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Helen Savage

Changing Sex?

Transsexuality and Christian Theology

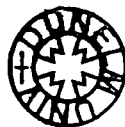
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Ph.D

The University of Durham

Department of Theology and Religion

2005



05 MAY 2006

Changing Sex? Transsexuality and Christian Theology

Helen Savage

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study about the nature and causes of transsexuality and an attempt to formulate a Christian ethical response to it, a subject which has until now received no extended academic attention from a Christian perspective.

There are two aims. The first is to examine what the Christian theological tradition has to say about transsexuality. The second is to explore what the experience of transsexual people has to say to the Church, and to the formation of its theology and ethics.

It is a survey of the evidence for the existence of transsexuality prior to the twentieth century when it was first recognised and described. It explores the experience of transsexual and some transgendered people in Britain today. It pays particular attention to their encounters with and within the Church. It investigates how those transsexual and transgendered people who profess Christian faith use the Bible and relate to the Christian tradition as they attempt to understand their condition better, and try to come to terms with the theological issues that this process of reflection raises – an example of 'ordinary theology'. It then examines what the Bible and the Christian tradition themselves might have to say about transsexuality, and about those same far-reaching issues, which include the significance of the human self, of embodiment and of sex, gender and sexuality. It draws in particular on the foundational theology of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa and on the writings of four contemporary theologians: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Elaine Graham, Susan Frank Parsons and Rowan Williams.

At the heart of the study are seven detailed case studies of transsexual or transgendered British Christians, but I also draw upon a personal engagement with around twenty-five others over a period of almost thirty months.

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Declaration

None of the material in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree in this or any other university and it includes no contributions from other researchers.

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Finally, but most important of all, I thank, from the bottom of my heart, Katy, David, and above all, Olwen, for being prepared to stand by and with me, and to travel a difficult path together with so much love and affection.

Helen Savage

Introduction

I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it is the earliest memory of my life.

*Jan Morris*¹

I was convinced that I was a girl – even at five! And I was trundled to all sorts of places like Great Ormond Street, and their advice in 1933 was 'make a man of him!' Well, that was the biggest disaster, of course, that ever walked. I had everything feminine removed far distant, was made to use carbolic soap, and sent to the toughest public school they could find.

Bernadette Rogers

The Personal and Professional Context of the Study

I am a transsexual woman and an Anglican priest. The main reason for embarking on this study is rooted deeply in my own attempts to understand my condition in the light of my faith, and to reflect upon my experience in the context of an appropriately rigorous intellectual framework. Nicola Slee points out that a writer "necessarily writes out of her own life and context and writes at least partly to make sense of and shape that life experience."² Jackie Leach Scully develops this idea further and argues, "The starting point of the theological exploration of impairment must be the experience of those who live this embodiment ... what needs to be clear is the position of the speaker."³

It will help, I hope, to begin by telling the outline of my story.

¹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 1.

² Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.

³ Jackie Leach Scully, 'When Embodiment Isn't Good', *Theology and Sexuality* 9 (1998), 10-28 at 24-5.

I was aware, at a very early age, of a strong sense of gender identity at odds with my apparent physical phenotype, certainly by the time I began school and well short of my fifth birthday. Apart from this nagging, persistent and often distressing feeling, I had a happy childhood, supported by loving parents. I am by nature cheerful, outgoing and optimistic. I had no great difficulty in making and sustaining friendships, but my deep disquiet around my gender identity was always there in the background. When I was about eleven, I tried to talk about my feelings to my mother, but she dismissed them declaring, "someone will think there's something wrong with you!"

Puberty and teenage years brought special agonies, but as well as wanting with all my heart to be female, I found girls strangely attractive, though, in retrospect, not perhaps in quite the way that other boys did. (I have always found male sexual fantasies strange and rather distasteful.) I wanted to love and to be loved. I wanted to share in the creation and nurturing of children. I wanted to be part of a stable relationship. These hopes were realised – wonderfully so, but my feelings of what I now recognise as gender dysphoria did not fade in the way that I and my wife both hoped. I yearned to wear female clothes, I wanted to share the experience of pregnancy, and I felt a profound and increasing sense of shame and of puzzlement. Despite this, and buoyed by my optimistic nature, I offered myself to the Church of England and was accepted for ordination. I had mixed feelings, but few regrets. I am ashamed to admit that I still did not find it within me, however, to talk about my gender problem with my bishop or the college authorities. It was my guilty secret – and I still hoped that it would go away.

I didn't know quite what I was, what was wrong with me, and why I felt the way I did. Labels like 'transvestite' and 'transsexual' meant very little. One day, during my curacy I found momentary relief by screaming, "I want to be a woman!" towards the Lady Chapel altar when I was supposed to be saying the office. But the intense sense of wrongness did not go away, and my wife and I both became more alarmed by it.

I began to cross-dress in private whenever I could, but ended up feeling a deeper sense of guilt and shame. I didn't want to deceive those I loved most. I did, however, find that dressed as a woman, I felt calmer and much more at ease. Increasingly, most of my more creative written work was done while 'dressed'.

The pressure mounted, and my wife became even more distressed. So did I. We talked for many hours. We both began to see that I could no longer sustain a male identity for even part of the time, without regular periods of 'being' female. I made contact with a national organisation principally for male transvestites, but their literature gave me little comfort. The experiences described therein did not ring many bells with me. I quickly recognised that whatever I was, I was not a transvestite.

Although the shared, open exploration of my problem helped us greatly, both my wife and I found being 'stuck in the middle' intolerable and I became ever more tense, withdrawn and depressed. My ministry suffered. Above all, I felt I was living a lie, such that it might well destroy my priesthood.

It was at this time, while still hoping against hope that I would not be drawn into a path that might threaten my marriage and just about all that I knew and valued, that I began this study. It was in some ways, an act of therapy or self-help, but I did not know what I would discover or quite where it would lead me. I very soon found that I was treading a lonely path. There was, and is, remarkably little published about gender dysphoria and transsexuality from a Christian perspective.

Also at roughly the same time as I began this study, I admitted that I needed medical help. In both enterprises, academic and medical I asked that I should be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. I am grateful to my supervisor, Robert Song of the University of Durham and to my doctor, Lyndsey Myskow of Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. They have both succeeded wonderfully in balancing kindness and compassion with a deep concern that I should proceed only in

accordance with the most stringent medical and academic standards. In the course of my studies, whenever I have failed to live up to these standards, it has been my fault alone.

In March 2004, I resigned my living at Bedlington. I began, at last, my life as Helen. My wife and family supported me fully and we began to adjust to a new life together, a life that has brought many new challenges but also a new and profound sense of relief. Even for my wife, what has been in part a process of bereavement has also brought a resolution and new hope for the future. Throughout all this I have tried to relate my experience to my faith. I could not have asked for a more intense project of practical theology! The results of my work, however, must only be judged by normally accepted academic criteria. I cannot pretend to look in upon transsexuality objectively, but I have attempted here to reveal as honestly as I am able my experiences, motivations and commitments.

The Aims of the Study

There are two aims of this study. They are linked. The first is to examine what the Christian theological tradition has to say about transsexuality and the second is to explore what the experience of transsexual people has to say to the Church, and to the formation of its theology and ethics.

Very little indeed has been written before this study about transsexuality from a Christian perspective. It did not emerge as a phenomenon until the second half of the twentieth century, and did not become a concern for Christian ethicists until it became clear that transsexual people might wish to marry or even apply to be ordained. The first influential British study to address it theologically was a short essay by Oliver O'Donovan,⁴ whose main concern was to guard against the possibility of same-sex marriages taking place in the Church of England. A decade later, another short booklet appeared, written by an Anglican priest, David Horton,⁵ who apparently unlike O'Donovan, had encountered a considerable number of transsexual,

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* (Bramcote: Grove, 1982).

⁵ David Horton, *Changing Channels: A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual* (Bramcote: Grove, 1994).

transgendered and transvestite people. He was not, however, a theologian of anything like the same insight or distinction, and his study is anodyne and unsatisfactory.

In the later 1990s several short papers were published in academic journals, all of which were in some measure critical of O'Donovan's hostile stance. The most important of these were by Rodney Holder,⁶ Victoria Kolakowski⁷ and Fraser Watts⁸. In 2000 however, the hugely influential Evangelical Alliance,⁹ alarmed as O'Donovan had been twenty years earlier, by the possibility of transsexual people being allowed to marry in the Church of England, and of gaining new rights in law, brought out a short but highly-publicised attack on transsexuality that added little to the theology expressed by O'Donovan, but provided a still more contentious account of the phenomenology of transsexuality. Finally, in 2003 the House of Bishops of the Church of England¹⁰ included transsexuality in a broader discussion document about human sexuality, but added no significant new insights. It was very clear when I began this study in 2000 that the lack of an in-depth, interdisciplinary study of transsexuality had contributed to many misunderstandings in the churches about its nature and to an often distorted and relatively superficial treatment of the theological issues that it posed.

Transsexual people themselves had not written a great deal either. There were a number of autobiographies, most notably that by the journalist and travel-writer Jan Morris,¹¹ and then with direct relevance to the position adopted by the Church of England, that by Mark Rees,¹² who had offered himself as a candidate for ordination, but had not been recommended for training, in part at least because according to British law at the time, he remained a biological female. In the United States and in Britain relatively large numbers of transgendered,

⁶ Rodney Holder, 'The Ethics of Transsexualism', Part One, *Crucible* (1998, no.2), 89-99, and Part Two, *Crucible* (1998, no.3), 125-36.

⁷ Victoria Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', *Theology and Sexuality* 6 (1997), 1-31.

⁸ Fraser Watts, 'Transsexualism and the Church', *Theology and Sexuality* 9, no.1 (2002), 63-85.

⁹ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality* (London: Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission, 2000).

¹⁰ House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003).

¹¹ Morris, *Conundrum*.

¹² Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam: The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London: Cassell 1996).

transsexual and transvestite Christians attempted to bandy biblical texts with those who used them to condemn them,¹³ but no substantial theological study of transsexuality founded on the experience of transsexual people has yet been published.

The Nature of the Study

This study is of necessity interdisciplinary. In the first part it draws upon insights from many fields of study including history, archaeology, anthropology, gender studies, sociology, psychology and medicine. In the second part these are joined by theology and theological ethics, but even here the nature of the material is again heterogeneous, from biblical studies and hermeneutics, patristic studies and church history, to ethics, pastoral theology and practical theology.

Throughout the study I have drawn from the personal stories of seven transsexual or transgendered Christians whom I interviewed over a period of eight months in 2002 and 2003.¹⁴ Appendix 1 gives more details of the circumstances of these interviews, and Appendix 2 the framework questions I used, but it is important to point out now that each interview was in two parts, the first a more general account of each person's life story and the second a more searching investigation of how they had made sense of their experience from the perspective of their faith.

I was only able to interview a few individuals because there are not many people in Britain who readily identify themselves as either transsexual or transgendered but also as Christian. I then discovered that many of those who do, from bitter experience of a hostile press, are extremely wary of talking about such deeply personal matters 'on the record'. If it had not been for the 'Sibyls', a Christian spirituality group for transgendered people, I very much doubt that I could have made contact even with these seven. In many other conversations, and especially with at least two-dozen other members of the Sibyls, I was able, informally, to

¹³ See for example, Julie Ann Johnson (ed.), *By the Grace of God: Lee Frances Heller and Friends: Writings for Families, Friends and Clergy* (Wheaton, Ill.: SSP, 2001).

¹⁴ From time to time, I have found it helpful to cite the same part of an interview in different parts of the study.

learn a great deal, to check out and to refine my impressions gained from the interviews and to explore a host of ideas.

It is, of course, a very small sample and of no statistical significance quantitatively, but qualitatively, as case studies, they are much more than just an illustrative device. Although some social scientists have questioned the reliability and representativeness of case studies, and in particular, have cautioned against trying to base generalisations upon them. It is also widely accepted that case studies are reliable and may even be representative if they can be used, for example, to qualify or disprove general statements, produce new insights, or serve as a pilot study.¹⁵ Indeed their strength may rest in their very particularity. This is endorsed by Liz Stanley, who from a feminist perspective argues that auto/biography, with its concern with the details of particular, points up the uniqueness of the lives written about.¹⁶ Of course there were times during the course of the interviews when I was either acutely aware or often suspected 'fractures, silences, secrets, elisions and excisions', but as Stanley points out, 'without a life that contains [these], neither would writing about that life contain these elements.'¹⁷ They are inevitable and unavoidable, an integral part of lives the stories of which are constructed afresh each time they are told, and it would be invidious and a mistake to attempt to list particular examples. As Peter says (page 64, below), 'my past doesn't tie up with my present.'

The seven case studies, together with the many more informal encounters, also provided an impressive, persuasive and valid basis on which to construct an exercise in practical theology, which has shaped both the process and content of the second part of this study. The

¹⁵ See, for example, Paul Taylor, et al., *Sociology in Focus* (Ormskirk: Causeway Press, 1995), 624. Very similar points are made by James Fulcher and John Scott, *Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2003), 77; by Tony Bilton, Kevin Bonnett, Pip Jones, Tony Lewson, David Skinner, Michelle Stanworth and Andrew Webster, *Introductory Sociology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 4th ed., 2002), 460-1; by Martin Haralambos and Martin Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (London: Collins Educational, 1995), 833, and by Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London: Routledge, 1992), 250. Sawyer concludes: 'We could easily criticize [research based upon case studies] for its incompleteness and apparently informal character, without thinking what else we could reasonably expect of research on this kind of subject'.

¹⁶ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 242.

¹⁷ Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, 109-10. (Stanley is not concerned with autobiography as case study as a sociological tool.)

theological method I have used begins from the standpoint of human experience, and draws upon a feminist model adopted and adapted by Nicola Slee in her study of women's faith development.¹⁸ She argues not only that the transparency of such qualitative research is its own grounding in subjectivity, but that the praxis model of practical theology,

explicitly roots all theological enquiry in concrete, historical and social experience as the 'first act' of theology, upon which the 'second act' of reflection is dependent. It holds a strong commitment to story as the primary data of theology, the first hand stories of those in a particular situation whose experience constitutes the lived reality of faith.¹⁹

She qualifies her understanding of experience here as "never understood in a naïve sense as 'given', as socially or politically innocent, uninformed by values or commitments." She then introduces the idea of a hermeneutic of suspicion, an idea that we shall later see is an important element in Susan Frank Parsons' understanding of the ethics of gender.²⁰ Such a hermeneutic of suspicion,

has to be brought to bear upon experience in the first place, to render visible the politics of bias inherent in any given social situation, including the reality of the church's institutional life, which is always situated in historical time and political place.

Slee thus concludes,

The critical analysis of experience upon which the wisdom, insights and the praxis model of theology is grounded is then brought into interaction with the wisdom, insights and practice of Christian tradition, via a reading of the scriptures, tradition,

¹⁸ It also has much in common with the model used by Ellen Clark-King in her study of the religious experiences of working class women in Newcastle upon Tyne. *Theology By Heart: Women, the Church and God* (Peterborough, Epworth, 2004). Clark-King argues that feminist theology not only shares liberation theology's concern to take human experience as their starting point, but that feminist theology may be seen as a form of liberation theology (2-3 and 14-15).

¹⁹ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 6-7.

²⁰ Susan Frank Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 5.

liturgy and spirituality of the church. Out of the dialogue and interaction between experience and Christian tradition, a new praxis is born, a critically informed social action which must itself then be submitted to fresh and ongoing analysis.

The methodology of theological reflection that I shall adopt in chapters 4 and 5 especially is based upon just such a praxis model of practical theology as Slee describes, a theology explicitly rooted in the first hand stories of transgendered people whose experience constitutes the lived reality of faith, expressed and validated in and through their 'ordinary' theology. I will discuss the methodological issues raised in further detail in those later chapters.

Some Key Definitions²¹

I hope it will be clear, especially from the first three chapters of this study that definitions sometimes prove a recipe for real misunderstanding, but that they are a necessary evil. It is not always easy to be consistent, but in the course of the study I have tried to use key terms in ways that are consonant, as far as possible, with their use, both within the transsexual community and by those who engage with and work with that community in a variety of ways. They are as follows:

Transsexuality The condition characterised by the experience of profound incongruity between a person's sense of gender identity and their apparent physical phenotype, sometimes described as *gender dysphoria*. Transsexual people wish to bring the whole of their bodies in line with their perceived gender identity. This may include hormonal medication and a range of surgical procedures.

²¹ For a fuller glossary of definitions relating to transsexuality, see for example Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: Garnet, 2000), 61-6. I have based my definitions here closely on those suggested by Whittle.

Transvestite A person who dresses in the clothes of the gender opposite to that corresponding to their anatomical sex. It is often compulsive behaviour and may sometimes, but not always, be associated with sexual stimulation. *Cross-dresser* is an alternative and often preferred term.

Transgender A term that became common from the 1970s to describe a wide spectrum of people who may include both transsexual people and transvestites, but which is also used more particularly to describe those who which to live, part-time or occasionally even permanently, in the gender role opposite to that corresponding to their anatomical sex.

Sex The sum of a large number of (still sometimes disputed) physical and psychological factors that characterise a person as variously male or female.

Gender An individual's sense of maleness or femaleness, expressed in different cultures and at different times in often subtly different ways. In some cultures there are three or more genders. The distinction between sex and gender is not always neat or clear, and is to some extent an Anglo-Saxon semantic device. It is not always accurate therefore to describe sex as a biological essential and gender as a social construction. Indeed, in many languages, there is no word for 'gender' in this sense.

Sexuality Although there is a commonly held understanding of sexuality as the condition of being characterised and distinguished by sex, and also of a sense of sexual self-awareness, in the context of this study I understand sexuality to refer more particularly to the sense of physical sexual attraction to persons of a particular sex or gender: sexual orientation.

An Overview of the Study

The study is in two parts. In the first, chapters 1 to 3, I seek to describe the phenomenon of transsexuality in a variety of cultural scientific and historical contexts.

In chapter 1, I explore the character of transsexuality, beginning with an account of transsexual and transgendered lives, as illustrated by the seven case studies. This gives rise to a number of issues and questions that invite more careful analysis, and which I then address in the rest of the chapter. I examine the aetiology of transsexuality and in particular, the evidence for psychological and/or physiological causes. I then consider the extent to which transsexual identity is formed by cultural conditions and expectations. I comment on the relationship between transsexuality and transvestism. I ask if there is a typical transsexual developmental 'career'. I then review the debate about whether or not transsexuality can be treated and how effective any such intervention is. Finally, I make some more general observations about transsexual identities today. My thesis in this chapter is that transsexuality is not related essentially to other forms of gender-variant behaviour, nor to sexuality, and is not a psychological illness open to a psychiatric 'cure'. It probably has a genetic or neurological cause. Treatment, in the form of 'gender re-assignment', when managed with sensitivity and care, normally, and in the vast majority of cases, effects a satisfactory and permanent resolution of the experience of gender dysphoria.

In chapter 2, I look for evidence of transsexuality in the past and in different cultures – a study of the roots and emergence of transsexuality. I begin with a critical survey of gender crossing and gender reversals in the archaeological record and in early history. I then look in more detail at two intriguing case studies: eunuchs in Roman and Byzantine society and cross-dressing early Christian saints. I survey the evidence for gender crossing and gender reversals in medieval and post-medieval Europe until the start of the nineteenth century. I examine accounts of gender crossing and gender reversals in non-European cultures and pay particular attention to 'two-sprits' in native North American societies. I then return to consider the impact of the Industrial Revolution on attitudes in European society to sex, gender and sexuality, to the polarization of gender roles, to the emergence of male transvestism, to the desire to legitimate homosexuality, to changing medical models of sex, and in relation to that, the particular problem of hermaphroditism, and finally to the first accounts of transsexual people. I shall show that from an historical perspective, the boundaries between third gender,

cross-dressing, androgyny and transsexuality are often irretrievably blurred. Although I believe that transsexuality is potentially a universal aspect of human experience and not merely a twentieth century construct, I argue that it only emerged fully when societal and medical factors converged to allow it to appear – for the first time in Germany in the 1920s.

In chapter 3, I look in more depth at the lives and experiences of transsexual people in Britain today. I begin by examining the ways in which transsexual people have sought to express their own identities corporately, and then explore a number of significant contexts for transsexual experience: the law, the media, the relationship with both feminism and homosexuality, and finally, the churches. In each of these, I shall show how as transsexuality began both to be defined in relationship to other gendered expressions of human experience, and more particularly to be seen as a problem, this resulted in a distorted and sometimes damaging understandings of its aetiology, and confusion in relationship to matters of sexuality, as transsexual people faced a considerable and often uphill battle to be accepted.

At the end of the chapter, I identify four issues: the nature of human identity and selfhood; the nature and purpose of human sexual identity; the extent to which sex/gender reassignment represents healing or fantasy and the question of whether or not the church ought to seek to oppose or to fight for the rights of transsexual people. These issues form a bridge into the second part of the study.

In the second part of the study, chapters 4 to 7, I explore the ways in which transsexual people have tried to make sense of their condition in the light of the Bible and the Christian tradition, and I examine what that tradition might have to say about transsexuality.

In chapter 4, I ask what the Bible has to say about transsexuality. I begin first by looking at ways in which transsexual and transgendered people have themselves addressed and asked questions of the biblical tradition. In this I draw upon the seven case studies. I note that the ways in which transgendered Christians use the Bible appears to be as significant as the conclusions they draw from that engagement. Secondly, I then turn to examine the ways in which a number of key Old and New Testament texts have been used, or may be used, to

construct a theological response to transsexuality and observe that although there is no scholarly consensus from a biblical perspective about transsexuality, biblical scholars do raise important issues about the context of transsexuality, especially about the nature of the body and the significance of community. Thirdly and finally, I turn to broader hermeneutical questions and explore ways by which the Bible might be better used to construct a more sustainable and creative theological response to transsexuality. I suggest that this may be done through a combination of trusting 'ordinary theology' as described by Jeff Astley and by engaging in 'creative fidelity' to Scripture.

In chapter 5, I turn to the issues and questions articulated by transsexual and transgendered people as they struggle to relate their experience to the tradition of Christian theology. I begin again by drawing upon the seven case studies. In particular, I explore how transsexual people construct their own theology and relate this process again to 'ordinary theology'.²² Out of this, I identify, and examine in some depth, three areas of belief significant to transsexual and transgendered people: beliefs about God and Jesus; about the role and the nature of the church; and about the body and the self. I conclude by asking whether transsexual theology is different from gay theology. The evidence of the case studies appears to suggest that it is.

In chapter 6, I turn to key areas of belief raised in the previous chapter by the subjects of the case studies, about the body and the self and its gendered identity, and examine how these have been addressed within the Christian tradition. I begin by considering their roots in Greek philosophy and the Hebrew biblical tradition, especially as that influences the thought of the New Testament. I then look to the debate in the early Church broadly (if anachronistically) from the perspectives of essentialism and constructionism²³ as they are expressed in the

²² Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

²³ The use of the terms 'essentialism' and 'constructionism' (or social constructionism) is discussed by Jeffrey Weekes, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 57-64. He concludes that the debate during the 1980s about the significance of the distinction between the two was 'ultimately tedious' and considers that terms such as 'constructionism' are no more than heuristic devices, which should not obscure the proper ambivalence and ambiguity of sexual lives, but nevertheless offers the following definition:

[Essentialism] is a method which attempts to explain the properties of a complex whole by reference to a supposed inner truth or essence, the assumption 'that in all sexological matters there must be a single, basic, uniform pattern ordained by nature

writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian on the one hand, and by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the other. I comment on the rejection of the Origenist tradition in the theologies of Jerome and Augustine, and I draw attention to the abiding fear of Gnosticism within western theologies. I then turn to the twentieth century to examine how recent feminist and feminist-influenced theologies have shed new light on the significance of the claims of essentialist and constructionist understandings of the body and of human personhood. In particular, I examine Christian ethical perspectives on sex and gender in the writing of four contemporary theologians: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Elaine Graham, Susan Frank Parsons and Rowan Williams. I also note the rediscovery and rehabilitation of Origen and Gregory.

I conclude the study with chapter 7, where I attempt to suggest some of the elements of a Christian theology of transsexuality. I begin by summarising the argument of the six preceding chapters and then examine other Christian theological and ethical responses to transsexuality. As I consider Christian ethics and the experience of transsexual people, I ask four questions: why are transsexual people a problem? gender reassignment: fantasy or healing? how does one know oneself as significant? and how does transsexual experience affect what the church should say about sex and gender?

My thesis is that transsexual people are a problem because they disrupt boundaries accepted (usually implicitly) by society, but that the experience of transsexual people both offers the opportunity to re-examine such boundaries and also points us to the hope that in God's new creation, identity and difference, though significant, are less important than our unity in Christ.

Gender reassignment, as the case studies show, can and does represent healing, and often in a more profound and subtle way than the medical-therapeutic model of healing suggests. It may involve a strong social dimension, and similarly also for the Christian a dimension of

itself' ... Against this approach I shall argue that the meanings we give to 'sexuality' are socially organized, sustained by a variety of languages which seek to tell us what sex is, what it ought to be – and what it could be (57-8).

See also Elaine L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender Personhood and Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 77-98. Graham traces the origin of the understanding of 'biological essentialism' back to the inheritance of Darwinism, which tried to provide a scientific and objective account of human nature, and describes how 'social constructionism' emerged largely out of the feminist movement of the 1970s.

salvation in the sense of the restoration of life in Christ. Gender reassignment is not an attempt to transcend the created order, but to restore and fulfil it.

The knowing of oneself as significant must take place in society and in the context of a loving caring community. The transsexual body no less than any other body is a being for others. Transsexual experience, like feminist experience, takes embodiment seriously, and sees the world from that vantage point. It urges the church to be cautious about speaking about sex and gender and to encourage it to engage with pluralism and complexity. It encourages the church to listen before speaking.

There are two appendices. In the first I give brief information about the circumstances of each of the interviews. In the second I outline the questions that formed the basis of the seven case studies.

1 The character of transsexuality

Transsexual lives introduction

One is not born transsexual; one becomes transsexual, for whether transsexuality has a primary physiological cause, or one rooted in the complex interplay of psychology and culture, it is manifested in the stories of human lives. Stories are the bedrock of this study. As far as possible, they are told in the words of transsexual and transgendered people themselves. They reflect their struggle for self-understanding and integrity, and also their faith.

The words of the seven subjects of my case studies provide, then, not only a foundation, but also a common thread through the whole study. By means of an introduction, and before I can begin to attempt any kind of discussion, I begin with a brief outline of each life. In each case, I have used only the name and personal pronouns appropriate to their reassigned or desired gender status.

Bernadette

Bernadette was born in 1927 in South London. She was the only child of eccentric, middle class, devoutly Anglo-Catholic parents. Her parents' somewhat particular relationship is shown in her comic account of the event of their wedding, which was quickly followed by her conception and birth:

[My mother] married poor old John because [he] was all that was left. After a sumptuous wedding breakfast, preceded by the ultimate in nuptial masses, off they went on so-called honeymoon, for which my mother was not entirely prepared. She didn't think it was going to be like that, though she never defined what the 'it' was. Very shortly afterwards they came back and set up house in South London. And my mother found that she was pregnant, but didn't know why. A great friend of hers, who

had married a medical man, explained it to her, whereupon my father was banished to another bedroom for the rest of his life, from which he never reappeared.

Another disappointment was to follow:

The only redeeming feature was that they really wanted a boy. Well, before five and twenty minutes had passed, they suddenly discovered that the boy wasn't quite the boy they thought they'd got. The boy was convinced he was a girl, even at five.

Bernadette's parents, perhaps unusually for their time, sought medical help, but the only advice they received was to try to 'make a man of him.' Their solution was to 'remove far distant' everything feminine from her. Bernadette was 'made to use carbolic soap and sent to the toughest public school they could find around.' Such a 'solution' proved utterly ineffective, but Bernadette, who never concealed her feelings from her schoolmasters, coped, as far as possible, by immersing herself in academic work and then in a highly distinguished scientific career, often very much in the public eye. She married Joyce, and became stepfather to two teenage children. But the conviction that she was female did not disappear. In times of stress it became especially difficult to contain.

All through my career and life, the gender thing had bubbled underneath. But every now and again, everything would go wrong, and I'd have to take time to recover. Well, it was just getting worse and worse.

Eventually, in her early fifties, she became seriously epileptic. The neurologist treating her recognised that the root cause of her problems lay in the stress caused by her gender dysphoria. The advice she received was unequivocal:

"Look, there's only one thing you can do. You've got to go through a reassignment procedure. There is no alternative."

Well aware that treatment under the National Health Service might involve a tortuously long wait, Bernadette decided to seek treatment privately.

Fortunately, I'd had a life-insurance pay out which just about covered the cost, which, even in those days [1980] amounted to getting on for twenty grand.

Her marriage survived, though Bernadette now describes her relationship with Joyce as being between sisters.

Before reassignment, unlike many transsexual people, she did not cross-dress.

I was never a transvestite. Until I'd made all the other transitions there was no incentive. It was an incentive to be something, not to act like something.

Bernadette is certain that without gender reassignment she would not have survived, but is now re-energised and leads a very full life. In retirement, she chairs her parish council, is organist and choir-mistress of her parish church (and organ adviser to two Anglican dioceses), broadcasts regularly on local radio, and acts as an advisor to her local Primary Health Care Trust. She concludes:

The person I am is a woman. I do things, I think things, I act things, about things and in contexts, as a woman thinks.

Phyllis

Phyllis was born in May 1942. Her father was an Anglican priest. By the age of five she realised that she was 'different', but as she grew up, she didn't know where to turn for help.

In a medium-sized community, you've got two people you can usually rely on to go and see. One is the vicar, who's your father; the other is the doctor, who's a friend. So you're just stuck.

She was tempted to try on her sister's clothes, but being scared of spoiling them, found church rummage sales a better source of female clothing. As she got older, cross-dressing also became associated with new, far more disturbing feelings:

All the clothes were stored at the vicarage. I used to [find] things that would fit me. It was a twenty-two-roomed house. I used to go into the back and no one else bothered, and I used to get dressed. And then you get guilty because it excites you sexually when you're young, but you don't know why. And it's dirty. I used to have a bonfire, and a week later, I'd be looking for some more [clothes].

She was sent to private boarding school, an unhappy time dominated by memories of one traumatic event: she was raped by an older boy. After leaving school she became a mechanic, and in a desperate attempt to suppress her compulsion to cross-dress, determined to be as macho a male as possible, even at the expense of personal care:

I'd actually try to get dirty – well, you can't put on a dress, you know, if you're mucked up. I never looked after my teeth or anything like that. A spanner slipped one day and knocked one. Pull it out! Oh don't bother! No one would argue with me, you know.

She worked in the haulage industry and built up a breakdown business. She drove heavy goods vehicles and became a transport manager. She married and divorced twice and fathered two daughters (both of whom now no longer wish to see her), and began to drink heavily. There were other relationships, but when making love she imagined 'I was receiving not giving'. She began to cross-dress more regularly, with the acceptance of her then partner, and became Phyllis 'socially or at home'. She eventually talked to her GP about her feelings. 'He didn't know anything about it', but contacted Charing Cross Hospital and

supervised hormone treatment. She continued to work as a male by day and was relieved not to lose her job when she told her superiors about the process on which she'd embarked. Her work mates, however, began to exclude her from social events. A serious back injury proved a major setback, and she had to wait a further three years before gender reassignment surgery could be attempted. She was now past her mid fifties. Even then, all did not run smoothly. The surgery (in North Wales) was not fully successful.

I actually went down to theatre three times in a fortnight. I got to a state and I was actually disgusted at what I'd got. I couldn't look at it. I wouldn't look. I just couldn't.

Despite further medical problems, and until she moved house, a difficult time, during which she suffered petty vandalism to her property on the estate where she lived, Phyllis expresses no regrets about her decision to go forward for surgery.

As far as I'm concerned, I've had had something that was wrong put right. I haven't had a sex change; I've had a correction.

Her frustration with the results of her surgery is focussed on her inability to lead a full sex-life.

It's not right. And you're just told," Well there's other things you can do, you don't have to have penetration". Well, I'm sorry, I've just gone through puberty. I've looked for this all my life.

Susie

Susie was born in December 1945 and grew up, in a working class family, in Portsmouth. She had one, older, brother. She recognised that she had a problem at a very early age:

By age four, I knew that something was wrong with me. I was petrified that anyone would find out about it and did all I could to ensure that nobody's suspicions were

aroused. I remember, before going to school at four and a half years old, my mother trying to put a pair of white socks on me, and me resisting and crying.

She has a vivid memory of cross-dressing when she was about ten, and also the occasion when she chose her name:

A couple of skirts hung over the banisters and I tried them on. Of course they were far too big, but just wearing women's clothes was a great release. It was not very long after this that I decided that I should be called Susan, but I didn't tell anyone else.

She describes how, during her teens, when she was alone in the house, she would dress in her mother's clothes, and on the Mondays when her mother worked, even wore 'whatever underwear I could find' to school. On one occasion she was almost found out:

My parents found depressions on the bed where I'd sat one day to look through Mum's dressing table drawers. I vehemently denied being in the room, and then said I'd only just sat on the bed. I think my mum might have been wise to my actions, but nothing was said.

Susie also records two other significant experiences. The first caused her some shame and confusion:

Regrettably my hormones started getting busy around then, and masturbation whilst dressed as a woman was, perhaps, the substitute for the girl friend I couldn't have, or maybe, the girl that I couldn't be. I'm not sure which.

The second helped her to better understand her feelings, but also caused her more dismay:

I was about fourteen, when I saw an article [in a Sunday paper] concerning Jan Morris and her gender reassignment surgery. When I saw the cost of the operation,

*my heart sank. I had found out the nature of my condition, but felt that I would never be able to do anything about it.*¹

Aged about 23, Susie decided to do something 'about this problem that had been attempting to destroy me since early childhood'. She verged on the suicidal. She was referred to a hospital psychologist and asked to be 'cured, for the feelings to go away.' He carried out aversion therapy (electric shock) and recommended marriage ('That will cure you'). Susie's response was to place an advertisement in the local paper. A young woman replied, they met, and eventually married, but it was quickly apparent that the 'cure' had not worked.

I guess because we were both lonely, love of a sort blossomed, [but] we never had a physical relationship.

In 1980, nine years into the marriage, Susie came clean about her feeling and her desire for gender reassignment. Two years later she began hormone treatment, but in January 1985, in an attempt to save her marriage, she withdrew from treatment. She managed to maintain a veneer of normality at work and at home, but suffered occasional bouts of depression. In 1998, however she felt that she 'could take no more.' She sought help from Dr. Russell Reid, who again prescribed hormone treatment. A year later she underwent a bilateral orchidectomy. In June 2002 she legally changed her name and began to live full-time as Susie. At last, in the spring of 2004, after a series of postponements caused by a blood disorder, she was able to have full gender reassignment surgery. Her marriage eventually

¹ Susie is probably mistaken here. Morris did not undergo surgery until 1972 (Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (London: Faber and Faber, 2nd ed., 2002)). Her story did indeed receive a great deal of attention from the media, especially following the publication of her autobiography, but it is much more likely that Susie remembers an earlier account of transsexual surgery. A huge amount of publicity was given to Christine Jorgensen's story in the years following her surgery in 1952 (see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2002); and in the United Kingdom, around the time that Susie remembers the newspaper article, in the late 1950s or early 60s, the stories of Roberta Cowell and April Ashley were widely publicised. Ashley's sex change was reported in *The News of the World* in May and June 1962 (see Dave King, 'Cross-Dressing, Sex-Changing and the Press', in Richard Ekins and Dave King (eds.), *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 141.

failed. Twenty years earlier she had come to some conclusions about her the relationship of her gender identity to her sexuality:

I deduced that I must be a heterosexual woman with a male body. My feelings towards other women were, generally, only friendship and jealousy, although there were one or two lesbian encounters. As a male, however, I was not attracted to men; as a woman, I am.

Jenny-Anne

Jenny-Anne was born in 1946 in South London. She too, realised from about the age of four, that there was 'something wrong' with her gender status.

I much preferred to play with the girls, and, in secret, dressed as a girl, by borrowing my mother's and sister's clothes. All through my teenage years I would anxiously wait our home being empty, so that I could dress as my true self.

She read stories of gender transformations in the popular press (including the story of Christine Jorgensen) and was heartened to find that others shared her feelings. Later, at university, she read the work of early researchers into gender problems, including Alfred Kinsey and Robert Masters. This prompted her to seek medical advice for herself.

I was given the same unhelpful advice as was then given to gay people: take lots of cold showers, get yourself a girlfriend to settle down with, and forget all thoughts of gender reassignment.

She duly fell in love, married and fathered two children.

But the feelings of presenting the wrong image persisted.

She began again to cross-dress, for a while with the encouragement of her wife, and sought to make contact with other transgendered people. She joined the Beaumont Society² and began to venture out in public.

All this led to problems in my marriage. We separated for a year (in 1980) while we tried to sort the gender difficulties I had. I went to see a psychotherapist in London (John Randell), who spent the entire session trying to persuade me to start taking female hormones and go down the course leading to gender reassignment surgery.

This was, in fact, a strategy commonly used at this time by Randell to *dissuade* heterosexual males from cross-dressing, which he saw as an obsessive-compulsive disorder.³ In Jenny-Anne's case it failed. She went back to her wife and together agreed times when Jenny-Anne could 'emerge from the chrysalis'.

I was fortunate in coming to terms with my transgendered status, and stopped feeling guilty about it.

As Jenny-Anne started to establish a life of her own, so over a period of about ten years, her marriage gradually failed and a divorce followed. After living on her own for a few years, retaining a male persona for work, but a female one socially, Jenny-Anne found a new partner, who accepted her in both roles and helped to satisfy her continuing need as a male for heterosexual sex.

² The Beaumont Society is the largest UK national association of transvestite and transsexual people, founded in 1966. It is mostly orientated to the needs and experiences of heterosexual male cross-dressers.

³ J.B. Randell (sometimes 'Randall'), who practised at Charing Cross Hospital, London, from 1950 to 1982, used oestrogen (as did Harry Benjamin in New York) 'not as a prelude to surgery but to reduce the compulsion to cross-dress or seek sex-change' (Dave King, 'Gender Blending: Medical Perspectives and Technology', in Ekins, and King (eds.), *Blending Gender*, 93). Quite how Randell imagined this to work is not entirely clear, although some contemporary practitioners observe (personal communication) that in a very few cases, the start of hormone treatment has the effect of re-establishing a gender role consonant with the person's apparent phenotype. In this limited way, the administration of hormones may serve as a kind of crude diagnostic tool.

She continues to dismiss the possibility of taking female hormones, but hopes, one day, for breast augmentation. She sometimes expresses a desire to live much more fully as Jenny-Anne, but while she still needs employed work, feels that such a transition is not viable. On one occasion, she feels that the act of informing her employers about her cross-dressing led directly to her dismissal.

I feel much happier presenting as a woman, and I'm sure that I'm a more confident and likeable person as Jenny-Anne. It's hard to change back into my male guise, and I always prefer to be my true, female, self.

At other times, she prefers to see herself 'almost as an in-between person.'

If I want to dress as a woman, and present myself as a woman, why shouldn't I? I care very much about [my partner] and our physical relationship.

On a visit to Brazil she was taken to see 'she-males'.⁴

And I thought, if you could take away the obvious prostitution issues, that's how I'd like to be, but a more acceptable she-male. I'm a transgendered person in the middle.

Ruth (pseudonym)

Ruth was born in 1950, the youngest child of a military family. Her earliest memories of her gender identity problem began to focus when she was about four. A little later, she felt that 'I ought to be a girl.'

I felt wrong at that point and used to wander around my bedroom with my dressing gown tied around my waist. When I was seven, a couple of my mother's old slips

⁴ She-males are primarily homosexual prostitutes, some of whom have feminised their bodies by taking female hormones, but retain male genitals, while others have gone as far as gender reassignment surgery. See, for example, Vern. L Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 302.

*were lying around, and I sort of put them together and made my first ever long dress.
I still love long dresses.*

She describes how there were episodes, up to and around puberty, when the compulsion to cross dress came to the fore, and 'I would push it away'.

I remember stealing a cocktail dress from a jumble sale and wearing it, and feeling very, very guilty, and sneaking it back again.

From puberty into early adulthood she coped with her feelings by trying to push them away and immersing herself in work. There were times, however, when her sense of unease came very much to the surface.

One of the most poignant experiences was taking this young lady to a formal dance. I had to take her dress over to my place, so she could change there. Walking through the town with an evening dress hung over my arm was really a very complex feeling – a bit of embarrassment, and shame, and desire – everything like that.

She thought that going into the navy and getting married would solve her problems, but neither did. She tried to explain her feeling to her fiancée, but she also felt that she didn't really understand them herself. She did her best to suppress them by occupying her mind and her time as fully as possible. She hoped they would go away, but when her feelings came to the fore she found them distressing.

It was very frightening in the sense that I was trying to push [them] away, and yet [they were] obviously too much part of me to do so.

Sometimes they were 'almost uncontrollable':

I mean it took me six weeks after we were married before I started investigating my wife's wardrobe. And I hated that. I didn't want to. It felt disloyal.

She maintained her strategy of suppression, avoidance and hard work over many years. She left the navy, and after re-entering civilian life, felt called to offer herself for the ordained ministry of the Church of England, and was accepted for training. Shortly after being ordained priest, in the course of her pastoral duties, she was approached for help by a transvestite, and encounter that led her to face her own gender confusion afresh.

He lent me stuff about the Beaumont Society and Beaumont Trust and it struck chords. The idea that there were other people like me, who felt that their body hadn't worked out right, who were coping by occasionally visiting femininity explained the episodes [in my life] for me.

She met other transvestites, began to cross dress herself and gradually learned more about gender dysphoria. At a conference, she began to realise that transvestism might not be an adequate description of her condition.

There was a slide show from one of the surgeons [who performed gender reassignment surgery], showing all the gory bits. The joke was [at that time] that it was a kind of diagnostic tool. The transsexuals looked forward, and were interested in every detail, and the transvestites turned green and left the place. And I didn't leave. I found it very interesting.

She began to find cross-dressing in the context of transvestite groups unsatisfying and 'unnatural'. Changing from one to the other was unsettling. She found it more acceptable to be either male or female and felt that being female was like 'coming home'. Thinking, therefore, that she might be transsexual she visited two gender psychiatrists, who both agreed that she was gender dysphoric. She felt, and still feels, however, that to explore gender reassignment would threaten her marriage. Despite bouts of depression and failing

health, she decided to continue a pattern in which she would live and work mostly in her male role, but to retreat to safe places for several days where 'I could be me the whole time.' She admits that this way of coping is not very successful.

Prisca (pseudonym)

Prisca was born in Oldham in about 1952. She describes her gender dysphoria as a mental conflict, which began early.

I remember on my first day of school, at the age of four, I had to line up with the boys, but I really wished that I could be a girl and be with the girls. By the age of eight, I had a really desperate need to flee from having to be a boy all the time, and I started cross-dressing in secret. After acquiring a wig at the age of twelve, lived a double life as a girl for much of my adolescence. I felt more comfortable female.

The wig and clothes had to be hidden away carefully and the double life was far from easy. On at least one occasion it was even dangerous; Prisca was the subject of a violent attack by a man.

In later adolescence, she developed much stronger male characteristics and realised that her double life was no longer possible. Highly intelligent and academically diligent, she left school to read history at Oxford. Her feelings did not disappear. She was well aware of the 'concept of transsexuality' and always had a 'lurking fear' that this might be her lot too.

However I comforted myself with the thought that I must be OK, because I have never fancied men, my male bits worked and I seemed to have turned out to be properly male after all – what a relief! For years, I feared that I would never be able to marry or to have children.

She fell in love and married, and by managing to suppress her gender problems for the first few years of marriage, felt confident that there was, indeed, nothing wrong.

But gradually she started to feel more affinity with women than with men. 'I cross-dressed occasionally because I felt I had to escape from myself somehow.' She fathered five children, but tragedy struck when one of her daughters became seriously ill. In order to cry or indeed to 'feel anything much', Prisca felt the need to cross dress. When, however, her daughter died, she resolved to stop. Her wife was advised not to have any more children and was sterilised. Their sex life became more difficult. Prisca gradually found penetrative sex more difficult. Feeling that she 'couldn't connect with her body any longer', and also experiencing depression, stress, high blood pressure and psoriasis, she sought psychosexual help. She was diagnosed as transsexual.

This was a shuddering blow. I cried for two hours rather than jumping for joy. This was because I realised the rotten implications: inability to be a proper husband, a public freak, an embarrassment [to my family], and finally, a future as a despised pariah. Apparently all this must somehow be my fault and I must be under some form of curse.

Relationships with people in the leadership of her (conservative evangelical) church did, indeed, turn out to be difficult; and the problem of how, and when, to tell her youngest son what is to happen, has caused more heartache. One close family member has rejected her. Nevertheless, under medical supervision, she began to take hormones in the summer of 2003 and soon felt a new sense of stability and contentment. She wishes to remain married. She feels that she has become a more empathic and compassionate person. The psoriasis lessened and her blood pressure began to come down. Electrolysis, a lengthy and often painful process, has proved more distressing. The final step to live full-time as a woman has also proven to be a huge and daunting step, even though she recognises it as the only way forward for her.

I have sought to be healed of this condition, but I have come increasingly to see that I have ended up fighting God by trying to make myself something other than what I am. I have not been healed in response to my prayer, because I have, in fact, been praying to be somebody else.

Peter

Peter was born in Dublin in 1961, the eldest of four children of a Protestant family. He too became aware of feeling different at an early age.

I just thought I was me, until I went to school. I suppose I was about four when, all of a sudden, I was on the wrong side of the class. All the girls were on this side and I was put in with all the girls, and all the boys were on the other side. So I went APE, and I fought the girl I was sitting beside. I was so badly behaved that they put me with the boys, and I was fine!

He dreamed of being a boy. He doesn't remember enjoying childhood very much, describes himself as being a 'very serious character' and suspects that he suffered from depression. Adolescence was worse.

[It] was just horrendous. And I think what I did, was I just lived in my head, I didn't have a body. And you know, you hear about mothers sort of celebrating with their daughters by going out and buying the first bra? Well, I just ignored it, and [hoped] it might just go away! I don't think I really lived in my body at all; I just lived in my head. The older I [was], the more depressed I became.

He left school, and began to train as a physiotherapist. One reason for the choice of career was that he could wear trousers all day, and not a skirt. He failed the first year, became more depressed, and was referred to a psychiatrist who prescribed antidepressants. As these didn't seem to make much difference, he was sent to another psychiatrist.

It didn't really do me all that much good. She was the first person to whom (at the age of nineteen), I said, "I don't want to be a woman!" We talked it through a lot. She said, at the end of the day, "it's not an option, there's no option, get yourself a sports bra and get on with your life!" So in a sense, I think all I did then was, I just shoved it all down inside me.

He managed to complete his training and found a job, but hated it.

I wanted space. I just wanted to be me [though] I didn't know what me was. At that stage I was wearing all my father's cast-off shirts. I only wore jeans, sandals or trainers, and would not wear anything feminine unless I absolutely had to. I remember thinking to myself, "I want to be a gender-less blob." So I put on weight and I was a gender-less blob.

He was worried too because he found himself attracted to women. By now, he'd become heavily involved with evangelical Christian groups and had been taught that homosexuality was sinful. He internalised his feelings even more and became still more depressed. Desperate for help, aged about twenty-four, he twice submitted himself to a five-hour deliverance session. At the end of all this, he was taken out shopping to buy feminine clothes. He thought he had been healed. He moved to a new hospital and was befriended by a member of the medical staff. Flattered that anyone should take an interest in him, he fell in love. They married and moved to England.

But the trouble was, it just didn't work out. I was fascinated by his body, but we hadn't slept together before we got married because we were good Christians. I couldn't take intercourse. It was absolutely horrendous. So there was a huge rift at the very beginning. He wanted children. I didn't.

After a year of marriage, however, he agreed to try for a child, became pregnant, and gave

birth to a son. He couldn't cope with the baby, and sank further into depression. He sought further psychiatric help, and asked for counselling at church. Nothing he tried worked. Eventually he went to see a gestalt therapist, a former Roman Catholic priest. This finally proved to be the key that enabled him to understand himself and freed him to move on.

He made me challenge everything. He challenged my faith, he challenged my understanding. Basically, he almost gave me permission to explore myself, and to become my own person, to come out of my head and live in my body; and that was just an incredible experience.

Peter began to wear androgynous clothing and to reject anything feminine. The marriage came under increasing strain, but only failed after he discovered that his husband was having an affair. He asked his GP for help, but only discovered what to do next after phoning a female-to-male transsexual help-line. He went to see Russell Reid, began hormone treatment and later underwent surgery. He began to train as an accountant and finally divorced. After a court battle, he managed to retain custody of his son, and began a new relationship - with a woman. Even so, many things still proved difficult, even at work.

You were terrified of being found out. You'd go to the gents and even though you'd use a cubicle, you'd be terrified somebody was going to look under the door. You had all these fears and worries. But at the end of the day I was being myself.

Transsexual lives – discussion

These brief biographies are a vivid illustration of some of the ways in which gender dysphoria affects lives today. They are merely an illustration; their role as case studies in this study is qualitative, not quantitative – for that, a far larger sample would be needed. Nevertheless, I wish to draw attention to some of the common themes and issues that emerge from them, in the belief that they will provide a helpful starting point for a wider discussion of transsexual identity, aetiology and characteristics.

It is striking that, in every case, the stories begin with a recognition that some was 'wrong' at a very early age. If this was not actually one of the very first memories, then it was certainly well established by the age at which school began, an event that often proved puzzling and even traumatic for someone confused by their gender identity.

However and whenever established, that sense of wrongness did not go away, although as Susie's story shows, such feelings may also be accompanied, from almost the beginning, by a sense of shame or guilt in realising that one is differently gendered. Attempts to impose, by behavioural means, a strong sense of gender identity in line with the person's apparent physical sex in Bernadette's words 'to make a man' of him, did not succeed in early life, nor later, if the person wished to attempt that for themselves, as in Phyllis's desperate measures to be as macho as possible, or Ruth's military career.

Teenage years, fraught with difficulty for many young people become even more problematic for the gender dysphoric person. The effect of puberty is especially traumatic and confusing, as both Susie's and Phyllis's honest accounts of sexual arousal and masturbation show. Cross-dressing, once, and for most (though not all), an escape, may then assume a dimension that is far more disturbing.

There are many ways in which feelings of gender dysphoria may be, at least temporarily, suppressed. Hard work, as in Bernadette or Ruth's case, can be effective for a while. The advice given by psychotherapists in the late 1950s to Susie and Jenny Anne to go away and get married, certainly did not effect a 'cure', although as Prisca's story well illustrates, those who are gender dysphoric, may themselves also hope that it might prove to be the right course of action. This feeling is intensified, of course, by a basic human desire for love, companionship and family, and in some cases at least, for sexual fulfilment. Relationships entered into for what seemed like the very best of motives, may then turn into a major source of conflict, and even at best, contain the potential for much misunderstanding and anguish, as personal boundaries shift or are threatened, as Ruth's story shows.

The path to reassignment is often long and tortured. Denial and suppression are its characteristics. Any acceptance of the need to seek help is certainly far from being a lifestyle choice. The effect of prolonged suppression and denial seems clear. Depression, and sometimes more obviously visible physical illness, eventually take their toll. In some cases, as for example, Bernadette's, the sheer strain of keeping up appearances may result in a catastrophic break down of health. After a diagnosis of gender dysphoria has been accepted, sometimes in itself a traumatic event, the need to proceed quickly to treatment appears to become much more urgent. Bernadette makes a grim observation:

The wait for gender reassignment on the National Health Service is sufficiently long, that the waiting list is self-limiting by suicide.

Not surprisingly many turn, at least in part, to the private sector. In the United Kingdom, for example, some of these go to Russell Reid a Consultant Psychiatrist based in London, for psychiatric support and to begin hormonal treatment. It is a long and often lonely path to surgery, which as Phyllis' experience demonstrates, may not always turn out to be quite all that was hoped for.

Treatment and full reassignment does seem to bring release and comfort, even a real healing, although this may be hard won, and at the expense of damaged relationships. The transsexual person must make many adjustments, not all of which she may have anticipated. In addition to re-forming many everyday social roles, she may have to cope with a new sense of sexuality. Susie expresses this succinctly: "As a male ... I was not attracted to men; as a woman, I am." Phyllis's sexuality also underwent a significant change.

All the people I interviewed take a lively interest in the quest to understand the causes of gender dysphoria, but their first concern was to try to make sense of their own life, and especially to seek reassurance that their experiences were known and shared by others. Jenny-Anne researched the background to her condition carefully. The young Phyllis pored over her grandfather's encyclopaedias in vain for information. Stories in the popular press

certainly helped to define transsexual identities, even if, as for Susie, they also demonstrated how daunting, and expensive, the future might be. A lack of information could be equally significant. Peter had no model against which to assess his feelings:

I wasn't a woman, but I wasn't a man. I hadn't even met a homosexual; I didn't know what they were. So, in a sense I didn't know that there was such a thing as me. All I knew was that there were men who dressed up in women's clothes and I knew I wasn't that.

Jenny-Anne and Ruth have not sought gender reassignment. Jenny-Anne identifies herself as 'transgendered', and does not express a wish to live, fully, in either the male or female role. In this, her behaviour corresponds more to the model of 'transvestite' as suggested by Ruth's rough definition. Bernadette is unique in the group in not having cross-dressed before she underwent reassignment, and thus says that she was 'never a transvestite.'⁵ Ruth thought for a while that 'transvestite' was a reasonable description of her condition, but then decided that it was inadequate. The border between 'transvestite' and 'transsexual' does not always appear to be easy to define, and those who, later, recognise themselves as transsexual, may go through a period, even of many years, when their gender dysphoria seems to manifest itself, mainly, in a compulsion to cross-dress. The effort of maintaining a dual male/female role, does, in itself, appear to be draining and confusing, even if, as in Jenny-Anne's case, that is where someone seems to feel most at ease.

From this brief set of observations, a number of questions and issues that demand a wider and more careful consideration have become clear. These include: Is there a typical 'transsexual career'? To what extent is transsexual identity formed by cultural conditions and expectations? What is the relationship between transsexuality, transvestism and other variant forms of gendered behaviour and sexuality? What are the causes of transsexuality? How may it be treated? Can the effects of treatment be adequately assessed and evaluated?

⁵ Bernadette's case is unusual. The NHS in the United Kingdom follows the protocols of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. This requires patients undergoing gender reassignment surgery to live successfully for at least one year full-time (and more often two) in the role of the sex they wish to become.

I begin by examining the causes of transsexuality.

The causes of transsexuality

Transsexual people, those who offer them treatment, and those who oppose it, are all united in the hope of discovering the root cause(s) of gender dysphoria. What is clear, is that gender identity seems to be established early in life, and then remains remarkably stable and consistent, even if, as in the case of the transsexual person, it appears, by most readily observable criteria, to be at odds with all other features that define physical sex. Throughout the century or so that the existence and persistence of gender dysphoria has been recognised, the lack of an obvious cause has usually prompted one of two theoretical responses: either it is caused by physical factors the evidence for which will become clearer with further research, or else it is a psychological disorder, even, according to some, a form of mental illness. It is possible, of course, that its roots may lie in a combination of physiological and psychological factors. It may be, for example, a physical predisposition, which may be triggered by particular psychological or environmental circumstances.

Psychological causes?

The number of those who favour an exclusively psychological cause has dwindled steadily since its peak in the 1960s, when such beliefs characterised the majority of those who, within the medical profession, addressed gender problems. They were (hardly surprisingly) themselves mostly psychologists and psychotherapists. The psychological reasons they suggested for gender dysphoria were, however, at best hazy, such as inappropriate or distorted relationships with parents in early childhood, which, of course, lay beyond the possibility of testing.⁶

⁶ See, for example, Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 106-11, which includes observations on the 1954 symposium held by the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, at which Emile Gutheil not only pointed to problems in early childhood as the cause of male to female transvestism and transsexuality, but to 'six psychopathological factors': homosexuality 'with an unresolved castration complex', sadomasochism, narcissism, scopophilia, exhibitionism and fetishism. Of course, in 1954, the very concept of transsexuality was novel.

Forty years later, the most influential proponent of what, at first, appears to be a psychological cause is Ray Blanchard. He suggests that there are two main types of male to female transsexual, differentiated by, and essentially linked to, sexual orientation: feminine homosexuals and heterosexuals. The latter, he suggests, are affected by a kind of pathological narcissism in which they construct a fantasy of themselves as female, or as he describes it, 'autogynephilia' (the erotic love of oneself as a woman). In relatively mild form, autogynephilia may be expressed by fetishistic cross-dressing; more seriously, when it is associated with a desire to change the body itself, it becomes more truly gender dysphoric.⁷ Blanchard's view has been even more vigorously re-stated by J. Michael Bailey, who goes as far as to suggest that, in comparison with homosexual transsexuals, autogynephiles fail to present a convincingly feminine image.⁸ Blanchard and Bailey's theories might seem more persuasive if they were open to the possibility of much more rigorous empirical testing (Bailey's work, in particular, is unencumbered by anything more than anecdotal evidence); but a more serious flaw is that they are concerned solely with male to female transsexuality, and do not attempt to address questions about the character, or of the causes, of female to male transsexuality. They may, perhaps, help to explain the phenomenon of some forms of male cross-dressing, but fall well short of providing an adequate theory even of male to female transsexuality. Bernadette, for example, provides a clear example of someone who does not seem to fit either the category of autogynephilia, or of homosexual transsexual. Even if Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia could be shown to be correct, Bailey at least, concedes that, together with 'homosexual gender dysphoria', autogynephilia probably results from "early and irreversible developmental processes in the brain."⁹

Although the remaining few proponents of a psychological cause suggest that some kind of therapy might "help such people to work out a satisfying sense of gendered self which

⁷ Ray Blanchard, 'The Concept of Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male Gender Dysphoria', *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 177, vol. 10 (1989), 616-23, http://www.genderpsychology.org/autogynephilia/male_gender_dysphoria/ (15 August 2004).

⁸ J. Michael Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Blending and Transsexualism* (Washington D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2003), 166-8.

⁹ J. Michael Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, 207.

works"¹⁰, implying a sense of gendered self which is consonant with the seeming phenotype, and which thus avoids any hormonal and surgical intervention, the problem remains that they have not been able to identify any such successful strategy for use with adult patients. Even with children, attempts at reinforcing gender-types by behavioural means have limited success; and at that stage, it is not possible to predict who might later become gender dysphoric.¹¹

Physiological causes?

At the time when psychotherapeutic responses to gender dysphoria held sway, those who felt convinced that a somatic cause would be found, pinned hopes on the not yet testable: genes, prenatal or neonatal exposure to hormones, and the neurophysiology of the brain.¹² Although the balance of opinion amongst medical specialists has now swung firmly in the direction of biological causality, real evidence remains frustratingly elusive. Thus the British Parliamentary Forum on Transsexualism concluded in 1996, "Current medical knowledge recognises that an absolute aetiology for transsexualism is not available although the present weight of evidence is in favour of a biologically-based, multifactorial causality."¹³ That report did, however, draw attention to a new-published researched study, in which one of its authors, Louis Gooren, had been closely involved. This revealed research on the brain structure of male-to-female transsexuals carried out by Gooren and his colleagues at the University Hospital of the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. They suggested that certain, measurable differences in the human brain may have a specific relationship to transsexuality.

¹⁰ Bryan Tully, *Accounting for Transsexualism and Transhomosexuality* (London: Whiting and Birch, 1992), 258.

¹¹ Tully himself readily concedes this point: Tully, *Accounting for Transsexualism and Transhomosexuality*, 237-9.

¹² Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 120.

¹³ The Parliamentary Forum on Transsexualism, *Transsexualism : The Current Medical Viewpoint* (1996), <http://www.pfc.org.uk/medical/mediview.htm> (May 2004). This influential report was prepared by the following leading specialists: Dr R. Reid, Hillingdon Hospital (Medical Sub-Group Convenor), Dr Domenico di Ceglie, Tavistock Clinic, Mr James Dalrymple, London Bridge Hospital, Professor Louis Gooren, University of Amsterdam, Professor Richard Green, Charing Cross Hospital, Professor John Money, Johns Hopkins Hospital, USA.

They noted that the volume of the central subdivision of the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis (BSTc), a brain area essential for sexual behaviour, is larger in men than in women. Examination of the size of BSTc in male-to-female transsexuals, showed a consistently small size, similar to that of a genetic woman. As the size of the BSTc does not appear to be influenced by sex hormones in adulthood, and would therefore be unaffected by the medical and surgical processes involved in gender reassignment, they conclude that it seems reasonable to suggest that gender identity, develops, in part at least, as a result of an interaction between the developing brain of the foetus and sex hormones.¹⁴ Whilst (inevitably) the number of donors remains small (the initial study was of just eight brains), further research by the Dutch team, albeit still based on a very small sample, has strengthened the likelihood of a neurological basis for transsexuality, not only for male to females, but also for female to males. The science is complex, but the result of their findings merits repetition in full, in their own words.

A crucial question resulting from a previous study in male-to-female transsexuals was whether the reported difference according to gender identity in the central bed of the stria terminalis (BSTc) was based on neuronal difference in vasoactive polypeptide

¹⁴ J.-N. Zhou, M.A. Hofman, L.J. Gooren and D.F. Swaab, 'A Sex Difference in the Human Brain and its Relation to Transsexuality', *Nature* 387, vol. 6552 (1995), 68-70. Research programmes not primarily concerned with the aetiology of gender dysphoria have suggested differences between male and female brains. Some of this was popularised and very widely read in the last decade of the twentieth century. See for example: John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communications and Getting What You Want in Relationships* (London: HarperCollins, 1993) or Anne Moir and Bill Moir, *Why Men Don't Iron: The Real Science of Gender Studies* (London: HarperCollins, 1998). At a less popular level, Simon Baron-Cohen seeks to show that female brains are 'wired for empathy' but male brains are wired for 'understanding and building systems' (Simon Baron-Cohen *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male* (London: Penguin, 2003). Whilst there are clearly biological males who strongly display the characteristics of a female brain (and, presumably females with a 'male' brain), Baron-Cohen's position has been criticised by Lynne Segal as encouraging a 'false dichotomy which reinforces the gender stereotyping which still polices us all.' An e-mail conversation between them printed in the *Guardian* illustrates the continuing nature versus nurture debate. Baron-Cohen states, 'it is interesting that for people in social science, there is a deep-seated unwillingness to recognise that biology plays any part at all.' Segal develops her argument by saying that 'the special thing about the human body is that it can transform itself in the process of being transformed by all that impinges upon it. It is not that culture is more important than biology – its enabling of all the mysteries of human consciousness – turns us into cultural creatures.' Baron-Cohen agrees, to a point but concludes by saying that 'we know from medicine that there are limits on how far the body can adapt to environmental changes. Tracking those limits may be where the social and biological sciences meet.' 'Sex on the Brain', *The Guardian* Saturday May 3, 2003. See also, for a more general perspective on 'brain sex', Lesley Rogers, *Sexing the Brain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

innervation from the amygdala, which was used as a marker. Therefore we determined in 42 subjects the of somatostatin-expressing neurons in the BSTc in relation to sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and past or present hormonal status. Regardless of sexual orientation, men had almost twice as many somatostatin neurons as women ... The number of neurons in the BSTc of male-to-female transsexuals was similar to that of the females ... In contrast, the neuron number of a female-to-male transsexual was found to be in the male range. Hormone treatment or sex hormone level variation in adulthood did not seem to have influenced BSTc neuron numbers.

Their conclusion is clear and of considerable significance:

The present findings of somatostatin neuronal sex differences in the BSTc and its sex reversal in the transsexual brain clearly support the paradigm that in transsexuals sexual differentiation of the brain and genitals may go in opposite directions and point to a neurological basis of gender identity disorder.¹⁵

These studies have also been complemented by Professor Richard Green of Imperial College, and Charing Cross Hospital, London, who has investigated other biological indicators of transsexualism, using a sample of many hundred patients. His observations include hand use preference, fingerprint patterns, family tree patterns and sibling order.¹⁶ It seems that in

¹⁵ Frank P. M. Kruiver, Jiang-Ning Zhou, Chris W. Pool, Michel A. Hofman, Louis J. G. Gooren, and Dick F. Swaab, 'Male-to-Female Transsexuals Have Female Neuron Numbers in a Limbic Nucleus', *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, 85, no. 5 (2000), 2034-41.

¹⁶ Richard Green, 'Biological Bases Of Gender Identity Disorder (Transsexualism)', *Abstracts from Proceedings of the Head Injury Conference and Annual Meeting of the British Neuropsychiatry Association* (12-14 February 2003).

1) Hand use preference. This function, reflecting cerebral hemispheric dominance, is organised prenatally and appears to be influenced by sex steroid levels in utero.

Male and female transsexuals are more often non-right-handed.

2) Fingerprint patterns. These are organised prenatally and also may be influenced by prenatal sex steroids. Male-to-female transsexuals, sexually attracted to male partners, differ from other transsexuals or non-transsexuals.

3) Family tree pattern. Male transsexuals have a dearth of maternal uncles compared to maternal aunts. Genomic imprinting can explain a lethality factor in one generation and atypical psychosexual development in the next.

the discussion of the aetiology of transsexuality, whilst the role of some psychological or developmental factors certainly cannot be ruled out, the weight of evidence is increasingly tipping the scales towards a physiological cause.¹⁷ Despite this, many of those who offer treatment have become less concerned about the precise cause of the phenomenon, than about the effectiveness of the treatment they offer.¹⁸

This shift was made explicit by the 1996 Parliamentary Forum on Transsexuality, which concludes that,

Interest in aetiology has focused increasingly on its usefulness in informing treatment and contributing to successful outcomes. This trend reflects the fact that the aetiology of many of the chronic conditions for which medicine provides treatment is unknown. It also recognises that the growing complexity of scientific and social theories and their interrelationship makes causality increasingly difficult to define.

The extent to which transsexual identity is formed by cultural conditions and expectations

The increasing incidence of transsexuality

As well as the lack of agreement about the causes of transsexuality, there is considerable uncertainty about its incidence, which at first glance seems, at least in affluent western societies, to have increased during the second half of the twentieth century, in parallel with

4) Sibling order. The odds of a male-to-female transsexual being sexually attracted to male partners increases with each older brother. One explanation is a progressive maternal immune response to each male foetus.

¹⁷ See for example the conclusions of Kevan Wylie, 'Gender Related Disorders', *BMJ* 329 (2004), 615-17. Wylie admits that some theorists have emphasised 'the nurturing aspects of gender reinforcements and programming. Children may have to suppress their natural behaviours and tendencies to conform and fit in, which can cause undue distress.' He concludes, however, that the research carried out by Zhou, Kruijver et. al. 'seems to support a neurobiological basis for gender identity disorder'.

¹⁸ An example is one American handbook, aimed at the medical profession, which includes only cursory discussion of causality: Gianna E. Israel and Donald E. Tarver II, *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

the availability of treatment.¹⁹ Is it as some social commentators have suggested, a product of affluent, self-obsessed, western modernity, in which the body is seen as a kind of aesthetic project,²⁰ or is it inherent within humanity, with the potential to be expressed, perhaps, in different ways in different cultures?²¹ It certainly seems to be the case that the expression of such a potentiality is strongly influenced by what society tolerates and actually makes possible. For example, Joanne Meyerowitz, in attempting to explain why sex-change surgery was attempted in Germany in the 1930s and even earlier, but not in the United States, argues that it was not that German doctors had access to new medical technologies, denied to their American colleagues, but rather "it took root in part because Germany had a vocal campaign for sexual emancipation."²² (I shall return in more detail to Meyerowitz' fascinating analysis in the next chapter.)

The ratio of female-to-male to male-to-female transsexuals

Most studies show that there are many more transsexual women than transsexual men. Correspondingly there has been much more inquiry into male-to-female transsexuality (as this study itself reflects) and even the suspicion that it might be a largely a male condition²³. Meyerowitz, however, argues that recent studies in the United States now reveal much more equal number of male-to-females and female-to-males seeking treatment. She suggests that

¹⁹ There are probably at least 5,000 transsexual people in Britain today, at least one in four of which are transsexual men. For further details see Home Office, *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Transsexual People* (London: Home Office, April 2000), 3.

²⁰ See, for example, Bryan S. Turner, 'The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and its Perspective', in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15-41. Turner argues that the self in modernity is conceptualised as a project to be 'made, constructed, and endlessly refashioned through the life cycle ... Like the reflexive self, the modern body can be refashioned by face-lifts, by breast augmentation, by diet and jogging, and for women, if necessary, by regular weight-lifting.' Thus he concludes, 'transsexualism and transvestism are now a familiar feature of the middle-class scene.' (33). Turner earlier also cites transsexualism as an example of the 'malleable and contingent characteristics of embodiment in modern societies': Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2nd ed., 1996), 5.

²¹ Interestingly, it is Bailey who emerges as one of the most passionate recent objectors to the claims of social constructionists. Although he makes no claims about the persistence of what he calls autogynephilic transsexualism, he insists that 'men who look awfully similar to the [homosexual transsexual] men I've been talking about ... seem to have existed through the ages and in vastly different cultures' (J. Michael Bailey, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, 133).

²² Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 21.

²³ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 149.

the imbalance in numbers may have brought about by a complex mix of cultural factors, including that in the post-war era 'some highly-masculine women could find an accepting community in butch-femme working-class lesbian bar networks, but highly feminine men were increasingly reviled, even among gay men.'²⁴

Self-awareness and the role of the media

Meyerowitz later describes how an important factor in the development of the self-awareness of transsexual people during the twentieth century, was the extraordinary impact of the extensive media coverage given to those who first underwent gender reassignment surgery. Hitherto undreamed of possibilities were opened up, as we have seen was the case for both Susie and Jenny-Anne, even if those possibilities remained tantalisingly out of reach for financial or other reasons. Put simply, of course, transsexuality only became possible when a climate of (relative) acceptance came together with the medical means to deliver it. People who had been previously identified, or had identified themselves, as 'transvestites' or 'inverts' began to define their condition differently and to ask for treatment. As the number of post-operative transsexual people rose, so the number of those seeking surgery rose too, but the channels of communications, perhaps too dependent on word or mouth, and the popular press, also meant that others were left in ignorance of the possibilities, as Peter's story so clearly shows.

It is, of course, probable that some who wish to present themselves as 'transsexual' do so for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these may be bound up in other problems, including a variety of mental health disorders. One vital role for psychological screening before hormonal or surgical treatment begins, must address such needs appropriately, in order to ensure that traumatic and irreversible mistakes are not made.²⁵ It is possible too that 'lifestyle choice', as Turner suggests, may also lie behind some requests for treatment,²⁶ but as the stories with

²⁴ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 148-50.

²⁵ See for example, the discussion of 'key mental health issues' in Israel and Tarver, *Transgender Care*, 39-43.

²⁶ See especially the hard-hitting critique of the 'commodification' of American sex-change surgery first published in 1982 by Dwight B. Billings and Thomas Urban, 'The Socio-Medical

which this chapter began reveal, most of those who seek gender reassignment, do so only after many years of struggle, self-doubt and anxiety.

The relationship between transsexuality, transvestism and other variant forms of gendered behaviour and sexuality

The emergence of a transsexual identity

As the number of pre and post-operative transsexuals rose, and as their condition became more widely known and talked about, they became self-aware in new ways, and began to differentiate themselves in more subtle ways from others who displayed other forms of gender variance.

Those who first attempted a systematic account of transgendered behaviour, especially Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany and Havelock Ellis in Britain, sought to define it in relationship to homosexuality, though for slightly different personal reasons (Hirschfeld was himself homosexual, Ellis was not) to demonstrate that such gender variance was rooted in the essence of human sexuality.

Transgendered people themselves looked for support within the homosexual 'community', but in the second half of the twentieth century, different 'communities' emerged, each reflecting ever more subtle differences of gender expression. In the 1960s and 70s especially, transgendered and transsexual identity was formed in relationship to other gender variant groups. It was, perhaps, hardly surprising that even the vocabulary invented to describe such

Construction of Transsexualism: An Interpretation and Critique,' in Ekins and King (eds.), *Blending Genders*, 99-117. They portray a fantasy world constructed by physicians who transformed transsexuality into a luxury commodity available at a high price. In particular, they contend that physicians doing sex reassignment surgery heal neither the body nor the mind, but perform a moral function instead, by carrying out a surgical rite to sponsor passage from one sexual status to another. They argue that this rite of passage (wrongly) confirms traditional male and female roles. A more honest approach, they suggest, would be to repudiate the either/or logic of gender development. Very similar views, but from a feminist standpoint, are also expressed by Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire, The Making of the She-Male* (London: The Women's Press, 1979). The Transsexual Empire here is ruled by the physicians attacked by Billings and Urban. See also below, 109-110.

identities, was the product and property of those communities and the individuals who formed them.²⁷

The differentiation of sex and gender

Meanwhile, the medical community carried out its own process of differentiation. By the mid 1960s, research on transsexuality, mostly in a few major American university medical schools, increasingly made a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. Associated concepts, including 'gender role' and 'gender identity' began to appear. The acceptance that 'gender identity', however it is formed, is remarkably persistent and consistent marked a major development in the recognition and treatment of what was soon to be known as 'gender dysphoria' – a sharp conflict between the 'psychological sex' of an individual and the gender assigned to them at birth.²⁸

I will return to the fascinating and often confusing story of the emergence of these terms and categories in the next chapter. At this point, I simply wish to draw attention to their historical and cultural rootedness, which is a product of the attempt to describe and define what it is to experience human life as male and female, man and woman.

In the English-speaking world, 'gender' is now usually understood to refer to that which refers to an individual's sense of maleness and femaleness, and to the social construction of roles that accompanies that. 'Sex' refers to the biological differentiation of male and female. Thus the former may appear to be largely a constructed view and the latter an essential one, but

²⁷ The best account of this process is that by Meyerowitz. See also Stephen Whittle, 'Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending,' Ekins and King (eds.), *Blending Genders*, 196-214.

²⁸ King, 'Gender Blending: Medical Perspectives and Technology', 94. He explains, 'The gender terminology related primarily to a literature which ... is important for its stress on the independence of sex and gender identity and the immutability of the latter. Thus, it was no longer necessary to claim a biological cause of transsexualism in order to legitimise changing sex. If gender is immutable, even though psychologically produced, and if harmony between sex and gender is a precondition of psychic comfort and social acceptability, it 'makes sense' to achieve harmony by altering the body.'

King argues also that talk about gender dysphoria now began to seem more appropriate than references to 'transvestism' and 'transsexualism', which have their origin in the concerns of late nineteenth/ early twentieth century to 'discover' new sexual species.

this distinction is itself constructed and not always easy to sustain. Even medical definitions of 'sex' are inevitably themselves constructs.²⁹ Feminists have led the way in questioning the legitimacy of the sex-gender distinction, and have drawn attention to the 'phallo-logocentric' thought that they believe sustains it. The fragility and provisionality of the distinction is further illustrated by its very intranslatability even into some western European Romance languages.³⁰

Is Gender Identity Related to Sexuality?

For the purposes of this study I will use 'sexuality' to refer to sexual orientation. As such, it is now generally thought to have little or no relationship to gender identity. Blanchard and Bailey, of course, dispute this, but others are equally adamant that they are mistaken. Stephen Whittle, for example, a leading British advocate of transsexual rights insists, "despite popular conceptions, people do not 'change sex' because they are ashamed or unable to adapt to a gay or lesbian sexual orientation."³¹ It is certainly the case that sexual orientation may sometimes shift as a result of hormone therapy and transsexual surgery, as Susie's and Phyllis' stories bear witness, but it is just as clearly not the rule.³² In fact, in the majority of cases, it appears to remain the same – resulting, in many cases, for those who previously identified as heterosexual, in the phenomenon coined, perhaps rather clumsily, 'transhomosexuality', as used by some psycho-sexual medical practitioners, including, for example, Tully.³³

²⁹ See especially Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³⁰ See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, 'What's Wrong with Gender?', in Fokkelian van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner (eds.), *Reflections on Theology and Gender* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 49-50.

³¹ Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: South Street, 2000), 19.

³² See, for example, Janis R. Walworth, 'Sex Reassignment Surgery in Male-to-Female Transsexuals: Client Satisfaction in Relation to Selection Criteria', in Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias (eds.), *Gender Blending* (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 363-5. Walworth points out that, in the United States, some who admit to being attracted to women before surgery have, in the past at least, been refused treatment.

³³ Bryan Tully, *Accounting for Transsexualism and Transhomosexuality*, 259-60. Tully attributes the genesis of the term to Dorothy Clare in 1984.

Transvestism

Are transvestites and transsexuals on a common sliding scale of gender dysphoria, with transgendered people somewhere in the middle, or are they distinct and with different causes? 'Transvestite', sometimes qualified by the somewhat pejorative adjective 'fetishistic', is usually reserved, more often than not, for heterosexual males who cross-dress for erotic pleasure, or simply for relaxation. They may revolt against what they see as an inappropriate or oppressive separation of gender roles. They may simply wish to escape for a while from the burden and responsibilities of masculinity and to explore their 'feminine side'. They may find male clothing 'drab' and wish to enjoy more sensuous colours and fabrics. In this respect especially, it is significant that there is no real equivalent female transvestistic expression of gender crossing. Women who cross-dress are far less visible and attract far less attention than men who wish to do so. As I shall show in the next chapter, it has long been far more acceptable in western European societies for women to assume a male role and even male dress, than for men to take a female role or to appear in any way feminine.

Male transvestites or, as they often prefer to describe themselves 'cross-dressers', have no wish to actually become women, and though they may go to great lengths to present a female image, only rarely go to the extent, for example, of looking for hormone treatment. Their fascination is sometimes with the female role – or in some cases a fantasy image of that – but sometimes begins and ends with female clothing, and even then, not always the kind of practical clothing worn everyday by real women.³⁴ Perhaps if society were to tolerate a greater blurring of gender boundaries, the compulsion to cross-dress would be less common.

'Transsexual' people, on the other hand, are those who, as Whittle describes, experience a profound sense of incongruity between their psychological and anatomical sex, and wish to

³⁴ See for example, Vernon Coleman, *Men in Dresses: A Study of Transvestism/Crossdressing* (Barnstaple: European Medical Journal, 1996). Also M. T. Haslam (ed.), *Transvestism. A Guide* (London: Beaumont Trust, 2nd ed., 1994); George Stewart, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (London: Mind, 1999), 6; Jed Bland, *The Gender Paradox; What it Means to be a Transvestite* (Belper: Derby TV/TS Group, 3rd ed., 1993); id., *Transvestism: Four Monographs* (Belper: Derby TV/TS Group, 1994); and Peggy J. Rudd, *Crossdressing with Dignity: The Case for Transcending Gender Lines* (Katy, Texas: PM Publishers, 1999).

resolve that incapacitating condition by hormonal and, usually, surgical means. The relationship between transsexuality and transvestism is, however, sometimes far from clear in terms of the felt experience, as, for example, Ruth's agonising vividly illustrates. It is sometimes suggested that transvestism first occurs with puberty, and is associated with feelings of intense identification with the opposite sex and their clothing, whereas transsexualism emerges much earlier and is much more concerned with gender role than with erotic gratification.³⁵

Is there a typical 'transsexual career'?

There are many stories of transsexual people rehearsing the 'right' biography, even to the extent of telling lies, in order to convince doctors to treat them.³⁶ Although having, perhaps, a

³⁵ See, for example, the succinct definitions provided on her web site by Lyndsey Myskow, a leading British hospital and private practitioner in psycho-sexual medicine (<http://www.drmyskow.com/yrproblem/cross/crossdressing.html>) (December 2003):

Transvestite - a man who wears female clothes for sexual arousal. He is nearly always heterosexual, usually married and sometimes his behaviour is known to his wife. She may tolerate it, even encourage it, or insist that this is something he does on his own. Usually starts at or around puberty, when the boy discovers that female clothes have an erotic effect. They are an obvious extension of her body and in the case of underwear have been in contact with her genital area. Frequently the clothes used are those of mother or sister and may be associated with guilty incestuous feelings. The sensation of the material, often silky, against the skin adds to the erotic effect, as women know. As the clothes are worn the boy may start to create a woman in his imagination using his own body. Sexual arousal will increase with masturbation to orgasm, then the clothes may be removed hurriedly sometimes with feelings of disgust or guilt.

Transsexual - a man or woman who believes him or herself to have been born into the wrong body. Cross-dressing is part of the process of expressing one's preferred gender. They will usually seek medical help to alter their body to be consistent with their psychological gender. As yet it has been impossible to identify the cause of this syndrome - they are certainly not mad and there is no obvious hormonal or chromosomal defect. It will probably turn out to be a genetic defect. A few transvestites may become transsexual in later life.

³⁶ See, for example, Billings and Urbans' contention (first published in 1982) that transsexuals regularly 'conned' doctors into treating them. (Dwight B. Billings, and Thomas Urban, 'The Socio-Medical Construction of Transsexualism: an Interpretation and Critique,' in Richard Ekins, and Dave King (eds.), *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 99-117, 108-10.) There is, however, good reason to believe that much of the problem was grounded in the sometimes rigid sexual stereotyping assumed by some psychologists working in the 1960's, '70's and even '80's. John Randell, for example, who practised at London's Charing Cross Hospital until his death in 1982, is reported to have insisted that 'If they are going to be ladies they should be ladylike. Conformity and not giving trouble is surely what we are looking for.' (Dave King and Richard Ekins, 'Pioneers of Transgendering: John Randell, 1918-1982', *Gendys 2002, Conference Report*, (2002), 59-64, at 60.) See also Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 161, who observes that in the late 1960s medical literature on transsexuals 'regularly noted that [they] shaped

status at times akin to an 'urban myth', there is enough truth in this unhappy contention to reveal both the power and often rigidity of some of the 'gatekeepers' in the medical profession, and also a common anxiety to attempt to classify too rigidly human behaviour, which in reality, seems often to be far more subtle, complex and resistant to over-simple generalisations. It is immediately clear, for example, that the seven case studies reveal many similarities, but also some striking differences, such as the common and often deeply embarrassing experience, described by Phyllis and Susie, of finding female clothing the object of masturbatory fantasy, an experience which was not, however, shared by Bernadette.

Despite the proper complexities and obvious variety of experience, the high degree of convergence in the stories of transgendered people, transvestites and transsexuals, invites both those who observe them and those who seek to help, to construct theories which address and make sense of those points of convergence. For example, in a limited and popular way, but one which summarises the work of many writers quite succinctly, the 'Tranny Journey' outlined by Vicky Lee describes the typical 'career' of a male transvestite:

First steps - the desire in very early years to try on female clothing 'to get close to that with which he identifies', done in secret because society rejects signs of femininity as inappropriate;

puberty - a time of considerable confusion and a time of wonder and envy as girls of his own age blossom;

the done thing - often a time in which secret thoughts are repressed in order to conform, early marriage is common (and the desire to cross-dress is more often than not hidden from a spouse);

the pressure pot - when repressed feelings re-emerge as home and family become a routine and work demands increase; and then

relief - as cross-dressing emerges, usually in secret, and for brief periods - but bringing a sense of mental and physical excitement.³⁷

their life histories and even fabricated stories that might convince doctors to help them,' in order 'to conform to prevailing "scientific" fashions.'

³⁷ Vicky Lee (ed.), *The Tranny Guide* (Enfield: Way Out Publishing Co., 7th ed., 1999), 38-9.

A more subtle, process-sensitive alternative than the approach of simply labelling people as products (as, for example 'transvestite' or 'autogynephile') has been suggested by Richard Ekins and Dave King who propose four ways, 'modes' or 'styles' in which transgenering takes place in a society characterised by a bi-polar male/female divide. These are, migrating, oscillating, negating and transcending.

Migrating involves moving from one side of the binary divide to the other on a permanent basis. Oscillating involves moving to and fro between male and female polarities, across and between the divide, as is the case with the part-time cross dresser. Negating indicates the processes tending towards eliminating the binary divide – a move to the ungendered: the 'gender-less' ... Finally, transcending presupposes going beyond the binary divide – a move to the 'gender-full'.³⁸

There are also different components within each of these modes. For example, autogynephilia may or may not form a component both of oscillating and of migrating.

More simply, in an earlier study, Ekins talks about 'male-femaling', the activity of

male cross-dressers and sex-changers [who] are genetic males who 'female' in various ways, variously adopting what they take to be the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviours, accoutrements and attributes of genetic females.³⁹

Within this, he describes 'body femaling', 'erotic femaling' and 'gender femaling', which parallel the interplay of sex, sexuality and gender in observable, multi-faceted combinations.

³⁸ Richard Ekins and Dave King 'Transgenering, Migrating and the Role of Autogynephilia', *Gendys 2K Conference Report* (2000), 41. Transcending gender is graphically illustrated in the following statement from an internet mailing list called Sphere which states: "We take our name from the idea that gender is a dichotomy (where there's a rainbow of stuff in between, all in line and related to male and female) but a sphere, where male and female are just two of an infinite number of possible points and you can be anywhere on, inside, or outside the gendered world."

³⁹ Richard Ekins, *Male Femaling: A Grounded Theory Approach to Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1997), 48.

Each of these activities can again be broken down further. Body femaling, Ekins observes, is made up of the four degrees, of permanence, visibility, progression and accumulation and finally, of premeditation. Permanence extends from the wearing of padding to simulate breasts or hips to full and irreversible gender reassignment surgery. Visibility, in respect, for example, of depilation, is a matter of choosing between the treatment of those parts of the body that can be seen and of those that normally cannot. Progression ranges from occasional feminisation of the body to a steady increase of feminisation. Premeditation ranges from frenetic, impulsive feminisation to careful and protracted planning. Erotic femaling is "boundaried only by what the femaler finds erotic or potentially erotic, and by what he and/or his culture deem to be associated with the female." Thus, he claims, it may be expressed in behavioural, emotional, cognitive or anatomical ways. Erotic sensations may range from the enjoyable feel of a particular item of clothing to, for example, imagining oneself as female during intercourse. Erotic femaling commonly involves masturbatory fantasies, triggered by a bewildering range of stimuli. Gender femaling, need not, says Ekins be associated with erotic femaling. It refers to the female role – behaviour, emotions and cognitions.⁴⁰

Although Ekins and King's work is fascinating, it is also important to note that its underlying assumptions clearly show the influence of Blanchard's theories, and is thus firmly rooted in the description of male-to-female gender crossing. It makes no attempt to explain or describe female-to-male transgendering and it describes primarily the experience of cross-dressers and not transsexuals, even though, as my case studies show, there may be some close developmental parallels between the two. The elusive nature of the causes of gender dysphoria does, however, add value to the descriptive social-scientific analysis of King, Ekins and others, even though it may not primarily address transsexuality, and its illustration of the complexity of the nature of male to female transgendered experiences is especially helpful.

As both Phyllis and Ruth's stories illustrate, some male-to-female transgendered and transsexual people may seek to suppress their feelings by a flight into hyper-masculinity.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ekins, *Male Femaling*, 55-8.

⁴¹ See Alice Purnell, *A Guide to Transsexualism, Transgenderism and Gender Dysphoria* (London: Gendys Conferences, 1998), 12.

Eventually, as I was to discover myself, the sheer effort of trying to maintain a gender role that seemed increasingly foreign and dishonest results in a breaking point that may have catastrophic consequences, as Bernadette's story testifies. This may come after many years of trying to 'keep up appearances' and typically in mid life.⁴² While the transvestite experiences satisfaction in cross-dressing, the transsexual person experiences no real relief until she is able to transition fully.

How may transsexuality be treated?

When treatment is offered to transsexual people, it is now usually carried out on the basis of finding the most effective way of achieving a successful outcome. There is widespread acceptance amongst health professionals that gender dysphoria is not an 'illness', mental or otherwise, and that once apparent, it is a permanent, persistent condition. It is highly resistant to psychological intervention.⁴³ The most effective treatment in extreme cases is therefore gender reassignment, or as Susie, Phyllis and many other transsexual people prefer to describe it, an outward, physical confirmation and affirmation of their true gender identity.

Treatment in the United Kingdom is available under the National Health Service, but only in a very few regional centres, and often where a number of concerned health professionals have come together voluntarily to offer a programme of care. The availability of treatment often seems to be something a 'post-code lottery', and the patchy and apparently *ad hoc* nature of provision can lead to a great deal of frustration. I have already noted Bernadette's comment:

As some one said, the wait for gender reassignment on the National Health Service is sufficiently long that the waiting list is self-limiting by suicide.

⁴² This is corroborated by a number of statistical surveys, for example Janis R. Walworth, 'Sex Reassignment Surgery in Male-to-Female Transsexuals: Client Satisfaction in Relation to Selection Criteria', in Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias (eds.), *Gender Blending* (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 352-69. See also a survey of requests for new birth certificates in New York State from 1997 to 2003 from persons who have undergone gender reassignment surgery. The average age of male to female applicants was 45.2 years and female to male applicants, 39.7 years. See http://apha.confex.com/apha/132am/techprogram/paper_86226.htm (18 February 2005).

⁴³ See for example Israel and Tarver, *Transgender Care*, 18.

There is also a feeling amongst some transsexual people that strict guidelines are not always adhered to and that not every patient is treated on an equal basis.

What gets me is that they put me through the mill as regards waiting, and yet there's somebody I know who mentally isn't ready, and has had the operation in under two years. (Phyllis)

Most clinics, centres and practitioners in Europe and the United States who undertake gender reassignment follow voluntary guidelines for standards of care laid down by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), which have been regularly revised since their original formulation in 1979.⁴⁴ These insisted on a 'real life test' in which the patient must live full time in the chosen gender role for at least one year before any irreversible surgery takes place. The real life test, or, real life 'experience', as it is now termed is a process of social gender change, and is accompanied by a formal change of name and most ordinary, day-to-day documentation.

The first stage in the process of gender reassignment is usually psychiatric counselling, both as a diagnostic tool to help the patient be sure that this course of action really is right for them, and also to deal with any other problems that they may have encountered often as a result of many years of inner conflict. During the real life experience, and beginning in some cases even before that (for example both Ruth and Peter), hormones are then administered. These are designed to repress primary physical sex characteristics and to enhance those of the preferred sex. This process, as Stephen Whittle describes it, is "almost as if...going through puberty again, but in the opposite sex."⁴⁵ Male-to-females experience breast growth, some redistribution of the subcutaneous fat, a decrease in muscle tone, and a softening of the skin and of body hair, though beard growth is not significantly affected, nor is male-pattern-baldness reversed, even though the hair may thicken a little. The ability to have an erection and to reach orgasm will gradually decrease. Female-to-males experience a thickening of the

⁴⁴ For more information about the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, and the full text of their Standards of Care, see their web site <http://www.hbigda.org> (18 February 2005).

⁴⁵ Whittle, *Transgender Debate*, 21

skin, male-pattern-baldness, beard growth and the thickening of vocal chords leading to a deepening of the voice. Periods stop, muscle tone may develop (with exercise) and the waist will fill out. Sexual appetite increases and, according to Whittle, appetite for food too.

Surgery for the female-to-male takes the form primarily of bilateral mastectomy and possibly also, but not always, hysterectomy. Phalloplasty, the construction of a penis, is difficult and, not yet, fully successful, but surgical techniques are improving.

Surgical reassignment for male-to-females involves removal of the testes (bilateral orchidectomy), the dissection of the penis, and the creation of a pseudo-vagina. The skin of the scrotal sac is used to form labia. In addition and especially for the male-to-female, a range of other more minor procedures may take place; including most importantly, and more often than not at the patient's own expense, the removal of the beard through needle electrolysis or laser treatment. The Adam's apple may be reduced by means of a tracheal shave, and in some instances, the vocal chords may also then be tightened. Cosmetic surgery may include breast implants and some degree of remodelling to further feminise the face; again, this is almost always performed privately.⁴⁶

Can the effects of treatment be adequately assessed and evaluated?

If the rationale behind psycho-sexual and surgical treatment of transsexual people is now widely accepted as being the achievement of effective and successful outcomes, what counts as a successful outcome and how can it be measured? The simple aim of living a happier, more productive life, freed from the crippling anxiety of gender dysphoria needs to be fleshed out with reference to a great many other factors if confidence in the present processes of treatment is to be justified. Qualitative studies need to be corroborated by quantitative surveys.

⁴⁶ For a succinct summary of NHS gender reassignment in the UK see Home Office, *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Transsexual People* (London: Home Office, April 2000), Annex 1, 28-9. This also estimates the (then) cost of male-to-female surgery at approximately £10,000. Another good summary is provided by Whittle, *Transgender Debate*, 19-24. For a fairly recent summary of American practices see. Israel and Tarver, *Transgender Care*, especially chapters 2 to 5

Russell Reid asks simply, "How do we know our patients get better?" and suggests that three categories of outcome matter: symptom change, quality of life, and satisfaction with care provided. He provides a brief analysis of earlier studies, including two studies, one by Walinder et al. and the other by Blanchard, which specifically investigated the level of dissatisfaction expressed after surgery, and suggests that regrets are less than 1% in transsexual men and between 1 and 1.5% in transsexual women. He concludes both that psychiatric diagnosis and treatment should be primarily aimed at "distinguishing between those cases where, in all probability, hormonal and surgical treatment will further stabilise the patient, and those cases where it will not." He concedes, however, that further 'valid' outcome studies are still needed "to confirm that the current strategy of treatment ... is appropriate and may even be life-saving for the vast majority of correctly diagnosed Transsexuals."⁴⁷

In the light of a number of highly publicised cases of people who *had* expressed regrets after surgery, The *Guardian* newspaper commissioned the University of Birmingham's aggressive research intelligence facility (ARIF) to investigate the recent literature on the outcomes of gender reassignment surgery. They concluded that "although it's clear that some people do well with gender reassignment surgery, the available research does little to reassure about how many patients do badly and, if so, how badly." Their report was highly critical of many studies, which, they claimed were often poorly designed, and in particular, they called for a new study involving a control group who did not receive hormone or surgical treatment.

One response to this report, from Kevan Wylie, chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' working party on gender identity disorders, was to claim that "all of his patients' lives have drastically improved following gender reassignment surgery". Another response from a Urologist, James Bellringer, who has carried out gender reassignment surgery on over two hundred patients at London's Charing Cross Hospital, was to point out that given the high suicide rate amongst those waiting for treatment, the establishment of a control group would

⁴⁷ Russell Reid, 'Why Measure Outcome in Transsexualism?', *Report of the Seventh International Gender Dysphoria Conference*, 2002, 102-5. Reid advocates adherence to the HBGDA Standards of Care as one way of avoiding regrets.

be unethical. Bellringer concluded, "You either have an operation or suffer a miserable life. A fifth of those who don't get treatment commit suicide."⁴⁸

Further research is indeed clearly needed, but there will surely continue to be problems surrounding the difficulty of discerning borderline cases (of those who need treatment and those, like Jenny-Anne, whose gender dysphoria appears to lie somewhere in the 'transgendered' spectrum), and also of providing appropriate care for those who see gender reassignment as a means of solving other problems. There is always, and always has been a tension between patients, most of whom normally and quite properly diagnose themselves, and the medical practitioners who offer or withhold treatment.⁴⁹ In the United States this led, as I shall show in the next chapter, to something very much like the commodification of gender reassignment, and the current availability of surgery on demand to those who can afford to travel, for example, to Thailand demonstrates that this has not disappeared.⁵⁰

Transsexual identities

What happens to transsexual people after reassignment? If Russell Reid and others are right, the vast majority 'get better' and are enabled to immerse themselves anew in the ordinariness of life. Bernadette is a clear example. She takes a highly visible, even leading role in her local community. She makes no secret of her past. She has, for example, co-operated with a national newspaper to tell aspects of her story and has published an autobiography,⁵¹ but she prefers to be identified as a woman, not as a transsexual woman.

⁴⁸ David Batty, 'Sex Changes are not Effective, Say Researchers', *SocietyGuardian_co_uk*, July 30, 2004. A version of the ARIF report itself is available at <http://www.bham.ac.uk/arif/genderreassign.htm> (6 September 2004).

⁴⁹ These tensions are explored by Russell Reid, *Minifields and Pitfalls in Gender Identity Disorder, for both Patient and Doctor* (unpublished paper). Reid begins from the premise that self diagnosis is 'fundamental': 'Transsexuals invariably diagnose themselves because it is so obvious to them.' He argues both that the gender dysphoric patient must manage her own treatment and the role of the doctor is to 'remain neutral and objective in his opinions'.

⁵⁰ See for example <http://sexchangeasia.com/> (18 February 2005): 'The Samui (gender reassignment) Clinic provides accessible and affordable (SRS) Sex Reassignment Surgery.'

⁵¹ Bernadette Rogers, *With a Little Help From My Friends* (private publication, 2004).

Jan Morris, perhaps the best-known male-to-female transsexual living in Britain today, who wrote a widely read autobiography, is now reported as being "bored to death" with her sex-change (Nicolas Wroe, 'The Long Voyage Home', *The Guardian*, October 6, 2001). For an

I'm a woman inside and clearly I dress as a woman, I act as a woman, I do the things a woman does now, because I am one.

Peter and Susie go about their lives similarly. There are, of course, some situations when that story, and especially the changing nature of relationships, have the potential to cause embarrassment. For this reason, some transsexual people try to keep their past a secret, but such a strategy is hard to sustain and stressful.

It's taken me quite a long time to be 'out' in one sense, because I didn't want the neighbours to know, but now going to a school thing would be difficult because some of the parents will specifically turn their back on me, and some of them will actually go out of their way to say 'hello', which is almost as embarrassing ... One of the things I have problem with, my past doesn't tie up with my present, and if I get to know someone, I'd talk about X ... [his ex-husband]. And if I drop my guard, it's not a bad guard, but at work, you've got to be careful, because if you become too personal, you drop your guard and you say 'X' and they look at me ... and ... I don't like deceiving people. So you tell them and then you're stuck in the situation. What do you do?

(Peter)

Both Peter and Susie have divorced, but Bernadette remained married. She tells of how she completed the 2001 census, hoping in vain that it would not prove to be cause of distress and embarrassment, nevertheless there was no reaction to her declaration of herself as female, married to another female.⁵² Bernadette and her wife Joyce wished to stay together, and found that, for them, a socially acceptable way to describe their relationship was to become

alternative view, however, see Tracie O'Keefe, 'Ban Sex Changes', *Gendys '96 Conference Report* (1996), 114-16. She declares,

We are not part of the biological polarities. To live the gender and sex of transsexualism does not disappoint the transsexual, because we can perform that, and the expectations are within the range of achievements. However, when we are sex changed, into the stereotypical, biological polarity sex roles, it is an impossible goal for us, and failure is ensured by presuppositions. I am a transsexual woman. I don't want to have to live up to the expectations of the biological polarity sexes.

⁵² Rogers, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 138.

'sisters'. Their solution may not, however, be appropriate for other couples. How does one describe such a relationship accurately in socially acceptable terms?

Many other relationships do not survive. Phyllis, divorced twice, deeply regrets the lack of contact with her daughters, who no longer wish to see her, and for a while she suffered abuse and petty vandalism from youths on the estate where she lived. Peter was not only shunned by members of his church, but was also taken to court by his ex-husband over the custody of their son. Mark Rees describes the almost violent antipathy shown to him by his sister, but almost worse, a time of utter isolation when he felt that no one really cared about him at all. In his diary, one Sunday, he wrote,

Spoke to no one

Saw no one

No one called

No one rang

Do I exist?⁵³

Sadly, such feelings are not uncommon.⁵⁴

Although many transsexual people have to learn to cope with rejection, and whilst there is an undoubted need for more detailed research into the long-term implications of living after gender reassignment, there is also plenty of evidence that families can cope with the dramatic change in relationships that this brings, and that children in particular often prove remarkably accepting and supportive of parents who have transitioned. They may, for example, cling proudly and persistently onto the family relational names that they grew up with. My own children, for example, still insist that I am 'Dad', which can cause an occasional puzzled look in public. It is very clear that my experience is far from unique.⁵⁵ Such a desire to preserve

⁵³ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 172.

⁵⁴ See also, for example, Deirdre N. McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ See for example, Richard Green, 'Children and Transsexual Parents', *Gendys 1996, Conference Report* (1996), 55-8. See also, Claudine Griggs, *S/he: Changing Sex and*

and protect the status quo may, perhaps, reflect a denial of the change that has taken place, but it also illustrates the way in which even that majority who have transitioned successfully and now lead happier, more fulfilled lives, carry with them a life-story which undoubtedly has included episodes of much heart-ache, sadness, regret and soul-searching, but also often much for which they have cause to be grateful.⁵⁶

Those looking in from the outside do not always very seem sympathetic, but are probably not aware of the complexity of this emotional whirlpool. More challenging, perhaps, is the accusation raised by some feminists that transsexual women sometimes display deep selfishness by wanting what seems to be all the more superficial glamour associated with womanhood, without have to coping with periods, childbirth, the demands of young children and the menopause.⁵⁷ In reality, although they are probably no more immune to selfishness than anyone else, most transsexual people, both female-to-male and male-to-female are not only acutely aware of such accusations, but their stories typically show, time and again, that they have also agonised for many years about the competing demands of being honest about their condition, and of meeting the needs of those whose lives are bound with theirs.⁵⁸

Changing Clothes (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 138-40. Relationships with surviving parents can be more difficult. Griggs observes,

Mother and Father no longer blame themselves or me for my transsexualism, but they do not know Claudine as a daughter. Predictably they never will. I am a tolerated remnant of their son.

⁵⁶ So, for example, Bernadette ponders quite candidly (Bernadette Rogers, *With a Little Help from My Friends*, 136):

I became physically female late in life but was this the optimum for me? There is no satisfying answer and it is difficult to produce even a rough balance sheet. I regret bitterly never having been a young woman but fifty years ago I would have had to accept social constraints that are now forgotten. As a woman, I doubt that I could have achieved professional success and fame in my area of science and technology. Had my change occurred earlier, I would not have known Joyce and life without her would hardly been life at all. My deepest regret is not having had my own children. I feel envy and sadness when I see mothers and mothers to be. All these emotions compensate for each other to some extent, so I accept the status quo.

⁵⁷ For example, Julie Birchill, 'The NHS was Never Designed to Be a Sort of State-Run Jim'll Fix It, So I don't Understand Why Gender Should Be the Exception', *Guardian Weekend*, 20 January 2001, 3.

Transsexualism is, basically, just another, more dramatic twist on the male menopause, which in turn is just another excuse for men to do as they please.

Birchill describes those male-to-female transsexuals who

invariably report that they were aware of feeling "trapped" in the wrong body since boyhood. Yet, thoughtlessly, they go ahead and marry blissfully ignorant women and father children.

⁵⁸ See for example, Susie's comments, which illustrate the point very clearly:

Most transsexual people, whilst they are keen to be regarded as men and women, unhampered by any 'trans' suffix, are also characteristically diffident about making claims about what makes them such. They recognise that gender identity, although it may well have a somatic grounding, possibly within a person's neurological system, is both lived out through the complexity of the hormonal, genetic and outward physical, gendered form of the body, and also needs to be given cultural expression. It is always, thus, a process of becoming.⁵⁹

Conclusion

I have shown that while there is still some measure of uncertainty about the aetiology of transsexuality, the majority of those who provide medical treatment to people with gender dysphoria now look to a physiological (genetic or neurological) cause, and reject the notion that transsexuality is a psychological illness that may be cured by psychiatric means. In fact the stark dichotomy sometimes drawn between physical and psychological causes can be a most unhelpful distortion. The link between physiology and psychology is subtle and intricate and both are equally 'real'. Even if, in the highly unlikely situation that transsexuality could be shown to have no genetic or neurological foundation, it does not necessarily follow that that a psychological 'disorder' should or could be dismissed as being less significant or open to 'correction', as indeed much discussion about homosexuality has also come to recognise. It is also clear that while transsexuality does share some characteristics with other gender-variant

Within weeks of our marriage I knew that I was not 'cured'. Nine years later I came out to my wife and told her my feelings and that I wanted the operation. We stayed together but with a heightened level of tension between us. I started hormone treatment in 1982 and was progressing well towards surgery. In January 1985 I decided to make one further attempt to save our marriage. I withdrew completely from the social scene, stopped hormones and threw away all my female clothes. I had no counselling, I just did it. In January 1998, I could take no more. I visited Dr. Russell Reid in London and re-started hormone treatment.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 176. See also Ruth's comments which illustrate the transgendered person's sense of inner turmoil:

I'm not a woman and I can never be a woman in that sense, but there's a very strong side of me that would function better in a woman's role than in a man's role, I'm pretty certain, and I'm not covering it up as well as I used to. It's too much like hard work. I've only got, by human life expectancy, perhaps twenty years left to go and I want to make something of my life which doesn't involve hiding away and compensating for things and pushing part of me away ... I got very, very depressed. Having talked to my wife some years before, when I'd actually worked out what was happening, I worked out a way of handling it, [but] it actually got much worse to the point at which my wife suggested that she'd much sooner have me living as a woman than dead.

behaviours and especially with transvestism, it is, nevertheless, a discrete condition and is not related to sexuality, especially in the sense that I have adopted here as referring primarily to sexual orientation. Treatment for gender dysphoria in the form of the administration of hormones and gender reassignment surgery provides a remarkably effective resolution of the problem, with remarkably few exceptions.

The seven case studies illustrate the variety, contingency and complexity of transsexual experience. This reflects the similarly complex and often contradictory cultures in which we live; and they illustrate the ways in which, in that context, sex, gender and sexuality are continually being defined and given meaning. In the next chapter, therefore, I turn to examine what cultural expressions of gender dysphoria have existed before, and in other places, and the processes that have created them.

2 The roots and emergence of transsexuality

Introduction

If transsexuality is inherent within humanity, it follows that it may be expressed in different cultures, in different times, in different ways. As I noted in the previous chapter, any expression of such a potentiality will always be strongly influenced both by what society wishes or tolerates, and also by what it is able to achieve technically. Thus the possibility of 'sex change' can only be realised when both the medical technology is available to enable that to happen, and also when society perceives a need for it, or at the very least, is liberal enough to allow it to happen - as was to prove the case for the first time in the Germany of the 1920s.

There are many accounts of gender crossing and gender reversals in history and anthropology, but our description and discussion of these cannot help but be conditioned and coloured by the assumptions and values we bring. Any account of the past is always also a product of the time in which the story is told and retold. When, then, we consider different cultural expressions of gender crossing and gender reversals, we must do so with considerable caution. The contingent, cultural significance of gender crossing and gender reversals is such that evidence for transsexuality, as we know understand it, may prove frustratingly elusive. Even greater caution needs to be exercised when we turn to the archaeological record, especially when that is restricted to the study of objects and artefacts as in prehistory.

Our values and cultural assumptions are also rooted in the past, and although the status of any interpretation we make is by its very nature provisional, if we are to better understand those values and assumptions, we need to attempt to place them in a wider historical context, and to compare them with the ways in which other people make sense of similar situations and possibilities. I wish to argue that transsexuality must be thought of as inherent, potentially, within human experience, at least in as far as it seems to arise with the origins of

gender identity at the foetal stage, but I shall show how the character and expression of gender dysphoria is no more be stable across time and from culture to culture than is gender itself. Until the twentieth century it would have been almost impossibly difficult for transsexuality to have been identified, even by transsexual people themselves.

I turn now, therefore, to consider some historical and cultural expressions of gender crossing and gender reversals in an attempt to provide a more adequate background to our present understanding of the variety, contingency and complexity of transgendered and transsexual lives. If the medical evidence of the previous chapter is correct, transsexuality lies blurred here as an un-named dis-ease amongst an inevitable confusion of cross-gender categories, including third gender, cross-dressing and androgyny. We will consider first the archaeological record.

Gender crossing and gender reversals in the archaeological record

The raw material of archaeology is things. We may wish to interpret them with an open mind and to try to lay our values and assumptions aside, but we know well that an interpretation is just that and nothing more. Even though we may attempt to be guided by what we know of other, apparently similar cultures, our interpretation remains provisional, a working model or hypothesis. The burden of our own assumptions weighs particularly heavy when we turn our attention to the archaeology of sex and gender. Physical human remains, even if they can be DNA tested, will not reveal gender identity or sexuality. Artefacts associated with people, especially those found in burials, might help to reveal aspects of gender, but this is dangerous ground inasmuch as apparently gendered symbols may not quite be all that they seem.

This can be demonstrated very simply by first calling to mind common contemporary assumptions about masculinity and femininity. It is, for example, often thought that male behaviour is typically dominant, aggressive and even violent, but that female behaviour tends to be passive, nurturing and gentle. If weapons and drinking vessels are found in a grave, we therefore jump to the conclusion that we are dealing with the burial of a male, but when

brooches, mirrors and earrings are found, we are more likely to imagine that it is probably that of a female. However, there are burials in which warrior grave goods have been found with biologically female skeletons, associated with more conventionally feminine artefacts such as jewellery, mirrors and spindles. Some of these female skeletons may even show evidence of physical violence commensurate with a warrior status in life, such as weapon blows to the head and arrow heads still embedded within the bone. In one site at Sauromatia, to the north of the Black Sea, such burials represented a fifth of all known warrior graves. Roberta Gilchrist in her discussion of these sites concludes that from the perspectives of history and anthropology, categories of sex and gender appear unstable. Moreover, from the evidence of burials and visual representations of people, she suggests that there is a "potential of multiple gender categories."¹

In some burials from ancient Egypt, biological sex certainly does not always appear to be the determinate of perceived sex or of gender roles. One mummy, which X-ray analysis indicates to have been a biological male, was buried as a female with careful bandaging to her hips and breast. Another, apparently a young female, was buried in accordance with the normal female addition of gold nipple covers, but also was provided with a prosthetic penis, made from wrapped bandages, a typical feature of male burials.²

¹ Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 54-78. Gilchrist does not disclose the date of these burials, but comments that they are 'accepted as female warriors largely due to historical provenance: writing in the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus introduced the "Amazons", a race of warrior women of the steppes.' Similar burials have been found in other cultures, including in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, but Gilchrist notes that archaeologists 'display a remarkable reticence to address women's adoption of "masculine" symbols to convey authority.' Perhaps the most striking example of this is the discovery of phalluses buried with anatomically female skeletons: for example at Hasanlu Tepe in north-western Iran, where pins showing an erect penis were found placed on the chests of five females. Another celebrated, indeed according to Gilchrist, 'infamous' example of the inclusion of 'masculine' artefacts with the burial of an skeleton, thought to be female, but not well-enough preserved to enable the remains to be 'sexed' confidently, is that from Vix in northern Burgundy, dating to around 500-480BCE. A person estimated to be in her early thirties, popularly described as a princess, was buried with a massive bronze cauldron – an enormously impressive piece of imported drinking equipment, along with other items associated with traditionally-associated male pursuits of drinking, riding/driving and bodily ornamentation as well as 'feminine' items of jewellery. The unsettling nature of this has prompted some even to suggest that the burial was that of a transvestite priest. See, for example, Timothy Taylor, *The Prehistory of Sex* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 226.

² Taylor, *Prehistory of Sex*, 224. Taylor notes the suggestion of the Egyptologist who analysed the body, Rosalie David, that the person may have been a victim of drowning and was recovered in such a poor state that her biological sex was no longer clear. The embalmers then 'hedged their bets' by providing her with both female and male attributes.

Another teasing insight into the very different assumptions surrounding sex and gender in ancient Egypt may be detected in the extraordinary religious reforms of Akhenaten in the fourteenth century BCE. The monotheistic worship of Aten in whom gender is united was, at least in part, argues Winnie Brant, a creation of Akhenaten in response to his own experience of being transgendered. Akhenaten is depicted in female form, his consort Nefertiti was later portrayed in male form and other members of his family appear to have crossed gender boundaries. This interpretation is however, every bit as conjectural as the traditional interpretations of masculinity as an exclusively male quality symbolised by weaponry and phallic imagery. It similarly transposes one set of stereotypical assumptions, anachronistically, into a very different cultural setting.³

Gender crossing and gender reversals in early history

A thousand years earlier, ancient Sumer provides still more striking evidence of how misleading it can be to use contemporary assumptions about sex and gender as tools to interpret an ancient civilisation. There are surviving accounts of cross-dressing by worshippers of the goddess Inanna, some of who were said to have been changed by the goddess from males to females. But Judith Ochshorn warns that the significance of such changes, in as far as they can be reconstructed at all, can only be guessed in the context of a broader understanding of the significance of gender within that society. In a lament, Inanna proclaims her powers:

I go at the front. I am lofty.

I proceed in the rear. I am wise.

Taylor even suggests that it was only with the emergence of agriculture that people in societies began to be classified first as a woman or man and then as an individual.

³ Winnie Brant, 'The Gender Heresy of Akhenaten', in Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias, *Gender Blending* (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 215-26. The common association of cross-dressing and religious ritual in the historical period has prompted some archaeologists to re-assess artefacts from earlier times. Timothy Taylor draws attention, for example, to androgynous figures from the Mohenjo-Daro culture in the Indus valley around 2000BCE and on the famous, second century BCE Gundestrup cauldron from Denmark (Taylor, *Prehistory of Sex*, 215-19). Brant suggests, intriguingly in the light of Taylor's observations, that priests 'dressed as their gods and wore masks'. Brant notes that the Nile god Hapi was hermaphroditic, 'apparently male but portrayed with breasts and pregnant; his priests must have worn appropriate forms.'

I make right into left.
I make left into right.
I turn a man into a woman.
I turn a woman into a man.
I am the one who causes the man to adorn himself as a woman.
I am the one who causes the woman to adorn herself as a man.
I cause the weak to enter the house.
I expel the mighty from the house ...
I am the stairs to the high roof.
I am...the low parapets
I turn white into black.
I turn black into white.⁴

Ochshorn argues that in Sumer, in the second half of the third millennium BCE, gender does not seem to have been a significant factor in either the distribution of power or in the understanding of values. Gods and goddesses held equivalent if not always equal power, indeed the gender of the divine seem almost irrelevant. Ishtar, the Semitic counterpart of Inanna is simultaneously goddess of love and war, fertility and violence. It is little wonder, therefore, that her worshippers sometimes carried spindles or symbols of femininity and sometimes engaged in bloody war games. In some cases, the sex of deities changed as their worship spread. Ochshorn also points out that it would not be wise to assume that the fluidity of gender roles in the Sumerian understanding of divinity was paralleled by similar patterns in human society, but even then, she suggests, women had an unusually equal role in power and trade, and ran not only households, but businesses and cities as well. Given this apparent rejection of a polarised ideology of gender, Ochshorn concludes that,

gender role reversals, or causing men to dress as women and women to dress like men, could have been merely another demonstration of Sumerian conceptions of the all-encompassing power of the Goddesses Inanna and Ishtar over heaven and earth,

⁴ Judith Ochshorn, 'Sumer: Gender, Gender Roles, Gender Reversals', in Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996), 52–65.

love and war, life and death, and, what is basic to all human cultures, gender and gender roles.⁵

By the classical period, historical sources suggest that gender roles were certainly much more polarised, though even here they could be crossed from time to time. Both Hippocrates and Herodotus in the fifth century BC, describe, for example, Scythian tribes in which 'enarees' (men without manhood), 'effeminate' or 'eunuchs', dressed as women, spoke like women, and did women's work.⁶ They also performed a vital role in society as diviners or prophets. It seems that they were quite numerous, but according to Hippocrates, they were largely restricted to the upper class. He suggests that the enarees' loss of masculinity came about through a mystery disease, which may have been linked to the passion among the noble class for horse-riding. Hippocrates own theory of how this came about is fanciful, but the link with horse-riding may not be. The Scythians were famous horsemen, and it is quite possible that long periods of bare-back riding may have caused very considerable damage to their testes.⁷

The Roman poet Ovid, who was exiled to the borders of the Scythian steppe in the first century BC, provides a tantalising hint of the practice there of drinking mare's urine, a substance so high in oestrogens that it is still used as the source of a proprietary drug, 'premarin', widely used still for hormone replacement therapy – and to feminise male-to-female transsexuals.⁸ Taylor observes that the practise of drinking animal urine is still not unusual among pastoralist peoples, and suggests that if the Scythians drank this potent liquid it is hardly surprising that they experienced some very disturbing effects from it. Whether or not the enarees were feminised by sustaining damage to their testes or by the effects of

⁵ Ochshorn, 'Sumer', 62-3.

⁶ Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters and Places*, trans. J. N. Mattock and M. C. Lyons (Cambridge: Heffer, 1969). Herodotus, *The Histories*, IV, 67, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), (256-7).

⁷ Taylor, *Prehistory of Sex*, 210-14. Taylor notes that bare-back horse riding is known to have caused impotence amongst native North Americans, and that even modern Australians suffer from 'geographer's balls', by which excessive bumping around the outback in Land Rovers can cause internal bleeding in the testes (the 'female sickness' also noted by Herodotus?) and later the loss of ejaculatory and erectile functions. Hippocrates describes the horse-riding Scythians generally, as 'the most impotent of men'.

⁸ Ovid, *Amores* 1, VIII, describes a 'a certain old dame ... by name of Dipsas, who knows ... the poison of the mare on heat.' id., *Heroides, Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2nd ed. Rev. G.P. Goold, 1977), 347.

oestrogen, it is clearly impossible to know whether any deliberately sought feminisation as a result of gender dysphoria. However, as the feminising effect of drinking hormone-rich urine was known and as there seems to be no evidence that anyone was forced to take it against their will, some measure of willing compliance in a process of feminisation, for whatever reason, seems at least plausible.

There is a sufficient body of literary evidence to suggest that the co-incidence in the ancient world of cross-dressing (especially male cross-dressing) and religion was not uncommon. Tacitus, for example, describes a Germanic tribe, the Naharvali, in which a priest presides in a sacred grove, "apparelled like a woman".⁹ It is, of course, often suggested that the injunction against cross-dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5 is part of a wider call to purity, to preserve Israel from the polluting influence of local pagan cults, some of which practised transvestism.¹⁰

Cross-dressing not only also seems to have characterised aspects of Dionysian worship in Greece, but was permitted at religious festivals in numerous Greek states. Bullough and Bullough suggest that it is because Greek society enforced such clear distinctions between the gender roles that it was important to allow time when those barriers could be safely removed.¹¹ The strictly temporary nature of such a relaxation is, perhaps, the single most important factor in allowing any challenge to the status quo to be very carefully contained. Thus the tradition has grown that even today, at the end of a drag act, the performer will often

⁹ Tacitus, *Germania*, 43, id. *Agricola and Germany*, trans. Anthony R. Birley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59. Taylor even suggests that such practices may have survived into early pagan Anglo-Saxon society and, although he acknowledges the usual explanation of the origin of clerical dress in the costume of Roman noblemen, he also hazards that 'Christianity might have used the transvestism of the local pagan priesthood for its own purposes ... It may be that it neatly fitted local expectations of priests in dresses' (Taylor, *Prehistory of Sex*, 221).

¹⁰ See for example, A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (London: Oliphants, 1979), 307. For an alternative view, however, see Deborah Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32-4. She argues that the question of cultic prostitution is more fully and more explicitly dealt with elsewhere in the Old Testament, and that the 'picture of the lascivious world of cultic prostitution, painted with particular confidence by biblical scholars' is based far too much on one source - Herodotus. The primary concern of this passage, she suggests, is to guard against the transgression of boundaries.

¹¹ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 23-44. Bullough and Bullough provide, for the most part, an excellent, detailed and persuasive historical survey of gender crossing from the classical period to the twentieth century.

doff his wig in order to make his true gender utterly clear. It is therefore inevitable perhaps, that no good can come of the cross-dressed Pentheus in Euripides' 'Bacchae', for his cross-dressing is to deceive, in order to learn the secrets of the Bacchanalian rites which threatened to undermine women's traditional role in society. In their blind ecstasy, the women mistake the unfortunate Pentheus for a lion, and tear him limb from limb.

In those societies where a third-gender category exists, whether or not, as with the enarees of Sycthia, this involves physical change, the need to preserve and control gender boundaries seems no less strong. Startling and recent evidence of this can be seen in the account by Mildred Dickemann of 'Balkan Sworn Virgins', some of whom still survive in Albania. These 'femalebodied men' could be summarily and killed by stoning or burning, if they were found to have broken the oath that bound them to their status and role in society.¹²

The unsettling, even dangerous potential of gender-bending, whether it is temporary or more permanent, is explored in a number of other Greek legends and plays. These include, for example, Ovid's story of Tiresias who was temporally transformed from man to woman. The goddess Hera was so annoyed by his subsequent claim that women's enjoyment of sex is three times greater than men's that she blinded him. The most abiding ancient symbol of physical sexual ambiguity in the ancient world is surely, however, another of Ovid's stories, that of Hermaphroditos, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, whom the gods united in one body with the nymph Salmacis.¹³ According to Pliny real 'hermaphrodites' were once 'considered as portents', but by his own day had come to be seen as entertainments'.¹⁴ Pliny also describes strange stories of spontaneous female to male sex changes ('transformations of

¹² Mildred Dickemann, 'The Balkan Sworn Virgin: A Traditional European Transperson,' in Bullough, Bullough, and Elias, *Gender Blending*, 248-55.

¹³ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, III and IV, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955).

¹⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, VII, 34, id., *Vol II: Libri III-VIII*, trans. H. Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1942), 531. According to Bullough and Bullough (*Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 37) Pliny describes the drowning of two hermaphrodites at birth so that no one would be defiled by contact with their blood, and Diodorus Siculus reports the tragic fate of a woman who was said to have changed into a man and was then burned alive. Unfortunately and uncharacteristically, the references Bullough and Bullough supply for Pliny are incorrect and I have been unable to corroborate their story.

females into males is not an idle story'). He even claims to have seen such a 'man', one L. Consitius.¹⁵

Although ancient societies were concerned to establish clear boundaries between the genders, one of the reasons for their fear of changing sex was, perhaps, because their understanding of the nature of sex, typified by the writings of the Roman doctor Galen, allowed them to believe that such a change might just be possible.

Galen was born in Pergamum in 129 CE and arrived in Rome around 161 CE where he worked and wrote, prolifically, for around fifty years. He took his lead from Aristotle, who in the fourth century BCE, suggested that the reproductive life force was contained in semen. The ideal creation, Aristotle thought, was one in which all creatures would be male. Galen took these views, revised and elaborated them. He held that males and females were essentially the same. Both had, for example, testes, but those of the female remained inside the body; indeed inside a woman all the same sexual organs as those seen externally in the male could be found. Four elements constituted the human body, fire, water, earth and air. Semen was hot. The female was too watery and too cool to produce semen and was therefore a less perfect form of humanity. In the womb, a female was formed if the foetus failed to receive enough heat.

This suggested to Galen a primary state of sexual indifferentiation, and this, in turn, so worried red-blooded Roman males that they strove hard to remain virile, lest they might lapse back into this appalling condition. No normal man would become a woman, but it was a constant battle not to become 'womanish'. Roman gentlemen were urged to restrain from excessive ejaculation in order to preserve the vital life-giving heat concentrated in the semen, though a little intercourse, even if it gave no pleasure, might be beneficial; indeed it was thought to be an effective cure for maladies caused by excess heat, including, for example, headaches.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*, VII, 36, trans. Rackham, 531.

¹⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 9-20, citing Galen. The persistence of this view is astonishing. Not only did it form the basis of all

Despite this, there are several examples of those who took a very different view. These included the emperor Nero and his third century successor Heliogabalus, who not only cross-dressed, 'with protruding bosom', depilated, wore women's jewellery, but also yearned to find a doctor who could equip him with female genitalia.¹⁷ Presumably the most powerful person in the Roman Empire felt that he was sufficiently safe to cross with impunity the boundaries that others strove to maintain. At face value, in Heliogabalus's case, the desire to cross the gender boundary would appear to go far beyond any fetishistic desire to cross-dress or to subvert the structure of social order. It looks remarkably like a case of gender dysphoria, but of course it is impossible to know for sure what he really wished this for himself or whether he was a victim of hostile and salacious gossip.

Eunuchs

Eunuchs in Roman and later, especially, in Byzantine society represent something of a conundrum. Castration was forbidden under Roman law and disapproved in Christian teachings, but from the fifth to the fifteen century eunuchs performed a wide variety of courtly, ceremonial, religious and political functions in Byzantine society and at court. They seem to have supervised many functions at the boundaries of life. For example, they acted as go-betweens and doctors and prepared the dead for burial. Many performed mundane domestic duties, but others enjoyed high office and positions of considerable trust and responsibility. Some were ordained as priests and even bishops; others were monks.¹⁸

western understandings of sex until the Enlightenment, but it even survived into nineteenth century medical debates about the nature of sex and gender.

¹⁷ See, for example, Aelius Lampridius, *Life of Antonius Heliogabalus*, trans. D. Magie (London: Loeb, 1924). For a succinct account of Nero's cross-dressing and even a bizarre story that he wished to be pregnant see Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 38-9. For other possible evidence of a desire amongst phenotypical males to change sex physically in the ancient world see Roberta Parker, 'Geldings for the Gods', <http://www.gendercentre.org.au/4article3.html> (9 February 2005).

¹⁸ For a detailed picture of the place of eunuchs in Byzantine society see Kathryn M. Ringrose, 'Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium', in Gilbert Herdt (ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone, 1996), 85-109; also Shaun F. Tougher, 'Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, with Special Reference to Their Creation and Origin', in Liz James (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 1997), 168-84.

Galen had inherited from Aristotle an understanding of sex in which the idea of perfection was maleness, a masculinity in which the ability to procreate was of paramount importance. Castration arrested proper development as a male, and made the eunuch similar to a woman, or else to a pre-pubescent boy. Thus, despite the prominent and significant roles they performed in society, like women (especially) or boys, they were thought to be deficient in the virtues that attained their completeness only in manhood. They were believed to be morally as well as physically weak, self-centred, quick to anger, lacking self-control, lazy and altogether unreliable, but they were also seen as clever and wily.

The revulsion felt by many towards eunuchs in Byzantium seems in part to have been a reaction to their physical appearance and deportment – smooth skinned, yet finely wrinkled and with a tendency to ‘run to fat’, mincing, and speaking with odd, high-pitched voices, with raised eyebrows and exaggerated, rather feminine gestures. Others certainly looked down on them because so many were foreign and often of lowly or servile origin. More particularly, perhaps, many were simply jealous of the position some eunuchs enjoyed within the court, including close contact with the emperor and the imperial family. From the emperor’s perspective, however, eunuchs not only represented no direct threat to their power (sons of deposed emperors are even known to have been castrated to ensure that they could not assume the purple), but also they were quite safe to be left in the company of women.¹⁹

They adopted their own bearing, mannerisms and dress to set them apart from both men and women. Their primary role was social, and seems not to have been motivated by any personal sense of cross-gender identity or sexuality even though some enjoyed sexual activities with both males and females. Sexually they ranked with boys and women, as a gender they were distinct.²⁰

¹⁹ Tougher, ‘Byzantine Eunuchs’, 173. See also Ringrose, ‘Living in the Shadows’, 94-5.

²⁰ Gilchrist argues that the eunuch in ancient society often represents not so much a gender-reversal but an institutionalised third gender – ‘a permanent ontological space between male and female’. Such roles, she says, may be linked with cross-dressing, and sometimes with sexuality, but more often with social or economic gender roles (Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology*, 58-61).

Some men sought castration in order to try and preserve their vital bodily fluids and thus increase their intellectual powers,²¹ others, including the theologian Origen, did so in anticipation of the life to come, and to demonstrate an extreme commitment to celibacy. However, not all eunuchs were castrated. Eunuchs included infertile males and, according to Clement of Alexandria, those who had no desire for women. In some cases, 'eunuch' was little more than a synonym for 'celibate'. Thus, to be a "eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" by choosing total abstinence from sexual activity, was considered (by Athanasius and Chrysostom amongst others) a much more praiseworthy state than of being physically incapable of it.²² The high value placed on celibacy and on asceticism, led eventually, Ringrose argues, to an alternative, radically different concept of manhood, no longer based solely on the ability to procreate, within which eunuchs could no longer be regarded as representing a third sex, nor even a third gender. According to this ecclesiastical view of masculinity they became less ambiguous sexually. They now become 'simply men'.²³ It is, of course possible that within a category as diverse as the Byzantine eunuch, there were some who found such a life the answer to deep problems of gender-identity, but it is equally clear that in the majority of cases, to be a eunuch was quite unrelated to any possibility of gender dysphoria.

Cross-dressing saints

The story of the classical and Byzantine eunuch is a male story that sheds light on deeply masculinist notions of sex and gender. Although some eunuchs wore jewellery, and behaved in an effeminate way, they did not cross-dress and they did not seek to take up women's roles in society. The dominance of Aristotle's and Galen's essentially misogynist understanding of the human self made it almost inconceivable that anyone would actually admit to wish to be or

²¹ Ringrose, 'Living in the Shadows', 86.

²² Ringrose also notes Eusebius' objection to Origen's excessively literal interpretation of Matthew 19:12 ('Living in the Shadows', 100). She notes furthermore that Chrysostom suggests that 'castration is the devil's work since it injures God's creation and allows men to fall into sin.' See also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 19: Brown cites an example of post-pubertal eunuch, who managed to preserve his vital heat – an 'asporos' – who would not waste his vital heat on others and thus through losing no vital spirit, would be fitter and healthier. This view, Brown points out, became part of the 'folk wisdom of the world in which Christian celibacy would soon be preached.'

²³ Ringrose, 'Living in the Shadows', 108-9.

to become a woman.²⁴ Therefore one unsurprising exception to the classical world's fear of gender-bending was for a woman to wish to become a man. Christianity's adoption of the idea that virtue, godliness and manliness were synonymous, did not change even when asceticism proffered an alternative vision of perfect masculinity, and resulted in such a masculine vision of saintliness that women aspired to it, even to the extent of cross-dressing and hoping for the physical signs of man-hood, especially facial hair – the lack of which was, of course, one of the features which most singled out eunuchs for popular disdain. Women who cross-dressed as a path to sainthood were greatly admired, even though the Council of Gangra, in about 340 CE, in an attack on excessive and false asceticism, condemned women who cross-dressed in order to gain admittance to male religious communities.²⁵

One of the earliest, and certainly the most popular stories, the model for many to follow, is that of Saint Thecla of Iconium, told in the second century text 'Acts of Paul and Thecla' a fragment of the apocryphal 'Acts of Paul'. It was circulated so widely and with so much enthusiasm that, by the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote disapprovingly of its popularity. It existed not only in the original Greek, but also in no less than five separate Latin versions, and was translated into Syriac, Armenian, Slavonic and Arabic.²⁶ It remained popular into the Middle Ages.

Thecla's story, in brief, begins with a sermon, preached by Paul, which ends:

Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their continence, for the word of the Father shall be unto

²⁴ Something of the embarrassment and anxiety aroused by male cross-dressing can be seen in a curious little tale about Saint Jerome, who unusually supportive of women, was once found in church wearing a woman's gown. He claimed that enemies had put the gown beside his bed, so that in the dark, his way to matins he would fumble about and put it on in place of his own. Whatever the true reason, the incident brought him into disgrace. See Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 51.

²⁵ See, for example, Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 51.

²⁶ F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: OUP, 2nd ed., revised, 1983), 1049.

them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest world without end.²⁷

Thecla, a virgin herself, and apparently very beautiful, heard Paul, and was utterly convinced by his preaching. To the great consternation her family, she immediately broke off her engagement and determined to follow him and his Lord. Thereupon life became tough. She resisted an attempted rape and even, through divine intervention, survived being stripped and thrown to the beasts in a gladiatorial show. She cut off her hair and after receiving Paul's blessing worked as an itinerant preacher and then eventually, still dressed in a man's cloak, retired to a cave near Seleucia.

J. L. Welch suggests that the story of Thecla may be interpreted in three ways: as an acquisition of maleness, as the attainment of a state of androgyny, or as an annihilation of the female. Thecla becomes a 'man' in various ways. Her adoption of male appearance, clothes and hair is, perhaps, the most obvious mark of this, but perhaps not the most significant. There is a deeper, psychological level in which, in accord with the thinking of her time, she proves her 'manhood' through her success in tests of 'courage, truth and fortitude'. She lays aside her mortal female weakness, especially her dominance by men through marriage, intercourse and childbirth, and finds salvation through the strength of these higher male, spiritual virtues. As a sign of her manhood, she gains the authority, rights and privileges of a male apostle, with Paul's blessing, to preach and to convert. Welch argues that Thecla also becomes androgynous, through her sexual continence and her boycott of the womb. Indeed, her state may be better thought of as being a-sexual than of androgyny, a return, perhaps, to an original, state of humankind before the Fall. Her story "can be read as an allegory illustrating the defeat of sexual desire." Thecla's 'annihilation of the female' is swept along by a more sinister undercurrent of deep misogyny, which, Welch argues, occurs again and again in the stories of later female martyrs, forced to disfigure those parts of their bodies which identify them most as feminine and seductive. Female beauty was widely feared as the cause of temptation, the power to infatuate men and to fill them with uncontrollable sexual passion.

²⁷ M. R. James (trans.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 273.

Welch suggests that Thecla's transformation may be seen as the female equivalent of castration,²⁸ but if so, the parallel is most properly drawn with Origen and with those who metaphorically, rather than literally, became "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God."

Other female saints who crossed gender-boundaries, trod an even more colourful path, beginning as prostitutes and ending cross-dressed as hermits. Saint Pelagia is perhaps, the most famous example (although the historicity of her story is in doubt).²⁹ Other legends, some far less plausible, concerned the protection of virginity. Amongst these, is that of Wilgefortis (in England, Unencumber the patroness of women with troublesome husbands), whose prayers for protection from being given away in marriage were answered with a prodigious growth of beard.³⁰ There is indeed a considerable corpus of stories about female saints who lived and worshipped as men and whose biological sex was sometimes only discovered at their death.

Gender crossing and gender reversals in the European Middle Ages

Galen's masculinist model of sex and gender remained the norm in medieval Europe. Bullough and Bullough in their thorough discussion of cross-dressing and social status in the Middle Ages, conclude that as long as manliness in women was not carried too far, it continued to be admired. Male cross-dressing, in contrast, and of which there is very little evidence, was still widely regarded as unthinkable. If a man cross-dressed, it was considered evidence of either homosexuality, or of a sexually motivated desire to gain improper access to women's society. Those who did so, in order to pursue a homosexual relationship, even risked the death penalty.³¹ Those males who crossed dressed to carry on clandestine affairs

²⁸ J .L. Welch, 'Cross-Dressing and Cross-Purposes: Gender Possibilities in the Acts of Thecla,' in Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 66-78.

²⁹ Cross and Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1058. Other examples of this tradition include the popular seventh century legend of Thais, adopted in the late nineteenth century by Jules Massenet for his opera of the same name.

³⁰ Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 341.

³¹ See, for example, the story of the rescue of Marie de Marcis from prison by the physician Jacques Duval, who was able to show that 'Marie' was in fact 'Marin' – a male. Duval went on to write one of the first treatises to explore gender-crossing 'Des Hermaphrodites', published

with women might also face the executioner.³² It is reasonable to assume that whatever disease any biological male felt who experienced gender dysphoria, relief could not easily have been found in a transgendered existence. Their misery would be simply lost to the historical record.

As in ancient Greece, however, there were times of festival or carnival, throughout medieval Europe, when the strict division of society, made visible by sumptuary laws, was suspended, or even turned upside down.³³ On these occasions, including, for example, the twelve days of Christmas, gender roles might also be relaxed and often burlesqued. Some Englishmen enjoyed festivities associated with Maid Marian as a particular opportunity to cross-dress.³⁴ The memory of these traditions may still be detected in dance and theatrical traditions including mummery and Morris, and in English pantomime. During the Festival of Fools of fifteenth century France, young clergymen dressed as women and made 'wanton and lewd gestures'. At the carnival of the Boy Bishop, in Henry VIII's England, young males were taken from house to house dressed either as priests – or as females. Monastic life, Garber ventures

in Rouen in 1612. (Winfried Scheiner, 'Cross-Dressing, Gender Errors and Sexual Taboos in Renaissance Literature,' in Ramet, *Gender Reversal and Gender Cultures*, 92-104.

³² The story of a thirteenth century English 'nun', for example, is told by Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 57-60.

³³ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1993), 27-9. Throughout medieval Europe, sumptuary laws were passed to establish clear and extremely strict dress codes, an inheritance which still felt in contemporary cultures, most obviously perhaps, by uniforms for medical staff, clerical dress and the like. Garber, who provides a wry and acute commentary on the growth and persistence of sumptuary laws, notes that by the time of Elizabethan England, when more royal orders concerning clothing were made than at any other time in English history, there was also a noticeable appearance of transvestism in the streets of London. Even the Queen herself was said to have cross-dressed on at least one or two occasions. The vogue was mainly for female to male transvestism, but some men and boys crossed dressed too. The playwright Thomas Middleton, for example, was the victim of an attempted robbery by a male transvestite when, in 1599, he attempted to have sex with 'her'. Women were assumed to cross dress for reasons of fashion or perhaps even a sense of excitement in contravening the law, but it was still assumed that when men crosses dressed, as was assumed in the case of poor St Jerome, it was either to gain immoral access to women or to enjoy homosexual sex. Garber quotes Dr John Rainolds, who wished to warn against these dangers, and who was also remarkably insightful in suggesting another reason for male transvestism:

a womens garment being put upon a man doth vehemently touch and moue him with the remembrance and imagination of a woman; and the imagination of a thing doth stir up the desire (29, from Rainolds, *Overthrow of Stage Playes*).

This is, perhaps, the first recognition of the role of fetishism in transvestism and of the impulse to be described five centuries late as 'autogynephilia'. Garber also reminds us, however, that sumptuary legislation in sixteenth century England 'was overwhelmingly concerned with wealth or rank, and with gender largely as it was a subset of those categories' (27).

³⁴ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 65.

to suggest, brought with it a male bonding that could result either in hyper-maleness or feminisation. Both may have found expression either through identity with women or through misogyny, both also a hallmark of later female impersonation.³⁵

On the rare occasions when it was discovered, male cross-dressing seems have touched upon one of the same fears aroused by Byzantine eunuchs, that such an action was the work of the devil. This led some in medieval Europe to the belief that witches were cross-dressing men. An early example, from ninth century Spain specifies those "who in the dance wear women's clothes and strange devices and employ jawbones and a bow and a spade and things like these shall do penance for one year." And French bishops in the thirteenth century were requested to look out for throngs of demons transformed into women.³⁶ It would be a serious mistake, however, to imagine that every bearded old hag was thought to be in reality a cross-dressed male. As Keith Thomas points out, in the vast majority of cases there is very little evidence to suggest that physical appearance was a prime factor in anyone being charged with witchcraft, and more importantly, it was simply the low status and the very dependency of women within the community that left them vulnerable to such an accusation. A woman's behaviour, along with her and social situation more usually led to her downfall.³⁷

Another exceptional and very particular opportunity for male cross-dressing in public came about, ironically enough, through the Church, with the growth of sacred drama. As this was performed often within the church, and often within the sanctuary itself, a place where women were not permitted to go, boys and clergy took female parts. Even the Virgin Mary herself had to be played by a male. Bullough and Bullough note, for example, the remarkable impact made by one such boy actor who performed the role of Saint Barbara at Metz.³⁸

³⁵ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 218. Garber illustrates several ways in which, during the middle ages, priests were equated with women, exempt from military service, wearing a cassock resembling a woman's skirt, (sometimes) devoid of political power and living in quiet obedience, doing domestic chores. Were clergy thus, in effect, a third gender?

³⁶ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 61, cite Jeffrey Burton Russell *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

³⁷ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin, 1991), especially 675-7.

³⁸ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 64 cite Karl Mantzius, *A History of Theatrical Art*, trans. Louise von Cossel (New York: Peter Smith, 1937), 2:89: the boy acted so

In contrast to the limited and very particular opportunities for male cross-dressing, from the early Middle Ages, a great number of stories were told of women who dressed as men in order to fight. The most celebrated example of a cross-dressing female soldier is, without doubt, that of Jeanne d'Arc. Even so, the fact that her action was not regarded wholly acceptable, despite the popularity of so many stories to the contrary, is illustrated by the fact that at her execution in 1456, one of the charges laid against her was that she cross-dressed. Perhaps one reason for this hostility towards her is that she simply went too far, and as Bullough and Bullough suggest, threatened the male hierarchy by adopting too overtly a masculine role.³⁹

Gender crossing and gender reversals in Europe, from the sixteenth to mid nineteenth centuries

For the most part, the attitudes and practices seen in the Middle Ages continued. Women, occasionally, cross-dressed in order to do things that their gender status did not allow; in particular, to fight as soldiers, but there continue to be very few stories of men who dressed in women's clothes. The old fears associated with male cross-dressing remained. Indeed, one rare and significant exception to the relative invisibility of male cross-dressing, 'Molly Clubs', which appeared in London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, helped to justify the suspicion that such behaviour was mainly a cover for homosexuality. Contemporary reports, however, indicate that 'mollies' seem to have taken a delight not just in dressing, but also in speaking and acting like women. Members sometimes strayed beyond the inns which were they centred their activities and appeared more widely in society, and by so doing, risked

thoughtfully and reverently that several persons wept for pity; for he showed such fluency of elocution and such polite manners, and his countenance and gestures were so expressive when among his maidens, that there was not a nobleman or priest or layman who did not wish to receive this youth into his house to feed and educate him; among who there was a rich widow ... who wanted to adopt him as her heir.

³⁹ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 57 and 68. Both the cross-dressing female warrior and the deathbed discovery of a person's 'true' sex are categories of story that would later come to intrigue the early pioneers of research into transgendered behaviour.

prosecution.⁴⁰ It is again impossible to know how many 'mollies' may also have experienced gender dysphoria, or how many were attracted in a fetishistic way to cross-dressing.

Most examples of female cross-dressing involve women from lower social groups. Many of them tried to pass as men to follow husband or lovers or to find work. Others wished to remain in male role and their biological sex was only discovered after their death. Queen Christiana of Sweden (1626-89) was, however, unusual, not only on account of her high social status, but also in that she was granted papal disposition to wear male clothes, and to live as a man in Rome, where she became known as a great patron of the arts.⁴¹

And again, in contrast to evidence of female transvestism, that of male cross-dressing tends to come almost exclusively from royal or noble classes who remained relatively untroubled about questions of status. Many of the leading lights in London's Molly Clubs were aristocrats. The royal court of France seems to have tolerated the cross-dressing of among others, Henri III (King from 1574-89) and Philippe d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIV. Both were, it seems, homosexuals, but the Abbé de Choisy (1644-1724) was not. His story, told candidly in his own memoirs, has much in common with those of many heterosexual male transvestites two and three centuries later.⁴²

In the early years of the eighteenth century, Edward Hyde, Viscount of Cornbury, and Governor of New York and New Jersey, was bold enough to cross-dress in public, and even had his portrait painted whilst so dressed. But by far the most celebrated eighteenth-century diplomat to live as a woman was Charles d'Éon de Beaumont, the Chevalier d'Eon (1728-1810). His cross-dressing seems to have been widely accepted, but only, perhaps, because

⁴⁰ See especially the excellent discussion of the nature and significance of Molly Clubs in Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 119-23.

⁴¹ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 97.

⁴² Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 104-10; also Garber, *Vested Interests*, 256-9.

many people imagined that he actually was a woman who occasionally cross-dressed as a man. Indeed he was not conclusively discovered to be a biological male until after his death.⁴³

By the later eighteenth century there is evidence of increasing interest in the impersonation of the opposite sex and of 'a culture of travesty' in which masked balls were popular. How far this new openness was anything more than an upper class phenomenon is difficult to judge, but the masked balls seem to follow in the tradition of cross-dressing at Greek, Roman and medieval festivals, and shows again that the desire to cross dress is not necessarily either an erotic activity, a path to homoeroticism or a sign of gender dysphoria. However, it certainly allowed both men and women to experiment and, perhaps, to express hidden needs in a safe context.⁴⁴

Gender crossing and gender reversals beyond Europe

When Spanish conquistadors and other colonists arrived in North and South America they were astonished to discover large numbers of gender-crossing 'hermaphrodites'. They found men who not only wore women's clothes, but who also played a woman's role in society and, sometimes, even enjoyed sexual relationships with other men. The Europeans were outraged. They equated such practices with sodomy and prostitution, and applied the harsh laws of their homeland to punish 'offenders' with unremitting cruelty. In sixteenth century Spain, only heresy and treason were considered more serious than sodomy. The startling extent of Spanish loathing of homosexuality, and cruelty towards those who were thought to embody it, is illustrated, for example, by the actions of Nuñez de Balboa who condemned a number of Panamanian womanly males to be thrown to his dogs and be torn to pieces.⁴⁵

⁴³ There are many accounts of Beaumont's life, see for example, Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 126-32, but also the paper by Peter Farrer, 'D'Eon De Beaumont: New Facts, Or Fiction?', *Gendys 2002 Conference Report* (2002), 31-7.

⁴⁴ Henry Fielding seems to have been aware of this, and in 1728 wrote that to masquerade the face was to 'unmasquerade the mind.' See Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*, 126.

⁴⁵ Sabine Lang, 'There is More Than Just Women And Men: Gender Variance in North American Indian Cultures', in Ramet, *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*, 183-96.

In an early account of 'hombres amariondas' ('effeminate men'), written in 1520, Cabeza de Vaca observes:

I saw a devilry which is, a man married to another man, and those are some effeminate and impotent men. They go dressed like women, and they do women's work, and they shoot the bow and carry heavy loads ... And they are larger than other men and taller: They are able to carry very heavy burdens.⁴⁶

De Vaca wrote about the Coaluiticans whose territory stretched from Mexico north into what is now Texas, but in many ways, his description illustrates several features typical of 'two-spirit people' in many native North American cultures.⁴⁷

Sabine Lang describes the lives of 'two spirits' in surviving communities of native North American peoples. She points out that in native North American societies the 'two spirit' represents neither an accommodation of homosexuality nor a gender reversal, but to a greater or lesser extent, a separate gender (or genders), in which gendered roles and behaviours are blended. She suggests that there are three and sometimes four genders to be found in most groups: women, men, women-men and sometimes men-women. Often, as in the case of the Coaluiticans, the woman-man clearly carries out a blend of male and female roles: men normally practise archery, but women carry heavy loads. In other societies, for example the Navajo, a two-spirit woman-man may take on the gender role of the 'other sex' completely. Women-men of the Mohave in California are known even to imitate menstruation and pregnancy. Lang quotes from a conversation she held with a Navajo man in 1992:

The traditional *nádleehé* is a person who is the true *nádleehé*, but I think only very few exist ... A true [male, S.L.] *nádleehé* or traditional *nádleehé* is somebody who is one hundred percent a woman, [who] was born a man but is a woman in Navajo

⁴⁶ Lang 'More Than Just Women And Men', 183-4.

⁴⁷ Native American gender-variant males (as they appeared to European eyes) were described by the invaders as '*berdaches*' (derived from an Arabic term for a male prostitute). Contemporary native American societies now reject the negative connotation of this word and prefer to describe both men-women and women-men as 'two spirits'.

society – not in their sexual preferences or sexual persuasion, but as an occupational [preference].⁴⁸

This last point is significant. Lang argues that a boy becomes a woman-man primarily as a matter of choice based on an interest in the woman's role in society. This decision may also be corroborated by dreams and visions, and the entry into the gender may be marked publicly by tests and initiation ceremonies.⁴⁹ The desire to play a different gender role in society is, of course, one of the key elements in contemporary western gender dysphoria, but it would be unwise to assume that in the context of such a different culture this is clear evidence of quite the same phenomenon.

Although women-men may perform all the tasks normally performed by women and dress as a woman, they may or may not have a sexual relationship with a person of their biological sex. Some marry women and father children. Even, however, if a woman-man marries a man, Lang insists that the significance of this is very different from that of a same-sex relationship as viewed by European eyes. To the native North American, it represents a partnership of different genders with gendered roles clearly differentiated. The distinctiveness of the woman-man as a third gender is also marked by special roles, such as acting as a go-between within the community or a shaman or medicine person. They may enjoy particular rights and privileges.

Men-women are far less visible in both the historical record and contemporary society. Lang is unsure whether or not this reflects a genuinely lesser incidence of men-women than of women-men, although she records decisions by some groups, including the Inuit, to socialise girls into male roles, especially as hunters, if the number of boys becomes too small to carry out all the necessary functions for the survival of the group.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Lang, 'More Than Just Women And Men', 188.

⁴⁹ Lang, 'More Than Just Women And Men', 190. Taylor, however, notes (*The Prehistory of Sex*, 212) that "among some Plains Indians, *berdaches* were ritually and physically created by making prepubescent boys ride bareback until their testes were destroyed, causing feminizing hormonal change in their development." Unfortunately he does not cite the evidence for this claim.

⁵⁰ Lang, 'More Than Just Women And Men', 192.

Lang also suggests, intriguingly, that there is a consonance between the place of the two-spirit in society and the religious value system of native North American communities. In contrast to the Judaeo-Christian story of creation, she argues that native North American creation stories teach that the world remains in a state of transformation:

Within world views where things can not be taken at face value, and where anything within the realms of the worldly and the supernatural may manifest itself in two or more forms at the same time, the thought of a person combining the masculine and the feminine becomes just another aspect of a sense of ambiguity and transformation that is a central part of Native American religions.⁵¹

Parallels to the two-spirits of North America may be seen in a wide range of cultures, in particular, the *hijras* of India,⁵² but also the *Sarombang* of Madagascar, the *Mahu* of Tahiti, the *Fa'afafine* of Samoa,⁵³ the *Xanti* of Oman and in many other groups from Polynesia to the Arctic.⁵⁴ In some of these societies, gender diversity is even greater than in North America. The *Chuchki* of Siberia, for example, recognise no less than nine different gender categories.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Lang, 'More Than Just Women And Men', 187.

⁵² See especially Serena Nanda, 'Hijras: an alternative sex and gender role in India', in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 373-417; also comments by Gilchrist (*Gender and Archaeology*, 59-60), and Anne Bolin, 'Traversing Gender: Cultural Context and Gender Practises', in Ramet, *Gender Reversal and Gender Cultures*, 22-51. See also William Dalrymple's vivid account of *hijras* in *City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi* (London, Flamingo, 1994), 169-83. In a fascinating parallel with those rare Christian worshippers whose devotion is so great that they become marked with the 'stigmata', the wounds of the crucified Christ, Cynthia Ann Humes relates that the famous nineteenth-century Bengali saint Ramakrishna was said to have been so blissful in his devotion to a goddess that he began to menstruate. In general however, she shows that classical Hinduism teaches that females must gain male bodies in order to attain salvation. Enlightenment is to be found through the putting aside of feminine characteristics, linked to worldliness and the curse of birth and re-birth, and the attainment of the masculine characteristics of purity and transcendence. The Buddha, represented in male form, is, however, also 'unmarked, beyond gender.' Cynthia Ann Humes, 'Becoming Male: Salvation through Gender Modification in Hinduism and Buddhism', in Ramet, *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*, 123-37.

⁵³ See, for example, Joanna Schmidt, 'Redefining Fa'afafine: Western Discourses and the Construction of Transgenderism in Samoa',

<http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue6/schmidt.html> (10 December, 2002).

⁵⁴ There are many accounts of these and other groups. See, for example, Marjorie Garber's succinct description of Omani *xanith* (*Vested Interests*, 348-52). Garber's account makes many insightful cross-cultural links.

⁵⁵ Lang, 'More Than Just Women And Men', 186.

The reasons for, and the benefits of gender variance for any community, are sometimes easy to see, as in for example, the need to preserve a clear division of labour. Individuals who can hold and sometimes transcend boundaries are also important, hence, for example, the incidence of gender-variant people who have served as priests, medicine people and shamans. In a study of the 'gynemimetic shaman', William Dragoin has attempted to answer in more detail why this phenomenon is so common, what is its significance, and why it has persisted. How, he asks, can 'gynomimesis' benefit hunter/gatherer societies?

One study of 27 'primitive' peoples showed that 23 groups had such people institutionalised as shamans. Most shamans are seers, artists, keepers of tribal knowledge, gender-inverted effeminate, but not necessarily homosexual males. Many were chosen for the role at puberty, partly on the evidence of boyhood femininity (are there hints here, again of what might now be recognised as gender dysphoria or not?), and partly because they seemed to have an artistic sensibility, and had the ability to learn the skills and techniques that would allow him/her to interact with the supernatural. The special role of the shaman is to enhance the solidarity of the group or society to which she/he relates and thus, especially if it is a hunter/gatherer society, to make it more effective. It is a position of considerable power, wealth and status.

Dragoin suggests that there may be "a relationship, an interconnectedness of socially recognised male inversion, shamanism and primary talent" which is based upon brain organisation.⁵⁶ This conclusion is prompted by a number of phenomenological observations of the behaviour of effeminate boys, and is not related to any medical study of brain structure or function. Although such a conclusion must be treated with some measure of caution, it does seem, on face value, to provide some corroboration for the idea that biological triggers for transsexualism may be latent within human nature, and that in some cultures they may have found visible and acceptable expression. However, in the case both of North American 'two spirits' and of 'gynemimetic shamans', the exact relationship between gender identity and sexuality remains unclear. It was, however, to be a process of reflection upon the nature of

⁵⁶ William Dragoin, 'The Gynemimetic Shaman: Evolutionary Origins of Male Sexual Inversion and Associated Talent', in Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias (eds.), *Gender Blending* (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 227-47.

just that relationship that informed a wholly new debate about transvestism and transsexuality in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe.

How sex changed: Gender crossing and gender reversals in nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a significant number of European males seemed to have developed a new and strikingly different interest in cross-dressing. These were otherwise respectable, middle-class men, and to the surprise of those who observed them, were apparently predominantly heterosexual.⁵⁷ They expressed a strong, if often guiltily secret desire, even a fetish for women's clothing and wished not only to dress in it, but also to act out the part of a woman. All gendered behaviour, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this chapter, reflects the core beliefs of any society about gender, sex and sexuality. What, then, were the changes in existing convictions and attitudes that triggered the appearance of the heterosexual male transvestite in European culture at this time?

Late nineteenth-century male transvestism as a response to the polarisation of gender roles

The industrial and scientific revolutions prompted a gradual redefinition of gender roles in European culture during the nineteenth century. Victorian ideas of moral progress, illustrated early in the century by the abolition of slavery and of the slave trade in England, went hand in hand with an erosion of hierarchy and the promotion of equality, not least of which was that between the sexes.⁵⁸ And yet in some significant ways, the differentiation between the sexes, at least among the emerging middle classes of Europe and America, also became quickly and significantly far more marked.

⁵⁷ Note, however, the assertion by Weeks and others that the differentiation of a 'homosexual person' from a 'heterosexual person' as distinct from a homosexual or heterosexual act, was also 'essentially a creation of the nineteenth century.' Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 95-6.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially, 393-418. For a helpful critical discussion of the contribution of Michel Foucault to this argument see the essay by Jeffrey Weeks, 'Foucault for Historians', in Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000), 106-22, and again on Foucault and Thomas Laqueur in a later essay in the same volume: 'Sexuality and History Revisited' (126-41).

Urbanisation meant the exclusion of many women from the economy and a new isolation centred upon the home. Although this was not, of course, experienced to anything like the same degree across the whole of society (many more women were forced to work long and hard in often gruelling circumstances), nevertheless, the persistence of emerging middle class values were instrumental in producing what Bullough and Bullough describe as "a new concept of motherhood ... enveloping the woman in a mystique that asserted her special status but at the same time kept her confined." They argue that this mystification also took a physical form as the antithesis of practical Victorian manliness. Clothing and hairstyles now emphasised an assumed (and essentially false) feminine fragility. Corsets, for example, became hugely restrictive – young girls were prepared by being made to wear 'trainer corsets' even before their tenth birthdays and underwear became ever more elaborate. But in stark contrast to this, male clothing in response to the new earnestness of the age, lost its colour and flair.⁵⁹

If society was still determinedly patriarchal, many men seemed to go through an identity crisis too. Just as, two thousand years earlier, the Romans had emphasised the need to practise manly virtues to escape the slide into the watery weakness of femininity, so the Victorian gentleman, especially if he had been educated in a public school, became obsessively concerned to demonstrate his manliness. Masculine values, which had to be carefully cultivated, were strength, discipline of mind and body, loyalty, decisiveness, dominance and 'hardness' – an absence not just of bodily but also of intellectual and emotional fat.⁶⁰ Victorians "frequently spoke of the 'manliness' required to face the bare truth."⁶¹ Male bonding, through an astonishing variety of clubs and associations and a new interest in team sport, sustained public school camaraderie into adult life and helped to support men in the roles that society expected of them.

⁵⁹ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 154-75. Turner also asks if corsets were an instrument of male oppression, but concludes that paradoxically, their effect was to contribute to the development of *anorexia nervosa* and even to make middle-class married women less available sexually (and prompted middle-class men to seek out working-class prostitutes): Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2nd ed., 1996), 191-3.

⁶⁰ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 178.

⁶¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 404.

Women had from time to time, over many centuries, taken the opportunity to reject the role and the clothing assigned to them by society, now it was the turn of some men to seek an escape into the separate and very different sphere of women. This seems to have been more than just a flight from the newly polarised differentiation between the gender roles, with all the expectations that were now laid upon men. Bullough and Bullough argue that the more different and mysterious women were made, the more men tended not only to objectify and eroticise them, but also the objects associated with them, especially their elaborate lingerie and corsetry. They point out, for example, that women's clothing was designed to give greater prominence to erotic areas, especially the breasts and buttocks.⁶² Nineteenth century male transvestism flourished in response to an excessively binary polarisation of gender, but also paradoxically, in response to the imprisonment of women in a newly eroticised parody of femininity – itself almost a travesty. At the same time, European and American women were moved to continue to cross dress to escape the limitations of the female role. Surprisingly large numbers of women posed as men and successfully managed to join the armies of the American Civil War, and of every other conflict in Europe up to and including the First World War.⁶³

The study of transvestism in the context of a desire to legitimate homosexuality

Two of the most thorough and influential early studies of male transvestism were carried out at the turn of the twentieth century by Havelock Ellis in Britain and Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany. Both were concerned to foster sexual liberation, and in particular, to show that homosexuality had always existed and was a natural part of human sexuality. Ellis, indeed, was the first to use the word 'homosexuality'. Ellis's essentially descriptive work was informed by two convictions. He believed that moral attitudes were the product of the society in which they were formed and were in constant evolution (hence he saw 'Victorian attitudes' as

⁶² Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 184-9. They quote *The London Graphic* of 7 May 1870, which reported not only on the numbers of men who like to take female roles in amateur dramatics, but also 'a practice which has unquestionably become more common of late, namely, the mania among young men of girlish appearance for dressing themselves up like women.' It described 'hair-dressing establishments' in the West End that offered a transvestite make-over.

⁶³ See, for example Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 157-64.

transient), and he held that sexual characteristics were biologically determined. In his later work, he insisted far more strongly than he had earlier, on the significance of biological differences between 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Thus whilst he saw homosexuality as a natural 'inversion', he saw transvestism as a distortion, a largely heterosexual phenomenon and a product of an exaggerated identification with the object of one's sexual attraction.⁶⁴

Hirschfeld shared Ellis's concern to demonstrate that 'transvestites' (his own term) were very different and not essentially linked to homosexuals. His great work on the subject *Die Transvestiten* was first published in 1910, but was not translated into English until 1991. It is in many ways a peculiarly discursive work and highly anecdotal, but it still offers a *cornucopia* of often highly detailed stories, all but one, of male cross-dressers. It raises issues and ideas, many for the first time, which will come to feature strongly debate about cross-dressing and sex-changing during the twentieth century.⁶⁵

It begins with seventeen case studies, some short, some quite lengthy, in the most part stories told personally to Hirschfeld himself. Some of these, he followed through over a period of over twelve years. For most, but not all the subjects, he supplies a brief note of any evidence of "deviations of the drives or degeneration in relatives". He then describes each person's 'present status, and then 'sexual life', followed by a first-person account of his or her life of cross-dressing. Twelve of his subjects were married. Only one claimed to be homosexual, though two other identify as bisexual and two as 'auto-erotic'. He observes that most, but not all, the cases reveal an erotic association between cross-dressing and sexual stimulation, often including masturbation. He insists that costume, "is not the chosen expression of an arbitrary mood, but rather is a form of expression of their inner personality as

⁶⁴ For a good discussion and analysis of Ellis's work see, Jeffrey Weeks, 'Havelock Ellis and the Politics of Sex-Reform', in *Making Sexual History*, 17-52.

⁶⁵ Magnus Hirschfeld, trans. Michael Lombardi-Nash, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991). For a good, brief account of Hirschfeld's wider research and his own sexuality see Gert Hekma, 'A Female Soul in a Male Body: Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology', in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 213-39. Vern Bullough, in an introduction to the English translation of Hirschfeld, comments, 'One possible reason for the lack of an English translation is that Hirschfeld wrote a rather difficult German, and occasionally he was rather a sloppy writer, misidentifying sources or giving incomplete citations.'

a valid symbol,"⁶⁶ but significantly, in the context of the emergence of transsexuality, he notes that three of his subjects are different: "The charm of women's clothing has, for them, nothing erotic about it; it is only a temporary pressing forward of their feminine characters."⁶⁷ This is a highly significant observation in that it begins to establish the evidence, seen again and again in the twentieth century, that transvestism is a relatively common phenomenon, but that transsexuality is much rarer, and that it may not be linked to sexual orientation.

Although both Hirschfeld and Ellis lay outside the medical mainstream, the importance of their contributions to the development of understanding of gender crossing in the twentieth century was to prove considerable. More immediately, both of them, but in particular Hirschfeld in Germany, were to be more influential in countering a growing hostility to homosexual people and in promoting a culture of sexual liberalism, which according to Jeffrey Weeks was to become a root of the 'permissive society' that would not fully come to fruit in Britain and America until the 1960s.⁶⁸

Joanne Meyerowitz argues that it was this increasingly vocal campaign for sexual emancipation in the Germany of the 1920s, even more than the development of medical technology, which was to prove sufficiently fertile ground to enable the first attempts at sex-change surgery to be made.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, medical science had indeed moved on a very great deal during the nineteenth century.

Changing medical models of sex and the problem of hermaphroditism

If the nineteenth-century had witnessed a sea change in the newly industrialised society's understanding of gender, the change in its understanding of sex was just as great. Both Darwinism, which held that the sexes gradually became more differentiated through the process of evolution, and the Creationist response to it, which appealed to Genesis 1:27 in

⁶⁶ Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, 124

⁶⁷ Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, 139.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History*, 18.

⁶⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexualism in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21.

stressing the immutability of a romanticised ideal of sexual bi-polarity, provided an essentialist counterpart to the construction of a highly polarised expression of gender difference. At the same time, medical science began to disprove, once and for all, Galen's unitary understanding of sex. It was now finally clear, for example, that women were not failed males, with essentially similar genitals. But a small though significant group of people, hermaphrodites, simply did not fit this powerful new binary model of sex.⁷⁰

A 'hermaphrodite' is usually understood to have *both* male and female sexual organs, but in many cases the sexual organs are merely ambiguous.⁷¹ Alice Domurat Dreger has studied the attempts of British and French doctors to respond to over 200 cases of hermaphroditism, principally in the years between 1870 and 1915. The essence of her thesis is that the strangeness of hermaphrodites illustrates the difficulty, even the impossibility, of maintaining a strict, binary understanding of sex (and of gender too).⁷²

By about 1870, she shows that the medical profession had come to a consensus that any attempt to 'resolve' the riddle of ambiguous sex should be based, first of all, upon examination of the subject's gonads, although in practice, variants were found to be remarkably difficult to resolve into one sex or the other. French doctors, after having determined the presence of either testicular or ovarian tissue, and thus having made their mind up as to the 'true' sex of an individual, tended to insist that h/she then lived in that role, even if that meant a change of

⁷⁰ Hermaphrodites, although relatively uncommon, were, of course, nothing new. They were normally expected to choose to be either male or female and to abide by that decision. Those who wavered or changed role were looked upon with some disgust. But by the mid seventeenth century, the word 'hermaphrodite' had acquired another confusing and far less helpful reference to obviously effeminate homosexuals, though it was recognised that female 'hermaphrodites' also existed. For a fuller discussion of this see Randolph Trumbach, 'London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of a Modern Culture', in Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender*, 111-36 and particularly 115-21.

⁷¹ The distinction between hermaphroditism, which implies that a person has both male and female attributes and 'intersexuality' in which s(he) has a blend sexual characteristic somewhere *between* the extremes of male and female was not made until the second decade of the twentieth century.

⁷² Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6. She comments,

We tend to assume that the normal ...existed before we encountered the abnormal, but it is only when we are faced with something that we think is 'abnormal' that we find ourselves struggling to articulate what 'normal' is.

role. And in almost all cases, this meant people who had always thought themselves female, suddenly having to try to adjust to becoming male, sometimes with tragic consequences.⁷³

In Britain, surgeons took a rather different view, and were more concerned to take outward appearance into account. There are several accounts of operations to remove the testicles of patients to allow them to continue legally, as girls or as women. It was still regarded as almost inconceivable that anyone could be a true hermaphrodite. Most patients were classified as either male pseudo-hermaphrodites (having only testicular tissue) or female pseudo-hermaphrodites (having only ovarian tissue). The difficulty of determining 'true' sex through an examination of the gonads led some surgeons to consider behavioural evidence to support their diagnoses. Physiology, demeanour, tastes and talents were taken into account as well as anatomy.⁷⁴

⁷³ Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 17-9. Dreger relates the story of Alexina/Abel Barbin, who was discovered to have

a strange mélange of sexual anatomy: a short, imperforate penis, curved slightly backwards and pointed toward what [could only be called] a vulva – labia minora, and a vagina large enough to admit an index finger: Twenty-nine years before his piteous death, in the town of Saint-Dean d'Angely, Barbin was born and christened as a girl. It is not clear whether any questions were raised about the child's sex at that time. We do know that within a few days of the birth, as required by French law, the newborn was presented to the mayor and civil status registrar so that they might record certain facts ... Alexina gained a position at a small girls' boarding school... Alexina – an individual of somewhat stocky build, who had, to her dismay, never menstruated - and Sara [the young unmarried daughter of the owner of the school, Mme P.], whom Alexina saw as a model of feminine grace, grew intimate. Indeed they became nearly inseparable, even going so far as to share a bed regularly. Witnessing their strong attachment, Madame P. scolded them, 'You are very fond of each other, and for my part I am very happy that you are; but there are proprieties that must be observed even among girls.' Still, Madame did not suspect the level of their intimacy. Not long after Alexina's arrival, she and Sara had begun having sexual relations. As Alexina remarked, Sara's mother 'saw me only as her daughter's girlfriend, while in fact I was her lover!' A combination of weighty conscience and a painful abdomen finally led the tortured Alexina to a series of priest-confessors and medical men, the result of which was a consensus that Alexina was a man, a male who had been mistaken at birth for a female, and that therefore her legal and public identity ought to be 'rectified' to match her 'true sex' ... On June 21, 1860, the register of Barbin's birth was amended. Her sex was changed to male, and her name to Abel... Barbin hoped that this new public identity might enable him to marry Sara, a dream the two apparently shared. Such happiness was not to be; the scandal was too great ... Alexina had detested the thought of being a working woman, and now she found herself a working man. He bemoaned his fate: 'Reality is crushing me, is pursuing me. What is going to become of me?' ... Within a short time the body of Abel Barbin lay on the dissecting table of Goujon. We do not know precisely what finally drove [him] to suicide ... In any case, at the autopsy, the doctor saw to it that careful sketches of Barbin's unusual anatomy were made and recorded in the medical literature.

⁷⁴ Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 107-8. The persistence of this method has been astonishing and is strikingly, perhaps disturbingly, close to the approach taken until quite recently by medical panels in the United Kingdom when trying to establish a diagnosis of transsexuality.

Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, there was not only a disturbing, persistent and visible challenge to the strict binary model of human sex, but also a body of doctors willing to 'change sex' through surgical means, if necessary, in order to enable people to live in accord with what society deemed acceptable; doctors moreover, who were prepared to take into account not just physical but also emotional and behavioural factors in the determination of sex.

The first transsexuals

Although the notion of 'transsexuality' still lay a generation or two in the future, the early years of the twentieth century saw a number of attempts to change a person's sex through surgical means. Hirschfeld's Berlin Institute for Sexual Science led the way in Europe. Both Ellis and Hirschfeld, at different times, challenged the dominant, binary model of sex, and asserted theory of human universal bisexuality. The recognition that males and female not only possessed residual physical characteristics of the opposite sex, but also both male and female hormones, added weight to this new conviction, especially amongst those, in Germany, like Hirschfeld, who campaigned for sexual liberty. In the less liberal climate of the United States, however, doctors equated a wish to change sex with evidence of homosexuality.⁷⁵

The Second World War was to prove a decisive turning point in the story of modern transsexual identities. Hirschfeld's work finished with the closure of his Institute by the Nazis in 1933. Harry Benjamin, a Berlin-born endocrinologist, who had worked with Hirschfeld, emigrated to the United States, and began to experiment with hormone treatment on a few patients who expressed a burning desire to change sex. Another American doctor, however, David Cauldwell, who in 1949, first applied the term 'transsexual' to those whom he believed to be physically of one sex, but psychologically of the other, advocated, psychological

⁷⁵ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 14-45. Meyerowitz' convincing and insightful study is, I believe, by far the finest work on the history of transsexuality. It forms my main source for the story of sex-changing in the second half of the twentieth century.

treatment to help his patients adjust to their condition. Thus began a divide in American and European medical approaches to transsexuality that was to persist for almost forty years.

Christine Jorgensen

Public awareness of transsexuality remained very slight until the sensational story of Christine (formerly George) Jorgensen, an American citizen, made headline news in December 1952. The huge publicity given to Jorgensen's 'sex-change' through hormones and genital surgery (in Denmark) allowed many others in America who felt as she did to clamour for help, though very few were able to follow her path.

Her case also prompted others to explore for the first time, the fundamental question of what really makes a woman a woman and a man a man. Meyerowitz, who discusses the impact of Jorgensen's story in some depth, shows how it could, and was, interpreted from apparently irreconcilably different standpoints. Either, at the dawn of the atomic age, she represented the triumph of science over nature and also an archetype of American libertarianism, or else a "foolish libertarian strain that threatened the social order" by failing to respect the laws of nature. Furthermore, she illustrated a new fragility of gender roles, and raised old fears about homosexuality. As a heterosexual woman, was she now more acceptable than when she had been a homosexual man? ⁷⁶

After Jorgensen, there continued to be a trickle of other highly publicised sex changes. Treatment in the 1950s however, was far from consistent and reflects a growing sense of unease in the medical profession about the true nature of transsexuality. Dave King draws attention, for example, to the very different experiences of Roberta Cowell and April Ashley. Roberta Cowell was a former RAF officer and well-known racing driver. The son of a surgeon, Robert had access to sympathetic medical help to which he turned, complaining of depression and a persistent conviction that he was feminine and that he identified with women. Although he had been able to father two children, she/he was discovered to be

⁷⁶ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, especially 51-97.



genetically female. In 1951 her birth certificate was amended from 'boy' to 'girl' and after being treated with hormones, and an artificial vagina was created by surgery.

Soon after this in 1953, George Jamieson aged 17, a boy from a poor Liverpool council estate, was receiving treatment in one of the city's hospitals following an attempted suicide. The medical staff there believed him to be a "constitutional homosexual who says he wants to become a woman." He was administered male hormones and ECT (electroconvulsive therapy).⁷⁷ It was not until 1960 that George would be able to save up enough money to go to Casablanca for surgery and so to become April.⁷⁸

Gender dysphoria and the rise of medical anxiety about its cause

In the USA, the conflict deepened between those who saw what now began to be described as 'gender dysphoria', as a biological problem to be treated by changing the body, and those who continued to insist that it was a psychological abnormality, a kind of mental illness. But even some of those doctors, including Benjamin himself, who admitted to the deep rootedness of gender identity, and to a possible physical cause for it, also regarded environmental factors as significant, especially in early childhood. One response was to emphasise and to attempt to reinforce gender role differences in children who showed signs of gender-variant behaviour, in order to conform to norms felt desirable by the society of the day.

Transsexual people themselves began to assert what they perceived as their rights, often in opposition to those doctors who thought themselves 'liberal' in their willingness to offer treatment. Numbers of transsexual people grew enormously too, as news spread that treatment might be possible, and as people began to recognise in themselves symptoms like those they now read about in the papers or saw in television documentaries.

⁷⁷ Dave King, 'Gender Blending: Medical Perspectives and Technology', in Richard Ekins and Dave King (eds.), *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-changing* (Routledge: London, 1996), 79-98. King does not record the genetic background to Cowell's case. For that see Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 255.

⁷⁸ *Daily Mail*, 16 February 1996.

The first cases of female-to-male sex reassignment were also published in the years following the Second World War. One of these was that of Michael (formerly Laura) Dillon, who in 1949 completed a programme of surgery that had included double mastectomy and the construction of an artificial penis, as well as hormone treatment with large doses of testosterone.⁷⁹ By the early 1980s there was a rough balance between the numbers of female-to-male and male-to-female patients seeking surgery, though the former still continued to receive less publicity.

Concluding comments

This chapter, in its very broad and necessarily sometimes rather superficial sweep through history and anthropology, has shown that cultural expressions of gender crossing and gender transformations reveal a great deal about how each society has constructed gender. There are expressions of gender dysphoria here, but only according to each contingent understanding of gender. In other words, if gender is not stable, it is clear that neither is gender dysphoria, even if and when it is triggered primarily by genetic or neurological factors. I have thus shown that the boundaries between third gender, cross-dressing, androgyny and transsexuality are inevitably and often irresolvably blurred in the historical record. The story of Byzantine eunuchs is a clear example of this, even though there is a complete absence of any satisfactory evidence any eunuch was motivated by a personal sense of cross-gender identity. I suggest that even if such a sense was there (and I suspect that it was), it could not easily have been expressed in that cultural milieu.

Culturally-constructed gendered factors, and especially those relating to the exercise of power, go a long way to explain why female to male cross-dressing and gender shifting was both more common and also thought to be more acceptable until well into the twentieth century. Similarly, male to female crossing was bound to be both more hidden and far less acceptable. Correspondingly, the same factors have persisted almost until the present day to mask the true extent of female to male gender dysphoria - and transsexuality.

⁷⁹ Bullough and Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, 255.

As transsexuality became recognised in the twentieth century and first described, it appears to be not merely *gender* dysphoria, but in a very real sense, also emerges as *sex* dysphoria. Often, of course, the two overlap and have many cultural expressions that are remarkably similar (it is, for example, still not always easy to tell apart transvestites from transsexuals), but the element of gender/sex-dysphoria is rare, even now, and it is hardly surprising that it is almost impossible to detect in the historical and archaeological record.

If the weight of medical evidence summarised in Chapter 1 is correct, it follows that transsexuality must be thought of as inherent, potentially, within human experience and cannot be dismissed merely as a twentieth century construction, but it could only be fully recognised when, as in Germany in the 1920s, societal and medical factors converged to allow it to appear. And even here, a note of caution is needed. It may be too simplistic to regard gender as wholly belonging to the realm of social construction and sex to biological essentialism. Such a neat differentiation can be difficult to sustain.

In the late nineteenth century it is hard to imagine that, for example, Bernadette's or Peter's gender/sex dysphoria would ever have been recognised, probably not even by themselves. In the sense that transsexuality was not fully described before the twentieth century sense it is a sign of the times, but it is not merely a twentieth century construct, and certainly not a twentieth century disease. Before then, it is likely that Peter would have struggled through life, unhappy, and inwardly troubled, but he would never have known why. Bernadette would have remained Bernard, a successful scientist and diplomat who suddenly developed epilepsy and died in his fifties. It is unlikely that he would ever have talked about a sense of inner conflict. I doubt that any of the people I interviewed would have joined a Molly Club or even perhaps have become *hijras* or two-spirits; it is more likely they would have remained simply but profoundly troubled. In the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first they have, at last, been able to find some possibility of resolution and, with that, of healing. I shall return to the nature of that healing in the next chapter and then again in chapter 5.

3 Transsexual Experience in Contemporary British Society

Introduction

The lives of the seven people described in the case studies illustrate a little of the variety, contingency and complexity of the transsexual experience. In this final chapter of the first part of the study, I explore transsexual lives within British society today in a number of contexts: the law, the media and the churches, and much more briefly, in relationship to feminism and to homosexuality. There are, of course, other significant contexts, including, for example the world of employment¹ and that of literature and the arts,² but those I have selected for special attention serve two purposes well. The first is partly descriptive, to understand better the nature of the transsexual experience, what impacts upon it, what helps to form it and what influences it. The second is to tease out those issues which, if any, might lend themselves properly to further exploration and reflection in the light of the Christian tradition, and thus form a bridge into the second part of the study.

My thesis in this chapter is that transsexual experience in the latter part of the twentieth century shows that transsexuality gradually became to be seen as problematic and thus became increasingly defined only in relationship to a series of problems. As other sexual minorities also began to become more self-aware and to fight for what they now perceived as their rights, the blurring that had always existed between transsexuality, third-gender, androgyny and cross-dressing was gradually, but not always helpfully, resolved. The feminist movement in perhaps a necessary and certainly understandable drive for purity and rejection of gender stereotypes moved to further exclude transsexual women and to despise

¹ See for example, Press for Change, *Transsexual People in The Workplace: A Code of Practice* (London: Press for Change, 1998). Also The Gender Trust, *Transsexualism and Gender Reassignment: Recommendations for Management Guidelines* (Brighton: The Gender Trust, 2002).

² The work of Marjorie Garber, especially *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London, Penguin, 1993) is of particular interest here, not least because it is a vivid illustration of the destabilising effects of moving the boundaries in such key, defining human categories as sex and gender. Her work however, as its title makes clear, is concerned with the cultural significance of cross-dressing and gender-shifting, and only incidentally with transsexuality.

transsexual men. As categories of gender and sexuality were parsed out, new more narrow definitions of homosexuality emerged. This was to prove a curiously double-edged sword for transsexual people. As the homosexual community no longer saw transsexual people as their allies, others, especially in the churches, became more convinced that transsexuality was merely a less honest form of homosexuality. Meanwhile the media used increasingly derogatory language to describe and sensationalise transsexuality and coined the damagingly misleading term 'sex-change'. Finally, the law was used to give its own intractable gravitas to the process of defining transsexuality as problematic, a fantasy and deviant. Given the weight of this cultural pressure, it was hardly surprising that the churches did nothing to challenge the basis of these views and moved from a position mostly of disinterest to one of rejection of transsexual people. It was hardly surprising that in such an atmosphere there was a strong concern to find a cause for gender dysphoria that might lead to a solution that would ensure its eventual elimination. The social and medical factors which seemed to converge in the Germany of the 1920s to allow transsexuality to emerge were short-lived, and society seemed to want to put it back into Pandora's box.

I begin with some observations about the attempts of transsexual people to come together to fight, in an increasingly hostile world, for what they have come to see as their rights.

Transsexual organisation

Early links with other sexual minorities

In her account of the ways in which 'sex changed' in the United States during the twentieth century, Joanne Meyerowitz describes how as numbers of transsexual people began to grow, some at least looked for peer-support, especially in the months and years leading up to full transition and surgery. At first, they were welcomed by other people who expressed a range of sexual and gender variations. Transsexual people, in turn, were happy to associate with and be accepted by gays, homosexual drag artists and other transvestites, and saw themselves as belonging to a common sub-culture. Gay clubs and bars, for example, in some

American cities were a safe place, including the famous Stonewall Inn in New York, which after the famous 1969 riot became the focus of the nascent Gay Liberation movement.³

Gender stereotypes and the transvestite rejection of transsexuality

Gradually, however, the various groups began to identify themselves not in terms of a common experience, but by what made them distinct. In both the United States and Britain, for example, transvestites sought to distance themselves from both transsexual people and homosexuals. In America, Virginia Prince, one of the leaders of this movement, was openly antagonistic towards transsexual people, and sought through her magazines *Transvestia* and then *Femme Mirror* to distance male-to-female transvestites from any charge of effeminacy or sexual deviance. Prince herself, after two divorces, lived full-time as a woman and even underwent some degree of hormone therapy, but insisted that most male-to-female transsexuals were properly heterosexual transvestites and as such were utterly mistaken to request surgery. Her position was based on a delight in conventional gender stereotypes and a belief, with echoes firmly in the past, that men took precedence over women in the social hierarchy. Her somewhat contradictory aim was to try to elevate and encourage transvestism as a way of expressing more fully a man's full personality, by releasing his normally repressed feminine side.⁴ In 1966, six British and Irish subscribers to Prince's publications decided to form the 'Beaumont Society', with similar objectives of supporting heterosexual, often married, male cross-dressers.

Prince's views have had a considerable impact on many later writers and activists. Her notion of the 'true' transvestite as a 'femmiphile' (a 'lover of the feminine'), anticipates Blanchard's and then more especially Bailey's theories of autogynephilia, and her advocacy of a

³ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 168-96. See also Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: South Street, 2000), 43-5 and 58: the riot began when police attempted to arrest (under the terms of a local law) a female-to-male transsexual for failing to wear at least three items of female clothing. Several transsexuals fought back.

⁴ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 180. See also especially Dave King and Richard Ekins, 'Pioneers of Transgendering: The Life and Work of Virginia Prince', *Gendys 2K Conference Report* (2000), 48-54.

particularly stereotypical expression of femininity has persisted in groups like the British Beaumont Society, even though that organisation has since opened its membership to both homosexual cross-dressers and to transsexual people. Her work, however, took no account of the character and needs of female cross-dressers, nor of female-to-male transsexuals, and is perhaps, one of the factors in making gender dysphoria appear, wrongly, to be a predominantly male condition.

Transgender and Transsexual activism

Like Peter, many transsexual people remained unaware of other people who shared their experience, and not everyone wished to network or to join a local support group.⁵ Even if someone did wish to meet other transsexuals, there was not always the opportunity to do so. This was Claudine Griggs' experience in the United States in the 1970s.⁶ Twenty years later, however, many groups had begun to form. The 1990s saw a blossoming of transgender activism as transgendered and transsexual people, now far more numerous and thus much more visible especially in many western societies, sought to express their rights. This was sometimes but by no means always in tandem with the gay and lesbian movement.⁷ In particular, this found a focus around a demand for full legal recognition of transsexual people, in the gender to which they have been re-assigned, including the right to marry and the retrospective alteration of birth certificates. In the UK, for example, this led to the foundation of 'Press for Change' in 1992, a highly organised, vocal and ultimately successful lobby group

⁵ See, for example, Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam: The Autobiography of a Female to Male Transsexual*, (London: Cassell, 1996), 163. Although Rees found the FTM network in Britain very caring, he criticises some of those who wrote to him after media interest in his case,

[I] sometimes found that it was assumed that because I shared this particular medical condition I wanted to be a bosom pal. I didn't.

⁶ Claudine Griggs, *S/he: Changing Sex and Changing Clothes* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 28.

There were no 'group meetings' of transsexuals that I ever found. I didn't see another transsexual until two years after I changed my name, and my next encounter was six years later.

Griggs began living as a woman in 1974.

⁷ The motivation for this is illustrated, for example, by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox, *Trans-X-U-All: The Naked Difference* (London: Extraordinary People Press, 1996), 94:

It is a case of surviving among a hostile force. This must stop, as the only way for the transsexual minority to persuade the heterosexual majority that they are not going to put-up with any more trannie-bashing, is to net-work ... A proliferation of 'Glad to be a Trannie' groups needs to be formed in order to help transsexuals fight against apathy, which proves to be their own worse enemy.

with a very substantial membership of around two thousand, which now probably represents around a third of all transsexual people in Britain.⁸

Transsexual people and Feminism

Many of the doctors offering help to people with gender dysphoria, and high-profile activists within the transgendered community like Virginia Prince (notwithstanding her antipathy to transsexuality), were concerned to uphold and protect gender stereotypes, including the notion of female subordination and inferiority. It was hardly surprising therefore, that with the rise of feminism in the 1970s, these same people, and with them the wider transgendered community, came under attack. Even those transsexual women who themselves joined the feminist movement soon found that they were sometimes excluded, accused of masculine invasiveness of women's space and even of rape. Female to male transsexuals, in turn, were sometimes regarded as "misguided lesbians who betray their sisters."⁹ Janice Raymond was at the vanguard of this attack.¹⁰ For Raymond, the rape consisted in the appropriation of women's bodies, by reducing them to an artefact. Her main objection was to male to female transsexuals, whom she saw as deviant males who embody the sexual stereotyping of a patriarchal society. But she also considered that the female to male transsexual is the "token that saves face for the male 'transsexual empire'. She [sic.] is the buffer zone who can be used to promote the universalist argument that transsexualism is a supposed 'human' problem, not uniquely restricted to men." She continues, "women have been assimilated into the transsexual world, as women are assimilated into other male-defined worlds, institutions, and roles, that is on men's terms, and thus as tokens."¹¹ Raymond's views, as Meyerowitz points out, are very much of their time, written in the context of a new and broader feminist

⁸ Whittle, *The Transgender Debate*, 55-6. Whittle has himself played a leading role in 'Press for Change'. One of its founding members was Mark Rees, who describes its genesis in a fringe meeting at the 1991 Liberal Democrat Conference, hosted by Alex Carlile (Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 159).

⁹ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 258-2; also Whittle, *The Transgender Debate*, 45. See also Sally Hines, 'Absent Subjects: Feminist Discourse and Trans Masculinities', *Gendys 2002 Conference Report* (2002), 47-55. Hines notes the 'virulent denouncement' during the 1980s and 1990s 'within feminism around trans male identities.'

¹⁰ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire, The Making of the She-Male* (London: The Women's Press, 1979).

¹¹ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 27.

discussion of gender roles. She accuses Raymond, "in classic sectarian fashion [of purging] the [feminist] movement of those she claimed tainted it, and attacked her allies instead of her enemies."¹² Although Raymond appears on the one hand to hold an essentialist view of sex differences (like the lawyers and churchmen of the day, she held that chromosomal differences defined sexual identity and that this was immutable), nevertheless, she also wrote that gender and that gender identity differences are *not* natural and immutable. Meyerowitz comments that Raymond "seems to have confused gender identity, the psychological sense of a sexed self, with gender roles, the social norms for men's and women's behaviour."¹³ Not surprisingly, the transsexual community was outraged by Raymond's thesis¹⁴, but her caricature of transsexuals as evil sexual agents of male oppression who hold to dangerously distorted masculinist sexual stereotypes cannot just be brushed aside, even if the real lives of transsexual people (as the case studies here show) demonstrate a far more complex range of expression of gender than Raymond allows.

The accusation that male to female transsexuals are misguided men seeking to live out a insulting and derogatory view of femininity has also persisted,¹⁵ along with those deeper questions about the proper nature of gender and of the boundaries between genders. The attack has sometimes broadened to embrace wider cultural criticism, as exemplified by Bryan Turner's polemic (see above, 49 note 20) that transsexualism is little more than a life-style choice and middle-class conceit.

The greater visibility of transvestites and of some transvestite literature has done little to deflect this criticism. Some transvestites certainly delight in preserving and delighting in extraordinary images of femininity, with the curious, parodic stereotypes of 'sissy maid', 'baby

¹² Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 260.

¹³ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 264. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, Routledge, 1993), 126-7. Butler accuses Raymond of ignoring the important differences between drag, cross-dressing and transsexualism, and of wrongly maintaining that in each women are the object of hatred.

¹⁴ See, for example, Carol Riddell, 'Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*', in Ekins and King (eds.), *Blending Genders*, 171-89.

¹⁵ See for example, Julie Birchill's comments above, page 66, note 57.

doll', 'schoolgirl' and the like.¹⁶ Even those publications within the mainstream of transvestism that advocate cross-dressing for a men as a harmless way of alleviating stress, do so at the risk of preserving notions of womanhood that can now seem, at the very least, questionable.¹⁷

Another hugely significant effect of feminism on the transgender debate has been its stress on the contingent, provisional, social construction of gender, and with it a willingness to use, often playfully, the language of gender-bending and gender-crossing.¹⁸ By contrast some other women qualify this by a new stress on essentialism. For example, the journalist Carol Sarler, who in responding to the much publicised story of Carole Stone's gender-reassignment (see below 124-6) commented that it is impossible to feel like a woman without the combination of social and chemical ingredients that are unique to women.¹⁹

Transsexual people and Homosexuality

I have shown that it has often been (wrongly) assumed that those who cross the gender divide do so in order to give expression to homosexuality.²⁰ Male to female transsexuals were seen as effeminate homosexuals, and female to males as butch lesbians. Since the days of Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld, however, the lack of any essential link between transgendered behaviour and homosexuality has been equally strongly emphasised.

¹⁶ See for example, Veronica Vera, *Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Become Girls* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). This book (written by a woman!), even describes masturbatory fantasies in graphic sexually explicit detail, and how other fantasies of imagined femininity may be lived out.

¹⁷ For example, Vernon Coleman, *Men in Dresses: A Study of Transvestism/Crossdressing* (Barnstaple: European Medical Journal, 1996), 111-12. Coleman, himself both a doctor and a cross-dresser, acknowledges the impact of feminism and the justice of women's rights; but following the lines of an argument similar to that articulated earlier by Virginia Prince, suggests that cross-dressing is a tool by which men may too may be liberated and more compete, as they open themselves to their feminine side. Unfortunately, the categories of masculine and feminine he employs are still somewhat pejorative:

By dressing as women [men] can liberate their feminine, gentle side – (temporarily at least) escape from their aggressive, ambitious, demanding masculine selves ... While women fighting from liberation burnt their bras men fighting for liberation are now wearing theirs.

¹⁸ See below, 208-9. Also Garber, *Vested Interests*.

¹⁹ Carol Sarler, *The Daily Express*, 5 December 2000.

²⁰ For example, see above 86.

It was as much the emergence of the gay movement, and of a gay identity, as the growth in research on both homosexuality and transsexuality, that led transsexual people themselves, and the doctors who treated them, to separate the categories of gender and sexuality and to develop new, more narrow definitions of homosexuality, which recognised that not all homosexuals were either feminine men or masculine women, and that a person's object of sexual desire was not a defining characteristic of their gender identity (and vice-versa).²¹ Despite this, there continues to be a temptation for many others, not least in the churches, to try to lump conveniently together all who do not seem to fit society's accepted norms of sexual and gendered behaviour together;²² and those who have felt so marginalized have also, often, looked to one another for mutual support.

Transsexual people and the media

The Impact of the Christine Jorgensen Story

The Christine Jorgensen story first thrust transsexual people into the press limelight. Since then, stories about 'sex-changing' have continued to make the headlines.

Meyerowitz charts the way in which, over a period of less than ten years, the media's initial infatuation with and tentative approval of Jorgensen turned to hostility, especially in relation to questions of her perceived sexuality. There was, she suggests, always a tension between the view that Jorgensen represented an example of the triumph of science over nature, and of an almost heroic American individualism, with the growing body of opinion that this same libertarian individualism threatened both the laws of nature and the social order. It was a story partly of personal triumph over adversity, but partly also one of 'titillating sexual transgression'. Unease over Jorgensen's sexuality came to a head more clearly after 1959

²¹ This process is described in depth by Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 168-85.

²² Thus, for example, the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003) seeks in one volume to think through issues affecting homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals and the church, each as modes of 'sexual orientation'.

when she applied for a marriage licence. She began to be perceived as a walking example of the fragility of gender roles – and as such, to many people, increasingly unsettling.²³

'Sex-change'

Thereafter, on both sides of the Atlantic, the press seemed more concerned with more sensational aspects of transsexuality and, indeed, to such an extent with the wider aspects of gender crossing, that they often confused transvestism and transsexuality. Dave King points out that the British press, and especially until the 1970s the popular, tabloid press, developed their own terms, and in particular, favoured 'sex-change', a term which was only otherwise used with some caution by the medical establishment or the transsexual community. Although clearly most concerned with the more sensational aspects of transsexuality, the press nevertheless reported some individual personal stories with reasonable sympathy. King observes, however, that the newspapers characteristically told these stories in conformity with, and in order to reinforce, prevailing idea of gender stereotypes; thus the successful outcome of a 'sex change story' might be an "attractive model on the arm of a wealthy man."

Given this, it was hardly surprising, perhaps, that the British press were also quick to pounce on stories which illustrated, in their eyes, a far less glamorous side to transsexuality. They have proven to be especially assiduous in reporting accounts of regret or failure, and have treated anything that might be regarded as sexual deviancy with a disdain often bordering on disgust, although in many cases, this has actually meant items more properly concerning transvestism rather than transsexuality.²⁴

In many ways, the more negative trends set in the 1960s and 70s have continued into the first decade of the twenty first century. My own story, for example, was splashed across the front page of the *Newcastle Journal* in highly sensationalist language: "ANGUISH OF SEX CHANGE VICAR". The report followed a characteristic pattern in portraying the outcome of

²³ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 51-96.

²⁴ Dave King, 'Cross-Dressing, Sex-Changing and the Press', in Richard Ekins and Dave King, *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 133-50.

transsexuality as a resolution of conflict, but also of delighting in and over-dramatising the circumstances surrounding a single event – in this instance, my resignation from my position as Vicar of Bedlington.²⁵

Continuing objections to the perceived negative attitude of the British press to transsexual people

The transsexual community still experiences much that is written about them in the British press as hostile, discriminatory and misleading. This is clear from a highly detailed report published in November 2004 by Press for Change, which received written evidence from sixty transsexual people. It corroborates the impression that British newspapers still use inappropriate and often highly derogatory language to describe transsexual people. The report reveals that too often newspapers fail to use proper personal pronouns when describing transsexual people, and persist in the inappropriate and often derogatory use of terms such as 'gender-bender', 'tranny', 'she-male' and even 'sex-change', in such a way that would not be tolerated in describing other minority groups. It thus calls on the Press Complaints Commission to "adopt a more proactive position in regard to encouraging fairer and more equally balanced reference to transsexual people in the British Press."²⁶

This report also makes it clear that sensationalist and derogatory stories about transsexual people sometimes act to trigger further abuse of those people in the community. It even comes to the disturbing conclusion that "the single most terrifying force in the lives of the average transsexual person [is] the British press."²⁷ However, whilst this is undoubtedly the very real experience of a significant number of transsexual people, it is also true, as King has

²⁵ Rhodri Phillips, 'Vicar Quits Post for a Sex Change', *The Newcastle Journal*, 22 March 2004. The report is interesting in both its stereotypical portrayal of my 'condition' and in the sensationalising of the event that brought it to public attention. For example, although I was at pains to stress to the reporter who wrote the piece, Rhodri Phillips, that it would be misleading and unhelpful to say that I felt like 'a woman trapped in a man's body', I was quoted as saying exactly that! Also, although it was made very clear to Phillips that my resignation was timely for many reasons, the circumstances of my parting was exaggerated to 'one week ago, he walked away from the parish he has served for ten years.'

²⁶ Christine Burns, *Transsexual People and the Press: Collected Opinions from Transsexual People Themselves*, (A3b), Press for Change, www.pfc.org.uk (29 November 2004).

²⁷ Christine Burns, *Transsexual People and the Press*, (B3c).

also noted,²⁸ that stories in the press have sometimes acted to encourage and inform others, for example, both Jenny Anne and Susie (see above Chapter 1).

The broadcast media and the Internet

As well as the press, of course, the broadcast media has clearly had a profound impact on transsexual lives, but apart from the sensationalist approach of voyeuristic shows like that hosted by Jerry Springer, there has been space for a more reflective, documentary style of reporting, which has usually been far more sympathetic than the coverage found in the British press. The success of the Israeli singer Dana International, a transsexual woman, in the 1998 Eurovision Song Contest is clearly very different event from Christine Jorgensen's attempts to win popular approval through her stage act, as is also Nadia Almada's triumph in Channel 4's 'Big Brother' in the summer of 2004; while the character of Hayley Patterson demonstrated that transsexual people can be portrayed sympathetically even in such a popular television 'soap' as 'Coronation Street.' The Internet too has made networking possible for many transsexual people, and has become a hugely important source of the widest possible range of information.

Transsexual people and the law

Corbett v Corbett

The legal status of transsexual people was not perceived to be a problem until it was challenged under matrimonial law in the British courts. In 1951, for example, Roberta Cowell succeeded in obtaining an amendment of her birth certificate from 'boy' to 'girl'.²⁹ The case of *Corbett v Corbett* (1970), which first put a transsexual person under the English legal spotlight, was also to prove the first instance on which an English court had been called upon to describe the sex of an individual. Lord Justice Ormrod's judgement was to have far-

²⁸ King, 'Cross-Dressing, Sex-Changing and the Press', 148, quoting, especially, Mark Rees.

²⁹ Ekins and King, *Blending Genders*, 88.

reaching consequences for the way in which transsexual people were regarded more widely in society.

Arthur Corbett married April Ashley by licence in Gibraltar in September 1963. Corbett was fully aware that Ashley was a transsexual woman. Their relationship had always been stormy and the marriage soon failed. Under English law, at the time, divorce was not admissible on grounds of mutual consent; grounds of adultery or cruelty had to be established. As neither of these was demonstrable, and as Ashley herself did not in any case wish to be divorced, in order to avoid any possibility of her claiming any rights to inheritance (Corbett was the heir of Lord Rowallen), Corbett petitioned for a decree of nullity on the grounds that Ashley was a male.

Lord Justice Ormrod gave judgement in the case on 2 February 1970. Expert witnesses included several of the leading medical practitioners involved in the treatment of transsexual people, including Dr John Randell of Charing Cross Hospital. Ormrod, himself a qualified medical doctor as well as a judge, was persuaded by Randell's contention that he was treating essentially male homosexuals, that transsexuality was a psychological disorder, and that any surgical procedure was carried out in order to "help relieve the patients' symptoms ... in the management of their disorder ... not to change their ... sex."³⁰ In his judgment, Ormrod chose to define sex as a constitution fixed at birth and governed by just three factors: chromosomal sex, gonadal sex and genital sex. On this basis alone, he ruled that Ashley was, and had always had been a 'biological male' and that as marriage was a state between a man and a woman, her marriage was therefore void.³¹

³⁰ The full text of the judgment, may be found at www.pfc.org.uk (30 November 2004).

³¹ Lord Justice Ormrod considered and rejected the possibility that Ashley might have been properly regarded as having inter-sex characteristics. From a number of comments made in the course of the judgment, it is clear that he did not care much for either the petitioner (Arthur Corbett) or the respondent (April Ashley). Some of these comments are distinctly insulting. He decided, for example, that, 'the pastiche of femininity was convincing', but 'the voice, manner and gestures and attitude became increasingly reminiscent of the accomplished female impersonator.'

The consequences of Corbett v Corbett

The implications of this judgment had a profound effect, for over three decades, on the lives of transsexual people in Britain. Lord Justice Ormrod himself recognised that certain rights, in respect, for example, of employment and pensions would be affected; but there have been far wider, often embarrassing and sometimes distressing consequences of his judgement. Although before the Gender Recognition Act 2003 came into force it was possible to obtain a passport, driving licence and NHS number appropriate to the new gender status, it remained impossible not only to marry, but also to benefit from any of the rights, including adoption, normally available to a married couple. Birth certificates could not have been changed, with the effect that at times the birth sex as recorded, was granted precedence over that in which a person lived, often for many years.³²

Attempts to change to law

In 1984, after several years of frustration over what he perceived to be a clear case of injustice, and still smarting over the Archbishop of Canterbury's reliance upon the very limited criteria outlined by Lord Justice Ormrod in his *Corbett v Corbett* judgment, Mark Rees took the UK Government to the European Court of Human Rights for failing to recognize his status as a male.³³ Although it failed, in October 1986, it proved to be the first of many such attempts. In February 1996, Alex Carlile, the MP whose organisation of a fringe meeting at the 1991 Liberal Democrat conference had helped create the impetus that led to the formation of 'Press for Change', introduced a Private Member's Bill in the Commons, The Gender Identity (Registration and Civil Status) Bill, which sought to address many of the issues raised by Rees and others. After a short debate, however, it ran out of time and fell.³⁴ By 2000, the United Kingdom was one of only four out of thirty nine countries in the Council of Europe that

³² For example, Whittle, *The Transgender Debate*, 44, 'The government insists that a birth certificate is not an identity document, yet civil service and public sector employers insist that it accompanies job applications.'

³³ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 157-9.

³⁴ Hansard, Vol. 20, No.43 (Friday, 2 February 1996), Columns 1282-1290.

failed to provide full legal recognition for transsexual people in their new gender role (the others were Albania, Andorra and Ireland).³⁵

The Gender Recognition Act 2004

In 1999 the Labour Government passed a Sex (Gender Identity) Bill which gave greater protection to transsexual people in the workplace, and set up an interdepartmental working party on transsexual people; but three years later, the success of two parallel appeals to the European Court of Human Rights finally forced the UK Government to act to redefine the legal status of transsexual people.³⁶ A Gender Recognition Bill was introduced in the Lords in November 2003, and after lengthy debate was finally passed in the Commons the following June, receiving Royal Assent on 1 July 2004. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 allows transsexual people who have lived in their 'acquired' gender for at least two years, who are divorced or separated from any former spouse, and who intend to live in that gender until death, to apply for a gender recognition certificate. The effect of this is, at least in theory, simple:

When a full gender recognition certificate is issued to a person, the person's gender becomes for all purposes the acquired gender (so that if the acquired gender is the male gender, the person's sex becomes that of a man and, if it is the female gender, the person's sex becomes that of a woman).³⁷

³⁵ Whittle, *The Transgender Debate*, 44. See also Home Office, *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group on Transsexual People*, 58-67, Annex 4 'Practice in Some Other Countries'. This includes information about the legal recognition of transsexual people in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

³⁶ The appeals were *Goodwin v UK* and *I v UK*. The first, brought by Christine Goodwin addressed the failures of the UK government to grant her a pension at 60, to give her a new National Insurance number appropriate to her assigned gender and to allow her to marry her male partner. In the second, 'I' protested against being made to produce a birth certificate in her 'old' sex in order to undertake a nursing course and to obtain a student loan. Full texts of both judgements are published on www.pfc.org.uk (5 December 2004).

³⁷ The full text of the bill as debated in the Commons may be found at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmbills/056/04056.i-iv.html> (6 December 2004).

The only real area where this strikingly succinct rule does not take full effect is that of sport, for which the governing bodies are enabled to legislate to prevent transsexual people from competition, if they fear that they might either inhibit the fairness of that competition or endanger its safety.

Transsexual people and the churches

From disinterest to rejection

The churches showed rather less interest in transsexuals during the 1950s and 60s than did the popular press. One of the first recorded comments in the United States, for example, was a message of support in 1966 from Protestant clergy in Baltimore, together with local Jewish leaders, for the work of the newly founded Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins University in the city.³⁸ The experience of many transgendered Christians on both sides of the Atlantic shows however, that such a liberal spirit of generosity was short-lived, especially amongst more conservative churches.

In the United Kingdom, in 1979, Mark Rees discovered that he could not be considered as a candidate for ordination, because the church, following civil law (and in particular the *Corbett v. Corbett* ruling), still regarded him as a woman, and at that time, did not allow the possibility of women's ordination.³⁹ Publicity surrounding his story, and his own appeal direct to Donald Coggan, then Archbishop of Canterbury, helped to trigger a debate about transsexuality in the British churches for the first time.

Transsexualism and Christian Marriage: Oliver O'Donovan

³⁸ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 221 and 329, note 35. The report appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* on 23 November 1966 in response to that paper's invitation to comment. They apparently 'failed to produce any moral objections to the physical change of sex.' Meyerowitz notes that the Roman Catholic diocese chose not to comment. I contacted the *Baltimore Sun* in the hope of examining an original copy of the report, but they failed to respond to my request for help.

³⁹ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 145-46; also 'Becoming a Man: The Personal Account of a Female-to-Male Transsexual', in Ekins and King, *Blending Genders*, 36.

It was not this, however, but a request from a Canadian bishop for guidance on the issue of whether or not a post-operative transsexual should be allowed to marry that prompted what was probably the first British systematic theological discussion of transsexuality. Oliver O'Donovan's booklet, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* set the parameters of the debate for the following two decades in the British churches.⁴⁰ He emphasises, on the basis of the book of Genesis, that dimorphic differentiated sexuality is part of the essential nature of God's creation, which is "clearly ordered at the biological level towards heterosexual union as the means of procreation."⁴¹ He follows Donald Coggan in using *Corbett v Corbett* judgement to reject the possibility that post-operative transsexuals have actually changed sex, and to argue that transsexual people's claims to the contrary are a gnostic denial of their bodily state:

If I claim to have a 'real sex', which may be at war with the sex of my body and is at least in a rather uncertain relationship to it, I am shrinking from the glad acceptance of myself as a physical as well as a spiritual being, and seeking self-knowledge in a kind of Gnostic withdrawal from material creation.⁴²

In other words, he sides with those psychologists, who still in the 1970s and 80s, believed that transsexuality is, in effect, a psychological, essentially delusional state, which should not be accepted but, if possible, 'cured'.

Further rejection of transsexual people: The Evangelical Alliance

Given the state of knowledge available in 1982, O'Donovan's conclusions, if somewhat starkly uncompromising in their adoption of one, very particular understanding of the aetiology of transsexuality, seemed cogent and persuasive. It is striking, however, to observe the way in which a fear that any kind of homosexual relationship might be condoned, has continued to govern – and to distort, both conservative evangelical and Roman Catholic attitudes to

⁴⁰ Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* (Bramcote: Grove, 1982).

⁴¹ O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 6.

⁴² O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 11.

transsexuality. This is particularly evident in the 2000 report published in the United Kingdom by the Evangelical Alliance.⁴³ In essence, their thesis closely follows O'Donovan's argument, though it is both less rigorous and also wider in scope. They pay lip service to the possibility that their understanding of the causes of transsexuality is more open and even-handed than it appears, by stating that "Christians believe that science will ultimately, if accurate, confirm God's revealed truth if correctly understood,"⁴⁴ but whilst appealing for more medical research, they are convinced that transsexual people delude themselves, wrongly disfigure their bodies, and should be helped back to a 'biblical' view of maleness and femaleness.⁴⁵

Although such an appeal to biblical truth is complicated by the stark reality that the Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about transsexuality, this does not seem to persuade the Evangelical Alliance and allied groups that they should, perhaps, be a little more tentative in their interpretation of biblical material. Their confident conclusion that "authentic change from a person's given sex is not possible and an ongoing transsexual lifestyle is incompatible with God's will as revealed in Scripture and in creation,"⁴⁶ is inadequate, not only in the light of continuing uncertainties surrounding the nature and aetiology of transsexuality, but also in the experience of transsexual people themselves and those who treat them, quite apart from the lack of any clear biblical teaching on the issue.

The Church of England: Trying to sit even-handedly on a rotten fence.

Inadequate, distorted and confused as it is (I will return to further consideration of the theological issues in more depth in chapter six), the Evangelical Alliance's re-articulation of O'Donovan's position also dominates the disappointing consideration of transsexuality in the Church of England's discussion document published in 2003 by the House of Bishops of the

⁴³ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality* (London: Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission, 2000).

⁴⁴ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 14.

⁴⁵ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 82.

⁴⁶ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 84-5.

General Synod.⁴⁷ As I shall also show later, this does take some account of alternative views, but it accepts far too uncritically the Evangelical Alliance's limited and highly selective understanding of the aetiology of transsexuality. Although it leaves open questions about the place of transsexual people in the life of the church, including the ordained ministry, it concludes by raising, once again, the charge that transsexuals espouse a "new form of gnostic dualism in which the body is seen as separate from the self."⁴⁸

One of the four Bishops who formed the membership of the Working group on Issues in Human Sexuality, Michael Scott-Joynt, Bishop of Winchester, played a leading role in the House of Lords debate on the Gender Recognition Bill late in 2003 and into 2004 and was insistent in re-iterating the view that sex cannot be changed.⁴⁹ He did not subsequently vote in any stage of the bill's passage through the house, and although four bishops, Worcester, Manchester, Newcastle and Oxford all voted in favour of different aspects of the bill (the Bishops of Chester and Southwell supported Winchester's conservative line), the general impression, especially within the transsexual community was that the established church still put most of its weight behind those who wished to see no change in the law, lest by admitting otherwise they should appear to condone what they still believed to be potentially homosexual relationships. Activists like Mark Rees had long since concluded that the Church of England simply did not care about people like him, and didn't want to know about his condition.⁵⁰ It is a matter of no little regret that the Church of England appears so concerned about the conservative backlash that might be prompted by taking any position that appears to condone

⁴⁷ House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003).

⁴⁸ *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*, 249.

⁴⁹ Hansard, 18 December 2003, quoted in full by www.plc.org.uk (25 November, 2004):

My basic point is that nothing in the judgments of the Court of Appeal, or of your Lordships' House, in the case of Mrs Bellinger, and nothing in Goodwin—and I have re-read all three this week—seems to me to present a cogent argument that a person's sex can be changed. So I cannot agree to 'for all purposes' in Clause 9(1), the Bill's 'fundamental proposition', which will especially permit people to marry in their acquired, recognised, gender. Their noble and learned Lordships admit in different ways that that is to change irrevocably the fundamental character of marriage in UK Law. 'Marriage according to the law of this country is the union of one man with one woman.'

⁵⁰ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, 146. In 1993 Rees wrote to all forty-one dioceses of the Church of England asking to examine 'the plight of the transsexual.' He was saddened to receive just five replies. Those more used to extracting any kind of information from the dioceses might be forgiven for a wry observation that he did quite well!

homosexuality, that its entire official thinking about transsexuality is unnecessarily confused, and its attitude towards transsexual people seems often less than loving.

First-hand experiences of rejection – and acceptance

Transsexual people who belong to those conservative churches both within and outside its own communion that the Church of England has taken such pains not to offend, have often faced, and still do face, humiliation and rejection. That has clearly been Peter's lot, also shared latterly by Prisca,⁵¹ but it is not the whole story. Susie, for example, has found times of acceptance as well as times of rejection. Phyllis, to her delight found not only warm acceptance, but was even elected church warden:

I'd been asked a couple of times, and I'd not said anything, but I was at one church meeting and it was election of the officers and somebody said, "Would you like to be, put your name forward as a churchwarden?" I said, "I don't want to offend anybody." There were about twenty people there. And the vicar said, "Would you like to put your name forward, are you interested?" And I said, "Yes, OK." And it went through unanimously. And I've just been re-elected.

Bernadette too has played a very full part in the life of the local church. I asked if any particular insights or experiences had helped or encouraged her.

Yes! I suppose it has been the fact that contrary to what a lot of people expect, it has been that my total acceptance throughout the transition period and subsequently, as somebody within their faith, within the context of faith and the church community, I'm involved in a lot of parishes round here from a musical point of view, and I duly maintain their organs and the like, and I suppose that has given me the most encouragement.

⁵¹ There are numerous published American illustrations of this problem too. See for example, Vanessa Sheridan, *Crossing Over: Liberating the Transgendered Christian* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), especially chapter 8, 60-86. Also Julie Ann Johnson (ed.), *By the Grace of God, Lee Frances Heller and Friends: Writings for Families, Friends and Clergy* (Wheaton, Ill.: SSP Publications, 2001).

She has not always been received so warmly, however, away from the Church of England:

I've had slightly less favourable vibrations from the Methodists and the Baptists strangely enough. The Moravians, who are very well represented around here, again, I have found no problem. I've found a problem; it has been the Catholic Church certainly. The local priest considers me as near untouchable as anybody could and he backs away like this whenever I appear, but it's a great satisfaction to be able to say it is our dear old Anglican church which has been the one which I've found to be the most supportive.

Although transsexual people have found support and acceptance within mainstream Christian denominations, some have felt much more at ease within the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) which offers a ministry to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. Susie has valued the possibility of occasional attendance, but Jenny-Anne, who found her Catholicism hard to reconcile with her transgendered experience is now a very active member of the MCC. She recalls her first experience of the church:

It is a truly inclusive church. I don't say we're perfect, by any means, we're not, but they do seem to welcome any and every body, unless they're disruptive! And I was so amazed to go there and feel the love of the people there. I was immediately adopted into their social circles. I was asked would I like to go to the monthly dinner club, which raises money for the church, but allowed me to go as myself and be myself. I got asked to picnics and barbecues and church outings. And I thought 'this is fantastic!'

Transsexual clergy

A few transsexual people have continued to act as ministers of the church after transition, and a few others are in training, while others have been forced to resign after revealing a gender

identity problem.⁵² Within the United Kingdom, the case, in particular, of Carole Stone attracted great attention when the *Church Times* made her story public on 23 June 2000. In a sympathetic and supportive leader article, published in the same edition, the paper called the objections raised by the Evangelical Alliance 'mistaken.' Instead it declared that,

Gender dysphoria is simply a medical condition unrecognised in previous generations. The ignorance of the ancient Israelites should have no more influence upon us than the ignorance of, say, the Elizabethans. The related argument that gender dysphoria sufferers should accept "God's created intent" is, by extension, a line of reasoning that rules out all medical intervention, and therefore manages to be thoughtless as well as heartless.⁵³

When she resumed her parochial duties a few months later, she received, yet again, broadly sympathetic press coverage.

Within the Church of England, the fate of any transsexual ordained minister who wished to continue in office continues to lie in the hands of individual bishops. Barry Rogerson of Bristol was warmly supportive of Carol Stone, but Christina Beardsley did not meet with such understanding. Her area bishop, Wallace Benn of Lewes, supported the stance of the Evangelical Alliance and commented that,

⁵² One well-publicised case is that of Dian (formerly Bill) Parry, who was forced to resign from her post as a non-conformist minister in South Wales after declaring her intention to transition in 1998. She comments, 'God hasn't left me but many of those who call themselves Christians have. However I recall and believe what God has promised. 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' (<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/dian.parry/personal.htm>) (December 2004)). See also *The Sunday Times*, 'Secret Sect of Transsexual Priests Shakes Church', 31 May 1998:

The Church of England is facing fresh controversy over the revelation that two women priests began their ministries as men and that the number of transsexual and transvestite clergy is growing. Two other priests are having sex change treatment, church sources have admitted. One has been forced by his bishop to take indefinite leave, but intends to seek a fresh appointment after his operation, as a woman priest. Many of them meet regularly with a number of lay Anglicans as part of a secret group called Sibyls - from the Greek word for prophetess. They hold private church services wearing female clothes.

The figures quoted in this article are not cited and cannot, even now, be corroborated. The 'Sibyls' far from being a 'secret sect', is a Christian spirituality group for transgendered people, with an open membership.

⁵³ *Church Times*, 23 June 2000.

I think the evidence points to developmental psychological problems rather than physical. They need to be shown compassion and care, and given help and counselling, but not indulgence.⁵⁴

Transsexual people and those who seek to support them, in common with most members of society in Britain tend to be aware only of the views expressed by a vocal hostile conservative lobby within the churches. It is hardly surprising therefore, that they all too readily assume that such a position characterises the position of the churches as a whole.⁵⁵ Their reaction ranges from dismissive non-comprehension to irritation. Other commentators regard the churches' position on matters of sexual ethics more generally as "confused and fumbling".⁵⁶

Key Issues and Questions

There are at least four key issues or questions, which arise from the first part of this study, and which seem to lend themselves to further exploration and reflection in the light of the Christian tradition. These are:

- 1) The nature of human identity and selfhood
- 2) The nature and purpose of human sexual identity
- 3) Does sex/gender reassignment represent healing or fantasy?
- 4) Should the church seek to oppose or to fight for the rights of transsexual people?

- 1) *The nature of human identity and selfhood*

The 2003 House of Bishops report on Human Sexuality concludes its section on transsexuality by stating, "At the heart of the matter is the question of the Christian understanding of what constitutes our God-given identity as human beings." It then argues

⁵⁴ *Church Times*, 16 February 2001.

⁵⁵ See for example Alice Purnell, *A Guide to Transsexualism, Transgenderism, and Gender Dysphoria* (London: Gendys Conferences, 1998), 29-31

⁵⁶ For example, Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 244. Weeks is not talking specifically about transsexuality here, but includes the churches as one of 'the traditional agencies of social and sexual regulation.'

that, "We are not simply people who inhabit bodies, rather our bodies are part of us." From there, it suggests that transsexual people claim a "'true' identity, different from the body in which they were born."⁵⁷ Clearly the validity of this claim is questionable. I have shown that transsexual people are by necessity often more painfully aware than most that their identity, whilst inevitably expressed in physical form, cannot be sufficiently described by their bodily state, and certainly not by any ineffable sense of self, but by the interplay between their physiological and psychological make up and, most importantly, by the story of their lives, formed in and through a complex series of interrelationships. Is this a more theologically satisfying way of describing our God-given-identity? There are real problems, however, when one's physiological and psychological make-up is in conflict, perhaps even for biological reasons, and when that story does not readily fit with the conventions that society expects, especially when for reasons of embarrassment or even personal safety parts of it must be withheld. Amongst the many practical questions that arise from this, is for example, that of the further tension between the need to change a birth certificate retrospectively in order to facilitate normal relationships within society, and the need to tell one's story fully and honestly, especially if that story has included marriage and parenthood.

2) *The nature and purpose of human sexual identity*

The experiences of transgendered and some transsexual people show the relationship between sex and gender to be highly complex. The possibility of more than two gendered states is clear, and as presence of (for some, uncomfortably large) number of people with inter-sex characteristics, the same is certainly true of sexual states. The lack of any essential link between transsexuality and homosexuality, further demonstrates a parallel lack of correlation between transsexuality and sexuality *per se*. Whilst there is little argument that gender is socially constructed, it also appears that sex and sexuality themselves are, in some part at least, a human construct if, for example, Tracie O'Keefe, and those who think like her, is even only partially right⁵⁸, and as the sex assignment of hermaphrodites also suggests. This is all very different from the contention, often expressed, in particular, by conservative

⁵⁷ House of Bishops, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, 249.

⁵⁸ See above, 64, note 51.

Christians, that sex and sexuality is a strictly bipolar biologically-determined state, constituted for the procreation of the species, with the union of one male and one female at its heart. Whilst this may be a common, socially acceptable, and not unreasonable norm, it is clear that it may also be overloaded by culturally based assumptions around what properly constitutes maleness and femaleness, some of which, as the women's movement has undeniably shown, can be unjust and oppressive. Transgendered and transsexual people and those who provide medical treatment for them cannot separate themselves from the cultures in which they have been formed, and therefore also embrace those same cultural norms that govern perceptions of sex, gender, sexuality and the nature of the borders between them. It would even seem that, on occasions they may even be held guilty of wrongly adhering to norms and stereotypes that are, at best, questionable. But might recognition of the reality of transsexuality, and of transgendered identities, be a God-given opportunity to review some of the cultural norms and assumptions that surround our understanding of sex, gender and sexuality?

3) *Does sex/gender reassignment represent healing or fantasy?*

This question is at the very core, not only of the legal struggle for rights for transsexual people in Britain over the last thirty five years, but at the debate in the churches about whether transsexuality represents a problem for Christian ethics or not. By providing such a narrow set of criteria by which sex may be distinguished, to the end that he was able to contend that birth sex cannot be changed, and that consequently transsexuality is a psychological problem, indeed, logically, a delusional state, Lord Justice Ormrod expounded a view of transsexuality which not only formed the basis of future legislation, but also supplied welcome ammunition to those in the churches who wished to dismiss transsexuality as a wilful denial of the body, a dangerous, selfish fantasy, and therefore a sin. If Ormrod's view is correct, O'Donovan's and the Evangelical Alliance's objections would seem, largely, to stand, and would not need to be backed by any appeal to scriptural texts that appear to have, often, only tangential reference to the issues that are now before us. At best, transsexuals, as the Evangelical Alliance allows, should then be treated with the generosity and acceptance that is demanded of any Christian

group in relation to any minority, however misguided. Only the apparent stubborn intractability of transsexuality to any kind of psychological or prayerful cure, as Peter's story illustrates,⁵⁹ might give those who adopt such a position pause for thought. They might then reason, as again the Evangelical Alliance does, that qualified toleration of transsexual people, might represent the lesser of two evils, but the primary ethical objection remains.

If however, Ormrod is incorrect, and if sex and sexual identity is constituted by a far wider set of criteria than he allowed, then it becomes very much more difficult to dismiss transsexuality as a fantasy. The very persistence and apparent intractability of gender identity, whatever its precise aetiology (and there is growing evidence, as I have shown, to suggest that it is indeed 'biologically' rooted), suggests that the 'lesser of two evils' argument is no argument at all. It is simply a question of healing or not healing. The consequences of not healing are clear and stark: declining physical and mental health, and the gradual loss of any ability to relate fully and appropriately to other people; in other words, a process of dehumanisation. Whilst there are indeed 'grey areas', as we saw in chapter 2, and mistakes are clearly made from time to time in both diagnosis and treatment, the clear evidence not only of the restoration of both physical mental well-being, but also of a corresponding restoration of an ability to relate, constructively, openly and imaginatively to other people surely represents a genuine process of humanisation – real healing. If this is indeed the case, then any Christian ethical issues (and it is not easy to see what they might be) are now very much of second order, and must be judged only in the context of an individual's ability to find herself in genuinely loving relationship to others and before God. There are, of course, many theological questions that remain, not least those already outlined in relations to the nature of the self, the proper ordering of human relationships, and the significance of the body, but the most substantial ethical argument about the very admissibility of transsexuality as a real, intractable and medical condition would be shown to be a perniciously destructive Aunt Sally.

⁵⁹ See below, 180-83.

4) *Should the church seek to oppose or to fight for the rights of transsexual people?*

If Omrod and the Evangelical Alliance are right, it is clear there is no obvious agenda for justice for which the church should campaign in support of transsexual people, apart from seeking to uphold other more general rights that protect people from abuse and uphold human dignity. Indeed, some bishops of the Church of England have shown that they believe it is their Christian duty to oppose legislation to extend full recognition of transsexual people and the rights that such recognition might entail. If however, transsexual people are not in the grip of delusion and fantasy, the agenda presented by groups like Press for Change, deserves to be examined very carefully indeed by the churches, and supported, as indeed other Anglican bishops have certainly done. Apart from the more obvious issues addressed, for example in the Gender Recognition Act 2004, the church would need to be seen to be taking a far more proactive role than it has certainly seemed to do in the past, in according transsexual people protection and equal status, and in righting the kinds of intolerant abuse still typified by the attitude of some parts of the British press. It remains a sad fact that the British churches are perceived by many transsexual people to be unaccepting, hastily judgmental and profoundly unloving. Until that perception changes, the church can neither hope nor expect to be heeded when it wishes to engage in an open dialogue with transsexual people about some of the theological implications of specific issues, for example, the retrospective changing of birth certificates, and more generally, of how human identity is most fully expressed and understood.

4. The Bible, Hermeneutics and Transsexuality

Introduction: does the Bible say anything about transsexuality?

A theological response to an ethical issue would normally include and often begin from a biblical perspective. I will therefore attempt in this chapter to summarise current scholarly opinion on those texts which may be thought to have some bearing, even if sometimes obliquely, on transsexuality, even though the Bible does not and indeed cannot say anything directly about transsexuality or gender dysphoria. The case studies also reveal a passionate and lively engagement by transgendered Christians with a wide range of biblical texts, and especially those concerned with issues of sex, sexuality and gender.

It is appropriate in accordance with the experience-grounded theology methodology I have adopted in this study, to begin with the 'first act' of theology and to pay attention first to the experiences and reflections of transgendered people as revealed by the seven case studies. These demonstrate not only a concern to engage with the content of biblical revelation, but also to illustrate a number of different ways by which that engagement is done. I observe that the ways in which transgendered Christians attempt to make sense of the Bible is as significant as the conclusions they draw and have therefore chosen to examine the case studies using a hermeneutical framework.

Those Christian groups who have sought to condemn transsexuality as a wilful denial of the givenness of the body or as a psychological disorder have also tried to justify their position by recourse to same texts, but with far less concern about the process of engagement. I review their views in the next part of the chapter, in the context of a brief overview of scholarly readings of scripture.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that scholarly engagement with biblical texts concerning of sex, sexuality and gender, which might be used to form a biblical response to transsexuality, reveals a rather different set of concerns. The contrast between the sometimes vague.

process-orientated reflections of the case studies and the precise, content-rich analysis of biblical scholarship is stark, but although I shall show that the scholarly engagement with Scripture reveals no consensus about transsexuality, scholarship does raise some important issues about the context of transsexuality, and particularly about nature of the body and of community, which transsexual Christians and those concerned to form a theological response to transsexuality should address. I shall return again to some of these issues in the next two chapters.

I do not wish to appear to privilege the views either of transgendered people or of biblical scholars, but I am concerned that the witness of scholarship and its reliance on a historical and textual critical approach does little to resolve the hermeneutical dilemma faced by transgendered Christians. The central issue for me that arises from this is therefore about how the Bible might be *better* used to construct a sustainable theological response to transsexuality?

In this chapter I want to suggest that the authority of experience which is that of 'ordinary' readings of the biblical tradition, must be tempered in dialogue with the wider tradition (hence my reason for the summary of biblical scholarship) and in the context of the living Christian community. This process is best done, I shall suggest through the process of 'creative fidelity' in which the insights from experience, in this instance of transgendered people, and those from the scholarly tradition may come to merge. I shall conclude this chapter, therefore by addressing directly what creative fidelity means, and how it may be done.

Ways in which transsexual and transgendered Christians approach and make sense of the Bible

Cognitive Dissonance

The evidence from the seven case studies and a great deal of other literature¹, strongly suggests that the way in which transsexual and transgendered Christians use the Bible, is characterised by the degree of cognitive dissonance² experienced between each person's awareness of gender dysphoria and their faith tradition. For example, Peter, Prisca, Susie and Jenny-Anne have all abandoned a more or less literalist reading of Bible as they have struggled not only to come to terms with their gender dysphoria, but also to justify their actions in the face of hostility from other (usually conservative) Christians. Ruth too has been forced to revise essentially conservative views. Each of them has chosen one or more of a range of strategies in order to re-accommodate their life and faith. In contrast, Bernadette who also values the Bible greatly and engage with it at a deep level, but has brought to it a long-established liberal, critical hermeneutic, has encountered less much dissonance. Her use of the Bible has not, therefore, changed significantly as a result of her gender dysphoria. She has continued to be more content to live with complexity, ambivalence and paradox.³

The preponderance of conservative understandings of the Bible is, perhaps, to be expected. Leslie Francis surveyed the views of churchgoers in a northern English town. This revealed that although only one in six of the churchgoers believed in the inerrancy of Scripture, "the

¹ A representative selection of this is gathered in Julie Ann Johnson (ed.), *By the Grace of God: Lee Frances Heller and Friends: Writings for Families, Friends and Clergy* (Wheaton: Illinois: SSP Publications, 2001). This book is an eclectic gathering of a large number of papers and correspondence by Lee Frances Heller, Becky Allison, Terri Main and Elizabeth Kellogg, much of it originally published on the Internet. It also re-publishes David Horton's pamphlet 'Changing Channels' and provides links to a number of web sites where further material may be found.

² Cognitive dissonance and how it affect the way in which adults learn, is succinctly described by John Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 97: 'Conflicting beliefs will tend to cancel each other out or to devour each other as in the case of the anti-semitic white Christian who was nonplussed to discover that Jesus was an Asiatic Jew. Here we find a little group of cognitions: 1) Jesus was a wonderful man, 2) Jews are a rather miserable lot, 3) Jesus was a Jew, and 4) I myself am a sensible person with responsible and well considered views. Something has to give.'

³ I also share a very similar experience.

majority of churchgoers take a literal and factually historical view of the gospel stories and the miracles of Jesus".⁴

Francis' survey is complemented by Andrew Yip's exploration of the religious beliefs of 565 non-heterosexual British Christians.⁵ This is an important and helpful piece of research. It gives a vivid example of the nature of cognitive dissonance experienced by a significantly large number of people in their attempt to relate the Bible to their faith. They are a group who, because of their sexuality, feel marginalised from the mainstream church.

Yip examines four main areas of belief: sexuality in relationship to Christianity; beliefs about God; beliefs about Jesus Christ; and beliefs about the Bible. His survey reveals that 84.9% of his respondents either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that "the traditional biblical exegesis on homosexuality is inaccurate, and as many as 94.9% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that "the Bible cannot always be taken literally"; yet only 10.1% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that "the Bible seems irrelevant to your everyday life." Yip observes that, to a considerable extent, a sense of dissonance is more readily resolved by individuals who still consider the Bible relevant to everyday life, but who acknowledge the 'situatedness' and 'constructedness' of the Bible and who interpret it "through the lens of shifting socio-cultural realities and personal experiences."⁶

Much the same process is revealed by the interviews with transsexual and transgendered Christians, but I want to suggest that, for them, cognitive dissonance has been resolved in at least three different ways, alongside instances where no significant dissonance has been

⁴ Leslie J. Francis, 'The Pews Talk Back: The Church Congregational Survey', in Jeff Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way: Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 161-86. 409 people completed a questionnaire, a mix of Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and United Reformed Church members.

⁵ Andrew K. T. Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality: An Exploration of the Religious Beliefs of Non-Heterosexual Christians in Great Britain', *Theology and Sexuality* 9, no. 2 (2003), 137-54. The research was carried out between May and December 1997 and was part quantitative (a 17-page questionnaire) and part qualitative (61 semi-structured interviews). The respondents were overwhelmingly white, middle-class, highly educated and almost a quarter, clergy. I feel rather jealous of Yip's access to a far larger and more visible group, but also somewhat relieved that I was not faced (and could not have been presented) with so many interviews to process!

⁶ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', 151.

experienced and where it is still in the raw stage of resolution and the outcome of it is, as yet, unclear.

Resolution Through Establishing a Hierarchy of Texts

Firstly, and simply, it is resolved by the process of establishing a hierarchy of texts. This presents no challenge to the literal meaning of the offending text, but its message or meaning is qualified or even cancelled by a test of prior significance. For example:

When I discovered the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy were laws designed to keep Israel in check and to prevent them from going after pagan gods, and then discovered in Colossians 2:14 that Christ nailed all of these laws and ordinances to His cross, taking them out of the way by cancelling them, I was released from that load of guilt and was born-again a second time! There is no need to carry all of that guilt brought on because of cross-dressing.⁷

Similarly, Susie finds a resolution not only of Deuteronomy 22:5 (a verse that condemns cross dressing) but, by implication, of Genesis 1:27 as well:

I have at last been able to reconcile my identity and my faith. For the Evangelicals, all seems to hinge on Deuteronomy, particularly 22:5. For me, the early chapters of Genesis sum up God's attitude to creation: "And God made all things and was pleased with them." It says nothing about God making mistakes, so I am "fearfully and beautifully made," not a mistake. Jesus and his statement in John 3:16, however, must be the rock on which I stand. For me, one of the most beautiful words in the Bible is "WHOMSOEVER". I no longer apologise for my condition. God allowed me to be made in God's own image, male and female and all shades in between I was created I am but a part of the variety of God's creation.

⁷ Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 120. This is Heller's most consistent theme and line of argument.

One consequence of such a resolution is that it may involve, as in the above example, the sidelining of major sections of Biblical material. The significance of the Old Testament, in particular, may be downgraded:

I believe that when Jesus came, it was to say things have changed. I look at the New Testament much more than the Old Testament.

(Jenny-Anne)

Or,

It's not the church's place to tell somebody they're wrong – not as far as that is concerned. They can say to somebody, 'look, that is contrary to Jesus' teaching', which is not the same as what's in the Old Testament, because there's a lot of difference in my opinion ... I try live by Jesus' teaching, rather than by the Pharisaic rules.

(Susie)

Resolution Through Historical or Redaction Criticism

Secondly, for others, the dissonances created by difficult texts are resolved by a form of broad historical or redaction criticism, an acknowledgement, as Yip observes, of the situatedness and constructedness of the Bible. This is particularly marked by reference to the ways in which the 'abomination' of cross-dressing of Deuteronomy 22:5 is explained away.

Deliverance from temptation to sin is not necessary when the activity in question is not a sin! ... Look again at Deuteronomy ... These statutes and ordinances cover matters as diverse as religious festivals, forbidden foods, slavery, and the conduct of war; yes, and the wearing of clothing of the opposite sex. Cross-dressing in the Old Testament times was a practice associated with priests and priestesses in the pagan

temples of the Canaanites. The worship of false gods was why it was called an "abomination."⁸

An inevitable consequence of this approach is a move away from literalism and the adoption of a hermeneutic that allows for a much greater degree of critical openness:

I've gone from believing that the Bible was the Word of God and that's that, in a very evangelical approach, to saying well, yes, but it was written by men and sometimes things are not appropriate to modern living, or were just simply misinterpreted in the translations. Now I hope that doesn't sound like a cop-out. It's not supposed to be.

(Jenny-Anne)

And,

I think it's a case that a lot of Evangelicals probably push some of the Scripture beyond its original context ... I've come back to the view that you can't just be a literalist who takes the Bible as an instruction manual that's got every possible procedure and instruction for everything that you might come across in life. I do believe it tells us a lot and it is the basis of how we should live. It is really [a set] of instructions, but it's not absolutely comprehensive, certainly there must be room, you know, to listen to the Holy Spirit, because sometimes God does do a new thing. If we stick very literally to everything in the Bible, we'll end up like the Amish people, something stuck in the seventeenth century ... I wouldn't actually say the Bible doesn't have all the answers, but it doesn't have a ready answer to every single problem in life, to every situation.

(Prisca)

And again,

⁸ Rebecca Anne Allison, 'Answered Prayers', in Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 212-15, at 213.

I'm [now] aware of the danger of using the Bible to bolster positions, either my old position or my current one and I think it has made me more aware that there are different possibilities about reading the same passage, to a greater degree than I'd thought. It was an intellectual understanding, but it's more a personal one now ... I'm fundamentally convinced that the Bible is the way God speaks to each generation, but I'd already come to the insight, I suppose that different generations, different situations required a different way of understandingAnd that's something that I hadn't made clear to myself before I started thinking about theology in terms of gender.

(Ruth)

The move away from literalism to critical openness was not great for Prisca or Ruth. Both had already made steps in that direction, but in Peter's case the dissonance was far greater, and correspondingly the move was both far more traumatic and more far-reaching. His sense of dissonance is still very much in the process of resolution:

I was challenging my thinking..."Why do I take the Bible so literally?" ... It's very strange. I'm in a flux. I'm almost like in a time warp. From somebody who had [the Bible] on their bedside table and read it twice a day, I couldn't find it ... I don't read it very much at all [now]. I don't know where my relationship with God is going ... there's things that I don't know. I still haven't worked out what I think about homosexuality. In one sense, I don't think it's wrong, but I don't know, because I've got so much stuff I still haven't worked through, but I've got so much 'unk' that I just swallowed and I still haven't worked it through.

It is perhaps significant that as part of the strategy by which they came to cope with their own dissonance, both Lee Frances Heller and Becky Allison also migrated from membership of conservative evangelical churches, to the relative liberalism of the Episcopal Church of the USA. Heller was confirmed as an Episcopalian just before her death. According to Allison, this parallels the experience of gay couples who have been "driven out of their fundamentalist

churches, and thankfully have found acceptance in some of the liberal mainstream churches."⁹ This trend appears to be corroborated too in the UK by Francis' congregational survey. He found that the "most fundamentalist view of Scripture" was held by Roman Catholics (here represented alone by Jenny-Anne) and that "overall ... Anglicans held the most liberal view of Scripture."¹⁰

Resolution by Changing the Subject

It is not, however, inevitable that recognition of gender dysphoria is incompatible with conservative evangelical faith. A *third* solution is offered by Terri Main, who, whilst agreeing with the need to understand the verse in the light of its cultural context (whatever that might be) offers the possibility, at least, of holding to a literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 22:5, by shifting the subject of the verse:

From the transsexual's point of view, we are not men wearing dresses: we are women in training before SRS – in body afterward. In fact, it is most appropriate that we dress as women, since it is proper for women to wear women's clothing!

She then, however, reveals her true colours by recourse to the response characterised above by Lee Frances Heller:

I might add that this is the only Scripture in the entire Bible dealing with crossdressing at all. It is poor hermeneutic ... to build entire doctrine from a single verse, especially a verse from the Old Testament law, most of which has been superseded by the grace of the new covenant in Christ.¹¹

⁹ Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 253.

¹⁰ Francis, 'The Pews Talk Back', 182-3.

¹¹ Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 277. A cross-dresser would not be able to employ this escape card, in that he/she could not and would not claim to be a woman.

Those whose gender dysphoria is not in conflict with their understanding of the Bible do not, of course, experience anything like such a level of dissonance. In Bernadette's case, for example, her scientific training helped to form a very different way of holding faith:

My faith is not [threatened] ... either by my scientific background, or the fact that I've had to undergo some fairly traumatic procedures. I cannot believe for one moment that the anomalies of gender are something that should affect, influence or in any way disturb our faith. It seems bordering on irrelevance. I can accept that the background that exists there has got those concepts in it, but nobody was wise enough to be able to say otherwise; now we are. After all, there was in the time when the gospels were written, nobody who was very certain what the relative functions of the heart and the brain were, let alone where the soul resided! And the fact that gender could be separate from physical sexual differentiation would have meant nothing to people then. So why waste our time, why stretch our intellectual capacity debating something which was irrelevant in the environment in which that set-up was produced?

(Bernadette)¹²

Privatized Faith?

Another significant dimension of the way in which the faith tradition and personal experience combine in creative tension is illustrated by Phyllis who holds a position characteristic of very many people in Britain today, common both to those who regularly attend churches and those who confess belief but without any particular commitment. Grace Davie has described this as 'privatized' faith: "so long as the expression of your views does not offend anyone else, you can believe whatever you like." But as this way of holding faith is not formed in a vacuum, but reflects the concerns of surrounding culture, Davie also describes it as 'common' religion.¹³

¹² I recognise that although my own world-view has not been formed through the kind of engagement with science and technology that Bernadette describes here, I am aware that similarly deep rooted core values and feelings lie behind and are prior to my own hermeneutical stance.

¹³ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 75-6. Davie's characterisation of 'common religion' is commented upon and cogently criticised, amongst others, by Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*

Phyllis' understanding of the Bible, no lightly held affair, has been formed though and withstood a life of considerable conflict.

The Bible, for me is a set of instructions and rules. Now it's up to us how we interpret those, how we rule our lives. You can't blame Jesus, God for how you interpret it. You know you can't turn round – this has gone wrong – so God's to blame, you know. I've got my set of, say, standards. People will have theirs. As long as I keep to mine and you've got to be flexible; you've got to be able to listen to other people; you can agree or agree to differ or anything like that. But that's my interpretation. Because there's everything in the Bible, no matter what's written in that Bible, you can carry on reading that Bible and find an alternative.

There are then very different hermeneutics in operation amongst the people interviewed, but particularly acute challenges for those who have had to try to marry a conservative faith, evangelical or Roman Catholic, to their experiences of gender dysphoria. All these, to some extent, as a result of cognitive dissonance, have changed in the way in which they both use and understand the Bible.

The Value of Community

Another significant issue that emerged from the interviews, raised first by Bernadette, but echoed by others, is the need to find or to build communities which can make appropriate links between life and faith and, in particular, between the biblical tradition and life experience:

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 45 and 90. Astley rightly points out that "common religion" is not always privatized, and may not and often does not slip, as Davie suggests, into superstition. I do not wish to make any kind of value judgement here about Phyllis' views, and I certainly do not wish to suggest that they are unorthodox. In any case, her strong involvement in her local church is the very opposite of the situation later described by Davie (122): she describes there a split between 'orthodox' beliefs held by church attenders which, she contends, are increasingly 'drifting apart' from 'popular religion'. My point is simply to point out that Phyllis holds to a world view that each person is free to believe what they wish and that different interpretations hold equal value.

I suppose we have to ... resolve the problems of a lot of peoples' interpretations of Scripture. Therein hangs the great difficulty that I think people find. I can accept all of Scripture, in the context in which it was written and in its meaningfulness now. I suppose, somehow or other, and I don't know how we do it, and I've struggled with it often enough, we have fit Scripture that is so important to us, into the context in which we have to live and the people we have to live, and I take into account people [upon whom] it impacts in a particular way. Scripture impacts upon everybody if they're any thing like the Christians they ought to be. And we've got to resolve some of those points. We've got to fit what we believe, how we believe it and what we base that faith upon, into the people we're endeavouring to help with it, and we're endeavouring to guard it. And I think that every time that all of the churches deal with this in their own way, they tend to make matters worse, not better. So ... if I had a wish, a prayer to be answered, it would be that we can find a way of fitting ... all of the portfolio of Scripture and our faith into, in fact, the present situation in which mankind lives.

It is clear that there can be no single way to attempt this. Each set of experiences and each hermeneutic raises new possibilities, but in an attempt to find a way through this post-modern dilemma, I suggest that a lively engagement with the scholarly tradition needs to take place in the context of the Christian community. It is therefore to that scholarly tradition that I now turn.

Scholarly treatment of Biblical texts that have been used, or might be used, to construct a theological response to gender dysphoria

In this brief survey I seek to illustrate something of the range of ways in which a number of key biblical texts that might be thought to impact upon gender dysphoria have been interpreted in the scholarly literature. This is not intended to be a comprehensive account, but a sample of the views of those commentators who have shown a particular concern to explore gender problems, with passing reference to some standard and recent studies where further

elucidation might prove helpful. It is hardly a surprise to note that transsexuality is directly addressed only by those who have already declared a special interest in it.

Genesis 1:27

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*¹⁴

Direct consideration of this text by those concerned with questions of gender identity is made less often than one might imagine. Oliver O'Donovan, in his discussion of transsexualism and Christian marriage, is typical of one tradition of interpretation. He first states, "human beings come into existence with a dimorphically differentiated sexuality ... part of God's creational gift" and a few lines later notes "the Priestly interest in sexual differentiation as a creational order ('... male and female he created them')."¹⁵ The 'givenness' of sexual differentiation as an interpretation of Genesis 1:27 is accepted by other, less rigorous and perceptive writers than O'Donovan, especially by conservative evangelicals, including the Evangelical Alliance. Their position is that this text "emphasises the basic and clear distinction between men and women. It does not teach, as some allege, that maleness and femaleness are two poles between which is a spectrum or ambiguous blend of human sexuality." This, they claim, suggests, "the individual who claims ontologically to be a 'woman trapped in a man's body' (or vice versa) is fundamentally mistaken given the biblical assertion of the primacy of the physical."¹⁶ But does it really follow that such an extreme view is an inevitable consequence of a belief in sexual distinction? Might not this text point to something quite different? Claus Westermann, for example, whilst he agrees that "the division of the sexes belongs to the immediate creation of humanity", is not concerned to stress the extreme differentiation of

¹⁴ All biblical quotations given here are in the translation of *The New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

¹⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* (Bramcote: Grove, 1982), 6. O'Donovan argues that 'It was not a theologian who first thought that this redactional association of thoughts [sexual differentiation as a creational order related to marriage] was important; it was Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 10:6f and parallels).'

¹⁶ See, for example, the report by the Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality* (London: Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission, 2000), 48-9.

sexual types, but rather he believes that the primary purpose of the text is to emphasise that human destiny “is to live in community.”¹⁷

It is hardly surprising that a liberal feminist reading of the verse should also arrive at very different conclusions. Zoë Bennett Moore, for example, who is not here concerned with the particular plight of transsexuals, notes the concern of exegetes as to whether the third part of the verse “male and female he created them” refers primarily to the image of God or to the verses which follow, about being fruitful and multiplying and subduing the earth. She points out that the answer we give dramatically affects the interpretation of the verse: “If we believe that male and female is not part of the image of God, then we will emphasise the idea of God being beyond gender.”¹⁸ This is far from being a new idea. A particularly striking example is provided by the writings of Gregory of Nyssa who held, on the basis of this text, and in conjunction with Galatians 3:28 that the original creation was of *non-sexed* (i.e. non-genitalised) beings.¹⁹ Von Rad rejects this: “The plural in verse 27 (‘he created them’) is intentionally contrasted with the singular (‘him’) and prevents one from assuming the creation of an originally androgynous man.”²⁰ Moore laments, however, that the preference for linking male and female as part of the image of God, has more often than not, resulted in a skewed, over masculinised understanding of the deity.²¹

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-1: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984), 160. He continues: ‘Every theoretical and institutional separation of man and woman, every deliberate detachment of male from female, can endanger the very existence of humanity as determined by creation.’

¹⁸ Zoë Bennett Moore, ‘Male and Female in the Image of God?’, *The Bible in Transmission* (Summer 2003), 12-15.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis*, 16-17. Gregory’s understanding of the ‘transformation of gender’ is explored by Sarah Coakley, ‘The Eschatological Body: Gender Transformation and God’, *Modern Theology* 16 (2000), 61-73.

²⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1961), 60.

²¹ Coakley, ‘The Eschatological Body’, 13: ‘For example, Augustine held that though women and men were both made in the image of God, they were made so in a complementary way; the man was the rational soul part of the image, while the woman was the bodily part. This clearly signals that the man is “more” in the image of God whereas the woman was only in the image of God as part of the complementary partnership with the man.’

Genesis 2: 18-24

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man ..."

This is taken by the Evangelical Alliance as firm evidence of the 'natural' purpose of sexuality, centred on the necessity of procreation: "relationships that are heterosexual, monogamous and open to the possibility of procreation are clearly God's ideal for the expression of sexuality."²² The Evangelical Alliance shares with O'Donovan a consistent concern, held by many from a conservative perspective that issues of gender identity cannot be separated from a discussion of sexuality. This and the above passage are the principal texts upon which the Evangelical Alliance builds its scriptural perspective on transsexuality and a number of issues relating to legal recognition of the rights of transsexual people. Karl Barth takes Genesis 2:18 as one of the three cardinal texts which speak of humanity's duality in male and female form – its only 'structural differentiation'. He states: "In all the common and opposing features of human existence, there is no man in isolation, but only man or woman, man and woman. In the whole of human life there is no abstractly human but only concrete masculine and feminine co-existence and co-operation in all things."²³ This emphasis seems to me to be

²² Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 49-50. On the grounds of the exegesis of Genesis 1:27 (see above), the Evangelical Alliance holds that a relationship between a transsexual and partner cannot be 'regarded as truly being contracted between a man and a woman as it really the between the partners of the same sex, one of whom has opted to adopt a gender identity that is at variance with their biological sex.' See also Victoria S. Kolakowski who, in a most helpful essay, places this 'natural law' understanding of human sexuality in the context of 'traditional Catholic and Jewish' understandings ... 'largely based upon the belief that our sexuality is not a core part of our personality/identity, but rather is a faculty which may be used for some God-intended purpose.' (Towards a Christian Ethical Responses to Transsexual Persons', *Theology and Sexuality* 6, (1997), 10-31).

²³ See Gerard Loughlin, 'Baptismal Fluid', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no.3 (1998), 261-70. Loughlin refers here to *Church Dogmatics* III/ 2, 285-6. Barth's other two cardinal texts are the Song of Songs and Ephesians 5. Laurence Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 232, picks up Westermann's concern to emphasise the nature of partnership between male and female: 'Genesis 2 is unique among the many creation myths of the whole of the Ancient Near East in its appreciation of the meaning of women, i.e. that

rightly upon the givenness of embodied existence, an existence which is essentially and properly gendered, but it does not occur to Barth, any more than it does to the writers of Genesis, to deny the existence of inter-sexual characteristics or, of course, of gender dysphoria. These remain unconsidered.

Deuteronomy 22: 5

A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God

The condemnation of cross-dressing in this verse continues to prompt much discussion and sometimes heart-searching within the transgendered community. As the case studies show, there are many, almost desperate attempts to explain it away, or to disarm its force by a broad-brush dismissal of many other rather sometimes quaint and sometimes disturbing laws in the Pentateuch.

There are three characteristic readings of the verse. The first is to accept it literally as a condemnation of cross-dressing. This is the position of few commentators, almost all of whom are conservative evangelicals, fundamentalists/literalists. Others argue that the primary intention of the text is a call for holiness. Whether or not cross-dressing was part of Canaanite religious practice, or of other more or less specific practices characteristic of the culture which surrounded it, Israel was to demonstrate its distinct and separate identity by maintaining a clear distinction between the genders. The Evangelical Alliance manages to have a foot in both camps. It notes the concern for holiness and states that "it is probably doing a disservice to reasonable hermeneutics to apply it directly to transsexuals;" It then draws attention to the strength of the word 'abomination'. This, the Evangelical Alliance insists, is to indicate that the passage is concerned with the "sanctity of the distinctiveness between the two created sexes

human existence is a partnership of man and woman.' But he does not stress that such partnership implies the necessity of procreation.

[which is] to be maintained."²⁴ Some Jewish scholars hold to a position not dissimilar to that of the Evangelical Alliance, but are much more concerned to read the passage in the context of laws against deceit, a concern which underlines many later condemnation of cross-dressing as a preventative measure to combat any illicit homosexual practices.²⁵

The majority of contemporary commentators follow an interpretation of the text that centres on a call for holiness, but they do not tease out any wider ethical implications with respect to transgendered behaviour.²⁶ Amongst those concerned to explore more fully the implications of the text for the transgendered community, David Horton, like the Evangelical Alliance, considers that the context of the verse is probably a call for ritual purity. He believes that it may be interpreted as emphasising a need to not undermine sexual differences, but then qualifies all this by saying, "it is also possible to argue that any context is so remote as to give this verse no direct force for today."²⁷

Deborah Sawyer suggests a very different reading. She argues that not only is the question of cultic prostitution more fully and more explicitly dealt with elsewhere in the Old Testament, but that the "picture of the lascivious world of cultic prostitution, painted with particular confidence by biblical scholars" is based far too much on one source, Herodotus, a source the accuracy

²⁴ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 47. The Evangelical Alliance's endorsement of the verse as a prohibition of cross-dressing which carries abiding force is emphasised in a footnote: 'The connection between cross-dressing and religion is, of course, very significant. There is a profound psychological connection between forms of sexual anomism and certain religious roles. Here we want to highlight not to relativise the fundamental ethical significance.'

²⁵ See, for example, Rabbi Tilsen, 'Cross Dressing and Deuteronomy 22:5', www.uscj.org/ctvalley/beki/crossdress.html (2001). See also J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 337. 'The condition is either to discourage homosexuality, or to prohibit transvestite practices found in Canaanite and Mesopotamian worship ... The latter is suggested by the word "abhorrent".'

²⁶ This position is typified by Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 219-21, in which he draws upon the work of Mary Douglas. A very similar stance is taken by A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 306-7. See, also, an extraordinary web site, which quotes thirty different commentators on this text: http://aol.com/ht_a/rachelmill/30coment.htm (2001). Also Elizabeth Anne Kellogg, 'Transvestism, Transgenderism and Deuteronomy 22:5', in Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 314-24.

²⁷ David Horton, *Changing Channels? A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual* (Bramcote: Grove, 1994), 11. Since the publication of this paper, however, David Horton has written a discussion document which moves away from the 'both ... and' position shared with the Evangelical Alliance and instead stresses more the obscurity of the original context and the difficulty of drawing any clear contemporary ethical guidelines from it.

of which some contemporary classical scholars have seriously questioned.²⁸ Deuteronomy 22:5 is, perhaps, better understood in the context of “clear lines of demarcation to protect patrilinear descent and the male power base.” She believes that the holiness laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy were concerned to maintain clear boundaries between male and female roles, an apparently strict patriarchal society in which male power is based on the notion of the fatherhood of God, a strange, far more austere and sometimes even despotic understanding of fatherhood, very different from that suggested by the modern western stereotype of fatherhood. Yet, she also goes on to argue that the Bible itself contains texts which appear to challenge, parody and undermine the same strict polarisation of gender roles and of patriarchy in particular.²⁹

Deuteronomy 23:1

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord

The Evangelical Alliance begins its comments on this verse by warning: “We need to be beware of attempts to indulge in simplistic moral readings of the Bible that treat it as a sort of ethical cookbook.” They argue that Matthew 19:12 “implies acceptance of the genitally mutilated”, that Isaiah 56:4-5 removes the Deuteronomic ban and look to the story of the conversion, baptism and acceptance of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-39) as further demonstration of a very different position from that suggested by Deuteronomy 23:1. They point out that Jesus’ words in Matthew 19 are made in connection with a question about marriage and do not therefore add up to a commendation of “self-castration.” They warn that although it is wrong isolate this verse from the rest of Scripture as a whole, the regulation in it “affirms the positive value of sex and explicitly contradicts the dualistic suggestion that sexuality and spirituality are somehow in opposition to one another.”³⁰

²⁸ Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32.

²⁹ Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, 35.

³⁰ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexualism*, 45-8.

Victoria Kolakowski also explores this text at some length by in the context of the same passages in Isaiah, Matthew and Acts. Her conclusion is that "it is not unreasonable to extend two of these passages (Jesus' eunuch saying in Matthew and the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts) by analogy to support open inclusion of transsexual people (even post-operatively) into the community of faith." She adds,

This argument supports a more compassionate view of transsexuals and thereby of sex reassignment surgery. Since the transsexual, like the eunuch, is of mixed sexuality, and no condemnation is made of eunuchs, there is far greater reason to support surgical intervention in those cases where it compassionately meets a need in the transsexual person. This is especially true if research concludes that there is a strong biological component, making surgery a more fitting response.³¹

It can be argued that the prime concern of Deuteronomy 23:1, like 22:5 is holiness.³² In this context any blemished being, human or animal, would be regarded as unacceptable. Matthew 19 may also, perhaps, be read in the same way.³³ But it can also be argued that that the post-operative male to female transsexual woman, far from being a blemished male, is actually a healed female.³⁴ A transsexual woman cannot be thought of as a eunuch in the way that condition was understood in the first century, or later. The Evangelical Alliance miss this point. They state (without citing any evidence) on the basis of Matthew 19:12 that "some" suggest that the witness of the New Testament "actually supports gender reassignment surgery."³⁵

³¹ Victoria S. Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 26.

³² This is the position taken by both Mayes and Brueggemann. Brueggemann (*Deuteronomy*, 227) adds wryly, 'The preoccupation with male genitalia here brings a notion of the holy people unsettlingly close to the rules of a sperm bank, albeit a holy sperm bank.'

³³ See for example David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972), 279. Matthew's 'treatment, like that of Mark, in no way can be interpreted as a radical departure from the Law of Moses, but only as a radical interpretation of it.'

³⁴ This is certainly also the firm conviction of those who have undergone gender-reassignment procedures:

[Is it more important to you to live as the woman you are rather than to live between the genders?]

Yes, yes...Because that role fits me more comfortably...It's the role that I can most relax to most comfortably... And to me, it's the role that I was intended to fill. (Susie).

It is also corroborated by the research of Russell Reid and others. See especially Russell Reid, 'Why Measure Outcome in Transsexualism?', *Gendys Conference Report* (2002), 102-5.

³⁵ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexualism*, 46.

Clearly it does not, and, perhaps, the equation of transsexual people with eunuchs is, in the end, a metaphor that proves unhelpful if pushed too far.

The Song of Songs

Sarah Coakley shows how Gregory of Nyssa builds upon his theory of personal transformation into the divine life, by reading the erotic sexual ambiguity in the book as allegorically illustrative of gender shifts and reversals, as the person finds its true meaning in God. Coakley wonders, however, if this is not an acceptance, at some deep level, of normative gender binaries.³⁶ Janet Martin Soskice reflects that Gregory's commentary demonstrates "a happily diverse appropriation of sexed symbols, often used disruptively of God in order to free us from any idolatrous assumption that God is either male or female."³⁷ Barth, however, as I have noted, reads the Song of Songs as illustrative of the essential duality of male and female.

John 19:34

One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out

Janet Martin Soskice traces an extraordinary medieval tradition that depicts the body of Jesus as female and stylises Jesus as a mother, extended in the most vivid imagery to the "physical side of what mothers do – bleed and feed." This tradition is ancient and is illustrated by St John Chrysostom's exegesis of this verse.

³⁶ Sarah Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', 69: 'It is not that either "body" or gender are disposed of in this progressive transformation to a neo-angelic status. Rather, as advances are made in the stages of virtue and contemplation, *eros* finds its truer meaning in God, and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of the ascent: the increasingly close relation to Christ, marks, in the commentary on the Song of Songs, a shift from active courting of Christ as "Sophia" to passive reception of Christ as the bride-groom.'

³⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Blood and Defilement' (unpublished paper). This paper was originally intended for inclusion in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, SJ, and Gerald O'Collins, SJ, (eds.), *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The symbols of baptism and mysteries (eucharist) come from the side of Christ. It is from His side, therefore, that Christ formed His church, just as He formed Eve from the side of Adam ... Have you seen how Christ unites us to Himself his bride? Have you seen with what food He nurtures us all? Just as a woman nurtures her offspring with her own blood and milk, so also Christ continually nurtures with His own blood those whom He has begotten.

Soskice points to other Johannine passages which explore the imagery of blood and birth and links with it the significance of kinship. She concludes: "There is abundant sense in seeing Christ as our mother, and blood as the source of new life."³⁸

Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus

This verse receives surprisingly little attention from those interested in questions of gender and sexual identity. The Evangelical Alliance make no reference to in their consideration of Scripture, and on the other side of the divide, Lee Frances Heller cites it only once and then to argue that there will be no need to cross-dress in heaven!³⁹

Gerard Loughlin argues that "being in Christ does not mean that one ceases to be male or female; but it does mean that such social-symbolic orderings no longer have true solidity – a final oppression – but are liquefied and made to flow, so that they can in fact become a sign and a means of freedom to us." He cites Barth, John Paul II and even Luce Irigaray in the

³⁸ Soskice, 'Blood and Defilement', 10-12. Kellogg, 'Transvestism, Transgenderism and Deuteronomy 22:5', 320 also discusses the verse and quotes Lawrence O Richards: 'This proclamation insists that there is spiritual equality in God's sight.' It is not entirely clear whether Kellogg agrees with this or not.

³⁹ Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 128.

defence of his position that humanity is always concretely gendered.⁴⁰ Loughlin here follows Augustine's view that we shall recognise one another in heaven as male or female.

Dennis MacDonald suggests that Galatians 3:28 echoes an apocryphal saying of Jesus recorded in slightly different form by both Clement of Alexandria and in the Second Epistle of Clement (of Rome) and may hark back to a traditional baptismal saying.⁴¹

For the Lord himself being asked by someone when his kingdom should come, said:
When the two shall be one, and the outside (that which is without) as the inside (that which is within), and the male with the female (neither male nor female.)⁴²

J. D. G. Dunn disagrees, and argues that "the suggestion that Paul assumes here a doctrine of an androgynous Christ redeemer ... diverts the thought much too far from Paul's line of argument; as so often with the hypothesis of Gnostic influence on Paul, the influence most obviously ran the other way." Dunn prefers to read Galatians 3:28 as emphasising that distinctions such as Jew and Greek, slave or free, or male and female had been relativised by being 'in Christ.' "It is a oneness, because such differences cease to become a barrier and a cause of pride or regret or embarrassment, and become rather a means to display the diverse riches of God's creation and grace."⁴³ F.F. Bruce arrives at a similar conclusion: "it is not their

⁴⁰ Loughlin, 'Baptismal Fluid', 261-70. The traditional essentialist view is also supported by C. K. Barrett (*Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1985), 36-7):

The only distinction that concerns [Paul] is 'in Christ', 'not in Christ'. In this connection, but in this connection only, the difference between male and female ceases to exist. Paul was not under the illusion that the coming of Christianity meant the obliteration of sexual differences...It should, Paul thought, be clear who was a man, and who was a woman. He did not, for example, like unisex hairstyles; clearly because of his horror at the thought of any kind of homosexual relationship. Men are and remain, women are and remain women; but before God, in Christ, the distinction does not exist.

Some older commentators, however, are not so convinced, amongst them, for example, J. B. Lightfoot: 'There may be an allusion to Gen. i. 27...and if so, this clause will form a climax: 'even the primeval distinction of sex has ceased.' *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: MacMillan, 1890), 150.

⁴¹ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *'There is No Male and Female': The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

⁴² 2 Clement; xii.2, in M. R. James (trans.), *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1953 (corrected)), 11.

⁴³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London, A. & C. Black, 1993), 205-8.

distinctiveness [between male and female], but the inequality of religious role that is abolished in Christ Jesus."⁴⁴

Feminist readings of the text have stressed the ethic of "a discipleship of equals" in the church.⁴⁵ Carolyn Osiek offers five possible interpretations⁴⁶ and again notes the close link between this passage and Genesis 1:27-28. The verse may, she suggests, be 1) An emancipation proclamation ahead of its time. 2) A formula used in the baptism of new Christians (echoing Genesis 1:27-28 and implying that the saving grace of baptism overcomes the division in creation inherent in the gendered split between male rationality and female sensation.⁴⁷ 3) A reference to the order of creation, but not the order of the Fall. 4) The time of salvation anticipated in the present (this seems to be her preferred reading), and 5) A glimpse of the still-distant future. None of these positions denies or subverts the present reality of gendered identity, or suggests that it is normally anything but bi-polar.

1 Corinthians 6: 18-20

Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

O'Donovan comments on verse 18 alone. His position is that human sexuality is given and is dimorphic and directed towards reproduction through heterosexual relationships. Any deviance from this norm is "fornication." "The first obligation of every human being is to hail that givenness as created good and to thank God for it, even though he or she may then have to

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1982), 189.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Susan Frank Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 28.

⁴⁶ Carolyn Osiek, 'Galatians', in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), 333-7.

⁴⁷ Osiek, 'Galatians', 335. She refers to Philo of Alexandria's characteristic Jewish exegesis of the creation stories in Genesis as a metaphor for the make-up of a person. 'In this metaphor, the division of the original human being into two genders was the beginning of the internal division of the person into rationality ... and sensation ...'

acknowledge that for him or her in particular this created good has taken on the aspect of a problem." O'Donovan holds out no comfort for transsexual people, for from this foundation he argues that the givenness of the body means that surgically constructed genitals are an artefact, no more part of one's self than any other artificial organ. He concludes: "The transsexual can never say with justice: "These organs are my bodily being, and their sex is my sex."⁴⁸

In an intriguing contrast to O'Donovan, Barrett raises the possibility that Paul's argument in this verse may reflect a Jewish belief that "man as originally created was androgynous", although he also admits that such an argument does not necessarily depend upon it.⁴⁹

Stephen Barton comments on verse 20 at some length.⁵⁰ He makes a number of important points, but has a broader understanding of sexuality than O'Donovan. His definition of sexuality is "how we communicate desire for the other through our bodiliness"⁵¹ and this in turn has to be located in a more fundamental attempt "to articulate and embody our desire for God and God's desire for us."⁵² Our bodiliness and the sexual differentiation we experience is an expression of God's play in creation.⁵³ This view of the goodness of creation brings three correctives: firstly to attempts to deny the body by being prudish; secondly to attempts to deny

⁴⁸ O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 16. O'Donovan rejects any kind of biological basis for gender dysphoria. He is prepared to admit that in other cases of inter-sex (though he prefers to talk of 'hermaphrodites' for reasons of wishing to stress as strongly as possible the essential nature of sexual dimorphism) it is sometimes necessary to 'resolve' an individual 'away from the sex to which, had all gone well in gestation, the person would have developed.' He does not say whether in such case surgically constructed genitals are also not part of that individual's bodily being, and not of their sex.

⁴⁹ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 2nd ed., 1971), 151. See also Sally Gross, 'Intersexuality and Scripture', *Theology and Sexuality* 11 (1999), 65-74. Gross discusses a Rabbinical gloss that Adam had no clear and unequivocal gender and was even a hermaphrodite.

⁵⁰ Stephen C. Barton, *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 69-82.

⁵¹ Barton, *Life Together*, 73. Barton acknowledges a debt to the insights of two very different scholars – Roger Scruton and Rowan Williams (in particular his essay 'The Body's Grace', reprinted in Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309-21.

⁵² Barton, *Life Together*, 75.

⁵³ Barton, *Life Together*, 77. The idea of creation as God's play is Jürgen Moltmann's, after Johan Huizinga. It is based on Genesis 1-2. 'Our bodiliness, sexuality and sexual differentiation are expressions of God's play in creating the world: "male and female God created them" ... this tradition represents the strongest possible affirmation of human sexuality.'

the body by casual sex or sexual perversion or sexual abuse, and thirdly, "to narrowly instrumental approaches to sexuality which claim that sexuality and sexual intercourse are for the purpose only, or first and foremost of procreation."⁵⁴

Barton argues here that, "within a theology of play, sexuality ... is not limited to the imperative of human reproduction." His understanding of sexuality as God's play grounded on grace leads him to share with Rowan Williams an understanding of perversion and of pornography as one-sided, distancing and humourless.⁵⁵

Returning specifically to the text, Barton points out that Paul writes to correct those who regarded reality as 'spiritual', which can also be an escape from the acceptance of human embodiment. Paul's overriding concern is for transformation and healing *in community*. This too has profound implications for modern sexual ethics, for it is a corrective to the view that personal authenticity and individual choice matter more than the common good. A similar position is taken by A. C. Thiselton, who argues that "Paul was far ahead of first century cultural assumptions in perceiving the sexual act as one of intimacy and self-commitment which involved the whole person; not the mere manipulation of some 'peripheral' function of the body."⁵⁶

Barton also comments on verse 19 and expands upon this last view, quoting Hauerwas' injunction to "avoid the ontology of the body so characteristic of liberal societies - i.e. that my 'body' is an instrument for the expression of my 'true self' ... [as if] there is an 'I' that *has* a body."⁵⁷

Barrett argues that later generations of Christians failed to grasp the truth that "it is in the concrete circumstances in which the physical members operate that God is to be glorified," and supports his view by reference to the later variant reading of verse 20 which by adding

⁵⁴ Barton, *Life Together*, 77

⁵⁵ Barton, *Life Together*, 79.

⁵⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 474.

⁵⁷ Barton, *Life Together*, 197 and especially note 17.

"and in your spirit, which belongs to God" weakens Paul's stress on the significance of the body.⁵⁸

Ways by which the Bible might be better used to construct a more sustainable and creative theological response to gender dysphoria

The dangers of a narrow hermeneutic

Such a brief, relatively uncritical and necessarily unsystematic overview has obvious limitations, but it illustrates two dangers in particular: that of the 'proof text', used by one or other special interest groups to further their particular aims, and that of bringing to the Bible strong convictions which, while claiming to respect the biblical witness as a whole, only serve to act as a straitjacket into which a range of biblical material is constrained. Deborah Sawyer pithily expresses the fix by quoting Lauren Berlant: "I was stuck by how 'naïve infantile citizenship and paralysed cynical apathy' could be descriptive of contemporary attitudes to the Bible."⁵⁹

Stephen Barton illustrates the dilemma in more precise hermeneutical terms. He warns that the question "What does the New Testament say about ... ?" forecloses prematurely over the kind of wisdom to which the Bible testifies and fails to ask *how* we must read the Bible and *what kind* of readers we must be in order to hear what God through the Spirit is saying to the church. He argues that "simple Bible believing Christians" stretch passages of scripture to function as proof texts for today, but "at the expense of a fully informed historical imagination and at the risk of ethnocentric misinterpretation." Scholarly biblical critics on the other hand, have such a blinkered concern "to give primacy to the shaping of the text in and by its "original historical context" that they render it voiceless for today."⁶⁰ He suggests that the 'crippling positivism' of both standpoints cuts both the reader and the text off from their lifeblood, a life-blood that can only be talked about theologically and ecclesially.

⁵⁸ Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 153 and 144, note 1.

⁵⁹ Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*. 1

⁶⁰ Barton, *Life Together*, 37.

A similar point is also made by Jeff Astley in defence of what he describes as 'ordinary theology', in other words "the content, pattern and processes of ordinary people's articulation of their religious understanding."⁶¹ In contrast to 'ordinary theology', 'academic theology' can be sterile:

[It] is mainly reflection on theology, and is devoted to thinking through the meaning of theological conceptualizations of other theologians. It is learning about theology. Sadly, it is quite possible to study, and indeed to teach, academic theology without doing theology in any real sense at all. (I know, I've been there.)⁶²

I shall explore Astley's ideas in more depth in the next chapter, but I know too, not least during the time that Jeff and I co-operated to run a University Certificate course in 'Lay Theology'. We found it very difficult to persuade the participants to trust their 'ordinary theology'. They wished, instead, to give us the answers they seemed to feel we wanted to hear, answers which were often a cardboard cut-out of the academic theology they heard from the pulpit, such was their perception of what really counted as 'authentic' theology. Until they discovered the confidence to trust their own theology, based on a genuine dialogue between their life experience and the Christian tradition, the conversation was a stultifying parody of academic theology at its most supine.⁶³

The dead weight of clericalism expressed in a conservative hermeneutic is also seen in the stance of groups such as the Church Society in its defence of the Bible. George Curry, the then chairman of this small but extremely vocal group in the Church of England told the *Sunday Times*: "You try to find the middle way, but there is no third way on these things. You are either according to the Bible or you are not."⁶⁴ Neither George Curry nor the Evangelical Alliance seem concerned to answer Barton's question about *how* the Bible should be read. In

⁶¹ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 56.

⁶² Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 61.

⁶³ I am grateful to Jeff Astley for helping me to reflect on this experience.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 15 July 2003, in the context of a discussion of the fall-out after Canon Jeffrey John, an openly gay, Anglican priest, was pressurised by conservatives into withdrawing his acceptance of the post of Bishop of Reading.

continuing an exegesis that assumes that its truth is self-evident and is not formed in performance with life experience, they reify the Bible and render it meaningless.⁶⁵

What Might be Possible and What Might be Gained: Creative Fidelity

One way forward, Barton suggests, is an engagement with the greater reality of the life of the Trinity to which the Bible bears witness:

In other words, living as Christian families today is not a matter of reproducing the family life of New Testament times (even if it were possible). Nor is it a matter of replicating the patterns of authority contained in the New Testament 'household codes'. Rather it is a matter of *creative fidelity* to the witness of the text to the triune life of God, a fidelity inspired by the Spirit and worked out in the fellowship of the church.⁶⁶

What difference might creative fidelity make to the consideration of the issues with which we are concerned here?

First of all, it is clear that although the Bible richly illustrates the significance of gender in human relations, its main concern is not with the nature of gender *per se*, but with the nature of those relationships within the faith community and with God. The givenness of gender and the possibility of procreation is secondary to wider issues of grace, faith and hope.

Secondly, the givenness of sex and of gender *is* part of the economy of creation. But as Rowan Williams points out, sex is both comic and tragic. It is the place where "the awful incongruity of our situation can break through as comedy, even farce" – but 'on the edge of

⁶⁵ For a lively and profound reflection on the idea of the hermeneutic of performance see Frances Young, *The Art Of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990).

⁶⁶ Barton, *Life Together*, 38-9. The phrase 'creative fidelity' seems to have been coined by Clodovis Boff. See Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1990), 61 and 82, note 48.

pain."⁶⁷ A reading of the Song of Songs or of John 19:34 as coloured by Soskice's vivid imagery certainly brings the tragi-comedy and the pain associated with it into focus. Sex and gender does indeed seem to be an aspect of God's play, a play which invites, even demands our active response if its fullest meaning is to become clear. It is an aspect of ourselves to be discovered in relationship and not a rigidly pre-determined and restrictive given. Our part in the play of sex and gender in Christ is primarily an aspect of grace, not of law. Those who insist that the witness of Genesis is to a strictly differentiated dimorphic understanding of sex and gender run the risk of ignoring the dimension of grace and instead impose what often appears to be a narrow, falsely-founded legalistic view. Simply repeating the mantra of 'non-negotiable datum' fails to recognise the breadth of human experience and stretches the biblical texts well beyond their proper intention. Paul's reminder that the body is a temple of the Spirit is a timely corrective, for the Spirit leads us into all truth through a living, faith-imbued relationship with God and with other people. It is a process of *becoming*.

Transsexual people should not be accused too readily of denying the createdness of the body. They do not, by and large, seek to justify a false, dualistic, mind-body split, but take their bodily experience very seriously indeed. They make little or no attempt to deny the givenness of gendered identity.

Thirdly, the Bible's strong emphasis on the significance of relationship and of community is also a corrective to the excessive liberalism that suggests that individual will and freedom of choice takes precedence over the common good. Societies need boundaries, and in as far as we live by law as well as by grace, sex and gender are properly accorded different boundaries in different cultures and contexts. But, as we have seen very clearly, these boundaries are not fixed for all time. It is an indictment upon society's and the church's inability and failure to live out the biblical call to community that individuals are placed in the sometimes suicidal void between humanly constructed and artificially exaggerated sex and gender stereotypes. We must be careful not to give uncritical and unthinking blessing to society's norms. As Sawyer

⁶⁷ Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 314.

has shown, the Bible is sometimes surprisingly subversive about gender roles. God has a strong sense of humour. We need to laugh at ourselves too.

How Might Creative Fidelity be Done?

I have just made three observations: the Bible's main concern is not with gender but with the nature of relationships; the givenness of sex and gender is part of the economy of creation, and the Bible is primarily concerned with the common good. These are my own attempts to be creatively faithful to the Bible, but more needs to be said about the process whereby creative fidelity might be done by transgendered people and others especially and normally in community. Barton himself does not address this crucial question, but Bernadette's wish deserves better:

If I had a wish, a prayer to be answered, it would be that we can find a way of fitting ... all of the portfolio of Scripture and our faith into, in fact, the present situation in which mankind lives.

There are, perhaps, at least three starting points that may lead to an answer to her prayer:

- 1) Trust the processes by which ordinary theology is formed.
- 2) Enable those engaged in ordinary theology to gain a vocabulary and a sense of confidence.
- 3) Insist that the church provides a multiplicity of opportunities for dialogue and adult learning.

Creative fidelity is possible only if people trust their 'ordinary' theology enough to have the confidence to enter in to a dialogue with the wider scholarly tradition. Transgendered people are no different from any other individuals in that they need to feel that they will be listened to with respect and that the validity of their experience will be accepted. They need to learn, think and pray as equal members of Christian communities, so that as they take their place

within those communities they are enabled to allow experience to be filtered and refined by the tradition. Only then will, or indeed should they be able to enter into a full and lively dialogue with the scholarly biblical tradition, fully open to its challenge and willing to risk new things in response to it.

Next, however, I wish to look beyond Scripture to some wider theological issues.

5 Ordinary Theology and Transsexuality

Introduction

In the previous chapter, beginning with the experiences of transgendered people, illustrated by my case studies, I suggested that a constructive and sustainable biblical response to transsexuality might begin with the experiential expression of religion, which is the foundation of 'ordinary theology', and from that foundation, might then engage with the wider tradition through the hermeneutical device of 'creative fidelity'. In this chapter, I want to pursue this thinking one stage further and explore some important theological issues that arise from the theological reflections of transgendered people. In doing this, I continue to hold to a feminist-liberation theology conviction that experience must be the starting point of theological reflection, and then to consider further the extent to which any transgendered theology is also an expression of ordinary theology.

Doing Theology

Theology is a reflective process. It is re-made, refined and re-articulated whenever Christians reflect on their experience of God and of the world in the light of the Christian tradition.¹ The starting point for this reflective process may be a 'theological' problem, such as, for example, "what does Deuteronomy Chapter 22 verse 5 really mean?". Far more often, it will be a human issue, often personal, and frequently related to theodicy: "what kind of God would make me transsexual?".

How can I reconcile my deep sense of being a woman and my deep love for my wife and kids?

If God has any hand in these things ... why have I been led so far in ministry to face the prospect of being spat out and thrown away?

(anon.)

¹ See the helpful and succinct discussion about how theology has been defined by Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 52-5.

I begin with the views of transgendered people because it is important, as far as possible, to begin this kind of investigation in practical theology with the concerns, and from the perspective of those most directly affected. Feminists in particular have been quick to point out that there can never be a truly objective stance and to pretend otherwise is wrong and potentially manipulative. Grace Jantzen, for example, attacks the prevalent attitude that 'critical rationalism' is the ideal or proper stance for the study of the philosophy of religion and so dismisses the possibility of a 'view from nowhere'.² Nicola Slee, also from a feminist perspective, albeit one more at ease with traditional theological categories, argues as I noted in the introduction to this study, that "a writer necessarily writes out of her own life context and writes at least partly to make sense of and shape that life experience".³ Jackie Leach Scully, as I have again already noted, develops a similar argument in her discussion of theological responses to disability. She insists that, "the starting point of the theological exploration of impairment must be the experience of those who live this embodiment."⁴

Throughout this study, the nature of my interaction with those I interviewed to form my case studies has been conversational – similar to what Slee calls 'free-flowing dialogue'. As such this is a qualitative study and not a quantitative one; one consequence is that the concerns of the research group have not only helped to form my priorities, but also the ways in which those concerns are expressed. Thus, it has much in common with feminist approaches to research.⁵

² Grace M Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 206.

³ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.

⁴ Jackie Leach Scully, 'When Embodiment Isn't Good,' *Theology and Sexuality* 9 (1998), 10-28. She continues,

this does not mean that theirs is the only valid source of information. Outsiders can contribute from their perspective to enrich the whole picture; acts of the imagination and grace of God can transcend limitations. What needs to be clear is the position of the speaker. Those outside the situation have as much knowledge as those within, but their knowledge is differently situated and must be acknowledged as such. Able-bodied people cannot speak for those with disabilities, but can provide their own insight which may be invaluable for understanding certain things. (24-25).

⁵ See for example, Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, especially Chapter 3, 'Developing a Feminist Research Methodology'.

Transgendered Theology?

Transgendered people, and even more so, those who are transsexual, are a small and disparate minority which has struggled to be heard, especially by the churches. There is no measure of transgendered people's sense of isolation, but some indication of its scale is suggested by Andrew Yip in his survey of the religious beliefs of non-heterosexual Christians in Britain. His study shows that 93.3% of his respondents felt that the churches "have not taken due account of the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in their examination of the issue of human sexuality."⁶ Although transgendered people are not identified in Yip's research, they often articulate a similar feeling of being marginalized. It seems reasonable to believe, as Jantzen points out, that the perspectives of people oppressed by sexism and racism, while not identical, have a great deal in common.⁷ This comes about through very similar experiences, which include, for example, hostile press attitudes and discrimination within the work-place - even when the law claims to provide protection from that - and more generally a sense of marginalisation within society.

The natural and proper starting point for an exploration of gender dysphoria in the light of the Christian tradition must be, therefore, the concerns, questions and issues raised by transgendered Christians. Only after that has been explored do I turn, in the next chapter, to examine some insights that arise out of the wider Christian tradition.

Transgendered Theology as an aspect of Ordinary Theology

Jeff Astley describes 'ordinary theology' as the "content, pattern and processes of ordinary people's articulation of their religious understanding." It is a theology of those who have received no academic training in the scholarly disciplines of theology, but is rather "grounded in the challenges and fulfilments of ordinary life and its ordinary religious concerns, rather

⁶ Andrew K. T. Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality, An Exploration of the Religious Beliefs of Non-Heterosexual Christians in Great Britain', *Theology and Sexuality* 9, no.2 (2003), 137-54 at 142.

⁷ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 127.

than in the controversies of the academy.”⁸ Academic theology, in contrast, is a process of critical reflection on theological perspectives. It may even be better described as ‘religious studies’, “the labour of historical criticism, textual analysis or sociological reflection.”⁹ Astley argues that there is of course, and there should be, a considerable potential for overlap between academic and ordinary theology; the two are by no means mutually exclusive, and the first is always the starting point for the second in that the academic theologian starts out as an ordinary theologian and her academic theology may then be a modification of her ordinary theology. Academic theology may sometimes be a second-hand, distanced and sometimes arid reflection *on* theology; but the process of reflection upon the views of other theologians, is but a part of theology and not the whole of it. Ordinary theology, the theology that we form in response to our real, grounded experience is often more hesitant and tentative, unofficial and implicit and inevitably first-hand, but also characteristically religious (an expression of and reflection on religious experience), meaningful and salvific (in that it serves to make us whole) and ‘kneeling’ or ‘celebratory’ (in that it is ‘a theology at prayer’ rather than a ‘theology at the desk’).¹⁰ In other words it is to do with our spirituality, with “*the way we hold the what of our faith*” and with what heals us, what works for us. It is closely connected to personal faith.¹¹ It is an expression of “a holistic, embodied faith”¹². Astley is concerned to emphasise that ordinary theology is not uncritical or an endorsement of the idea that ‘anything goes’. It is not the last word of theology, but rather the first word. It differs from academic theology in degree rather than kind. Both may be found on the same theological spectrum. The one can and should inform the other.

Transgendered people seem to have less difficulty than most in articulating and trusting their ‘ordinary’ theology: in other words it is a theology that helps to makes sense of their experience, sustains them, and in which they have confidence.¹³ This accords with Yip’s

⁸ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 52.

⁹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 74.

¹⁰ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 57-76.

¹¹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 39-40.

¹² Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 145.

¹³ Grace Jantzen also stresses the importance of trustworthiness in theology as well as mutual accountability: see *Becoming Divine*, 223. See also my account of a parish learning project which enabled individuals within groups to become confident in their theology: Mark D. J. Savage, ‘Adult Learning and the Churches’, in Jeff Astley (ed.), *Learning in the Way*:

conclusion from his very much more extensive survey of the beliefs of gay and bi-sexual Christians. In this, the "vast majority" of his respondents appeared to have arrived at an expression of faith, which integrated their stigmatised sexuality and the Christian tradition with considerable harmony.¹⁴ Perhaps the very experience of finding oneself on the margins of acceptance, forces one to confront issues with which others may never engage. Being on the edge is just the kind of experience, which prompts one to 'do' theology. It certainly provides a vivid example of ordinary theology, which through experience connects beliefs and traditions in a dynamic, which has the power to challenge and to change both.¹⁵ Significantly, the theology expressed by Ruth, an ordained priest, seems to have more in common with the characteristics of a distinctively lay form of ordinary theology than it does with any clericalised form of academic theology. There is nothing, it would seem, like having to come to terms with a massively dysfunctional life experience to expose the shallow certainties represented by the clerical paradigm.¹⁶

The theology expressed by my seven case studies is authentic ordinary theology in that it is generally 'significant' in the sense that it serves to make individuals whole. In this sense, it is also thus salvific. It is 'meaningful' in the sense that it helps them to find coherence in life. It is 'religious' in the sense that it is, often surprisingly, tenacious in keeping close to the intensely personal religious impulses, experiences and spirituality "that drive people and heals them." It is also 'celebratory' in that it is often most at home 'on its knees'. For the most part, it is the kind of 'God-talk' that is a very natural incorporation of each person's deepest values.¹⁷

The range of questions and issues presented even by a very limited sample of case studies is considerable. I have therefore tried to group them in some accord with the questions I set out

Research and Reflection on Adult Christian Education (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 156-158.

¹⁴ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', especially 150-1.

¹⁵ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 40.

¹⁶ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 62-4. Astley argues that ordinary theology is lay in that it does not serve the narrow functional objectives of a theology formed to sustain the professional leadership of the church. This kind of theology leaves clergy ill equipped to reflect theologically on their own practice and experience. Those who have undergone some formal education in 'clerical theology' become distanced from ordinary theology. Ordinary theology is not expert or professionally qualified; it takes a different perspective from academic and clerical theology and a great gap has opened between the two.

¹⁷ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 64-76.

to raise and with issues raised by other studies, especially that by Yip, but my intention in so doing, has been to reflect the main concerns of the people I interviewed. These seem to be: beliefs about God and Jesus, beliefs about the role and nature of the church, and beliefs about the body and the self. My wider, more informal conversations with other transsexual and transgendered Christians have also served to confirm this impression.

Beliefs about God and Jesus

The dynamic of challenge and change was much in evidence, especially in the accounts of those who, as a consequence of cognitive dissonance, had also moved most in their attitudes to the Bible. Two changes are particularly striking. The first concerns the nature of God. A rather harsh and sometimes distant deity gives way to one who is more accepting, universal and loving:

When I was younger, God was too much like a schoolteacher. I was very cerebral in my faith ... I was a stickler for the rules. Rules made me feel safe and knowing that God cares for me, without any shadow of a doubt means that the rules can't come first and therefore God is not a schoolteacher in that sort sense. The closest thing is a father, or a mother. He actually cares for people and he may want them to be different in that he may see what's going on is hurting them and that there are alternatives, but acceptance comes first and then, perhaps the change follows on after that ... I feel that God has accepted me and therefore who am I to make artificial distinctions? If God so loved the world, God so loved the world. And that doesn't exclude people.

(Ruth)

God was the judge. If you did anything wrong you got slapped. You conformed to the rule ... the bits you don't do, the bits you do do. I guess it just got to me. In some ways, I suppose I've just discovered the Gospel ... There's [one passage] in Genesis ... God made everything in the world and God looked at it and it was good. So, OK, God made everything, God made me, God made homosexuals...God made babies

with Down's Syndrome, God made the blind, the deaf, the lame, God allowed children without arms or legs to be born ... But another verse that means everything is John 3:16. My favourite word in the Bible is 'whomsoever' – it doesn't mean 'if you don't do that ... or if you conform to this rule or whatever ... It means everybody – and that's wonderful.

(Susie)

God's become bigger ... [but] I don't know where my relationship with God is going. In one sense I don't even know what I think. I believe there's a God. I believe that he loves me. I believe that he's a lot bigger than the Evangelicals believe. I believe that he encompasses a lot more religions and people.

(Peter)

Secondly, God is not perceived as being gendered according to the traditional male model. God is more often experienced as multi-gendered (though not androgynous), or gender-less.

He's become multi-gendered! It's very strange, because I found, initially, the sort of gender-less language that's used now in some of the churches and the one I go to, annoying. You know, "This prayer wasn't like that! They've changed all the words!" And I'm quite heartened that one of the things we discussed recently was the use of inclusive language and have we gone over-board with it? And we decided, which I thought was very good, that where prayers were traditional, or the words of the Bible, we wouldn't change them. So where we've got "God the Father, God the Son" that's how it is. But we can say in the prayers "God is like a mother and God is like a father." And I think that's a much better way of looking at it and treating, if you like, God as a gender-less person.

(Jenny-Anne)

I don't think God has got a gender. Because I believe God ... is a spirit. He can't be anything else, you know, because God is the being, the one who created [us]. God

created all the animals and you know, it might sound weird, but he can't create one thing and not another. There are some species of animals and fish that are both genders or change gender.

(Phyllis)

Susie goes further and expresses a view of God that is not so much gender-less and beyond gender.

I now have a different faith from that which I have been taught over the years. I have learned that God made many variations on the human creature, black, white, yellow, straight, gay, tall, short, genius, not-so-genius and a number of people whose gender identity is not always all male or female. I also have a not very patriarchal view of the identity of God. I will not refer to God as male, female or any other gender identifier. These terms are, after all, merely a product of our limited intelligence and vision.

Some members of the group were keen to express God's love and concern for justice, often in very personal and experiential terms. This stance was combined sometimes with non-traditional understandings of God's gender, but alongside more traditional beliefs about God's power and function. Prisca explains:

Well, I first and foremost believe I'm a child of God, I was created by God, I am here to love God and God loves me. ... God to me is the alpha and the omega, the be all and the end all. What I've found hard is to relate to who exactly am I. God to me is all-powerful, but as a Christian, I do focus on Jesus. I see Jesus as a terrifically compassionate person, terrifically attractive person, and the only answer to my sin. I have sinned and all that, you know that sin can't just be as if it doesn't matter, it does matter. You know as a Christian I am very conscious of having been redeemed – the price has been paid for me.

Susie expands upon her experience and understanding of God in a particularly striking way:

My God is immortal, invisible, omnipresent, omnipotent, ungendered and all-gendered and vastly greater than anyone could possibly imagine. I have no problem with a supernatural, all-powerful God who can do as God likes.

In this, not only are there apparent contradictions ('ungendered and all-gendered'), but more significantly, there is also a complex mixing, or 'piling up' of metaphors. Ian Ramsey observed that this 'piling up' or 'jostling' of models is an appropriate way of being articulate about the mystery of God, and that each model may itself be, quite properly, be qualified in different ways.¹⁸ Sometimes it is even necessary to do this, for to press any model too far runs the risk of falling into heresy.¹⁹ Ramsey warns, however, that the balance of one model against another demands the 'greatest circumspection'. This argument is developed later by Sally McFague who argues that although there needs to be a network of dominant and subsidiary models used to talk about God, these need both to 'fit together', but also be sufficiently flexible to cope with anomalies or 'contra-factors'.²⁰ Is the description of God, thus, as 'ungendered and all gendered' irreconcilably inconsistent or is it an attempt to express to a proper anomaly?

Another question is prompted by Grace Jantzen's observations about the masculinist nature of theological language and the way in which man's own selfhood has been used as an analogy for God. One aspect of this is the belief that "only when the rational soul is released from its troublesome body" will it become truly godlike and that "the mind has no sex."²¹ I shall return to the debate around the formation of such views within the early Christian centuries in the next chapter, but for now need to ask if Susie's position represents, essentially, a re-articulation of this masculinist view, or is rather a deeper challenge to it, arising out of her own embodied experience?

¹⁸ Ian Ramsey, 'On Understanding Mystery', *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 53, no. 5 (1963), 10.

¹⁹ Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (London: SCM, 1957), 170.

²⁰ Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1982), 139-41.

²¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 31.

For some, the experience of being gender dysphoric has clearly had a huge impact upon the way in which they do theology and the kind of beliefs they hold. For others, its significance (though no less powerful) has to be judged alongside other major influences. For example, in Bernadette's case, her scientific and technological education and then career has had a profound affect upon the creation of her highly articulate theology.

I was in a great argument with a group of both clergy and quite bright lay people the other day, and I said that the great act of creation was randomness, that while, if you create a random system, you can prod it in various directions, the fact that God has allowed the universe a degree of randomness is the greatest possible freedom. I remember once saying to someone that what God created was Poisson Distribution – a series of random events in the continuum. And how could we accept quantum mechanics if God hadn't implied a bit of randomness around? The greater part of what hold the universe together would fall apart ... I'm glad I was [a scientist] and perhaps still am, because the fact that I've thought through my faith in a scientific context has certainly made it stronger.

Beliefs about the role and nature of the Church

In her widely-read, though somewhat contentious study of religion in Britain since 1945, Grace Davie draws attention to the steady decline in the membership of the main-line churches. She argues, however that this is not matched by a corresponding decline in religious belief. Rather the number of those who attend worship regularly represents but a small fraction of those who believe, and who for example, enjoy and derive comfort from watching *Songs of Praise* on the television.²² Those who *do* attend church regularly, at least

²² Grace Davie, *Religion In Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Note however, Jeff Astley's caution: 'The figure of approximately 70 per cent of adults who 'believe in God' is still routinely reported (especially by the churches) from surveys of the general population of Britain. It surely must be glossed by some reference to the fact that more sophisticated surveys reveal that over half this group understand 'God' to be some sort of impersonal spiritual force or power, rather than interpreting it as the traditional concept of a personal God' (*Ordinary Theology*, 101). See, in particular, Robin Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69. Gill notes, 'a comparison of those surveys which asked people to differentiate between belief in a personal God and belief in a

according to Leslie Francis' survey, do so for two main reasons. Firstly they find there a sense of belonging, a place where they can meet others and feel 'at home' and secondly, they enjoy worship and listening to the word of God within the context of public worship.²³ Yip's survey of non-heterosexual Christians indicates that his respondents did not feel at home or at ease in the Church to anything like the same extent. 93.8%, for example, believe that the churches "have contributed to the perpetuation of homophobia in society." One bisexual woman comments, "I think the Church is doing more damage than good, both to itself and the people it's supposed to be caring for. I often ask myself why I don't just walk away?"²⁴

Do transsexual Christians feel the same? Do they find the Church similarly unaccepting and uncomprehending?

There are certainly some disturbing instances of this as Peter was to find:

So many people didn't know what to say to me, so they didn't say anything. So if I sat down in church, there was a row in front of me and a row behind me – all these seats empty. It was just horrendous. So going to church was the most traumatic experience. It was the youngest ones were zealous, to get me out. So they wanted me out. They took a vote on it ... they just left me hanging, restricted my membership.

Susie's experience, at first, whilst not perhaps quite as traumatic as Peter's was not dissimilar:

more impersonal "spirit" or "life force" suggests that it is the first type of belief which has declined.' Later (72) he concedes, "questions about belief in God are notoriously difficult to frame and assess. This point is taken up by Paul Avis, 'The State of Faith', in Paul Avis (ed.), *Public Faith? The State of Religious Belief and Practice in Britain* (London: SPCK, 2003), 121. He observes wryly, 'researchers who design empirical projects are not always theologically skilled... Their questions about religious belief are usually lacking in refinement and are sometimes crude and inept.'

²³ Francis, 'The Church Congregational Survey', 167-71. Curiously, the enthusiasm for hearing the word of God within worship, does not translate into anything like a corresponding level of enthusiasm for Bible study groups (176).

²⁴ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', 142-3.

I kept getting this feeling that the church was OK as long as I played by their rules. As soon as I didn't play by their rules they really weren't interested ... I didn't want to be a member of the club. I just wanted to be me ... I didn't want to be conformed to their rules; I wanted to be conformed to how I felt I was made.

Some transgendered Christians insist that rejection rather than welcome and acceptance is the norm, but the number of people who have encountered a negative response is hard to assess.

There are more than we know, I think. And they won't say anything because they don't want to make a noise. (Phyllis)

It is wise, perhaps, to be cautious in interpreting an “everyone I talk to says ...” statement; but Phyllis’ claim does seem to accord with the feelings of guilt common in so many transgendered stories. For example:

The church denomination I was in I quit in 1970. I quit because I am a CD [Cross-dresser] and I feared the ridicule if it was ever discovered.²⁵

Jenny-Anne experienced similar feelings of fear, embarrassment and guilt.

For a long time I still went to Church, but there was always this conflict between the faith taught in the Catholic Church and my transgendered status. And it was as if you had to keep the two apart. And also I guess then I had more feelings that this was something that you hid.

xxxx asked me to tea one time, and then said 'this is a group you should try! And they were not far from where I live ... I went to the service. The pastor of the church

²⁵ Julie Ann Johnson (ed.), *By the Grace of God: Lee Frances Heller and Friends: Writings for Families, Friends and Clergy* (Wheaton: Illinois, SSP, 2001), 96 – from a ‘Grace and Lace’ letter by Lee Frances Heller, November 1993.

where I go now came and took the communion service and I felt two things. I felt wonderful to be able to have communion as myself, but I also felt very guilty.

The anxiety about 'coming out' and telling the truth can be considerable, and the church is not always perceived as a safe place in which to do this as Prisca explains:

I believe now that my gender problems in themselves are not rooted in sin, despite the fact that initially that was very much what my church was telling me, but I think actually that's just wrong. There's a lot of sort of prejudice there ... I don't particularly like the idea of being unpopular ... Some people you think would be horrified have really reacted quite positively, some other people whom you thought would be sympathetic have really not coped with it at all well ... But on the other hand there will be some people who may well find it totally bewildering, you know, who'll think I'm the devil's own work. The church has actually said, despite reservations, they all support me in what I do, so at least the church leadership will say, well you might not actually like it, or understand it, but this is it.

As Prisca concedes, the reality can be very different from the perceived fears and anxieties.

As Bernadette, for example, found:

I suppose [what has helped and encouraged me] has been the fact that, contrary to what a lot of people expect, my total acceptance throughout the transition period and subsequently, as somebody within their faith, within the context of faith and the church community and with no problems that it should raise. I mean I'm involved in a lot of parishes round here from a musical point of view and from the fact that I duly maintain their organs and the like, and I suppose it is the context in which that moves which has given me the most encouragement. The fact that my gender condition which is well known, I mean, the Daily Telegraph did a feature article some years ago about Joyce and me which was very, very widely read, and none of those things produced the slightest problem. Now it seems to me that it's very good that in our

Anglican church that that's the case. I've had slightly less favourable vibrations from the Methodists and the Baptists strangely enough. The Moravians, who are very well represented around here, again, I have found no problem with, but the, if I've found a problem, [its has been] the Catholic Church certainly. The boss of the Catholics round here, considers me as near untouchable as anybody could, and he backs away whenever I appear; but it's a great satisfaction to be able to say it is our dear old Anglican church which has been the one which I've found to be the one most supportive ... I suppose it is always having been able to turn to an environment, a church, community, even a church building when I've needed it, that has been the corner-stone (it's almost the start of a hymn, isn't it!) that's worked for me.

Phyllis despite her conviction that many transgendered Christians are rejected by their churches has herself, to her surprise and delight, not only been accepted, but also elected (and subsequently re-elected) as a churchwarden in the Church of Wales.

I started helping a bit with cleaning the brasses. Well I could stand up and do that, but they were in a bit of a state and I'm a bit fussy, so I've got them now so that they really do shine – I had the toothbrush in the cross and all that. I'm proud of it. And I'd been asked a couple of times, and I'd not said anything, but I was at one church meeting and it was election of the officers and somebody said, "Would you like to put your name forward as a churchwarden?" I said, "I don't want to offend anybody." There were about twenty people there. And the vicar said, "Would you like to put your name forward, are you interested?" And I said "Yeh, OK." And it went through unanimously.

Lee Frances Heller too, eventually found a church in which she could be accepted.²⁶ Susie, like Jenny-Anne, found acceptance in the Metropolitan Community Church, and her reasons

²⁶ Johnson, *By the Grace of God*, 163.

At 80 years old, I have finally found a church I can attend as who God made me and be accepted by God's people for who I am and not what I should be in someone's sight. I have been going to church for over two years now ... and I have enrolled in Wednesday night classes to learn about the church. They have two rules and two

for belonging, like those of Lee Frances Heller are very much in line with the majority of respondents to Leslie Francis' survey – a desire for friendship, acceptance, good worship and exposure to the word of God.

It's an inclusive, welcoming church, they preach the Gospel and have some good music. And they love everybody ... It's an inclusive and affirming church. Their church is for everybody, they don't care what colour you are, what ability you are, what gender or orientation you are, anything at all ... If you're in a wheel chair ... they're always welcoming ... As far as their ministry is concerned, you go in and they say "we are an inclusive church which preaches the love of God to all Christians. We want to tell everybody how wonderful God is, how wonderful Jesus is and how much they can do for you." And they have a reading from the Bible ... Sometimes they're very traditional, sometimes they're very modern ... and someone will preach, its not always the pastor ... The combination of the way they welcome people and the way in which no-one is excluded, reformed alcoholics, people who've had all sorts of problems in their lives, they just seem so welcoming. If you're a stranger, you're not a stranger within about five minutes of walking into that church.

Transsexual Christians' expectations of church seem to be unsurprisingly conformist, even though those expectations have sometimes been harshly upset. They have a very mixed experience of the church and often express their feelings about it very strongly. Those who have met with acceptance have found the church has been an important place of healing; others, who have experienced rejection and outright hostility, have come to very different conclusions. There is, however, a feeling that the church and the values of the Gospel ought to go together. Healing is to be effected in concrete, physical, bodily form, but also in the assurance of God's love and acceptance, mediated by the church.

rules only: that you love God and love your neighbour as yourself ... The church is St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral here in Jackson ... I love it there.

Beliefs about the body and the self

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that transgendered people should raise many questions about the significance of the body and the self. Peter expresses one problem:

When I became a teenager, maturing into adolescence was just horrendous. And I think what I did, was I just lived in my head, I didn't have a body.

The experience of gender dysphoria can be so acute that the body becomes an object of puzzlement and even of revulsion. The struggle to come to terms with the condition is long and hard and it can be difficult to relate propositional knowledge about God to what is actually being experienced. This can be especially and painfully true of bodily realities as Ruth's story shows:

I thought that getting married would solve my problems. I thought that going into the navy would solve my problems. And neither of them did. I tried to talk to my fiancée about what was involved, but I mean I didn't understand it ... It was very frightening in the sense that I was trying to push it away, and yet it was obviously too much part of me to do so. So ... I used the standard thing of doing anything as well as I could: volunteering for things, extra duties, work, training, trying to better that what I was doing. And I tried to cope with my own needs by being successful. There would be times when it didn't bother me at all, and then, there would be times when it was almost uncontrollable. I mean it took me six weeks after I was married before I started investigating my wife's wardrobe. And I hated that. And I didn't want to ... It felt disloyal. And it felt that I was doing something wrong and in a sense I was ... In terms of my Christian faith I certainly knew that God loved me, God cared, God accepted me. I had quite a strong conversion experience, but ... because I was denying that part of my life existed at all, as much as I could, I didn't think about it in that sort of terms. I tended to feel that I was a worse Christian than other people because of this, but beyond that, because of my desires to be different and my feeling that I wasn't ... I suppose ... 'normal'.

Jenny Anne's experience was similar:

At university I found out more and I started then to question, perhaps a little bit, whether it was right or wrong. I'd always assumed it was a wonderful pleasure, but extremely wrong! And I always felt very guilty after having time to myself. I got really no help from the church, probably because I was too embarrassed to talk very much. I took the attitude that was current that once I found a girl friend and fell for her, that would be the end of it. Of course it wasn't at all ...

The sense of dysphoria is very clearly seen in the perception of self. "Who am I?" The transgendered person is likely to ascribe the sense of 'real' selfhood to the desired or assigned gender rather than to the biological gender, or that assumed at birth, and then to attach considerable significance to that attachment:

The first time I ever took communion as my real, as what I regard as my more real self, I cried my eyes out. It was absolutely fabulous.

(Ruth)

Ruth in particular, keenly expresses the tensions she feels in identifying selfhood:

I don't want to deny – me. I'm not a woman and I can never be a woman in that sense, but there's a very strong side of me that would function better in a woman's role than in a man's role, I'm pretty certain, and I'm not covering it up as well as I used to. It's too much like hard work.

And:

I tried very hard to be a man and didn't succeed, so I'm trying to find a balance in between at the moment ... and I'm losing that battle. I haven't lost it yet and there may be some adjustments I can find along the way with God's grace, but my suspicion is that ultimately, I'm going to be either very screwed up (assuming I'm not now!) or else something will happen which will make it possible for me to seek a

resolution. And of course I've got no guarantee that that would work either. There may not actually be any balance ... I may just be just sort of terminally ill at ease with my position in life.

And again:

I had a health breakdown a few years ago. Part of it was the fact that I just felt less and less like me and there were lots of other factors as well, and one of which was the over-work thing. I'd over-used my escape mechanism and I got to the point of pretty much physical collapse and had some fairly severe health problems. I got very, very depressed. It actually got much worse to the point to at which my wife suggested that she'd much sooner have me living as a woman than dead. And there is a pressure but ... my research tends to let me think that as I get older, the balance in my body changes anyway, more towards femininity, in terms of chemicals. And I think that is a pressure as well. So at the moment, I'm still in the position where I'm still doing the same pattern, but it's not working as well. I'm not covering up as well either.

Healing and the transsexual body

The possibility of healing and its relationship to the Christian tradition's stress on the givenness of the body, has prompted much thoughtful, if somewhat agonised reflection, amongst those most intimately concerned. It is clear from these statements that although their sense of selfhood is linked most strongly with their assigned or desired gender, transsexual and even some transgendered Christians do not seek to disregard the evidence of their embodiment, or to deny the physical reality of creation more than anyone else, but are prepared to struggle with it. They are, however, often puzzled why they should have been created to face the problems of their condition. Nevertheless, not only are they driven to seek healing in physical, bodily form, and will, as we have already seen, but they also make almost desperate attempts to hold onto the identity of their birth gender and seek to suppress the conviction that they should or might be anything other, a process that involves much guilt and, indeed, confusion.

confusion. 'Healing' has therefore taken on a greater significance than of a narrowly therapeutic-medical model. It also signifies social acceptance (in a world, which as chapter 3 makes clear, is not always prepared for this) and, theologically, the hope of salvation. This is particularly clear in Peter's story, which deserved to be told at some length.

Peter's Story

Peter's story is a particularly painful and moving account of this process and of his quest for healing. It begins in childhood:

I remember having a dream once, and I dreamed that I was a boy, and I woke up, absolutely elated, and then totally devastated, and I think, when I was about nine, I was introduced to born-again Christians, and I think, I just latched onto that and saw that, "well, something is wrong, I don't know what it is, but in a sense, I'll find my healing."

But by the time he left school his quest for healing had still not succeeded:

... I didn't get great grades, so what I then did was I went to a, sort of, another college to re-do – I used to go home every afternoon and go to bed. And the only thing I lived for was religious activities. And at that stage, I knew there was something wrong, but I didn't know what it was, and I would go every healing service available.

He began to realise that his problem was related to his sense of gender identity:

... So I put on weight and I was a gender-less blob. I dressed very androgynously, I didn't take any interest ... I could see that I couldn't be a man, but I wasn't a woman, but I wasn't a man. So this was my saving grace. And, in a sense, I suppose, I was just taken as a tomboy. No boy friends, nothing ... the trouble was, I was attracted to women at times and that really worried me because homosexuality's wrong, they

were sinful, and I was terrified deep down inside that I was a lesbian. So, in a sense – shove it all down. But of course, the more you shoved it all down, the more depressed you got.

He still yearned for healing.

... So, anyway, I went away on one of these weekends and it was very powerful and I was very taken ... I believed that Christians knew better for me than I knew for myself. And they were in touch with God so they knew, what was right for me. And I just laid myself right open to anything. If they said “just stand on your head for half an hour a day and you’ll be healed”, I would have done it.

He did indeed go to enormous lengths to find healing.

... I had a five-hour deliverance session, casting demons out of me, and then they did the same the next night because there was more still there, and then ... we went out shopping and because I was big, they couldn’t find any clothes to fit me, so I ended up having two maternity dresses and being put in these little pretty green strapless sandals ... and somebody draping a cardigan ... and somebody giving me a bracelet ... It’s hilarious now, but I really believed that I was healed, because I’d been searching for healing.

He now realises that such ‘healing’ was bound to fail, but his story also illustrates what may happen to those whose gender dysphoria is unrecognised. An abiding sense of ‘wrongness’ prevails, but it is not related in any way to ‘transsexuality’.

Up to then I didn’t really know what the healing was all about. But even then, I couldn’t have put it into words. All I could say was “I don’t want to be a woman.” I didn’t see there was an option because I didn’t know. You don’t meet people in Ireland. I had a very sheltered background and I had most of, you know, born-again

Christian friends. I hadn't even met a homosexual; I didn't know what they were. So, in a sense I didn't know that there was such a thing as me. All I knew was that there were men who dressed up in women's clothes and I knew I wasn't that.

The consequences of not knowing the proper diagnosis, combined with a narrow, conservative faith proved disastrous.

I was about twenty-four. [I was] working in Sligo and along came this man. He was the first person that had ever taken an interest in me and I was quite flattered and I was told "right this is ..." you see, all the time I had all these people behind me saying "right, this is your healing, and you walk in this and this is God's way for you." Anyway, I was very flattered, and I fell in love with him.

They married and later, despite many misgivings on Peter's part decided to try to start a family. This resulted in the birth of a son.

I got the most horrendous depression. So they put it down to post-natal depression. I think it was just I'd had enough. And, of course, we were in a church who were reasonably supportive, but at the end of the day, I was looking for healing.

An alternating and thoroughly debilitating round of depression and attempts to find healing followed. The healing was sought both through church based counsellors and also through visits to psychiatrists. In the end, Peter found help in the person of a leading gestalt therapist:

He made me challenge everything. He challenged my faith. He challenged my understanding. Basically, he almost gave me permission to explore myself and to become my own person, to come out of my head and live in my body, and that was just an incredible experience ... He helped me to become me.

This was the turning point in Peter's search for healing, which would eventually result in gender reassignment. Despite the pain of rejection, including that by his church, the depression lifted and Peter was able to immerse himself, purposefully in life. He began to discover that to be healed might not just mean the resolution of his mental conflict, but that it might even mean a new acceptance within society. Three things stand out. Firstly, that despite all the difficulties 'at the end of the day I was being myself.' Secondly that the journey to healing is understood by Peter as a move from denial of his body to an acceptance of it and thirdly that despite all this, still Peter was concerned that his actions might not be accepted by God, a worry that healing might not include salvation:

I found myself distancing myself from God, because of all the negative stuff I was getting, I was terrified that if I was honest with God and say "God, do you accept me as I really am?" I was terrified he was going to say "No." So I didn't say it. So I couldn't actually get to the point. So I backed off. And I couldn't have honest communication with God because I was terrified that he was going to say, "No, you must be the other way." And I don't even think I've got to that stage yet. I know that he loves me, and I know that he accepts me, but ... I don't know if what I've done is acceptable in his eyes, because of all the stuff I've got.

Peter's story painfully and vividly demonstrates the unsustainability of the kind of 'healing' advocated, for example, by the Evangelical Alliance that depends upon holding to or even returning to one's 'birth gender'. It also illustrates the huge pain and confusion caused not just to Peter himself not just in Peter's life, but also to those close to him, of believing that such healing might be possible.

Healing need not always be a theological struggle

For the transsexual Christian, the process of healing often involves an explicitly theological struggle – the desire for justification and salvation, but not always. Bernadette, for example, sees the 'problem' from a very different perspective:

I cannot believe for one moment that the anomalies of gender are something that should affect, influence or in any way disturb our faith. It seems bordering on irrelevance. I can accept that the background that exists there has got those concepts in it, but nobody was wise enough to be able to say otherwise. Now we are. After all, there was in the time when the gospels were written, nobody was very certain what the relative functions of the heart and the brain were, let alone where the soul resided! And the fact that, gender could be separate from physical sexual differentiation would have meant nothing to people then. So why waste our time, why stretch our intellectual capacity debating something, which was irrelevant in the environment in which that set-up was produced?

Her response to those who take the view that gender reassignment is 'tampering with nature' is to insist again that the apparently essentialist ground on which such theological convictions are based is, in fact, nothing of the sort.

My answer to them always is the one that I've produced on numerous occasions, saying, well, back in Biblical times, we required people that had epilepsy to be considered possessed by the Devil. Whereas we don't think now that swallowing a certain small tablet removes the devil from people, we also felt that a number of other aspects, like leprosy, were afflictions, which required theological interpretation. We don't accept that at all now. So can we not accept, in fact, the same argument applies to a gender situation?

Bernadette's contention is simply that gender anomalies are a medical problem; no different in kind from other physical ailments and deserving of the same standards of medical care, and that healing is first and foremost a medical process, but in no way does she deny that her life experience is part of the raw material of theology or that gender has a theological significance. Her story also shows that healing for her has meant a new acceptance within society, and a vivid sense of her acceptance by God and thus of her salvation.

The Significance of the Resurrection Body

One area in which transgendered Christians' understandings of the significance of the gendered body and its relationship to the self is most clearly seen in response to questions about the nature of humanity in the resurrection life.

As many transgendered Christians, like those non-heterosexual Christians surveyed by Yip, are inclined to the belief that God is gender-less, it is not surprising that they tend to play down the significance of gender in their own hopes of resurrection life. In coping with a life in which gender has caused so much trouble and anxiety, some, but not all, seem to be expressing a wish that gender did not matter so much. Phyllis' views, for example, are consonant with her understanding of God.

I've not thought much about it, but no, I don't think [it's terribly important to have a gender], because it's not your body that is going, it's your soul, your spirit.

I asked, 'does your soul, your spirit have a gender?'

No, I don't think it does really. No, 'cos I don't think God has got a gender. I don't think gender is a problem in death. [In the world to come] ... there is neither male nor female.

I also asked Prisca, 'What will you be in the life to come?'

I'll be me.

I pressed, 'Well, will that be gendered?'

I find it very difficult, I mean, when you say 'will you marry?' you know it's more or less many of the things we take for granted, our current identity, our marriages, sort

of that will not be relevant in heaven. I suppose the Bible's suggesting that gender won't be an issue. Exactly how – what one would look like or be, I honestly don't know. Somehow, I will be me. I'm not quite sure what that's going to be called.

'But the gendered side of it is not the big issue?'

No, apparently not in heaven. Somehow we have only a hazy outline of what heaven will be, how we will be and I suppose I have to take it on trust that somehow, the innate person, almost transcending the sort of physical appearance will somehow be freed to worship God and to be with God. Gender is part of our material identity. So therefore it's an issue now, but it will apparently be less of an issue.

Bernadette, characteristically, takes a different view:

I suppose gender must have some sort of significance, because I believe that the part of me that is mortal, for want of a better word (and it's not a word I like, but it'll do for the moment), does deal with my gender, or it wouldn't be quite so totally ingrained in everything about me and everything I do and the way I think. If the way I think, if the person I am, is not that which survives, then what's the point?

She adds,

It's hugely important [to experience in a gendered way] because when it amounts to an anomaly, I am uncomfortable, I am not productive, I am not being the person I think I should be. The person I am is a woman, and I do things, I think things, I act things, about things and in contexts as a woman thinks. Now, some of these are so important, so intimate to me and have such an influence on the things, which are not physical, that I have to conclude they are above that level, if you will. So, yes, I conclude, there is some supra-physical aspect, which is gender-significant.

Only Jenny-Anne, who is content to remain 'in the middle', however, and wishes to retain that identity in any life to come:

It will be the Jenny-Anne I am now. I've been asked this question before: if you could be born again, which gender would you be? And I think I'd still choose to be in the middle. I'd choose to be more feminine, if that were possible, but I would still stay, sort of in the middle, which probably is quite unusual and there are not many people who would choose that middle course.

Yes, I went to Brazil [and was taken to see] the she-males. And I thought if you could take away the obvious prostitution issues, that's how I'd like to be, but a more acceptable she-male. And some people find that very hard to handle.

Concluding observations

a) Can faith change sex?

Nicola Slee has shown that women's faith not only develops in a distinct, gendered way, but is also expressed in a characteristically gendered way.²⁷ She argues that women's spirituality is "essentially relational in character, rooted in a strong sense of connection to others and an ethic of care and responsibility."²⁸ When women talk about their faith there is a dominance of personal and relational forms over abstract and impersonal forms, observable not only in *what* is said, but also in the *way* in which it is said. By and large, women value a conversational context in which to express their faith and seem more comfortable when using metaphor, story and examples than most men, even when those women are highly educated and

²⁷ The nature of the influence gender on language and linguistics has been described and analysed, importantly amongst others, by Deborah Tannen both in academic studies, especially *Gender and Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1996), and also in more popular form, in particular, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (London, Virago, 1991). Her work, however, is not addressed directly here by Slee, who is making a broader point from a study of developmental psychology and of theology, contrasting what she sees as characteristically male and female accounts.

²⁸ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 9.

familiar with working in an academic context.²⁹ On the face of it, even on the scant evidence of the fragments of conversations already laid out in this chapter, it begins to seem that some, though not maybe not all, transsexual women also tend to express their faith in such a predominantly feminine way, for example Susie's richly metaphorical descriptions of God. Similarly, Peter's faith tends to be expressed in a mostly male way, in that whilst he has an understanding of faith as being in relationship with God, typical not only of women's talk about God, but also perhaps characteristic of the extreme evangelical context in which his faith was formed, he does not call upon a wide variety of metaphors to describe that relationship. He is also, however, highly articulate, and as with most of the interviewees there are, perhaps inevitably, some elements of God-talk that reflect both male and female patterns. It is also true, as Deborah Tannen makes very clear, that cultural influences exercise a profound effect on the content and process of gendered talk. Thus Tannen argues that the relationship between language and gender "is best approached through the concept of framing, by which gendered patterns of behaviour are seen as sex-class linked rather than sex-linked."³⁰ This must mean for the transsexual woman, for example, that the experience of having to grow up and to survive in a male-dominated culture, must inevitably leave some mark on her style, processes and use of language use.

In as far as transsexual people express a faith in a way consonant with their assigned sex, many deeper questions that are not easily answered lie beneath these tentative observations. How has such a feminine faith emerged? Is it a language acquired as part of the process of gender reassignment, in much the same way as transsexual women undergo speech therapy to help them 'pass'? Or is it far more deeply rooted in the psychological make-up of transsexual people, something arising, perhaps, from 'brain-sex'? Most probably, the truth, as so often, is to be found somewhere in the interplay between the two.

There are also more disturbing currents to disturb this debate, if the feminist critique of theological language expressed by Slee, and still more strongly by Jantzen, is taken seriously

²⁹ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 80.

³⁰ Tannen, *Gender and Discourse*, 218. See also *You Just Don't Understand*, 205-7: 'People from similar cultural backgrounds... have habitual ways of speaking that are similar to each other's and different from those of people from other cultures.'

– as it must. They argue that all traditional Christian theological language is androcentric and patriarchal, a language which disempowers and oppresses women. In as far as this is true, transsexual women need to be especially aware of and sensitive to the experience of 'genetic' women.

In one other significant respect, however, transsexual faith seems to show a very strong affinity with that of women: it often parallels Slee's three-core pattern of women's faith development, of alienation, awakening and relationality.³¹ The key stating point in this process, the experience of alienation in which the self is experienced as "disconnected, unreal, paralysed, broken, alienated, abused or even dead"³² characterises almost all transgendered faith-stories, and becomes a lifelong sentence for many transgendered people, as it is for so many women. Not all succeed, as so many of Yip's non-heterosexual correspondents appear to do, in arriving at an expression of faith which integrates their life on the margins and the Christian tradition with such harmony. It is worth noting here that Jantzen also often brackets, with women, the experience of other 'fragile and fractured' selves as alienated from the masculinist 'symbolic order'.³³

b) *Is transgendered theology different from gay theology?*

Yip's survey of 565 self-identified gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians, carried out in 1997, is he claims, the largest of its kind to date in Great Britain.³⁴ It is, he admits, primarily a quantitative study. He restricts his research to the content of belief, and pays little attention to questions of process. But as there is little empirical research on non-heterosexual Christians, it provides some welcome and valuable insights. Non-heterosexual faith, as it emerges from Yip's study is of particular interest here, in that it seems to converge in a number of significant ways with transgendered faith, but does not overlap with it entirely.

³¹ Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 82.

³² Slee, *Women's Faith Development*, 106.

³³ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 43. She includes here blacks, lesbians and gay men, but not explicitly transgendered or transsexual people.

³⁴ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', 140.

Yip's data suggests, on the whole, that his respondents' "personal experiences and collective social circumstances appears to have a significant impact on their religious beliefs." ³⁵

He notes that at least 80% of his respondents agree with the statement that God is genderless and suggests that this shows a 'feminist slant'. More significantly perhaps, he observes that the themes of 'love and justice' emerge as being especially "indicative of [his respondents'] relationship between their social circumstances and their belief that God is loving and accepting of people of all sexualities. An emphasis on the God of justice is, says Yip, a characteristic of 'Queer theology'.³⁶ Beliefs about Jesus also flow from this conviction, with, in particular, a cherishing of his compassion to the socially disadvantaged.

A concern and commitment to love and justice emerges also strongly in the conversations with transgendered people, and presumably for much the same reasons as for the non-heterosexual group. Transgendered Christians, or more particularly, transsexual women, however, in their delight in the piling up, and rich qualification of metaphors to describe God, in often very personal terms, appear to have more in common with other women than with the non-heterosexual community. This seems to be more significant to them than just an assertion that God is genderless.

Beliefs about the Church held by non-heterosexual Christians are characterised by a sense of unease with, and often an alienation from its institutionalised structures, strongly linked to what is perceived as a lack of progress in adopting an inclusive attitude towards the sexualities they embody. Something of the same can be seen in the responses of some, but not all transgendered Christians. It is clear that some local congregations can be as loving and accepting as others are fearful and rejecting. Ecclesiological convictions seem to be a hugely significant factor in determining what kind of response is made.

The most immediate illustration of the way that transgendered people's beliefs are strongly shaped by their very particular personal lived experiences is seen in the questions they raise about the self and the body. This does not appear to be such a matter of concern to the non-

³⁵ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', 151.

³⁶ Yip, 'Spirituality and Sexuality', 144-5. An emphasis on the God of justice is, says Yip, a characteristic of 'Queer theology'.

heterosexual community, although in an interesting comment on the findings of a Church of England report, Anne Richards suggests that “to feel good about one’s body, one’s self and one’s sexuality” is also one of the “emerging themes” of contemporary spirituality.³⁷

My sample is clearly too small as a tool to construct the outlines of a transgendered theology, but some intriguing and distinctive strands are already beginning to emerge which suggest that although it shares with gay or non-heterosexual theology a concern, for example, for justice and a commitment to loving acceptance, it also expresses some distinct and different understandings of God and, more particularly, of the body.

Transgendered theology in common with ordinary theology, unlike feminist and liberation theologies, does not seem to be so clearly concerned with social analysis and does not therefore seem to offer a sufficiently strong challenge to oppressive structures of power (if this is true it would lend support to feminist fears that some transgendered people are concerned to uphold masculinist and patriarchal hegemonies in society). Also in common with ordinary theology, transgendered theology, especially when it takes form of autobiography, begins from a wide variety of starting points and engages with a very wide range of concerns. At first sight it may seem more elusive and slippery than either gay theology or feminist theology, but is this right? Does it in fact challenge orthodoxies about the nature of sex and of gender that neither liberation theology, nor even feminism fully addresses? It is my hope that just as feminist theology seeks to free the whole of society, women *and* men, from the oppression of patriarchy transgendered theology, so transgendered theology may enrich the whole church and not just those who struggle with gender dysphoria.

Many important questions remain, not least about the relationship between the individual and the wider community of the Church. Where, in particular, is the proper balance to be found between taking personal experience seriously (supported by hard-won ordinary theology) and the trend toward a highly individualistic, personal and particular spirituality, which sees the

³⁷ Anne Richards, 'Interpreting Contemporary Spirituality', in Avis (ed.), *Public Faith*, 85.

Church, in Richards' words as outdated and "little more than a piece of heritage."³⁸ Transsexuals are often urged, even in Christian groups to 'be themselves' and not to worry how others see them, "It's their problem!" This seems to be fundamentally at odds with traditional Christian understandings of the self, to which first in the debates of the early Church and then in contemporary theological ethics, I now turn.

³⁸ Richards, 'Interpreting Contemporary Spirituality', 79.

6 Gendered Identity and the Body in the Christian Tradition

"Oh, no," Vivi said. "No, no, no. Not my style. This is my luggage. These are my trunks ... I carry these stories. They have my name tags on them."

Looking up at her, Teensy said, "Any baggage you have, Bébé, ceased to be yours the minute that sperm hit that egg."¹

In the previous two chapters I looked at the questions posed by transsexual and transgendered people in relation to the Bible and the theological tradition. I argued that creative fidelity is a process through which personal experience of wrestling with the Bible and the scholarly tradition may be brought together and I showed that transgendered theology is a vivid and thought-provoking expression of ordinary theology.

My case studies revealed deep a concern among transgendered Christians to wrestle with the nature of God and the church in the light of their experience, and above all, to understand the significance of the self, of gender and of the body. These same concerns are also deeply rooted within the theological debate of the early church and again returned to the forefront of theological debate in the closing decades of the twentieth century. I now turn, therefore, to a survey of those questions raised within the Christian tradition itself about the body, the self and its gendered identity, and to some of the ways in which it has attempted to respond to them, and to explore what insights it may have to offer to a theological appraisal of transsexuality. I hope this may prove to be a starting point for a theological process parallel to that of creative fidelity.

Introduction: What is this mystery in me? The twin inheritance of Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible

My body was, to me, so repulsive that I didn't want to see it myself, let alone let anyone else do so.²

¹ Rebecca Wells, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (London: Pan, 2000), 377.

The agonies that accompany gender dysphoria inevitably prompt those who suffer to raise many questions about their bodies and what they mean, but, of course, many other people have done the same. Throughout history, Christians have shown a marked tendency to regard the body with a deep sense of anxiety and ambiguity. For example, in the seventh century, John Climacus asked, "What is this mystery in me?" Climacus expresses the complex and often highly ambiguous Christian attitude to the body with admirable brevity. He describes it as "my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor."³

This ambiguity is profound. In Christian thought, its roots lie deep in the tensions created through the inheritance of two very different world views, Greek philosophy on the one hand, and the Hebrew Bible on the other; though of course the matter is further complicated in that both traditions themselves incorporate many different perspectives, and therefore both possess their own complexities and ambiguities, even elements of internal conflict.

Plato and the heritage of Greek philosophy

The dominant force in the Greek inheritance, as it influenced the thinking of early Christianity, is the philosophy of Plato, and in particular, that expounded in the *Timaeus*, the only one of his dialogues widely available to the ancient world in a Latin translation. Here, in an exact parallel to his understanding of the human person, he describes the cosmos as being a soul dwelling in a body.

[God] constructed reason within the soul and soul within the body as He fashioned the All, that so the work He was executing might be of its nature most fair and good.

Thus, then, in accordance with the likely account, we must declare that this Cosmos

² Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam: The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London: Cassell, 1996), 17.

³ Quoted by Kallistos Ware, 'My Helper and My Enemy: The Body in Greek Christianity', in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 90-111 at 90.

has verily come into existence as a Living Creature endowed with soul and reason owing to the providence of God.⁴

In this scheme, the soul itself also has a three-fold nature, comprising of reason, psychological energy and desire, but it is reason, thought and intellect that rule supreme.⁵

Because Plato and those who followed him, regarded the mind as masculine and the life of the spirit a male preserve, his conviction that thought and reason alone endure, and matter far more than the temporary shell that is the body, now appears strongly, even oppressively masculinist. This, as we shall see, had a profoundly distorting effect on the formation of Christian spirituality and on the theology of the body. At its most extreme, it blessed a complete denial of female experience and spirituality. Thus the Gospel of Thomas proclaimed,

114. Simon Peter said to them, "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life."
Jesus said, "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the domain of Heaven."⁶

While the Gospel of Thomas is representative of the dualist thinking of second century Gnosticism (and possibly earlier), similar thought leached into the mainstream of Christian tradition, strongly influenced, amongst others, by the Neoplatonist Jewish philosopher Philo who, as Grace Jantzen points out, spoke of maleness and femaleness as categories of superiority and inferiority.⁷

⁴ Plato, *Dialogues, Vol. IX: Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 55.

⁵ See Andrew Louth, 'The Body in Western Catholic Christianity', in Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body*, 111-30 at 111-2. See also N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 58.

⁶ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and The Jesus Seminar (trans.), *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco, Cal.: HarperCollins, 1997), 532. The translators speculate that this verse may have circulated independently, prior to its inclusion in the Gospel.

⁷ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51.

Louth argues that Plato's cosmology and anthropology were *typical* for conceptions of the body in late antiquity.⁸ This is clearly reflected in the cultural attitudes and anxieties of the early Roman Empire. Peter Brown describes how Roman medical opinion (represented, for example, by Galen and by Aretaeus) held that females were failed males, softer, colder and more formless, all due to a deficiency in the supply of 'heat' and 'vital spirit' (which originated in semen) to the foetus in the womb. Such a view implies a primary state in the life of the foetus in which sex was not differentiated. This is clearly not quite the same as Plato's conviction that the pre-existent soul was un-gendered (a viewpoint shared later by those Christian thinkers who followed him most closely), but it is undoubtedly influenced by his line of argument. As I have already described⁹, red-blooded Roman males strove hard through a range of physical and mental disciplines to re-enforce their manhood lest it should ebb away from them. This even included abstinence from sex, lest by losing vital semen they also cooled too much and became feminine. No normal man might actually become a woman, but it was a constant battle not to become 'womanish' and the presence of eunuchs in society was, for them, an all-too-visible sign of the "fearsomely plastic" nature of the human body.¹⁰

The Hebraic understanding of the body and its influence on the New Testament

The Hebraic/biblical inheritance is more holistic than Platonism and, as such, affirms a very different and altogether more positive understanding of the body. The Old Testament characteristically sees the human person as a single, undivided unity. There is, for example, no concept of the soul's pre-existence, or of the soul's survival, separated from the body after death. It is neatly summarised by Ware as "I do not *have* a body, I *am* my body."¹¹ (Wright shows, however, that the idea of a soul separable from the body at death, was later absorbed from the Hellenistic world into later Jewish thought at the 'turn of the eras', as a number of funerary inscriptions bear witness.¹²)

⁸ Louth, 'The Body in Western Catholic Christianity', 111.

⁹ See above, 77.

¹⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 10-11.

¹¹ Ware, 'My helper and my enemy', 91.)

¹² Wright *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 140-2).

Ware argues that a holistic view of the body also typifies New Testament anthropology; indeed even his aphorism about the body is, in fact, borrowed from Bultmann, who coined it to describe Paul's view: "man does not have a *sōma*; he is *sōma*".¹³ At first glance, it might appear that Paul adopts a Greek, dualistic opposition of body and soul, but the distinction he actually makes between 'flesh' and 'spirit' is more subtle (as in, for example, Galatians 5). 'Flesh' here should no more be equated with 'body', than 'spirit' is a synonym for with 'soul'. Rather, flesh and spirit both refer to the *whole* human person and define the nature and quality of its relationship with God: 'flesh' symbolises separation and rebellion from God, 'spirit' symbolises communion and obedience.¹⁴ Dale Martin argues that when Paul claims (in 1 Corinthians 5:5) that the destruction of the flesh will enable the salvation of the spirit, he borrows from Graeco-Roman medicine an understanding of flesh as a polluting agent, from which the spirit needs to be cleansed.¹⁵ C. K. Barrett, in an examination of Paul's thought in Galatians and Romans, suggests helpfully that the true opposite of flesh, is love. He thus argues that the only 'cure' for flesh is spirit "understood also in the Pauline sense of the power of Christ operative and central in the life of man [sic]"¹⁶ J. D. G. Dunn who explores Paul's understanding of flesh and body and the relationship between them in considerable depth, concludes by arguing that Paul was probably "combining elements of Hebrew and Greek anthropology into a new synthesis." He continues, "In broader terms we could say that Paul's distinction between *sōma* and *sarx* made possible a positive affirmation of human createdness and creation and of the interdependence of humanity within its created environment. Sadly, however, this potential in Paul's theology was soon lost as the distinction itself was lost to sight."¹⁷

Perhaps the most influential teaching on the subject of resurrection in the New Testament, is 1 Corinthians 15. Martin, in general agreement with Dunn, reminds us that this verse must not be read as "as built on a Cartesian dichotomy of physical versus spiritual or natural versus supernatural ... Rather the contrasts in the chapter are of hierarchy and status, not ontology."

¹³ See J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T & T Clark, 1998), 55.

¹⁴ Ware, 'My helper and my enemy', 93.

¹⁵ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1995), 170-1.

¹⁶ C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1985), 71-90.

¹⁷ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul*, 72-3.

The resurrected body is a different kind of body, but it is still a body.¹⁸ Paul's metaphor of the seed is, as Wright suggests, an argument for "discontinuity within continuity."¹⁹ It is perhaps also hardly surprising, as Caroline Walker Bynum points out, that given the complexity of Paul's thought this metaphor was often either misunderstood or came to be ignored in the centuries that followed.²⁰

The New Testament is not, however, wholly comfortable with the body. Ambivalence is apparent even in the teaching attributed to Jesus himself. For example, Jesus seems to endorse both celibacy and an ascetic lifestyle and the extent to which Paul advocated celibacy and asceticism is still a matter of some debate. Brown suggests that in allowing marriage to continue, in 1 Corinthians, Paul acted less out of conviction, than from a need to maintain social structures that allowed his mission to flourish and even bolstered his own authority. Through a lukewarm series of "blocking moves" he succeeded only in leaving an essentially negative, even "fatal" legacy that saw marriage as no more than a defence against desire.²¹ Elizabeth Clark, however, argues that Brown fails to give proper emphasis to the asceticism that Paul expresses in this epistle.²²

What is certain, is that even if the New Testament expresses a predominantly Hebraic/biblical holistic anthropology, it is also formed in the context of societies where very different world-views were in dialogue, and often in conflict with that tradition, and thus is inevitably coloured by them, and by the inevitably messy process of assimilation, adaptation and change within cultures. When he turns to speak about the effect of the twin inheritance of Greek and Hebraic thought on the early Church, Ware himself draws attention to Mary Douglas's thesis concerning the correlation of the social and physical body.²³ If Douglas is correct, it is hardly surprising that in the first century, an age of turbulence, great uncertainty and many

¹⁸ Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 123-9.

¹⁹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 341.

²⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

²¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 53-5.

²² Elizabeth A. Clark, 'Brown's Body and Society', *The Journal of Religion* 70, no. 3, (1990), 432-6.

²³ Ware, 'The Body in Greek Christianity', 96.

contradictions, that similar confusion and contradiction should attend views of the human person – even in the pages of the New Testament itself.

The debate in the Early Church from the perspectives of essentialism and constructionism

The twin inheritances of Platonist and Hebraic/biblicism may also be seen to express something of the dialectic between the contrasting positions of essentialism and social-construction (constructionism); the very same dialectic which, as I have shown, also characterises the debate, even as articulated by transsexual people themselves, about the causes of transsexuality and the nature of sex, sexuality and gender. In brief, although Plato thought he was describing the essence of being, the Platonic inheritance follows a largely constructionist path, which will allow Gregory of Nyssa to claim that ‘we are our own parents’ – we have God-given freedom to become what we wish. The soul, or in other words, human intelligence, reason and thought, takes precedence over the body, a mere empty shell, which the soul longs to discard. It is this route that, at its most extreme, characterises Gnosticism, a dualism that goes way beyond Plato in scorning the body but prizing the soul.²⁴ The Hebraic inheritance on the other hand, takes the body far more seriously and values it. It gives rise to the strict and (away from their original cultural context) arcane and even rather silly purity laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, laws intended to protect not only the individual body but also the body corporate. It includes Paul’s much debated blessing of the body in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 and leads, through Irenaeus and Tertullian, to the high medieval obsession with ensuring that the physical body was preserved in such a state as could enable every last particle could be taken up and restored in the resurrection body.

The positions represented by Irenaeus and Tertullian in the essentialist corner, and by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa in the constructionist camp, not only set the terms of a debate that still continues, but they also still typify it. Although, amongst many others, Augustine and Aquinas make important and influential contributions, what they add is built on the foundation of these

²⁴ For a critical summary of some of the key gnostic texts see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 534-51.

early thinkers. Their own contributions serve either to weigh in on one side or the other, or to add points of detail and clarification. Indeed, it can be argued that, although many words and been spoken and countless words written, no radically different thinking has substantially altered Christian understanding of the relationship of body and soul between the death of Gregory and the last quarter of the twentieth century.²⁵ For that reason, I move now to examine in a little more detail those foundational ideas, and will then proceed with what might otherwise seem reckless haste to the debate in progress today.

Irenaeus and Tertullian

Certainly nothing else rises again but what is sown, nothing else is sown but what is dissolved in the ground, and nothing else is dissolved in the ground but flesh.²⁶

Tertullian follows Irenaeus in commenting on the fifteen chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons at the end of the second century, was concerned to refute gnostic heresy, and in so doing, stressed the significance of Christ's incarnation. He rejected the idea that only the soul would rise and be saved:

The flesh is to be interpenetrated by the power of the spirit, in such a way that it is no longer simply carnal but becomes truly spiritual through its communion with the spirit ... Just as the flesh is liable to corruption, so it is also capable of attaining incorruptibility.²⁷

²⁵ This may seem a startling claim, but as Bynum admits, 'the extraordinary materialism of early fifth-century eschatology set the course of discussion for hundreds of years [and] became the basis for the renewal of theological consideration of the body in the twelfth century' (113). As Bynum shows, the materialism of the high medieval period was such that even the 'soul' itself was depicted as embodied. By the early fourteenth century however, Aquinas' understanding of the soul came to prevail, and with it the idea that the self might survive without the need for the continuity of material particles, but for Thomas, the soul is gendered and closely patterns the body and must ultimately be reunited with the body. See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 1-17.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 53 in Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection: The Text Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1960), 157.

²⁷ Fragment 6, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 12:738, quoted by Kallistos Ware, 'The Body in Greek Christianity', 96.

He also stressed both that the whole human person, body and soul together was created in God's image.

Tertullian, whose influence in the West was to prove far greater, owes much to Irenaeus. He may even have had Irenaeus's work beside him as he wrote his own polemical defences of traditional doctrine a few years later in North Africa.²⁸

Stoic metaphysics were another profound influence on Tertullian's thought. He was thus convinced that *all* reality is corporeal, and that even the soul consists of many tiny particles that could, and would, be reassembled in the resurrection. Both theologians wrote in the context of a time in which martyrdom faced many Christians, and with it the thorny question that if body and soul together would become the resurrection body, what would be the fate of those who, for example, were torn to pieces and eaten by animals in the arena? Irenaeus handed on to Tertullian the idea that the paradigmatic body is the cadaver, which changes through decay and consumption, but it was Paul's metaphor of the seed in 1 Corinthians 15 that convinced Tertullian that despite the decay, dispersal and violation of human remains, the whole body could nevertheless come together and be transformed, and yet still retain its distinct and instantly recognisable identity.²⁹

Bynum argues that questions of the survival of personal identity did not figure large in early debates about the resurrection, but it certainly came to assume considerable significance for Tertullian. The resurrection body, he implies, would even show the scars of illness and injury, although these scars would no longer be the causes of pain; amputated limbs will be restored, the blind will see and the lame walk:

Next we have that well-known subtlety of vulgar unbelief: 'If, they suggest, 'the very same substance is recalled to existence, along with its own shape, outline and quality, then it retains also the rest of its distinguishing marks: and so the blind and

²⁸ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 32.

²⁹ For a fuller discussion of this point and the significance of martyrdom on the thinking of Tertullian and the apologists, see Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 34-51. See also Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 124-5.

the lame and palsied – and however one was marked at his decease, so will he also return.’ Well, now, even if so, are you too proud, in whatever state, to obtain so great a grace from God? ... What is belief in the resurrection, unless believing it entire? For if the flesh is to be restored from dissolution, much more will it be recalled from discomfort.³⁰

In the resurrection life, he argues, we will retain organs that have no further function except, for the essential purpose of recognition. Our teeth, and even our genitals, will be restored:

When death has been taken away, neither the supports of livelihood for the preservation of life, nor the replenishment of the race, will be a burden to the members. Moreover even today it will be possible for the intestines and the genitals to be inoperative ... So then the flesh will rise again, all of it indeed, itself, entire.³¹

In an earlier work, *De Pallio*, Tertullian suggests that even our earthly rank will be maintained in heaven, an idea that Augustine and others later adopted with some enthusiasm. He therefore condemned gender confusion and cross-dressing for the reason that it might help to conceal or to blur these distinctions.³² In his treatise on women’s dress, he argues against the wearing cosmetics or jewels, but does not go quite as far as did Cyprian later, who insisted that if women wore face powder, God might fail to recognise them in the resurrection.³³

Inevitably, Tertullian’s ideas about the resurrection of the body also had profound implications for the way in which Christians ought to live, and how they should view their bodies in this life. His message was austere. He believed that the body is a ‘unified organism’ as Brown points out, he was not in any way a ‘dualist’. The soul was ‘set in the mould’ of the outer body, inextricably linked to it and matched it completely, so much so that it is not altogether easy to understand just what he imagined the ‘soul’ to be or what function it might serve. He insisted that it was through the rigorous discipline and control of the *body* that the Spirit of God could

³⁰ Tertullian, *Treatise on the Resurrection*, 57.

³¹ Tertullian, *Treatise on the Resurrection*, 61.

³² See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 38, note 67, also 99-100.

³³ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 37.

enter into it: "By continence you will buy up a great stock of sanctity, by making savings on the flesh, you will be able to invest in the Spirit."³⁴ Sexual drives, he thought, are an essential but shameful part of the human person, and though they may diminish with old age, will always need to be rigidly controlled.³⁵ His teachings were also undoubtedly coloured by the misogyny that characterised so much of the philosophy and popular opinion of his day. He saw women as temptresses, the daughters of Eve, who each shared her sin in bringing evil into the world, and must, as a consequence also share her need for penance.³⁶

Origen

Irenaeus may have himself witnessed and then described the horrors of martyrdom, but Origen's own father himself met that grim fate in Alexandria, in the early years of the third century. Origen, then in his late teens, so wanted to join him that his mother hid his clothes to prevent him going out and giving himself up to the Roman authorities.³⁷

This experience formed one major influence upon a distinctive teaching, radically different from that propounded by Irenaeus or Tertullian; another was the philosophy of Plato as interpreted and developed by the philosopher Philo. It was from Philo, for example, that Origen inherited an idea that Louth describes as the doctrine of 'double creation.' In this, Origen imagined that the first creation was of spiritual beings, made in the image of God, being which were not differentiated and divided by soul and body, sex and gender. These binaries only emerged, as those created turned away from God and 'fell', and thus became embodied souls, which were further restricted and embarrassed by the divisions of sex and gender, a sign for all times "of the corporal creation's having fallen away from primitive unity." This second creation, or better, second stage of creation was, he believed, also coterminous

³⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 77, quoting Tertullian *de exhortatione castitatis*, 10.1-2. Clark, 'Brown's Body and Society', 434 argues, however, that Brown still does not stress sufficiently enough the full ascetic impulse of Tertullian's writings.

³⁵ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 78-82.

³⁶ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 45. Note, however, Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 37, note 64, who claims that Tertullian's ideas are 'much more complex ... than the charge of misogyny (so often made against him) allows.'

³⁷ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 73, 160.

with the creation of the (fallen) cosmos.³⁸ The distinctive feature of Origen's eschatology, explained, for example, in some length in the four books of his greatest surviving work is therefore of the soul's journey back to that blissful state of primal, undifferentiated unity.

Like Tertullian, Origen reflected on the nature of the resurrection body, and in *De Principiis*, at some length, on Paul's fifteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and its metaphor of the seed. His position, Bynum estimates, was roughly half way between the re-animation of the flesh, and the gnostic denial of all things bodily. Origen imagined the body, she suggests, to be an image or *eidos* of the spiritual body, in effect rather like a genetic code. In the radical transformation of resurrection, not only will it be freed from age and sex, but also it might even be released from the memories of human, earthly relationships.³⁹

If they [some of 'our own' who 'adopt a very low and abject view of the resurrection of the body'] believe the apostle, that a body which arises in glory, and power, and incorruptibility, has already become spiritual, it appears absurd and contrary to his meaning to say that it can again be tangled with the passions of flesh and blood, seeing the apostle manifestly declares that 'flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God, nor shall corruption inherit incorruption.' But how do they understand the declaration of the apostle, 'We shall all be changed?' This transformation certainly is to be looked for, according to the order which we have been taught above; and in it, undoubtedly, it becomes us to hope for something worthy of divine grace, and this we believe will take place in the order in which the apostle describes the sowing in the

³⁸ Louth, 'The Body in Western Catholic Christianity', 114-5.

³⁹ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 66-7. See also Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) 65 and 109. Edwards argues that Origen's understanding of the body is influenced by Aristotelian thought: 'the body is not for Origen as for the Platonists, a raft that bears the storm-tossed soul from one delusion to another. For him, as for any Christian, it is the guarantee of personal identity, the promise of immortality in the only life that God vouchsafes to us.' In this respect, Origen's thought begins to anticipate Aquinas' position, though as Bynum points out, Aquinas said, 'It is more correct to say that the soul contains body [*continet corpus*] and makes it to be one, than the converse' (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 259). See also Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 518-27. Wright reviews Bynum's argument, but maintains that Origen's position is similar to Paul's: 'When he affirms the resurrection, he [Origen] means a real body, in both important continuity and important discontinuity with that which went before' (527).

ground of a 'bare grain of corn, or of any other fruit,' to which 'God gives it a body as it pleases Him,' as the grain of corn is dead.⁴⁰

Origen himself is said to have looked for and anticipated this transformation in a particularly startling way. At some time, probably in early adulthood, Eusebius reports that inspired by Matthew 19: 12, he castrated himself (or persuaded a doctor to carry out the deed), and so became, in Brown's words, exiled from gender, "a walking lesson in the basic indeterminacy of the body."⁴¹ It is curious that he does not seem to have attracted the opprobrium often attracted by eunuchs, and even, later, was not debarred from ordination to the priesthood. It is also fascinating, in passing, to wonder why someone who presented himself as *un*-gendered, or beyond gender, seemed less threatening than eunuchs who, in that they sometimes seemed to cross gender boundaries, could be regarded as *trans*gendered. It is in the realm of speculation to try to imagine Origen's deepest psychosexual motivations in seeking castration, but he certainly stands out as a striking and puzzling example of embodied gender variance. As we have already noted, some transsexual and transgendered Christians today are happy to share his conviction that gender is transitory, and that gender differences are provisional and extrinsic to the deeper self.

Origen's understanding and use of Scripture is also hugely significant. Grace Jantzen argues that it represents a decisive, sinister and oppressively masculinist development of the Platonist idea of the superiority of the male soul over the female body. Origen's aim to subdue the body to the soul and then to free the soul from the body leads to a massive "gender transformation and with it the transformation of religious consciousness in the Jewish and Christian traditions ... the transformation of Wisdom to Logos".⁴² By advocating, in addition to a literal meaning of Scripture, a mystical meaning that points to and is fulfilled by Christ, a

⁴⁰ Origen, *De Principiis*, Book II, Chapter X.3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Frederick Crombie (trans.), Vol. X, 'The Writings of Origen', Vol. I, 139.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 169. It may be that the reason for Origen's castration, if it indeed happened, might not have been quite so noble as often imagined: Brown records that some of his supporters believed that Origen had undergone the operation 'so as to avoid slanderous rumours about the intimacy he enjoyed with women who were his spiritual charges.'

⁴² Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 62.

meaning only available to a male religious elite, she suggests that biblical interpretation was thereafter falsely and disastrously distorted, in a way that has excluded women and women's experience.⁴³ If this was the effect of Origen's teaching, it was probably not his intention. Like Gregory later, he was strongly influenced by female role models, and he certainly seems to have accepted women as his intellectual equals.⁴⁴

Frances Young argues, in contrast, that Origen's drawing out of the intertextuality of Scripture, which was also to help to make Gregory of Nyssa's gender-talk possible, can still prove empowering and liberating, in that it reminds us of the value of metaphor, which helps to engage and to shape our imagination.⁴⁵

Gregory of Nyssa

It may be argued that Origen's theology had most impact in the often bitter theological debates of the third and fourth centuries, not on the understanding of the body and the nature of embodiment, but on the unity and nature of God, and especially of God as Trinity; but his teaching about gender forms a platform on which Gregory, was to prove the most prominent builder. Gregory was born into an influential Cappadocian family. His elder brother Basil was to become 'the Great' bishop of Caesarea. The dominant influences in the early life of both brothers were female: their mother, grandmother and their remarkable older sister Macrina, whose death was the subject of one of Gregory's most influential works.⁴⁶

Although he is often accused of inconsistency and confusion, his writing, formed under the influence of Origen's legacy and also, significantly, by his own burning desire for fulfilment, now seems strikingly original, and has recently attracted the interest of a new generation of

⁴³ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 62-89.

⁴⁴ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 151-2.

⁴⁵ Frances Young, 'Sexuality and Devotion: Mystical Readings of the Song of Songs', *Theology and Sexuality* 14 (2001), 80-96.

⁴⁶ Verna E. F. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 41, part 2 (1990), 441-71. See also Brown, *The Body and Society*, 285-6.

theologians. Pre-eminent amongst these is Sarah Coakley, who argues that one of the reasons for this new enthusiasm for Gregory is undoubtedly his 'gender theory'.⁴⁷

Gregory shared something of Origen's understanding of the doctrine of 'double creation' and his idea that the resurrection would be a restoration of an original, primal, angelic state.⁴⁸ Like Origen too, he believed that sexuality was a result of the Fall, but it was not altogether bad. Indeed, it was a merciful afterthought, a sign of God's continuing care, in that it enabled Adam and Eve and their progeny to survive and continue in a material world; but to suppress sexual activity, as many in the Christian ascetic tradition believed, was a way of breaking from this fallen state and facing down death. Origen believed that gender and sexuality are contingent and provisional. All this he concluded, despite the fact being that less inclined to the ascetic life than other members of his family, he had himself married, albeit with some misgivings.⁴⁹ Rowan Williams, in his consideration of the complex and often confusing relationship between body and soul in Gregory's thought, observes, however, that human spirituality and intellectual activity has no reality for him apart from the materiality, which it animates and with which it interacts. "Whatever Gregory believed, it was *not* that the human subject consisted of a rational core with some embarrassing additions."⁵⁰

Gregory also believed that God is without gender or passion. If, therefore souls were created in God's image, passion cannot be associated with the essential being of the soul, but must be part of our fallen, gendered, animal state. It does, however, have an important and divine purpose in that it enables the soul to be drawn ever closer to God, who is the *erasmion* or

⁴⁷ Sarah Coakley, 'Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa: Introduction, Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of The Song,' *Modern Theology* 18 (2002), 431-3.

⁴⁸ Louth, 'The Body in Western Christianity', 115-16. However, Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 63 argues that Gregory's understanding of resurrection of the body is, however, less satisfactory than Origen's.

⁴⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 295-6.

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion', in Lionel R. Wickham, and Caroline P. Bammel (eds.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993). 227-46. Note, however, that Williams's attempt to defend Gregory from the charge of inconsistency is deemed "not wholly successful" by Anthony Meredith S. J., *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999), 134.

object of desire.⁵¹ This distinctively apophatic spirituality, in which the soul finds its fulfilment in an eternal pilgrimage, is the context for Gregory's most startling observations about gender. This is expressed in an exegesis of the *Song of Songs*, which owes much to Origen and his hermeneutical method, but also goes well beyond this in its 'noetic-erotic' movement towards God.⁵² Here we encounter Gregory's famous gender reversals through which the soul journeys. Gregory imagines that the soul passes through a series of stages. In the first, it is as a bridegroom, a young, virile male, but later becomes the bride, the receptacle and object of God's love.⁵³

The fluidity of gender in Gregory's earlier thought may owe much to the gender ambiguity of his sister Macrina, who, full of manly virtues, is portrayed as overcoming the constraints of her gender. She was, in Gregory's eyes, an example of the human person creating herself, an idea that he touches upon directly in his 'Life of Moses':

Being born, in the sense of constantly experiencing change, does not come about as the result of external initiative, as is the case with the birth of the body, which takes place by chance. Such a birth occurs by choice. We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.⁵⁴

Such a bold constructionist idea should not be divorced from the dynamic of the soul's relationship with God. Thus not only can he use female imagery to talk about each member of the Trinity, but even to describe the 'fatherhood' of God in such terms. Gregory's transgendering is, however, primarily symbolic and should not be taken too literally. Coakley,

⁵¹ Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited', 241.

⁵² Martin Laird, 'Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the Homilies on the Song of Songs', *Modern Theology* 18, no.4 (2002), 507-25. Laird suggests that 'Gregory, like, like Origen sees all the Solomon's books contributing to the desire to love God, the pedagogy of the Song of Songs focuses, unlike Origen, on exposing desire to the apophatic.'

⁵³ Verna E. F. Harrison, 'Gender, Generation and Virginitly in Cappadocian Theology,' *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series 47, part 1 (1996), 38-68, 59-61.

⁵⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Book ii, 3, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55-6.

building on Harrison's work, develops this argument in a fascinating comparison with the gender talk of Judith Butler, "the high priestess of feminism." She seeks to show that in both Gregory's and Butler's gender theories the binaries that remain culturally normative are not actually obliterated, but creatively transformed. For Butler, this means subversive acts of 'performativity', for Gregory, however, it is directed towards his eschatological goal of ascetic-erotic journey to the divine. Thus Gregory's gender fluidity or 'reversals' also may be interpreted as 'performances' of gender.⁵⁵ But Michael Nausner, in response to Coakley's argument, suggests that Gregory's destabilising of gender goes well beyond the symbolic, and reflects the way in which Gregory himself renders gender slippery, especially in respect of his relationship with his sister Macrina, in which she appears at times to take a masculine role and he a feminine one. Both, he suggests, "seem to be drawn into a similar kind of unstable movement back and forth between gender roles."⁵⁶ In responding to Gregory's commentary on the *Song of Songs* in just the way advocated by Young, Nausner is able to conclude,

To the extent that Gregory has succeeded in drawing us into his world, we may need to live with the awareness that our gendered identities after all are not created norms but malleable roles to be continuously and playfully enacted again and again.⁵⁷

The rejection of Origenist tradition – Jerome and Augustine and their legacy

Origen's teaching exercised a profound influence on the young Jerome. Like Origen, he welcomed women into his circle and accepted that they could be his intellectual equals. He also shared Origen's understanding of the body, and its sexual character as essentially ephemeral. Born near Aquileia around 342, he went east, learned Greek and became a pupil of Gregory Nazienzen, the close friend of Gregory of Nyssa's older brother, Basil of Caesarea. But around 393 Origen was accused of heresy and Jerome decided to change

⁵⁵ Sarah Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God', *Modern Theology* 16: (2000), 61-73.

⁵⁶ Michael Nausner, 'Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of his Transformative Eschatology', *Theology and Sexuality* 16 (2002), 55-65 at 61.

⁵⁷ Nausner, 'Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries,' 65.

sides. With all the zeal of a convert, he now emphasized the significance of permanent, even eternal sexual differences; and thus, as Brown observes, he came to see that Origen's views were deeply at odds with the (misogynist) prejudices of his Latin readers, prejudices he now shared.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Clark argues that this was the defining moment in the constructionist versus essentialist debate that had dominated the first four Christian centuries.⁵⁹ It was Tertullian's more rigorously essentialist position and not Origen's rather more subtle constructionist-imbued stance that would prevail.

Augustine emphasised a similar view to Jerome in which resurrection, as Bynum summarises it, "is restoration both of bodily material, and of bodily wholeness or integrity, with incorruption ... added on."⁶⁰ In his stress upon the soul's yearning for the body, he insisted that the flesh was an essential aspect of personhood. Augustine worried about almost every conceivable aspect of the resurrection body in extraordinary detail, including its weight, height and the possibility of the retention of physical impediments and injuries. He even decided that people would rise 'aged' about thirty. He foresaw an eternal future in which not only sexual differences but even rank would remain.⁶¹

The medieval church embraced Augustine's vision with surprisingly little dissent, for the most part turning its back on Paul's imagery of the seed, and opting not for what Bynum describes as the philosophical coherence suggested by Origen, but for the "oxymoron of incorruptible matter."⁶²

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 366-86. See also Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 86-94.

⁵⁹ Clark, 'Brown's Body and Society', 436.

⁶⁰ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 95.

⁶¹ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 97-104.

⁶² Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 112. Bynum also examines in great detail the theological debate about the resurrection of the body in the twelfth and thirteenth century but concludes (341):

The promise of bodily resurrection – the promise, that is, that the very stuff of change and putrefaction can be lifted to impassibility and immutability while continuing itself – remained an oxymoron through all the centuries of the Middle Ages. Neither mystics such as Mechtild nor poets such as Dante, for all their genius, could solve the contradiction, not even by lifting it into the paradox of satisfied but insatiable desire.

The one truly significant challenge to this in the Middle Ages came from Thomas Aquinas, whose thought was influenced not by Plato but by Aristotle. He did not believe that the soul stands apart of the body or that humans are just souls, housed within a body (he roundly rejected Origen's idea of the pre-existent soul),⁶³ but he taught that the soul may contain the body and that the nature of the body is carried by the soul and can be expressed in any matter that the soul activates. As Bynum again summarises, "body will be the expression of soul in matter"⁶⁴ As both Bynum and Pasnau explain, the resurrection body may thus be constituted by God out of matter other than which it possessed in this life.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Aquinas held onto the idea that significant differences, observable in the earthly body must also feature as aspects of the resurrection body, including, size, shape and gender. He even believed that the resurrection body must manifest the age at which the self is most fully manifested, perhaps thirty as Augustine proposed, but more likely, thirty-three.⁶⁶

The abiding fear of Gnosticism

Since then, stress both on the incorruptibility of the carefully reconstituted resurrection body, and also on the unity of 'soul' and body has continued to ensure that any dualistic, gnostic denial of the goodness of matter has been kept at bay. In both western Protestant and Catholic theologies, this, with the abiding emphasis on the necessity of reassembling all the parts of the body, even including those that may have lost their primary function, has also long formed the essential ethical rationale for rejecting any attempt to mutilate the body; though in the late twentieth century and into the twenty first, the desire to refute gnosticism seems to have also taken on a new and distinctly green hue, in the form of a rediscovery of the ancient Jewish idea of the essential goodness of creation. Contemporary restatements of the significance of a bodily resurrection have also, however, tended to moved away, by and

⁶³ See for example, Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae 1a 75-89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116-17 and 391.

⁶⁴ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 259.

⁶⁵ Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 393: '[Aquinas's] theory of personal identity requires only qualitative sameness of body, not numerical sameness.'

⁶⁶ Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 265.

large from the ancient and medieval literalism of precise re-assembly of every fleshly body part, and have rediscovered the Pauline emphasis on the seed motif and on transformation.⁶⁷

It was the argument that the goodness of creation needs to be valued that primarily convinces the House of Bishops of the Church of England in their report published as recently as 2003 that if transsexual people insist that their 'true identities' are different from the body in which they were born, they may be guilty of denying the body and, thus, of falling into the gnostic heresy.⁶⁸ It is not at all clear, however, from my case studies that transsexual people *do* make such a claim. My contention is that their understanding of the self often has, in fact, a strong bodily reference. Far more interesting and significant I suggest is a new and distinctive essentialism expressed by feminist theologians, very different from that rooted in Tertullian and Augustine's thought.⁶⁹ This offers a model in which the old dichotomy between essentialism and constructionism is creatively transcended, and thus the provisional and performative aspects of gender experienced and lived out by transsexual people may be seen to combine with the biological givenness of gender dysphoria.

⁶⁷ See for example, Robert Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002) 67-74. Song stresses that whilst the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is a necessary element in the Christian understanding of the nature of salvation, that body, though possessing a recognisable identity, is no mere reconstitution of flesh and blood. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2nd ed., 2002), 91 makes a similar point:

The risen Jesus is by no means, for any of the New Testament writers, a resuscitated body and no more; yet he relates to his disciples in recognizably bodily ways.

See also Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, especially 604-7 and 679-82.

⁶⁸ House of Bishops, *More Issues in Human Sexuality*, 247 and 249. The report approvingly quotes Song in the context of a contention (which Song himself does not make) that transsexual people fall into the gnostic trap of seeing the self as separate from the body. The report is also strongly influenced by the Evangelical Alliance, whose own study *Transsexuality* makes very clear that the root of their own claims that transsexual people are guilty of gnosticism is based on an argument that transsexual people mistakenly confuse sex with gender, and admit to total plasticity of both, whereas, they contend, the former is unambiguous. Such an argument, however, only has validity if their understanding of sex is accurate. Unfortunately, as they impose an unnecessarily limited definition of sex, it is impossible to concur with such a sweeping conclusion.

⁶⁹ Bryan Turner, 'The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and its Perspectives', in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15-41, argues that women have been denigrated in the western world through a combination of the medico-moral legacy of Galen and Aristotle and Christian creation mythology; it follows that any sociological analysis of the body and spirituality must therefore address the questions of women's bodies, the theology of sexuality, and the structural organization of the sexual division of labour within society. It is only by understanding the cultural presentation of women's bodies in social space that we can ultimately begin to understand the problem of sexuality and spirituality in human societies (*ibid.*, 25)

Feminist understandings of the significance of the body in Christian theology

Feminist theologies typically reject the 'sterility' of oppositional binaries, see gender as a social construct, reject the hegemony of rationalist language as an oppressive masculinist construct, and trust instead women's experience of embodiment. Grace Jantzen articulates this position with particular clarity and passion. Her basic conviction is that human personhood is achieved, often at considerable cost, through the experience of embodiment and does not exist apart from the physical history of an individual. She contends, as I have already noted, that the rejection of the body is already clear in Plato's thought, but is also restated (disastrously) in Augustine's image of God as mind, a mind that pretends to have no sex, yet which is unmistakably male, created (by man) in the image of man. And it is this that nourishes the roots of Cartesian dualism (*cogito ergo sum*).⁷⁰ She thus also rejects the anxious concern to save the soul that typifies much of the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation as, yet again, a masculinist construct, which, with its implicit and sometimes explicit understanding of sin as linked to bodiliness, sexuality, and the feminine is wrong-headed and pernicious.⁷¹ My case studies show that transsexual Christians also construct their understanding of the self around the twin poles of their history and their experience of embodiment. Peter's story is, perhaps, the clearest example of this.

Although feminism is often characterised as emphasising the constructedness of human nature and certainly of gender, its strong foundational stress on the significance of sexual, bodily experience demonstrates that at its best it is also expressive of a new form of essentialism. It shows, for example, that Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine and those who have followed in their footsteps proclaiming that they "looked to the body", have tended, rather, to follow a construct that deifies a very particular concept of thought and language, but denies the reality of (God-given) bodily experience – especially that as perceived by women, and I would want to argue also, by many transsexual people.

⁷⁰ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 31.

⁷¹ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 166.

Feminist theologians, including Elaine Graham, Susan Frank Parsons and Lisa Sowle Cahill, have consequently begun to construct theologies of gender and its relationship to the body that seek to discover a more convincing philosophical coherence, in which essentialism and constructionism are not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather complementary factors in the provisional and often messily ambiguous experience of being human.

Sex and gender in Christian Ethics – Contemporary perspectives

Lisa Sowle Cahill

Lisa Sowle Cahill writing from a Roman Catholic perspective draws on the Thomist tradition to emphasise that the human person is both embodied and social.⁷² She follows her feminist instincts in embracing Judith Butler's understanding of gender, and also regards sex itself as always conceived in some 'version'. She believes that cultural institutions give form to bodily experience, but balances this by insisting, equally strongly, that sex is not infinitely malleable, and stresses that Christian (and humanist) ethicists "may need to acknowledge ambiguity and a certain 'incoherence' in human life as embodied".⁷³ Like Jantzen, she trusts the common bodily experience of women as sexual beings, bound especially by the distinctive experience of reproduction.⁷⁴ To this extent, she defends the idea of the binary separation of male and female for reproductive purposes, but qualifies this by stating that such sexual dimorphism is a quite inadequate ground for the establishment of social roles.⁷⁵

For Cahill, the key ethical question, to which she constantly returns, is one of "how to socialise the body ... in ways which enlarge our social capacities for compassion towards

⁷² Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50.

To retrieve Aquinas as a source for a feminist and historically sensitive approach to sex and gender requires a readiness to develop in a more complete and egalitarian mode his inductive epistemology and his vision of the human person as embodied and social.

⁷³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 97.

⁷⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 87. She concludes, Women's sexual and, more so, reproductive experiences have not only set them apart from men, but have bound them together historically. Why are we so willing to deconstruct them now?

⁷⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 80-2.

others and solidarity in the common good.”⁷⁶ In this, she calls for a return to such moral values as commitment, honesty, fidelity, friendship, family, sense of community and intellectual achievement.⁷⁷

While she believes that those who “bear physical traits associated with both female and male reproduction” are, strictly speaking, ‘atypical’, their lives demonstrate the importance, for her, of “disallowing identity, personality and social roles to be so formed around sex and gender that persons whose sex is physiologically anomalous have little opportunity for self-respect, social acceptance, and social contribution.”⁷⁸

Whilst transsexual people would not seek to be separated from the social distinctions of sex and gender, they would certainly welcome the opportunity to be more completely included in society, in the way Cahill hopes, for in this lies, as I argued in the previous chapter, one important aspect of healing.

Elaine Graham

Like Cahill, Elaine Graham is concerned to escape from the ‘entrenched polarizations’ that divide essentialism and constructionism, and in so doing also draws support from the work of Judith Butler.⁷⁹ Unlike Cahill, however, who seeks to cling at least in part to the essentialism bound up in a belief in ‘Natural Law’, Graham rejects any such constraint. In her theology of gender she adopts the post-modern contention that even any definition of nature is always also a human construct. This leads her to the conclusion that neither sex nor gender can be truly bi-polar, even according to biological criteria.⁸⁰ This also accords, of course, with the experience of transsexual people.

⁷⁶ Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 164.

⁷⁷ Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 17.

⁷⁸ Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*, 283, note 11.

⁷⁹ Elaine L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender Personhood and Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 187-91. See also [Graham,] ‘Gender, Personhood and Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 (1995), 341-58.

⁸⁰ Graham, *Making the Difference*, 214-16.

Although she believes that gendered expression is neither an ontological state, nor an intrinsic property of individuals, she recognises that it remains enormously significant in as far as it is an unavoidable part of human cultural expression, albeit one that may be informed by accounts of human bodiliness. She calls, therefore, for a theology that does justice to gender as a “complex, dynamic and self-reflexive phenomenon”, a theology that is prepared to engage with pluralism and complexity. This can only be done, she insists, from that ‘vantage point’ of bodily experience, which itself cannot help but lend diversity and provisionality to gendered accounts.⁸¹

This does not mean, however, that gender can be just set aside or ignored. Graham hopes for a critical openness, justice and acceptance in our gendered relationships, even a kind of gender blindness, but certainly not for a vague androgyny that denies the proper complexity of the human person. Indeed she contends that androgyny, through its idea that the sexed body is a kind of prison, is in fact a latter form of gnosticism. She argues that together with culturally specific gendered ideas of masculinity and femininity, androgyny also represents a constructionist denial of sexuality, embodiment and physiology.⁸²

Graham believes that a self-critical gender theory shows that human nature is not essential but existential,⁸³ and that human personhood is provisional. Gender reflects the significance of human relations and it is only in relationship with one another, in community, that we become authentically human.⁸⁴ It is in within such relationships, in praxis, that ‘truth’ and ‘values’ are perceived and God becomes present. This, she insists, is the only proper response to the ‘impasse’ of post-modernity.⁸⁵ And it here, perhaps, that she comes closest to

⁸¹ Graham, *Making the Difference*, 221-6. Interestingly, Graham cites here the ‘testimonies of transsexuals’ as an indication of ‘how fundamentally society and individual self-image is built upon gender polarity.’ From this it suggests that she believes that transsexuality is primarily a socially constructed phenomenon, which, if society were to accept a broader, more complex understanding of human personhood, would not, or need not exist.

⁸² Graham, *Making the Difference*, 20-2. For a vivid and sympathetic illustration of the life of androgynes or ‘in-betweenies’ see Claudia Andrei, *Transgender Underground: London and the Third Sex* (London, Glitterbooks, 2002).

⁸³ Graham, *Making the Difference*, 222-3.

⁸⁴ Graham, *Making the Difference*, 224.

⁸⁵ Graham, ‘Gender, Personhood and Theology’, 358.

endorsing Cahill's call to uphold those values that give expression to solidarity in the common good.

Susan Frank Parsons

Parsons begins by emphasising the massive, all-embracing significance of gender in defining who we are in relation to other people. She calls for theologians to 'think with gender' and to allow the 'hermeneutic of suspicion', which is for her a definition of gender, to expose the cultural formations of theology, and so to purify them of 'idolatry'.⁸⁶ Thinking with gender also, inevitably, she argues, challenges the assumptions we commonly make about biological definitions of sex. Gender cannot be seen as based upon essential biological givens, rather it appears that it is our (highly questionable) investment in the binary separation of gender that governs our interpretation of biological information about ourselves. Gender as a self-critical hermeneutic of suspicion does not therefore seek to emphasise the notion of sex and gender as a construction over any essentialist understanding, but troubles and disturbs both points of view.⁸⁷

Parsons' concern is to explore the interface of ethics and gender. In this, her basic contention is that ethics is 'a discourse concerning good', a 'textual field' and a 'deliberative practice.' She then sketches three characteristic kinds of feminist ethics, in each of which, she detects an ambivalent relationship to the modern humanism to which each is indebted, but of which each is also deeply critical. The first, an *ethic of equality*, assumes a secular form of a one-nature theological anthropology, in which differences of gender are but temporary and pragmatic. This ethic is challenged by the Church's stubborn re-enforcement of sexism and by the question of women's difference, vulnerable to Irigaray's wry question, "*Égales à qui?*"⁸⁸ The second, an *ethic of difference* suggests that any idea of a common humanity is an abstraction, and the differences between men and women are essential. It is a bi-polar vision

⁸⁶ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1-6.

⁸⁷ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 19-21. Parsons draws here on the thought of Thomas Laqueur and Michel Foucault.

⁸⁸ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 26-31. Parsons identifies the key Biblical text 'for an ethic in which gender difference is not to make any difference' as Galatians 3:28. See also, however, my discussion of this verse above, 151-3.

that calls for a social order in which differences are allowed to flourish in a balanced and complementary way. This ethic is, of course, clearly vulnerable to the contentions Parsons has already made about the nature of sex and gender; nevertheless it exercises some appeal in its promise to bring caring 'feminine' values to a world brutalised by oppression and violence.⁸⁹ The third is an *ethic of liberation*, which, in contrast holds to a largely constructionist view of human nature and is concerned for the reconstruction of gender beyond the inheritance of dualism, and beyond the constraints of history, language and culture. Whilst the problem for this ethic is that it is not at all clear what may lie beyond gender dualism, it nevertheless draws strength from its trust in the liberating God who acts in history on the side of the poor and the marginalised.⁹⁰

After further exploring other troubled areas at the interface of modernity and post-modernity, she goes on to examine the work of three feminists, striking examples of thinking with gender, in which there is shown a deep awareness of these issues: the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, Elaine Graham and Lisa Sowle Cahill. She places Graham "within the broad stream of liberation theologians, who have emphasized that theology is a most fundamentally a reflective practice",⁹¹ and identifies the 'problematic' of gender in her thinking as a failure to be sufficiently reflexive and so to risk sliding into the mistaken extremes of essentialism or constructionism. But Parsons warns that Graham's claim that it is within the praxis of human agency that God becomes present, also risks a dangerously reductive and limited understanding of transcendence. Hence, she says, a "trembling humanity [is brought] to the working-out of its own salvation in fear of a disempowering."⁹² With some slight misgivings, Parsons approves of Cahill's attempt to hold the Christian tradition (or a particular version of it) together with the gendered experience of embodiment,⁹³ but cannot accept her concept of nature "as a kind of biological continuum which underlies all things."⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 31-6.

⁹⁰ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 36-41.

⁹¹ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 120.

⁹² Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 124.

⁹³ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 124-30.

⁹⁴ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 128. Parsons holds that Cahill's claim that her understanding of nature is faithful to the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition is also questionable:

The nihilism of postmodernity, which already knows that the foundations are not real, speaks itself into this projection of the natural, which thereby reveals the speaker

Parsons' own view, yet again influenced by Judith Butler, is deeply bound in a relational understanding of the self, which seems to differ substantively from Graham's position only in that she finds hope in an almost mystic vision of human fulfilment in the love of God, in which she uses language which echoes that used so many centuries earlier by Origen and especially Gregory of Nyssa. Thus she concludes:

Waiting upon truth in which is love conceived requires that thinking with gender is always to be prayer, attentive to the culture in which its words are formed and its grammar shaped, listening to the heartbeat that keeps the economy of human relationships anguish and vibrant, experiencing the world's anguish and its consolations, and asking, always at the threshold, how it is that the breath of love, that very breath which must inform an ethics in Christ, may come to matter here, or all else is noise and clanging. Such prayer is preliminary to the coming of God even as it bears witness of God's already having come. So our thinking here too is preliminary, reaching out for what has already come among us, making ready for what is here, and in that preparation is the readiness of the soul for a conceiving of the love of God.⁹⁵

As a vivid example of gendered talk, such language also illustrates an intriguing aspect of feminist theology evident in each of the writings of Parsons, Graham and Cahill. It is, as Parsons puts it, a concern to bring caring 'feminine' values to a world brutalised by oppression and violence. All three writers, and Jantzen too, yearn for the exercising of those values that help to build up relationships between people and which effect healing.⁹⁶ It seems

rather than the spoken about, and in that sense is not what was happening in Aristotle or Thomas.

⁹⁵ Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 187. A little earlier for (example 166-7) she declares: The virtue of hope is also that assurance with which I may abandon myself to the grace of this coming future, in which the breaking open of the psychic life of power begins in my taking hold of a future possibility for life given from ahead of me in God, and the ending of the law of subjection happens as I think that I am the one whose requirement to persist as myself, *kata sarka* as Paul expressed it, matters less in me than the person I am to become in God. These are elements in the revealing of hope, in the living of life *kata pneuma*, which a Christian ethics of gender may perform.

⁹⁶ Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, 271. For example, A person transcends her body, not because there is a 'part' of that which is not bodily (and which could perhaps survive bodily death), but because more things can rightly

that although feminist theologians rightly point out the cultural roots of gender, and rightly argue too that such views influence and help to form even our apparently empirically testable models of biological sex, nevertheless a woman's experience of trusting her bodily experience, leads her to believe that there are essential human values and dispositions that are characteristically, if not exclusively female. Graham, for example, while stressing the cultural basis our understanding of ourselves as bodies also admits that "it may be that there is a definitive difference between inhabiting a male body and a female one."⁹⁷ I suggest that a strikingly similar process (whether or not gender identity has a neurological foundation), also and almost paradoxically, informs the transsexual person's sense of gender identity as, again, Peter's story illustrates. It is, I feel, a strength of the feminist position and not a weakness, that it is thus possible to hold, through a hermeneutic of suspicion, both to a constructionist understanding of gender and to a significant extent of sex too, and yet also to hold open the possibility of some essential foundation of sex and gender as well, without compromising a proper acknowledgement of and engagement with pluralism and complexity.

The rediscovery of Origen and Gregory

The appeal of Origen and Gregory's subtle understanding of human nature and embodiment to those who adopt a typically feminist position, and to those many more who find such an approach illuminating and helpful is largely because it expresses a broadly constructionist view of gender theory, in contrast to the rigidly essentialist tradition of Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine. Maybe also, it is even that the elusive, slippery and often somewhat confused nature of Gregory's thought appears congruent with the post-modern agenda. As in feminism, as also in the transsexual experience, Origen and Gregory's constructionism is ambiguous and qualified. It leaves open other possibilities. It engages the emotions and the imagination. It offers a hopeful and constructive way forward to those who struggle with the proper ambiguities, diversities and provisionality of gender. For example,

be said of her than are reducible to statements about her physical composition. To have the capacity for transcendence does not entail having the capacity, now or in the future, to become disembodied, but rather to be embodied in loving, thoughtful and creative ways.

⁹⁷ Graham, 'Gender, Personhood and Theology', 356.

We need to learn from Gregory's gender inconsistencies. Discourse creates worlds. 5/c ?
The discourse of sexuality enables people of all sorts to discover through their physical passion a transformed and empowered love for God with no gender exclusivities. And that relationship can then shape relationships on earth as well as in heaven, enabling a transformation which is no mere sublimation, but a remarkable integration of the whole (often gender inconsistent) person.⁹⁸

Sarah Coakley argues that another reason for the awakening of interest in Gregory is that it corresponds with a resurgent interest in trinitarian theology.⁹⁹ The significance of Trinitarian theology in the context of the understanding of human embodiment and sexual identity is emphasised by Graham and Parsons and a number of others,¹⁰⁰ but it finds particularly rich and helpful expression in the work of Rowan Williams.

Rowan Williams - knowing yourself as significant

William's argument is most clearly found in his short essay *The Body's Grace*.¹⁰¹ He borrows

⁹⁸ Young, 'Sexuality and Devotion', 96.

⁹⁹ Coakley, 'Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa', 43. Coakley explains, 'The trinitarian persons are neither prototypes of Enlightenment 'individualism', nor examples of a 'personalism' that somehow precedes and transcends 'substance' (a false distinction). Rather, the most important point of contact between Gregory's human psychology and his trinitarianism ... lies in the notion of the unity of the will ... just as in Gregory's doctrine of the human, psychology takes its fundamental shape from a concern for the integrity of the will in its action.'

¹⁰⁰ For example, Graham, *Making the Difference*, 223:

The decisive impact of gender as a form of social relations is suggestive of a model of human nature as profoundly relational, requiring the agency of culture to bring our personhood fully into being. This resounds with other perspectives that emphasize such an identity as thoroughly compatible with a Trinitarian model of God.

Parsons, *The Ethics of Gender*, 103, cites Sally McFague's understanding of the world as the body of God and the Trinitarian nature of God as Mother, Lover and Friend. Marilyn McCord Adams reflects on the 'models of Godly love' in the writings of Richard St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx. Richard has a vision of the Holy Spirit as the intimate sighing of two lovers the Father and the Son, breathed into the lives of the saints (Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Trinitarian Friendship: Same-Gender Models of Godly Love in Richard of St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx', in Eugene Rogers Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 322-40). Rogers himself seeks to address the question of the human body to the trinitarian life of God in Eugene Rogers Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

¹⁰¹ Rowan D. Williams, 'The Body's Grace', in Rogers, 309-21. In his introduction to William's essay, which was originally given as the tenth Michael Harding Memorial Address in 1989,

the title 'the body's grace' from a novel by Paul Scott. There, it refers to a sexual encounter in which a woman discovers that her love-making lacks love, yet may nevertheless be a cause of happiness to herself and to another. Williams, as he reflects on this, comments that, "grace for the Christian depends on knowing yourself as significant, as wanted." He continues,

The whole story of creation, incarnation and incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity.¹⁰²

Central to Williams's argument is the conviction that

I cannot make sense of myself without others, can't speak until I've listened, can't love myself without being the object of love or enjoy myself without being the cause of joy.¹⁰³

Such a statement whilst being congruent with post-modern contentions that the body is a means of being for others, brings it into the trinitarian theological mainstream.

The converse of this conviction is that our identity is formed through our bodily-relations and not by the exercise of a proud, independent will. "We belong with and to each other, not to our 'private' selves."¹⁰⁴ This, clearly, not only has profound implications for our understanding of sexual fantasy and perversion in general terms, but also, more specifically, has considerable bearing on the argument that transsexual people are indulging in a self-absorbed denial of reality located in the 'otherness' of the material world. I suggest that my case studies show that transsexual people do not pursue a fantasy vision of self to the point of denying both their

Rogers considers this to be 'The best 10 pages written about sexuality in the twentieth century' (309).

¹⁰² Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 311-12.

¹⁰³ Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 316.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 317. See also the quotation at the head of this chapter.

bodily experience and their identity as bound up and even belonging to the story of others, but that their discovery of 'true' selfhood arrived at through both through a proper attentiveness to their bodies and also by their experience of being in the world in relationship with other people.

In his book, 'Lost Icons', Williams develops further his thinking about the nature of the self and its relationship to embodiment.¹⁰⁵ He emphasises the importance of seeing human personhood as *produced*, through the contingencies of biology, psychology and by the passage of time, as a story that is always being re-told and can never be complete;¹⁰⁶ and in which, crucially, human conversation also demands *recognition* – the capacity of others to talk with me and to recognise me.¹⁰⁷ He insists that it is a fundamental error to believe that there is a 'buried self' whose needs can be met once they have been brought to light.¹⁰⁸ He also warns that if our bodies are the means by which, in a culture, we may be recognisable to one another, the disappearance of a *common* sense of sex may produce not a paradise in which erotic liberty may thrive, but a society that becomes ever more obsessively anxious about sex. In other words, if the body no longer carries a shared social meaning, and if 'my body means what I choose it to mean,' the consequence is the destruction of sexual trust.¹⁰⁹ This presents a clear challenge to the transsexual person, especially if we accept Williams's understanding of the significance of recognition.¹¹⁰ We need to ask if transsexual people are less or more recognisable as a result of the process of gender reassignment. Does such treatment enable them to engage more fully, more openly in conversation to be more or less

¹⁰⁵ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000).

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 103. Williams's earlier thoughts on the significance of recognition may be found in *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1982).

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 151.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 167.

¹¹⁰ Such a challenge to the transsexual person ('now a familiar feature of the middle-class scene.') is delivered succinctly by Bryan S. Turner, 'The Body in Western Society', 33. He comments that the self in modernity is conceptualised as a project to be made, constructed, and endlessly refashioned through the life cycle ... Like the reflexive self, the modern body can be refashioned by face-lifts, by breast augmentation, by diet and jogging, and for women, if necessary, by regular weight-lifting. For some, the self is the body. These developments represent a definite reversal of the traditional Christian pattern in which the flesh was subordinated in the interests of the soul.

answerable to the perceptions of others; or might the withholding of treatment reduce their ability to be more fully human in the ways which Williams describes? The evidence that describes the outcome of gender reassignment according to very similar criteria clearly shows that as a result of the treatment they receive, transsexual people do indeed find a fuller sense of humanity and take up an active and responsible place in society.

Concluding remarks

Cahill in her concern to ask how the body may be socialised for the common good, Graham in her insistence that, in considering the body, theologians must engage with pluralism and complexity, and in her call for reflective practice in the churches in a spirit of openness and dialogue, Parsons in her advocacy of gender as a hermeneutic of suspicion, and her relational understanding of the self linked to a vision of human fulfilment in the love of God, and above all Williams through his insights into the significance of recognition and of knowing oneself as significant, all in the context of a profoundly trinitarian understanding of God, together offer a constructive and highly imaginative way of uniting the concerns of the ancient divide represented by Origen and Gregory on the one side and by Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine on the other.

Even though gender and to a significant extent, sex itself are human constructs, and despite the fact that, as Coakley observes, our bodies “are as elusive as they are ubiquitous” and “curiously hard to get our hands around”,¹¹¹ there is here both a proper recognition of the biological givenness of bodies and also of the many subtle, complex and diverse ways in which through our human experience of embodiment the created and the coming into creation intertwine to give meaning and hope. In our discussion of transsexuality there is in all this both a profound challenge and yet also the hope for the grounds of a sustainable Christian ethical justification of gender reassignment. To this, I now turn.

¹¹¹ Coakley, ‘The Eschatological Body’, 62.

Chapter 7 –Christian Theology and Transsexuality

Introduction

In this final chapter I begin by summarising and reviewing the main issues dealt with in the study so far. I then look at a number of other Christian theological and ethical responses to transsexuality, before finally and by way of conclusion, I consider four questions: Why are transsexual people a problem? Does gender reassignment represent the pursuit of a fantasy or healing? How do we know ourselves as significant? And, how does transsexual experience affect what the church should say about sex and gender?

The Character of transsexuality

In the first part of this study I explored the phenomenon of transsexuality. I began in Chapter One with an examination of the character of transsexuality. I showed that although there has been much debate about the aetiology of transsexuality in recent years, the vast majority of those who work with and seek to provide medical help to transsexual people are no longer divided into two distinct camps, one seeking to demonstrate and to address a psychological cause, and the other committed to looking for and dealing with a physiological one. There are several reasons for this. It is now quite clear that the 'condition' is stubbornly resistant to any psychological attempt to alter it. It looks increasingly likely is that it is triggered by genetic and/or especially, neurological factors, but that these are always lived out in a world in which gender, and to an often surprising extent sex too, is always and inescapably humanly constructed and interpreted.

Gender identity is normally established at very early age, possibly even by birth (the neurological evidence certainly indicates that this is so), and does not then seem to change, but the way in which it impacts upon an individual is strongly influenced by cultural norms, and is contingent upon the infinitely variable process of socialisation. Thus transsexuality was recognised and realised only when medical technology and social needs and conditions

converged to allow it to do so, and similarly, the subsequent rapid increase in the number of people who identify as transsexual only came about because the possibility of diagnosis and treatment became both more widely available and also, relatively speaking, culturally acceptable.

As a psychological 'cure' does not seem to be possible, the only real option for treatment is to alter the body, through medical (hormonal) and surgical means to bring it into line with gender identity. By this, the medical community, including in the United Kingdom the National Health Service, validates transsexuality as a medical condition. Psychology does, however, have a significant part to play in arriving at a correct diagnosis, and especially in enabling transsexual people to cope with the process of transition and, often also a highly troubled past. In the vast majority of cases treatment, though sometimes traumatic, proves highly successful.

In as far as there is a transsexual career path, it is marked at the outset by a profound, and permanent sense of dis-ease with one's seeming sexual phenotype.¹ Normally this is clear in early childhood, but is rarely expressed. Instead, it is often submerged under guilt, confusion and embarrassment. The onset of puberty may then bring new traumas and be further disorientating. In the majority of cases, transsexual people do not seek treatment until adulthood, often waiting until they can no longer sustain the gender role that corresponds to their seeming physical phenotype. Physical or mental illness, even attempts at suicide, may precede an acceptance that gender reassignment is necessary, and the same tragic outcome may still then result if treatment is not readily available.

Transsexuality is not linked essentially to sexuality (in the narrow sense of sexual orientation that I have used throughout this study). Indeed, the evidence of slight changes in sexual orientation experienced by some transsexual people after hormone treatment and surgery

¹ I deliberately qualify the identification of phenotypes here though the received wisdom, even among transsexual people themselves, is to describe transsexuality as a conflict or incongruity between one's psychological and anatomical sex (see, for example, Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate, The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading: South Street, 2000), 66). If, however, the causes of transsexuality are shown too include genetic and neurological factors, it may be found to be wiser and more accurate to regard those who present symptoms of gender dysphoria as having ambiguous, inter-sex characteristics.

raises the intriguing possibility that gender identity may be even more deeply embedded within the human psyche than is sexuality.

It appears that whilst, in the majority of cases, the dividing line between transvestism and transsexuality is clear and obvious, in some instances it may be blurred. For this reason, as the small number of people who express strong regrets after treatment shows, the need for careful but compassionate diagnosis is paramount. It also appears that there are some people whose sense of gender identity is troubled, who may be properly identified as being gender dysphoric, but who cannot easily be categorised as either transvestite or transsexual. They are caught 'in the middle', which for some may be a place of liberation and fulfilment, but for many others, a source of abiding confusion, guilt and frustration.²

The roots of transsexuality

In Chapter Two I sought to show, by means of a very broad-brush survey of instances of gender crossing and gender ambiguities in history and archaeology, the danger of interpreting other cultures' norms and assumptions about sex and gender by those that prevail in western civilisation today. There are very many instances of cross-dressing and of cross-gender roles, but they do not necessarily (and in most cases certainly do not) provide evidence of gender dysphoria as we recognise it now. Gender dysphoria is not a stable, objective condition, but is always contingent upon the nature and understanding of gender embodied by every different society and group.

For much of western history, sex has been thought not to exist in two distinct bi-polar forms, but to be a single state in which, typically, maleness has represented perfection and femaleness imperfection. For that reason, male 'virtues' and male gendered behaviour in predominantly patriarchal societies could be, and were, presented as universally desirable. Thus it is hardly surprising to discover female saints who yearned to be male and who cross-

² See for example, Christie Elan-Cane's story in Tracie O'Keefe, *Sex Gender and Sexuality: 21st Century Transformations*, ed. Katrina Fox (London, Extraordinary People Press, 1999), 118-22.

dressed as a kind of spiritual discipline. Conversely, to be seen to aspire to femininity and to feminine values would be regarded as unusually and inexplicably perverse. Women cross-dressed to escape the narrow restrictions of their gender roles; men might only do so in order to gain improper access to women, or worse, to carry on illicit homosexual practices.

In societies in which maleness was regarded as a quality to aspire to, to protect and to defend, it is again, hardly surprising that gender boundaries were sometimes carefully, even jealously guarded, as the Deuteronomic Code and Levitical laws show. Only the rich and powerful, those who were so far above the law that they could take risks not open to others, could easily transgress those boundaries with impunity. Thus Roman emperors shared with French royalty the luxury afforded only to the most privileged few of occasionally actually dressing and behaving as women; but even this may not be real evidence of gender dysphoria.

The need to relax boundaries temporarily certainly allowed many people to indulge in transgendered behaviour, but the primary function of such interludes was as a safety valve to reinforce and uphold those boundaries, not to give expression to any whose sense of gender identity was disturbed. It was an opportunity to burlesque and to cock a snook at the status quo in order to ensure its preservation.

In many societies, gender roles seem to have been more socially significant than sex differences. Thus, to satisfy society's needs, genetic sex has not always determined gender role, and some societies have evolved with three or more genders. Here again, it is important to stress that 'two spirits', for example, existed in many native American societies, not necessarily because there were large numbers of gender dysphoric people within them, but because societies evolved which functioned better with a greater diversity of gender roles than those which typify western industrialised societies.

In Europe and North America the emergence of gender dysphoria into public visibility in the nineteenth century, especially amongst biological males, and its status as a 'problem', came

hand in hand with a new and extreme polarisation of sex and of gender roles, triggered largely by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and contemporary with the emergence of the modern orthodoxy of heterosexuality.³ Theories of universal bisexuality, as propounded by Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld, and the problems for medicine raised by the existence of inter-sexed people and hermaphrodites failed to succeed the discredited traditional understanding of sex that had been, until then, largely unchallenged since the days of Galen. Sex and gender was now widely accepted as being bi-polar, and with that, the distress of being caught on the wrong side of the divide became all the more acute. Transsexuality emerged at a time when it was, perhaps, more socially acceptable to 'change' sex than to challenge its strict dimorphic boundaries, but that possibility also opened the door to a hidden minority, the root of whose private agonies had never before been recognised. The story of transsexuality is about 'changing sex', in the sense that it helps to show that human perceptions of sex are not stable, but it is also my contention that even within this state of flux, transsexuality is potentially a universal aspect of human experience and not just a twentieth century construct.

Transsexual experience

Because transsexuality can never be seen as just a medical problem, but one which also reflects the cultural norms and assumptions of the society in which it emerges, I turned in Chapter Three to examine the experience of transsexual people in Britain today in their diversity, contingency and complexity. The medical pioneers who first offered the hope of treatment to transsexual people were subjects of the culture in which they lived, and brought its assumptions to their understanding of the nature of the condition and to the outcomes of treatment that they thought possible and desirable. Inevitably, the same or very similar expectations coloured legal judgments about the proper place and status of transsexual people, and helped to define how transsexual people have been represented in the media. Although, broadly speaking, the churches also followed this cultural lead, in their treatment of

³ This idea is proposed, for example, by Randolph Trumbach, 'Sex and the Gender Revolution', in Jeffrey Weeks, Janet Holland and Matthew Waites, *Sexualities and Society: A Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 14-21.

and attitude to transsexual people they have seldom departed from anything but a relatively tentative and cautious approach, often reflecting distinctly conservative influences and failing, in particular, to understand that transsexuality and homosexuality are not related essentially. Transsexual people have thus tended to do battle with lawyers and politicians, to protest about the unsympathetic way in which they and their concerns have been treated by the press, and to dismiss the churches as either uncaring or self-obsessed, sometimes downright hostile, and only rarely to experience them as loving and accepting.

At the conclusion of this survey of transsexual experience, I identified four key issues that lend themselves to further exploration and reflection in the light of the Christian tradition.

1) *The nature of human identity and self-hood*

Transsexual people do not, by and large, claim a 'true' identity different from the body in which they were born, but struggle with a confused identity produced by bodies that send out conflicting messages. How then do they best resolve this dilemma?

2) *The nature and purpose of human sexual identity*

I have shown that gender identity is hugely influenced by social, cultural factors. To a very large extent it is a human construct, but it is also related to sexual identity, and this as gender dysphoric people bear witness, is also strongly rooted in our psychological and biological make-up. Sexual identity helps to make possible the vital function of human procreation, but it is very much more than that. Does the experience of transsexual people shed light on the complex balance between those constructed and essential factors that together contribute to our sexual identity?

3) *Does sex/gender reassignment represent healing or fantasy?*

The root of this problem may seem to lie in the conflict caused by the lack of an agreed, single, clear aetiology of transsexuality. There are certainly forms of mental illness that may result in some, usually temporary, degree of gender dysphoric behaviour including Borderline Personality Disorders and Dissociative Identity Disorder.⁴ One purpose of the psychiatric screening of those who request gender reassignment is to try to ensure that such cases are recognised and to provide appropriate treatments, and in most instances this is done successfully,⁵ but gender dysphoria itself does not appear to be a mental illness and transsexuals cannot be 'cured' by psychological intervention. What then is the nature of the choice, if any, that faces transsexual people? Only those very few who do not exhibit typical symptoms of gender dysphoria, yet demand gender reassignment might be properly accused of pursuing a fantasy. Neither Turner's accusation that transsexuality is a middle class project,⁶ nor Birchill's claim that it is a product of the 'male menopause'⁷ are supported by the evidence of the vast majority of transsexual identities and transsexual lives.

Evidence of healing is clear in the restoration of physical and mental well-being and in a person's new-found ability to build honest and open relationships with other people – and with God. But it is not won easily, and requires the good-will and commitment not only of transsexual people, but also those who share and shape their lives.

4) *Should the church seek to oppose or to fight for the rights of transsexual people?*

If this understanding of healing is correct, it is clear that the church should take a lead in enabling transsexual people to be accepted, respected and supported, in a way that has certainly not always been the case in the past. The shrill, often conservative evangelical,

⁴ See for example, Gianna E. Israel, and Donald E. Tarver II, *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 24-32.

⁵ The issues associated this have been well addressed by Russell Reid, *Minerfields and Pitfalls in Gender Identity Disorder, for both Patient and Doctor* (unpublished paper).

⁶ See above, 49, note 20.

⁷ See above, 66, note 57.

cry that transsexual people are deluded fantasists, sinfully denying the reality of their God-given bodily identities ought not to disable others from thinking and acting differently. Sadly, it sometimes seems that the fear of schism is so great that it is deemed expedient to leave transsexual people out in the cold. Is this the proper price for unity?

The Bible, Hermeneutics and Transsexuality

In the second part of the study I began an exploration of what the Christian tradition might have to say about transsexuality. In keeping with the feminist/liberation theology principles which I outlined at the very beginning of the study, I began this investigation with the experiences of those most clearly affected by transsexuality – transsexual people themselves and drew, in particular, up the seven case studies.

In Chapter Four I began with the Bible. I showed that the use transsexual and transgendered Christians make of the Bible is characterised by the degree of cognitive dissonance experienced between each person's awareness of their gender dysphoria and their faith tradition. In particular, I noted that transsexual people from a literalist conservative background often tend to move towards hermeneutical stances that allow a much greater degree of critical openness, and that enable them to cope with a higher degree of ambiguity and complexity. This can sometimes be a traumatic process as, for example, Peter discovered.

I then examined a number of Biblical texts that have or may be used to construct a theological response to transsexuality. This exercise showed that although scholarship reveals no consensus about transsexuality (and indeed rarely comments on it at all), it does raise some important issues about the context of transsexuality and especially about the nature of the body and of community. The résumé of scholarly also, however, further illustrated the aridity both of trading 'proof' texts and also of a similar potential for 'crippling positivism' by scholarly biblical criticism. This fails to resolve the hermeneutical dilemma faced by transgendered Christians. I suggested that one possible way out of this impasse is the adoption of what

Stephen Barton calls 'creative fidelity', a willingness to struggle with the Bible's witness to the triune life of God in the context of the fellowship of the church. In as far as the struggle of transgendered people to make sense of their experience in the light of biblical tradition, together with a consideration of how those texts that have something to say to transsexuality have been variously interpreted, may be thought to be such an exercise in creative fidelity, the following points can be made:

- 1) The Bible does not answer our questions but asks its questions of us.
- 2) The givenness of sex and gender *is* part of the economy of creation, but
- 3) the Bible's concern in these texts do not appear to be so much with sex and gender per se, but with the nature and significance of human relationships within the faith community, with society more widely, and with God.
- 4) This concern stands in judgment on any excessive liberalism that suggests that individual will and freedom takes precedence over the common good.

Ordinary theology and transsexuality

I began chapter 5 by again giving attention to the experiences of transgendered people and argued that the case studies provided a vivid illustration of 'ordinary theology.' According to Jeff Astley, ordinary theology, unlike academic theology (from which it differs in degree rather than kind), is formed by ordinary people in response to real grounded experience. It is very much to do with spirituality and with personal faith in that it is often a profound expression of people's deepest values. It is tentative, unofficial and implicit and inevitably first-hand, but also characteristically religious, meaningful, salvific and 'kneeling' or 'celebratory'. All this is evident in the accounts of faith in the case studies.

The case studies suggest that transsexual and transgendered Christians tend to hold a distinctive understanding of God, of the church and of the significance of the body. In common with other marginalised sexual minorities, they perceive God as loving and accepting, but in parallel with their changing understanding of the Bible, they also develop a

bigger, more complex and multi-layered, concept of God, often 'piling up' apparently contradictory concepts, images and metaphors. This is illustrated, for example, by Susie's belief that God is 'ungendered and all-gendered'. As I have already noted, in stark contrast with their beliefs about God, they do not experience the church as universally accepting of them or comprehending of their condition, but there are exceptions to this, and where the assurance of God's love and acceptance is mediated by the church, real healing is possible. This is clearly more far-reaching than the resolution of a physical and psychological medical problem. It may involve re-acceptance of the individual into society (though as chapter 3 showed, this has not always been smooth or easy) and for the transsexual Christian a new and even salvific experience of God's acceptance, if salvation is understood as a restoration of one's life in Christ.

Beliefs about the body and the self appear to be a particularly distinctive aspect of transgendered, and especially transsexual theology. This may take the form, as in Peter's case, of finding healing in the process of gender reassignment, seen not as a denial of the body, but as an acceptance of it. If transsexuals may be accused of heresy, Turner's charge that they are *too* concerned with the body is perhaps more plausible than the Evangelical Alliance's claim that they despise or reject the physical creation.⁸ Both extremes, however, in most instances fall well wide of the truth, as the complexity of the beliefs of transgendered people about the ultimate significance of gender also bears witness. After a lifetime of anxiety and struggle, some transgendered people are inclined to agree with non-heterosexual Christians that God is genderless, and that ultimately, in the resurrection life, they will be also. It is hardly surprising that those who have experienced such great difficulty in understanding and coming to terms with their gendered identity often hold a deep-seated desire for

⁸ Bryan S. Turner, 'The Body in Western Society', 33. Also Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality* (London: Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission, 2000), 65-6. See however Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 31-52. Here O'Donovan explains in great care and detail, the basis of this understanding of creation in which morality is based upon a complex network of 'generic' and 'teleological' relations. Thus 'Man's monarchy over nature can be healthy only if he recognizes it as something itself given in the nature of things, and therefore limited by the nature of things' (52).

deliverance from the confusion of their struggle, though others, including, for example Bernadette, who has a wholly positive experience of the effects of gender reassignment, hold a very different view of the eternal significance of gender.

I also noted in this chapter that the ways in which transsexual women hold faith appears to have very strong affinity with that shown by 'biological women'.

Gendered identity and the body in the Christian tradition

The contrasting views of the ultimate significance of gender, touched upon in Chapter Five, take centre stage in the first part of Chapter Six in the discussion of the very different theologies of the body and of the resurrection of the body evident from the early Christian centuries, as advocated by Irenaeus and Tertullian on the one hand, and by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the other. Even in the pages of the New Testament itself there is evidence of much confusion and no few contradictions, and the integrity of the two positions that developed later was rarely, if ever, absolute. Broadly speaking, however, the first (and earlier) pair follow an essentialist tradition rooted in the Hebraic/biblical inheritance, albeit tinged with Stoic metaphysics; the latter duo reveal a more constructionist tendency that may be traced back to Plato and his followers, and which, to a large extent, also characterised the typical Roman medical view of human sexuality. This included the startling but immensely damaging and profoundly misogynist thought that females were failed males. The essentialist tradition could be equally misogynist, however, as is typified by Tertullian's understanding of women as the daughters of sinful Eve.

It is, perhaps, in their views about sex and gender that the distinction between these two theological traditions is most evident. Although sexual drives were a matter of some shame to Tertullian, and needed strict control, he believed that the sexed body was an essential aspect not only of earthly creation but also of the resurrection life, although it was certainly hard to imagine what the function of the genitals might be in that state of bliss. Not only individual sex difference would abide, but also social divisions, including, presumably, gender roles would

continue too. Origen and Gregory on the other hand, believed that sex and gender were contingent, provisional signs of humanity's fallen state. They were never part of God's original plan, and certainly not blessed with eternal significance. God's true will was for his creatures to live in undifferentiated unity. Thus Origen anticipated the life to come in the most bizarre way by arranging his own castration, and Gregory delighted in the symbolic language of gender transformation, not only in the context of his relationship with his sister Macrina, but especially in his imagined journey of the soul towards God, and even in his vision of God as trinity. But no charge of Gnosticism could easily be sustained against either Origen or Gregory. Origen did not believe that the body was evil and Gregory thought that even sex was not altogether bad. Both took the materiality of creation very seriously indeed, yet were painfully aware that it was fallen.

Neither position is complete and adequate. Tertullian and then Augustine's insistence on the unity of soul and body, even in resurrection, may have proven a powerful counterblast to any dualistic Gnostic claim that creation was transitory and evil, but as Bynum insists, it also embodies considerable philosophical incoherence, and fails to do justice to the full force of Paul's teaching on the nature of the resurrection. Origen and Gregory's position, for all that it too is sometimes vague, often inconsistent and certainly too heavily dependent upon concepts, which like the notion of double creation now seem strange and quaint, does take seriously the reality of the constructedness of gender, its instability and contingency.

In fact, it is not the case that one tradition is nearer the truth than the other, but that aspects of both are needed to help make better sense of the human self and its place in God's plan. Although both traditions lack rigour and consistency, together they help to shed light on the proper complexity of the many different factors that constitute human personhood, a complexity and ambiguity to which the Bible also bears witness. The reality is that although one side of the argument held sway for long, it represents only one perspective on the truth, and notwithstanding the contribution of Aquinas, who nudged the pendulum a little way back towards the positions held by Origen and Gregory, it is hugely important to recover those other parts of the Christian tradition that help to broaden our perspectives and perhaps even

make us, as Paul would insist, rather more tentative, open and less foolish than has often been the case.

It is then, one of the most enlightening aspects of contemporary feminist theology that it is indeed able to draw in a disciplined way from both side of the debate as it seeks to shed light on the significance of the self, the body, sex, gender and sexuality. It offers a coherent and sustainable way forward in which bodily experience is the starting point, but it also pays proper attention to the reality of cultural influences in the formation of our language and our core assumptions and concepts.⁹ It shows that it is simply not true to say that sex is an essential given and that gender is constructed upon that, yet it remains the case that even 'feminine' values may well have an essential component, and sex is itself in part at least a humanly constructed concept.

Another consequence of the renewed interest of Origen and Gregory has been a recognition of the contribution they make to trinitarian theology and its relationship to the human self as something produced and incomplete, something which needs to find meaning in and through the act of recognition, but which only achieves healing and wholeness in the experience of loving and of being loved.

This synthesis forms not only the basis on which a Christian ethic of sex and gender can be built, but is also the proper locus for a consideration of the particular issues presented by transsexuality and the experience of transsexual people. Before, however, I finally turn to consider these, and to suggest in turn how transsexual experience may affect what the church should say about sex and gender, it seems wise to cast an eye over the issues presented by earlier attempts to hold transsexuality up to the light of Christian theology and ethics.

⁹ Contrast, however, the critique made by Bryan Turner of feminism more generally. Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2nd ed., 1996), 28: 'The irony of much feminist critique of philosophy is that in identifying the body as a crucial topic of contemporary thought they deny the facticity and givenness of the body as a consequence of their deconstructivist approach'.

Christian theological and ethical responses to transsexuality

Oliver O' Donovan: Transsexualism and Christian Marriage

I touched upon the church's response to transsexuality in Chapter Three, where I noted that O'Donovan set the parameters of the subsequent debate about transsexuality in the British churches through his 1982 booklet *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*.¹⁰ He uses Lord Justice Ormrod's (somewhat idiosyncratic) legal definition of sex expressed in *Corbett v Corbett* to support his contention that transsexual people have not actually changed sex, and questions the "appropriateness of surgery to bring a healthy body into conformity with the demands of a psychological disorder."¹¹ He takes a particularly gloomy view of the outcome of reassignment, and of its medical and psychological side effects. He insists that transsexual people must not be confused with those who present inter-sex characteristics, and he accused transsexual people of glorying in the "dimorphic opposition"¹² of human sexuality. Having made clear his view that gender reassignment fails to respect 'biological integrity', he bases his theological objections to transsexuality on a strict, essentialist and dimorphic understanding of human personhood, made clear, he believes, by the Book of Genesis.

Human beings come into existence with a dimorphically differentiated sexuality, clearly ordered at the biological level towards heterosexual union as the human mode of procreation.¹³

He clinches his argument with reference to 1 Corinthians 6:18 and the idea of a "sin against one's own body." Transsexual people by failing to accept the gift of their true sexuality are guilty of 'fornication'.¹⁴

¹⁰ See above, 119-20.

¹¹ O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 3.

¹² O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 10. He draws here on an unlikely source – the 'lesbian-feminist' position of Janice Raymond.

¹³ O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 6.

¹⁴ O'Donovan, *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, 16.

This clear and uncompromising view has since proven hugely influential, especially amongst conservative evangelical groups. However, it fails to convince. The familiar argument that transsexuality is a form of delusion, a psychological illness, is dismissed by the vast majority of those who work with people suffering with gender dysphoria.¹⁵ As with Bryan Turner's sweeping generalisation about transsexuality as a middle class project, O'Donovan's ideas fail to reflect the reality of transsexual lives illustrated in the course of this study.¹⁶

His appeal to the Bible to support his position also fails through the simple error of forcing the texts he cites to fit his pre-formed assumptions and convictions. As my discussion of Genesis 1:27 and 1 Corinthians 6:18 show, where I examine O'Donovan's reading of these texts in greater detail, other readings are not only possible but carry more conviction.

Conservative evangelical responses: The Evangelical Alliance and The Church Institute

The Evangelical Alliance follow the gist of O'Donovan's argument, but neither develop nor qualify it substantially. Their basic assumption is that unless and until a physiological cause for transsexuality can be established, the status quo¹⁷ of a psychological cause remains 'true' and that this, together with and supported by a reading of Genesis 1:27, which "emphasises the basic and clear distinction between men and women",¹⁸ indicates that transsexuality is "an admission of defeat, and a totally negative approach."¹⁹

¹⁵ See for example, Bernard Rattigan, 'Mysteries of Human Gender', *The Tablet*, 7 February 2004. Rattigan is a psychotherapist working in an NHS gender identity clinic. In this letter he insists, 'My clinical experience of conducting many assessments of gender dysphoric patients, who then go on to hormonal and surgical intervention, is that they are not in a delusional state.' He also flatly rejects the idea that a dimorphic differentiation of male and female in humans is sustainable – it is simply not supported by the evidence of the people he treats.

¹⁶ In contrast with O'Donovan's published views on transsexuality, his views later about homosexuality show a rather different tone and approach. He comments,

If there is anything more disconcerting than the hesitation and uncertainty with which theologians propose their answers on this subject, it is the dogmatic certainty with which they frame their questions. Here it seems, science and statistics allow us a security that neither faith nor personal experience can sustain!

(Oliver O'Donovan, 'Homosexuality in the Church: Can there be a Fruitful Theological Debate?', in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (London: SCM, 2nd ed., 2003), 20-36 at 25).

¹⁷ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 52.

¹⁸ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 48. They continue,

[This passage] does not teach as some allege, that maleness and femaleness are two poles between which is a spectrum or ambiguous blend of human sexuality. This

In his introduction to the report, Joel Edwards, the General Director of the Evangelical Alliance states that it is “no anti-transsexual polemic”, and that it “recognises the genuine convictions of transsexuals and attempts to handle this complex subject with sensitivity.”²⁰ In this it fails. Whilst with one hand it encourages evangelical congregations to “welcome and accept transsexual people”, with the other it hopes that the same transsexual people will “accede to the need to reorient their lifestyle in accordance with biblical principles and orthodox church teaching”, in other words to “readopt their birth sex identity.”²¹ In practice, as too many transsexual people have discovered, this means that evangelical congregations neither welcome nor accept them, but are quick to judge, to condemn and to exclude. However sincere Edwards may have been in wishing to treat transsexual people with sensitivity, by in effect, stigmatising them as either mentally ill or sinners, the effect of this report has been to drive a huge wedge between many evangelical transsexual people and the churches in which they were nurtured, and to send out powerful signals to the wider transsexual community that the church rejects and condemns them.²²

Although it attempts to give at least the impression of balance and openness, and calls for more medical research into the aetiology of transsexuality, this report is most unsatisfactory.²³

at least suggests that the individual who claims ontologically to be a ‘woman trapped in a man’s body’ (or vice versa) is fundamentally mistaken given the biblical assertion of the priority of the physical.

¹⁹ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 54.

²⁰ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, Foreword, x.

²¹ Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 85-6.

²² The report claims, ‘from a Christian perspective, transsexuality may be considered to be an expression of an extreme form of personal alienation and disunity’ (Evangelical Alliance, *Transsexuality*, 80). In contrast with this, the sadness of Peter’s story is stark:

If I sat down in church, there was a row in front of me and a row behind me – all these seats empty. It was just horrendous. So going to church was the most traumatic experience.

Prisca suffered similar rejection.

²³ The report contains numerous instances of distortion and even of error. For example, in relation alone to the chapter entitled ‘Medical Considerations Relating to Transsexuality’ (14-28):

(i) (19 and 22) It dismisses the research by Zhou et al. by stating that ‘the differences found in these brains may have been caused by hormonal medications’ to conclude that ‘any evidence of a pre-existing difference in brain structure or functioning in transsexuals is lacking’. In fact, J.-N. Zhou, M. A. Hofman, L. J. Gooren, and D. F. Swaab, ‘A Sex Difference in the Human Brain and its Relation to Transsexuality’, *Nature* 387, vol. 6552 (1995), 1 explicitly state that ‘The size of the BSTc was not influenced by sex hormones in adulthood.’ (This has also now been corroborated by Frank P. M. Kruiver Jiang-Ning Zhou, Chris W. Pool, Michel A. Hofman, Louis J. G. Gooren, and Dick F. Swaab, ‘Male-to-Female

It is to be regretted that it has been read widely and sometimes accorded a respect that it scarcely deserves.²⁴

The Newcastle-based 'Christian Institute' is even more blunt in its adoption of the Evangelical Alliance's argument, stating for example that "the problem is ... psychological: the evidence supports this view overwhelmingly", and that the proper response to transsexualism is "mind over matter" and "repentance and faith in Jesus Christ."²⁵

Other conservative responses, David Horton and Ashley and O'Rourke

Horton's study, is a lighter, more discursive and less rigorous contribution, but has been widely circulated, especially in its original form.²⁶ He addresses both transvestism/cross-

Transsexuals Have Female Neuron Numbers in a Limbic Nucleus', *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, 85, no. 5 (2000), 2034-41).

(ii) (22) The Report states, 'the body of evidence for transsexuality having a *psychological* cause is significantly greater and long-standing in contrast to the *biological* research.' As chapter 1 of this study makes clear, this is untrue and does not represent the mainstream of current medical opinion. See for example, Kevan Wylie, 'Gender Related Disorders', *BMJ* 329 (2004), 615-17.

(iii) (23) The report states, 'Published academic literature that indicates that transsexual people as children have experienced much greater psychological harm than non-transsexuals remains largely undisputed.' And, 'in many cases of extreme gender dysphoria, the father was physically absent during childhood.' There have indeed been many attempts to show that gender dysphoria may have some root in unhappy childhood experiences, but these are indeed now largely ignored partly because other studies did not find any such correspondence and partly because the nature of such case-histories, in any case, has been shown to be unreliable. See for example, Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 271-5, and especially Mary Hogan-Finlay, Nicolas P. Spanos, and Bill Jones, 'Development of Cross-Gender Lifestyle: Comparisons of Cross-Gendered Men with Heterosexual Controls', in Bonnie Bullough Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias (eds.), *Gender Blending* (New York: Prometheus, 1997), 161-73. This study concludes, 'theories that are based on the idea of radical differences in treatment or situation during childhood ... find no support in the present results'.

(iv) (25 and 27-8) The report resorts to mostly 'anecdotal' accounts of people who have 'reverted' to their original gender to claim that 'it is clear there is capacity for reversal, and a number of transsexuals do revert.' Whilst it is certainly true that a very small number of people voice serious regrets after gender reassignment as the result of poor initial diagnosis or of other complicating psychological factors (see above, 62-63 and 231), this is hardly evidence that 'there is capacity for reversal'.

²⁴ For example, the endorsement on the back cover of the report as 'carefully-researched' by Michael Scott-Joynt, Bishop of Winchester.

²⁵ Christian Institute, Briefing: 'Transsexualism – Mind over Matter', February 2002, <http://www.christian.org.uk/html-publications/transsexualism.htm> (8 October 2004). The evidence for these views is largely dependent upon O'Donovan and the Evangelical Alliance. It is possible, but by no means inevitable that some evangelical Christians may be influenced in their 'either-or' approach to transsexuality by a dual-system theological emphasis on categories such as sin and salvation, old and new life, pre and post conversion.

²⁶ David Horton, *Changing Channels: A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual* (Bramcote: Grove, 1994).

dressing and transsexuality and seems to assume that they share a common aetiology (he appears to hold open the possibility of a mix of psychological and physiological factors), and many common features, a difference in degree rather than in kind; but his main concern rests with transvestism and this colours his (brief) discussion of the biblical tradition. He shares with the Evangelical Alliance a concern that transsexual people may be too preoccupied with the self and need to accept responsibility for the consequence of their actions. He accepts O'Donovan's bi-morphic understanding of humanity. His approach seems to be one of cautious acceptance of the transvestite or transsexual person, and he is unwilling to adopt the extreme conclusions suggested by the Evangelical Alliance or Christian Institute.

Benedict Ashley and Kevin O'Rourke provide a succinct summary of a traditional Roman Catholic perspective.²⁷ In cases of sexual ambiguity, like O'Donovan, they allow that a person should be helped to live in the sex in which they are likely to function best, but they do not accept that this applies to 'sexual reassignment' in that, on balance, they are inclined to believe that it is a psychological problem, and that 'most' transsexual people suffer from "serious psychological problems, sometimes subtle and not immediately recognized, other than their gender dysphoria."²⁸ They clinch their argument "from a theological point of view" by insisting that as post-operative transsexual people are unable to procreate, their problems remain in that they cannot either marry or achieve 'sexual normality'. They propose a pastoral response based on restoring "the patient's sense of self-worth". This is achieved it seems, by trying to so distract the person suffering from gender dysphoria, that they recognise that their obsession with sexual identity is grossly exaggerated.²⁹ It hardly needs repeating that such a suggestion makes little sense in the face of the reality of transsexual lives. It must also be said that to limit an understanding of the nature and purpose of sex and sexuality upon procreation is unsatisfactory, but such views formed in the 'natural law' tradition do at least offer the possibility of revision if clear empirical evidence can be found to support a change of perspective. However, any possible admission of a more complex position, including for example the acceptance that transsexuality may have a physical cause, would seem unlikely

²⁷ Benedict M. Ashley and Kevin D. O'Rourke, *Health Care Ethics: A Theological Analysis* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 4th ed., 1994).

²⁸ Ashley and O'Rourke, *Health Care Ethics*, 343.

²⁹ Ashley and O'Rourke, *Health Care Ethics*, 344.

to shift significantly the tradition Roman Catholic emphasis away from the view that the prime purpose of sex is procreation. Presumably the transsexual person would still then remain at the very least exiled from 'sexual normality'.

Critiques of O'Donovan: Rodney Holder, Victoria Kolakowski and Fraser Watts

In a long article, split over two editions of 'Crucible', then the Church of England Board of Social Responsibility's own journal, Rodney Holder concedes that the aetiology of transsexuality is difficult to determine and possibly rests in a complex combination of physiological and psychological factors.³⁰ He reviews the oft-quoted Genesis texts, and emphasises the procreation as the purpose of sexuality, fulfilled in marriage. In general, he signals his broad agreement with O'Donovan's reading of scripture and tradition, and affirms his understanding of humanity as sexually dimorphic, but importantly, he comes to very different conclusions about transsexuality. For example, he argues that O'Donovan is not correct to say that transsexual people devalue their bodies; rather "it is precisely because transsexuals wish their bodies and psyches to be united that they wish to undergo S-R-S."³¹ He concedes that reassignment surgery may be an appropriate treatment, even if the cause of transsexuality is, in part at least, psychological in that it demonstrably allows patients towards wholeness and integration as human beings.³² He agrees that post-operative transsexuals should be allowed to marry, even though procreation is not possible, for much the same reason of finding "personal wholeness and union with a member of the opposite sex"; but puzzles long and comes to no real conclusion over the status of pre-existing marriages – "the most intractable of the problems posed by transsexualism".³³

³⁰ Rodney Holder, 'The Ethics of Transsexualism', Part One, *Crucible*, no. 2 (1998), 89-99, and Part Two, *Crucible*, no. 3 (1993), 125-36.

³¹ Holder, 'The Ethics of Transsexualism', Part Two, 128.

³² Holder, 'The Ethics of Transsexualism', Part One, 96, and Part Two, 129. He argues that if the body is seen, as it must, as a psychosomatic unity, it is reasonable and consistent to endorse treatments that combine psychotherapy, hormonal therapy and surgery.

³³ Rodney Holder, 'The Ethics of Transsexualism', Part Two, 132

Like Holder, Victoria Kolakowski³⁴ accepts that the causes of transsexuality probably lie in a combination of psychological and physiological factors, but notes the trend towards an acceptance of biological theories. She argues that if a physiological/biological element indeed triggers transsexuality, the neat bi-polar, dimorphic opposition of male and female is shown to be false. Transsexuals cannot be thought to cling onto a sexual identity separate from that of their body, and O'Donovan's objections to hormonal and surgical treatment cannot be sustained.³⁵ Even if the root cause of transsexuality is shown to be psychologically or socially founded, Kolakowski argues that as there is no evidence that transsexual people are able to adapt their sense of gender identity to conform to their bodies, the more compassionate response must still be to allow surgical reassignment to take place.³⁶ And even if, according to conservative 'natural law' theologies of human sexuality a post operative transsexual woman is better regarded as a castrated male - a eunuch. Kolakowski argues that that the New Testament makes it clear that eunuchs must be accepted and welcomed into the fellowship of the church.³⁷ She accepts that post-operative transsexual people should be permitted to marry, in that fertility is no longer seen as a prerequisite for marriage. And on the status of existing marriages where one partner has 'changed sex', she argues that, "there is still a strong argument for supporting continuation of the marital covenant. When in doubt, outsiders should not attempt to separate what God has joined."³⁸

Kolakowski rejects the idea implicit in some conservative theologies that insist upon a strict dimorphic understanding of sex that our sexual identity is determined and given by God and that 'God does not make mistakes'.³⁹

Fraser Watts⁴⁰ also sees this as implicit even in O'Donovan's approach and is unhappy with it. It is wrong, he argues, to insist that all aspects of human nature are given, which simply

³⁴ Victoria Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', *Theology and Sexuality* 6 (1997), 1-31.

³⁵ Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 21.

³⁶ Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 22.

³⁷ Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 23-5. For a fuller discussion of the meaning of the word 'eunuch', and the place of eunuchs in the early Christian centuries, see above, 78-80.

³⁸ Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 28.

³⁹ Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 20.

must be accepted. He acknowledges that there is both a givenness and a 'plasticity' in material creation, and although human beings should "show respect the givenness and show restraint and discretion in the way they mould creation", he contends that "most Christians would raise no objection to operations that corrected minor physical deformities", he therefore asks, "so why is transsexualism different?". The real issue is not that we should respect and work with nature as we find it, but that Christians should "carry the [creative purposes of God] forward as best they are able in the ordering of the world."⁴¹ Watts also endorses the observation that transsexual people are concerned about physical sexuality and that they reject a dualist dissociation between that and gender identity.

Watts is harsher in his criticism of the Evangelical Alliance report. He points out, for example, that if human beings are a psychosomatic unity (a view supported not only by modern science but by the biblical tradition) then "there is unlikely to be anything about human beings that is purely psychological. All human conditions seem to have some biological aspects, and it is highly unlikely that transsexualism has none."⁴² He develops this point, arguing that the Evangelical Alliance is 'theologically unsound' to assume that the physical is good, but that the psychological is defective, and points out that if God is the creator of all things, the physical does not have priority over the psychological.⁴³

Anglican Fudge: Some Issues in Human Sexuality

I argued in Chapter Three that the recent report from the Church of England House of Bishops, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, is disappointing and represents a missed opportunity for the church to move the debate forward and to provide a better-informed and

⁴⁰ Fraser Watts, 'Transsexualism and the Church', *Theology and Sexuality* 9 no.1 (2002), 63-85.

⁴¹ Watts, 'Transsexualism and the Church', 75. In an earlier, unpublished draft of this paper, Watts attacks O'Donovan more harshly and suggests that he is 'too willing to regard the natural world as entirely willed by God' – a position that is tantamount to creationism. In the paper as published Watts' views show much closer convergence with the position expounded by O'Donovan in *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, 31-52. See also above, 234, note 8.

⁴² Watts, 'Transsexualism and the Church', 77. Watts also argues (77-8) that the Evangelical Alliance's accusation that transsexualism is gnostic involves a 'very loose use of the term "gnosticism"', and wrongly conflates dualism with gnosticism. He also points out (79) that Genesis 1:27 is 'over-interpreted' in the report: 'The text does not say that there are no exceptions to the distinction between male and female'.

⁴³ Watts, 'Transsexualism and the Church', 80.

more sensitive alternative to the hostile approach of groups like the Evangelical Alliance and the Christian Institute. In the chapter entitled 'Transsexualism' it attempts to summarise the debate, but its attempt to do so is very seriously marred by the way in which it draws uncritically and far too heavily on the Evangelical Alliance report. It adds little to the debate and leaves the reader with a sense that this is almost too difficult an issue to engage with, and one that the church ought to approach only with extreme caution. It asks many questions, but gives little indication about how these might best be answered. The concluding paragraph of the chapter is a typical illustration of the poverty of its argument:

At the heart of the matter is the question of the Christian understanding of what constitutes our God-given identity as human beings. It has traditionally been held that one of the implications of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body is that it shows that our bodies are integral to who we are before God. We are not simply people who inhabit bodies, rather our bodies are part of who we are. If this is the case, what are the theological grounds for saying that, in the case of people with gender dysphoria, their 'true' identity is different from that of the body with which they were born? Can we go down this road without moving to a new form of gnostic dualism in which the body is seen as separate from the self?⁴⁴

As I have already tried to show, and as Kolakowski, Holder and Watts all agree, it is quite wrong to argue that transsexual people claim to merely inhabit bodies. As the witness of transgendered Christian shows, they wish rather to have bodies that more fully and adequately express their understanding of themselves before God. It is that very sense of rupture in the unity in the psychosomatic unity of the self that is the cause of so much of their distress. It follows then that the question of the "theological grounds for saying that, in the case of people with gender dysphoria, their 'true' identity is different from that of the body with which they were born" is nothing but a red herring.

⁴⁴ House of Bishops, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 249.

Special Pleading? Lee Frances Heller and friends, Vanessa Sheridan and Georgina Everingham

The American writer Vanessa Sheridan identifies herself as 'transgendered'. Her book is not a systematic attempt to relate her experience to Christian theology or ethics, but a call for transgendered people to be accepted into the life of the church.⁴⁵ Her main arguments are that gender variance illustrates the diversity of creation (she sees transsexuality as an extreme end of a transgendered spectrum), and hopes that those who are differently gendered may serve as 'sociocultural mirrors' to society "constantly revealing society to itself and boldly challenging our cognitive and emotional awareness of what it means to be male, female or 'other'".⁴⁶ Her main theological conviction is that, "One cannot – and, indeed, should not – be 'delivered' or 'set free' from something that is a God-given, holy and gifted aspect of one's personality."⁴⁷

The several contributors to the anthology published in memory of Lee Frances Heller⁴⁸ take a broadly similar stance, which is both rooted in American culture and also in Evangelical Christianity. It is again, no piece of systematic theology but a long, heart-felt call for acceptance, often a rehearsal of many biblical texts that speak of God's love for all creation, even, by extension, those who are differently gendered. In neither this collection, nor Sheridan's book is there any attempt to look at the aetiology of transgendered and transsexual identity and no engagement with the questions that so exercise those who look in on their condition from the outside. Instead, it begins, over and over again with a plea of 'why has God made me like this?' and through an engagement with Scripture, presents a gradual coming to terms with that state of being. The answer these writers appear to give to the Church of England bishops' question, of 'what constitutes our God-given identity as human beings?' would seem to be a simple, naïve, but often profound sense of being accepted as being loved by God. Whether or not they quite make the jump to see themselves as

⁴⁵ Vanessa Sheridan, *Crossing Over: Liberating the Transgendered Christian* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ Sheridan, *Crossing Over*, 40. She also draws here on the insights of Marjorie Garber.

⁴⁷ Sheridan, *Crossing Over*, 65.

⁴⁸ Julie Ann Johnson (ed.), *By the Grace of God: Lee Frances Heller and Friends: Writings for Families, Friends and Clergy* (Wheaton: Illinois, SSP, 2001).

significant in the profoundly interrelational way described by Williams is rather less certain, but one of the starting points on that road is self-acceptance and acceptance by a number of significant others, as Williams's original illustration of the body's grace suggests.

Georgina Everingham is a retired priest of the Church of England. In a moving account she describes how for over thirty years she "agonised before God over my condition." Like Peter and so many other she sought 'healing', but came to conclude, "God's original purpose for me was that I should be female." Her booklet, however, is not particularly helpful or insightful from a theological point of view.⁴⁹ For example, she states that "it is an essential part of the teaching of the Bible on redemption from sin and its evil consequences that we are separated from this earthly body at physical death" and thus falls into the trap of suggesting that "there must be a distinction between the real self and the body through which we express our inner self."⁵⁰

Conclusions: Christian theology and the experience of transsexual people

Why are transsexual people a problem?

It is very clear that some church groups are deeply and sincerely troubled by the existence of transsexual people. They argue that the transsexual project is sinful, a deliberate, selfish, wilful turning away from God, a reification of a delusionary fantasy, a denial of the goodness of creation and a shallow justification to indulge in other sins, including same-sex relationships, which they see as 'contrary to Scripture.' To them, it is a matter of 'truth' to expose what they see as the real dynamic of transsexuality, and they are vigorous in their attempts to call society back to a simpler, clearer, less muddled understanding of human relationships, and especially to the 'natural law' of a rigid bi-polar, di-morphic understanding of sex and gender. If transsexual people are hurt by their actions and approach, this may be a matter of genuine regret, but faithfulness to the 'truth' leaves no room for compromise. They

⁴⁹ Georgina W. Everingham, *Gender Reassignment and the Bible* (private publication, 2nd ed., 2000) 4.

⁵⁰ Everingham, *Gender Reassignment and the Bible*, 6-7.

are stewards and servants of a jealous God whose 'truth' is revealed unambiguously in Scripture.

But, of course, transsexual people are a problem for many others people who have a very different theological outlook, or no theological outlook at all. When I left the parish of Bedlington and the news emerged that I had 'transitioned', some people there felt hurt and betrayed. Even if they did not like me, did not approve of what I done over the previous ten years, or what they thought I stood for, they had seen me, and related to me as a 'family man', and I had deceived them. I had not been honest with them. I had invalidated my ministry, for what priest can be dishonest? I had broken boundaries that had been taken for granted. My very existence called into question the stability of ordinary life. No wonder they felt angry and hurt. Some of my close friends and family members were shocked and disturbed too.

The disruption of assumed sex and gendered boundaries is no light matter, as the persistently sensationalist press reporting of transsexual people illustrates. It was not for nothing that such rules were so carefully regulated in medieval and ancient societies, and relaxed on rare occasions only under conditions that everyone endorsed. Even the Levitical idea of 'holiness' itself may have been closely bound up, as Mary Douglas has argued, in a concept of completeness or wholeness that required individuals to conform to the class to which they belong and without confusion.⁵¹ Judged by such laws I am (or was) an 'abomination'.

The consequence of the wilful disregarding of commonly-agreed boundaries is chaos, not just a sense of disorientation and lack of trust in all that has been taken for granted, but even more potential for disruption, it alerts others to the possibility that they might change too – in

⁵¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Routledge, 1966), 54. For a more recent and detailed discussion of Douglas see John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (Dallas, Word Books, 1992), 137-47, and especially 144-6. Hartley considers that Douglas' work presents 'the most comprehensive system to account for the vast variety of laws on ritual purity'.

ways they might never have before contemplated.⁵² It really is a case, as the novelist David Lodge put it, of *How Far Can You Go?*⁵³

All this shows that the presence of transsexual people poses a serious challenge to society, even a society that is sufficiently open in the first place, and technically able enough, to remove the lid of the Pandora's box containing the transsexual project. But once opened what can be learned and gained from this situation?

The necessity of the persistence of the exquisite interplay between law and grace reminds the Christian that laws and boundaries cannot be swept away easily or thoughtlessly, but bad laws and inappropriate boundaries must be challenged. If I and other transsexual people have upset some old boundaries, I would hope that it would not be in order to erect new boundaries, but in the hope of a new creation, in which, as Galatians 3:28 suggests, distinctions between people remain (however complex they may be), but their significance is secondary to our being together in Christ. For the Christian, boundaries are not therefore a matter of total relativity, but relate ultimately to the Gospel values of the new creation.

The recognition of proper exceptions may also help to illuminate the deeper truths that form the foundation of so many rules. I would argue that transsexuality is just such an exception, irrespective of its precise aetiology. It does not, for example, of itself, threaten the conservative Christian understanding of marriage between one man and one woman, but instead asks what the church, and the society in which the church exists, properly understands as 'man' and 'woman'.⁵⁴ And as a cautionary tale, transsexuality alerts us also to take seriously the fact that creation is far from simple, but complex and diverse. This is a challenge to theology as well as to law. As Elaine Graham insists, we need a theology that does justice to gender as a 'complex, dynamic and self-reflexive phenomenon', a theology

⁵² I am grateful to a transsexual woman (not one of the people who interviewed) for this insight, which had been brought to her attention by her psychiatrist. The transsexual woman had been sacked and the psychiatrist was helping her to explore the disruptive dynamics posed by the need to adjust to a newly transitioned transsexual person in the work place.

⁵³ David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

⁵⁴ This according to Kolakowski is the 'fundamental issue at stake with transsexuality'. Victoria Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 21.

that is prepared to engage with pluralism and complexity.⁵⁵ Nothing illustrates the complex nature of that phenomenon more clearly than transsexuality.

Gender reassignment: fantasy or healing?

Because sex and gender is complex and diverse, we should not be surprised that transsexual people are far from being a neat, homogenous group. It is therefore imperative that if the Church speaks about transsexual people, it should take care to avoid talking about them in sweeping generalisations. Transsexual people can be selfish, devious and obsessive. Some cling to highly inappropriate gender stereotypes. Some are downright unpleasant. Some will be burdened by psychological problems so deep that it is far from easy for anyone to discern the real reasons for their request for gender reassignment. Some are clearly unhappy and maladjusted in a male role, but are no more at ease when they try to live as females, and vice versa. Psychiatrists and others who treat people with gender dysphoria make mistakes. Some people 'slip through the net' (in both directions). It is inevitable that some people seek gender reassignment for all the reasons that the Evangelical Alliance suspects; some are in pursuit of a fleeting fantasy self, and some will end up disappointed, disillusioned and regretful.

The overwhelming majority of transsexual people however, though they possess as many character flaws as the rest of the population, experience transition and gender reassignment as a release and as a whole new lease of life, as stories as diverse as Peter's and Bernadette's so vividly show. While it is perfectly proper to ask hard questions about the (admittedly very few) cases that go wrong, the evidence is that almost all transsexual people are, in every meaningful sense of the word, healed through the process of gender reassignment.

The theological argument as to whether or not gender reassignment represents healing or the pursuit of a delusional fantasy has revolved almost entirely around the debate about the

⁵⁵ See above, 216, note 81.

aetiology of transsexuality.⁵⁶ Those who think it is fantasy insist it has a psychological cause; those who believe it is healing look harder for signs of a physiological disorder. But, as those who actually treat transsexual people argue, such a complex phenomenon as gender dysphoria cannot be so neatly or conveniently reduced. Even if unambiguous biological causes are finally proven to lie at the roots of the condition, it has to be lived out and expressed in lives that are always shaped by cultural and environmental factors. Equally, even if were proven to be a purely psychological condition, it still remains recalcitrant to psychiatric treatment. 'Psychological' does not mean 'can be changed'.

This means that we have to deal with real lives, and one of the realities is that people with gender dysphoria face is that it seems that their condition will not go away. Whatever the truth about its cause, it leads more or less slowly but surely to a point from which no one can recover. Rowan Williams warns of the danger of believing that one has a buried self whose needs can be met once they have been brought to light,⁵⁷ but for those with gender dysphoria the dynamic is very different. It often takes the form of a damaging retreat into oneself, an inability to relate to other people and thus a block to becoming one's true self in and through the dynamic of those relationships.

I just shoved my whole self down... the more you shoved it all down, the more depressed you got.

Peter

The possibility of real choice and freedom is gradually diminished. Far from being an indulgent and selfish fantasy, or 'life-style choice' of thinking that one's body can mean what one chooses it to mean, the reality is a struggle against depression, guilt and despair. Healing begins, when like Peter, one begins to listen to and to accept one's body and to believe that

⁵⁶ It may be that the desire among some conservative thinkers to establish the aetiology of transsexuality is linked to a theological concern to establish causality and ultimate origins, as for example, in the doctrine of the Fall. This would suggest an interest in healing as salvation; but paradoxically, the concentration on a specific question of medical aetiology which so concerns conservative groups, actually serves only to promote a limited understanding of a limited, medical-therapeutic understanding of healing and not of a fuller societal and even salvific sense that I believe is articulated by the subjects of the case-studies.

⁵⁷ See above, 223, note 108.

by addressing the conflict within it, some kind of wholeness can be achieved. But real healing and completeness is not possible until one is able to become more fully oneself in relationship to others. As Bernadette says:

It was all done, could only have been done, "With a lot of help from my friends."⁵⁸

As Watts points out, gender reassignment is valid if it can be shown to be consistent with God's creative purposes, and if William's understanding of the self is correct, the proof of the fulfilment of those purposes is made evident in lives like Peter's or Bernadette's. This is evidence too, as Robert Song calls for, of a 'sign of the Kingdom'. The argument for gender reassignment is not just that compassion demands it⁵⁹, but that it can indeed be, and more often than not is a therapeutic intervention against disease and bodily disorder, which does not attempt to transcend the created order, but to restore and fulfil it.⁶⁰

Knowing yourself as significant?

Rowan Williams' belief that "grace for the Christian depends on knowing yourself as significant, as wanted"⁶¹ has profound implications for the transsexual person and for the community of which she is part. It demands honesty and sensitivity on both her side and that of the community, if she is to be enabled to become more fully herself, as her story is more ever deeply entwined with those of others.

It is also in this context of community that thorny issues about the marriage of transsexual people and about the status of existing marriages are best resolved. In as far as Christian marriage is a contact between one 'man' and one 'woman', it is only in the context of a loving and accepting community that such a relationship finds its deepest fulfilment and purpose, a purpose which is appropriately expressed in the act of procreation but is not necessarily

⁵⁸ Bernadette Rogers, *With a Little Help from my Friends* (private publication, 2004), 140.

⁵⁹ This position is defended for example by Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 22.

⁶⁰ Robert Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 68.

⁶¹ See above, 222, note 103.

diminished without it. The close relationship of an evolving Anglican theology of marriage to the changing cultural expectations around it is shown very clearly, for example, in the changes of emphasis seen in the preface to the marriage service from the Book of Common Prayer in the sixteenth century, to the Rites authorised in Common Worship at the start of the twenty first, away from the 'prime end' of the procreation of children, towards the expression of mutual care and love, within the wider community. The granting of permission to marry to transsexual women and men serves only to enhance the possibility of the process of them becoming their true selves in such a loving, outward-looking, relationship. The question of the status of existing marriages, which is such a concern to Holder, is also best addressed in this light. As Kolakowski argues, "when in doubt, outsiders should not attempt to separate what God has joined."⁶² More positively and importantly, however, as Williams points out, Paul's understanding of the distinctively Christian meaning of sex is shown "in relations of promise and constancy that allow us the freedom to be vulnerable."⁶³ The continuation of a marriage through the agonies and uncertainties of gender dysphoria is surely a powerful witness to core Christian values of commitment and hope – and in its fullest sense to love too.

As the process of knowing yourself as significant must take place in community, it must be there too that Bernadette's wish to find a way of relating faith, experience and tradition finds the possibility of greatest realisation. This study bears witness to the vitality of engagement by transgendered and transsexual Christians with the Christian tradition. It is a good example of 'ordinary theology', but as such, risks being undervalued and even ignored by a church that fails to respect all but the kind of theology forged in the limited context of academia. If the church is to become more truly itself and to discover its own significance, it too needs to listen before it dares to speak. It too needs, in this way, to commit itself to its most vulnerable members in hope and expectation. This too is the only kind of community in which 'creative fidelity' to the biblical tradition can take place effectively.⁶⁴

⁶² Kolakowski, 'Towards a Christian Ethical Response to Transsexual Persons', 28.

⁶³ Rowan Williams, 'Forbidden Fruit: New Testament Sexual Ethics', in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Intimate Affairs: Sexuality and Spirituality in Perspective* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 21-31, 29-30.

⁶⁴ The experience of Liberation Theology, in which the very idea 'creative fidelity' has its origin, has also, of course, much to contribute to this debate. See especially Christopher Rowland, and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to*

The church needs to accept and learn from its transsexual members just as much as they need to be accepted by the church and to learn from it. One of the unexpected outcomes of the church listening and taking the experience not only of transsexual people seriously but that of other marginalised groups, is that it may discover a process by which it is enabled to listen more effectively to *all* its members, and together to the triune God, a process of adult learning more effective than any syllabus or special initiative, which gives it the means, by becoming more truly itself to change and grow in the challenging world of the twenty first century.

How does transsexual experience affect what the church should say about sex and gender?

Transsexual experience, like feminism, offers the church, above all else, a hermeneutic of suspicion. It enables it to ask questions that might otherwise never have been imagined. It helps to shed light on the nature of the self, the significance of being embodied, and above all, on the nature and significance of sex and gender. As I have already indicated, it invites us to explore anew the nature of the boundaries that society constructs and religion then blesses. It alerts us to the interplay of nature and nurture.

One product of this hermeneutic of suspicion in the course of this study has been, for me, the rediscovery of something of the complexity of the understandings of gendered bodily identity in the early Christian tradition, and of the danger of narrowly adopting either an essentialist theology or one that is constructionist. Indeed, the very roots of both theological traditions are far more pluralistic than first meets the eye. As a result of my encounters with other transsexual people, I want to affirm as Elaine Graham does, the provisionality of human personhood, and the prime importance of becoming human, of becoming a 'man' or a 'woman' in the context of community. I also want to affirm the feminist imperative of taking seriously the experience of being embodied, and to see the world from that vantage point.

Biblical Studies (London: SPCK, 1990). The problem for the British context lies in discovering any kind of community in which this may take place, although Rowland and Corner insist that this must be possible.

For all these reasons, like Graham, I am suspicious of the position that advocates androgyny as the expression of an ideal state. Nor am I convinced that merely a greater relaxation of the boundaries between the genders will signal the end of the transsexual imperative, for that would indeed open the wrong-headed and ultimately unsatisfying possibility of 'allowing my body to mean what I choose it to mean'.

I recognise that there are people who, in the complexity of sexual variance, do not readily conform to one (part constructed, part essential) pole or another. It is important not to pressure them to conform to one sexual identity just to satisfy our cultural anxieties. Similarly, there are also those people who, like Jenny-Anne, experience gender dysphoria, but whose well-being is not always well served by pushing them to one side of the divide or another, though to live 'in the middle' certainly can put an immense strain on the relationships they form with those around them. It can be a long, painful and sometimes impossible task to help them find a liveable resolution, and the British National Health Service seems often to have neither the resources nor the inclination to walk with them and support them appropriately. Surely the churches could help to fill this small but agonising gap?

The often hidden existence of large transvestites/cross-dressers presents somewhat different issues. Transvestism clearly often involves a significant element of fantasy, and the shallow arguments of Virginia Prince that male to female transvestism encourages a proper expression of a man's 'feminine side' are, just as clearly, far from satisfactory and have the potential to cause much offence. On the other hand, the existence of transvestism should sound alarm bells about some of the gendered boundaries that society constructs, and the churches should listen as acutely to those as should anyone else concerned about enabling people to find their sense of self in engagement with others. In many ways, transvestism is potentially no more harmful than, for example, a passion for fishing, but the danger of any excessively obsessive behaviour is that it may turn in on itself, and by so doing eats away at the self and destroys it. It is certainly important therefore to bring out into the open and to address the problems of guilt, confusion and anxiety that often accompany cross-dressing, and to begin see it as a poignant illustration of the proper tragi-comedy that is human

sexuality. In this way, the attention sought by and given to high-profile transvestites like the comedian Eddie Izzard and the potter and 2003 'Turner Prize' winner, Grayson Perry, can only be regarded as good.

In all this, it is again clear to me that the churches need to be far more cautious than they have often seemed to be when talking about sex and gender. There is indeed a real need for a theology that is prepared to engage with pluralism and complexity, and not one that is simply too scared to offend those whose beliefs that sex, gender and sexuality are simple matters and who thereby seek to bless inappropriate and often damaging social models.

It may well be that with further research the roots of transsexuality are shown, beyond any reasonable doubt, to have a strong and intractable biological component. It may be then that gender reassignment becomes widely accepted as a medical condition, still traumatic and disruptive, but treatable. Such a medicalisation of the condition would then permit the Evangelical Alliance and other like-minded groups to change their position relatively easily, and to preserve largely intact their understanding of creation, the self, sex, gender and sexuality. The churches would gladly marry transsexual people. They might even find it much easier to accept and support transsexual clergy. But if all this comes to pass and the Church has still not learned to listen before speaking, especially to those who are suffering, or to admit that its views and assumptions are shaped just as much by the cultures of which it is part as anyone else's views are, it will be a tragedy. It will have failed to become what God yearns for it to be.

Appendix 1

Case Studies: methodology and context¹

The questions (in appendix 2, below) were intended to give a common framework to the interviews that formed the case studies, but they are best seen as a starting point for conversation. They were not intended to prescribe the exact form and content of each conversation, although in practice, they were put, more or less in full, to each participant. The questions were devised after about eighteenth month's preliminary study, and before I had had sustained conversation on the topics with other transsexual or transgendered people. I originally hoped to interview at least twelve people, but this was to prove impossible for the simple reason that there are not many transsexual or even transgendered Christians who are readily identifiable and fewer still who are willing to reflect and to talk at length about their experiences and their faith. Without the help of the Sibyls, a non-denominational Christian spirituality group for transgendered people, and the friendly support of their honorary chaplain, I very much doubt that I would have found more than one or two interviewees. An eighth person originally agreed to be interviewed, but then withdrew her consent.

From the start it was clear that the content of the interviews would act to illustrate and inform the thesis as case studies, but in no sense could be thought to provide any kind of quantitative evidence. In addition to the seven case studies I held many informal conversations with around another two dozen transsexual and transgendered Christians, mostly in 2003 and 2004. These helped greatly to inform, refine and correct my understanding of transsexual experience and of the attempts of transsexual and transgendered Christians to relate that experience to their faith.

Both Susie and Jenny provided me with written reflections before we met and Bernadette later sent me a copy of her autobiography.

¹ For a fuller explanation of the place of the case studies in the context of the overall aims of the study, see above, 13-15.

Most interviews lasted between one and two hours, though that with Prisca was considerably longer. I taped each conversation and did not attempt to take notes simultaneously. I then made a full, though confidential, transcription of each, with the exception of my conversation with Prisca, which was far too long to transcribe in full. I sent copies of the transcriptions back to most of the interviewees to enable any factual errors to be corrected. As the transcriptions contained a great deal of sensitive information and were also quite lengthy, each up to 10,000 words (with Prisca's in full at least twice that), I decided that it would not be appropriate to append them to the study.

I have changed the names of two subjects of the case studies, 'Ruth' and 'Prisca' to preserve their anonymity.

The first interview was Susie. It took place in a café in the precinct of Manchester Piccadilly Railway Station on 15 November 2002.

The second interview was with Bernadette in her home near Daventry later that month.

The third interview was with Ruth, in my house in Northumberland in January 2003.

The fourth interview was with Phyllis, in her home in North Wales in April 2003.

The fifth interview was with Jenny-Anne in a conference house in Derbyshire in May 2003.

The sixth interview was with Prisca, in my house, on 1 July 2003.

The seventh and final interview was with Peter in a restaurant attached to a large store on the outskirts of Warrington on 7 July 2003.

Appendix 2

Interview outline

1 *Brief biographic outline*

Date of birth

Assigned gender at birth

Please tell me the outline of your story – of how you became aware of your gender dysphoria, and what that has meant for you in terms of the things you've done and the decisions you've made.

2 *Faith story*

Please tell me the story of your faith

3 *Faith and gender dysphoria in dialogue*

Please tell me the ways in which your faith has helped you to accept your gender dysphoria or not.

Have you had any particular experiences or insights that have helped or encouraged you?

Have you had any particular experiences or insights that have hurt or discouraged you?

Has your experience of gender dysphoria affected, changed or influenced the way in which you read and understand the Bible?

Has your experience of gender dysphoria affected or changed your understanding of God in any way?

Has your experience of gender dysphoria affected or changed your spirituality in any way?

Has your experience of gender dysphoria affected or changed your attitude to and membership of the church?

4 *The significance of gender*

As a result of all that you have experienced, felt and thought, please could you tell me a little about your understanding of the significance of gender?

To be more specific:

How much do you value your own sense of 'having' a gender?

If there had been a public acceptance of a wider variety of gendered states (in other words, if people were allowed to live and move more freely between poles of male and female) would this have helped you?

Is gender a good thing?

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