the background. Certain questions need to be refused or un-asked if the focus on Trinity and prayer is to be sustained, if the book is to succeed, as it does, in generating more light than heat. It seems to be an advantage that if the science of sexuality and gender changed, the account of prayer and Trinity could remain undisturbed. The strategy is very long term. If the prayer-practice that undergirds the proposals for doctrine should take five hundred years to catch on, it would still be worth waiting for.

I have been asking myself why I have the opposite reaction to Coakley's new work on evolutionary biology and sacrifice (the Gifford Lectures, *Sacrifice Regained*).<sup>11</sup> So far, the

science seems to obtrude. The tone is apologetic (in the theological sense) rather than serene. One worries that if the science changed, or if Martin Nowak's theories about the place of cooperation in evolution did not prevail, the theology would suffer. The strategy seems much shorter term. Evolutionary science changes every week. If we believe, on theological grounds, that it is good for human beings to cooperate, and some evolutionists, on their own grounds, are starting to think so too, that is all well and good. But the evolutionary theories and data can hardly serve as evidence for the theological claim. Rather, in Aquinas' terms, they are at best “extraneous and probable” arguments from a different discipline with a different “formal rationale” or method, rather than “proper” to theology (ST I.1.8 *ad* 2). *Théologie totale* does a marvelous job of integrating the extraneous into theology—giving it trinitarian discipline—so that it becomes proper: water into wine. Or perhaps the Spirit herself accomplishes this. The new work on sacrifice seems not yet to have reached that point. It needs further integration into *théologie totale*.

One of the great virtues of *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* is to suggest ways of accomplishing that integration, both in terms of prayer and in terms of Trinity. Both have the effect of elaborating how it is that the truth is one, how the one God can speak alike in Word and world. Coakley's account of the Trinity could be expanded from patristics into the Middle Ages, where Thomas develops the missions or sendings of the Persons from God. For Thomas, the Father sends out the Son to be “the known in the knower” whenever a human mind knows anything, and the Spirit to be “the love in the lover” whenever a human will loves anything. This is an incorporative vision that easily takes in natural science, without making itself hostage to its every deliverance. Insofar as a scientist really knows anything, Thomas ascribes the real isomorphism of mind to thing to the structuring of both by the Logos. And insofar as a scientist proceeds with *desire* to know, Thomas ascribes that movement of the will to the indwelling of the Spirit. Those appropriations to Son and Spirit involve a wider definition of prayer, because here the Spirit both excites the scientist's desire to know, and conceives in her the form of the Son, according to the pattern of Romans 8, within the process of scientific inquiry itself. On this account of incorporative prayer, the scientist's love and wonder at the natural world is objectively contemplative prayer, whether the scientist (or even the theologian) recognizes it as such or not, and even if *this* type of contemplative prayer is from time to time full of noise and business. Indeed, on Christian grounds it is *Trinity-shaped* contemplative prayer.<sup>12</sup> On this expanded, medieval basis, natural science *does* belong within *théologie totale*. On this basis, theology does not depend upon what the scientist claims: theology depends on how the Spirit leads her into “all truth” (John 16:3), if and when the Spirit should conform her mind to the Logos of the matter, rendering her mind christoform, whether she recognizes it or not. On this basis, theology participates in the return of the Spirit to the “Father,” with the gift of more children on the pattern of God's Child.

8. In closing, a small matter. The segregating of references into bibliographical essays in each chapter works beautifully. It allows both the running commentary of the proper

footnote, without the constant interruptive need to pop back and forth from the top to the bottom of the page, with one exception. Coakley's account needs to be supplemented with the chorus of support for the incorporative model of the Trinity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. She does mention Thomas Weinandy. But it is odd not to mention Robert Jenson, who thirty years ago called Romans 8 “the most remarkable trinitarian passage in the New Testament, one amounting to a theological system,”<sup>13</sup> or Rowan Williams, whose “Word and Spirit” first appeared even earlier (in German) in 1980 and then in English in *On Christian Theology* in 2000.<sup>14</sup> Others have learned from them: Mark MacIntosh has a similar passage in his *Mystical Theology*, as do I in *After the Spirit*.<sup>15</sup> There are striking if more distant similarities to Florensky (always a good thing),<sup>16</sup> Bulgakov (always more difficult),<sup>17</sup> and Evdokimov (*Sacrament of Love*) in the treatment of trinity, friendship, and even sexuality. Certainly readers interested in Coakley's argument might have been directed to all of those related accounts.

But Anselm, in the very same passage, has been there before, excusing Coakley along with himself, when he observes that “the more [readers] wanted this work to be adaptable to practical use, the more was what they enjoined on me difficult of execution.” To be a theologian like Anselm—whose *Meditation on Human Redemption* brims with the language that Coakley calls proto-erotic—is always a wonderful thing. Thus all my questions are no longer ones for *God, Sexuality and the Self*, or even for Coakley, to answer. What's important is that questions about contemplative prayer and christoform lives are already new questions for current theology. They continue the conversation that *God, Sexuality and the Self* has so grandly begun.

### Footnotes

1. The writing of this essay was supported by a grant from the Templeton Foundation to the Center of Theological Inquiry on human nature.
2. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium, Monologium, An Appendix In Behalf Of The Fool By Gaunilo, And Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1926).
3. I mimic two sentences with which Richard Norris sums up the Chalcedonian definition in *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 23.
4. Cf. George P. Schner, SJ., “The Appeal to Experience,” in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., ed., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 23–43.
5. Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 244.



6. Mark Jordan, "The Pope Converts," in *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–18.
7. Or not so new. There are very many third-order Catholic Carmelites, and at least two communities of Anglican Carmelites, the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God in Oxford ("Fairacres") and the Episcopal Carmel of Saint Teresa in Maryland, both of which welcome associates.
8. Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 100.
9. Sarah Coakley, *Christ without Absolutes: A Study in the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
10. Except for Karl Barth and analytic philosophy. Is there some principled, textual, and charitable reason why *théologie totale* finds these alone indigestible?
11. Available online at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/gifford/about/>.
12. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "How Natural Science Becomes a Form of Prayer," *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas's Biblical Commentaries* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 265–288.
13. Robert Jenson, *Triune Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 44. Jenson's student David Yeago has an even more impressive account in his chapter "The Trinity" in *The Faith of the Christian Church*, privately published in typescript at the Lutheran Southern Theological Seminary, and the wider publication of which is devoutly to be hoped for.
14. Rowan Williams, "Wort und Geist," in Klaus Kremkau, ed., *Religiöse Bewusstsein und der heilige Geist in der Kirche* (Frankfurt: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 1980), 77–96; "Word and Spirit," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 107–127.
15. Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), e.g., 156; Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 75–97.
16. Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chapters "Doubt" and "Trinity," and "Friendship" and "Jealousy," 14–52, 282–343.
17. For those both attracted and repelled by Bulgakov's notion of Sophia, note that the way Bulgakov treats the dyad of Word-and-Spirit going out from and returning to God seems to have a more obviously orthodox version in Thomas' teaching on the sending of the Son and Spirit by the Father. On the relation of pneumatology to human relations of sexuality and

friendship, see the treatment of “syzygy” and “adelphopoiesis” in *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 320–324.

New rule: promoting liberal theology is prohibited. We all see the "thank goodness this isn't r/Christianity" posts. This sub was born out of a rebellion against the liberal theology so heavily embraced there. We will not allow it to go back. This sub will not become r/Christianity-lite. For the sake of defining terms, let's be clear that liberal theology is NOT the same as being politically liberal. The weekly prayer request thread does not work. People ignore it because they don't want advice, they just want prayer, so they fire their prayers into the sub and don't read. And we comment and pray for the ones outside the weekly thread, and don't go into the weekly. It should be a sexual issues/ mb thread. McKnight is the author, coauthor, or editor of more than seventy-five books, including It Takes a Church to Baptize, Adam and the Genome, Kingdom Conspiracy, The Jesus Creed, The King Jesus Gospel, and The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life. He is also a canon theologian for the Diocese of Churches for the Sake of Others. We typically understand Christoformity in individual terms. A person "you or me, for example" increasingly becomes like Christ in thought, word and deed. theology at the time of Bodin and the absolutizing of the theory. and practice of monarchy while ignoring earlier European experience. The particular historical period at which Schmitt chooses to begin his study is significant because institutional religious insight into the political and (more importantly) religious insight informing the political were much diminished by the time "divine right". a discussion of the Roman Catholic Church, which is dependent on an explicitly revelatory theology. By looking at the interactions between the church and the various political bodies during the middle ages, the theology of politics in action, or "revelatory" political theology, is clarified. Schmitt's political theology, on the other hand