

## **Gender Variance and the Abrahamic Faiths**

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### Abstract:

This chapter discusses accounts of gender variance (with particular emphasis on trans, that is gender transition) in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It explores acknowledgements of the existence of sex- and gender-variant people within Jewish rabbinic, Christian theological and Islamic jurisprudential writings; addresses theological, ethical and legal objections to gender transition from within these faiths; and points to some trans-positive responses emerging from each tradition.

### Introduction

The Abrahamic faiths all share a conviction that human beings are works of God, and many traditionalists within these faiths would hold that seeking to alter the sexed body, as God has made it, is a problematic rejection of this divine gift (see e.g. Altinay 2014: 116). Additionally, since Judaism and Christianity also hold that humans are created in the image of God, some Jews and Christians attribute certain additional cosmic significance to binary human sex, and hold that seeking to change sex may interrupt or obscure this imaging of the divine.

Within all three faiths, however, there are more conservative and more liberal traditions, and it is not always the case that theological conservatism also entails a more conservative response to gender transition (that is, moving from the gender one was assigned at birth – usually the one assumed to “match” one’s sex – to another gender). There are examples in all three faiths of trans-positive responses, sometimes based on reframing or reinterpreting traditional teachings, and sometimes based on bringing faith traditions into conversation with insights from medicine, psychology and psychiatry, critical gender studies, and other disciplines. While the numbers of people transitioning gender seem to be rising, and the last decade has seen far greater social and cultural visibility of trans people, variant gender is not a new phenomenon. In the chapter I discuss accounts of variant gender in Islam, Judaism and Christianity, including both historical and contemporary responses, and show that trans people have long been known within all these traditions, even if the faiths have sometimes found it difficult to allow trans people to define themselves on their own terms.

### Trans in Islam

Many Islamic objections to gender confirming surgery (that is, surgery to alter one’s body in line with one’s gender identity) for trans people rest in the conviction that God creates every

human as male or female, and that changing God's creation is a work of Satan (Qur'an 4:119), a rejection of the divine will (Altinay 2014: 116), and a deception (Haneef 2011: 102-103). Within various hadiths (collections of teachings of Muhammad) there is mention of figures called, in Arabic, *khasi* and *mukhannathun*. *Khasi* probably refers to eunuchs: that is, biological males who had undergone genital alteration, possibly as part of a process of the imposition of colonial rule in order to exert power over them.<sup>1</sup> *Mukhannathun* might also mean eunuchs, though the term also seems to be used in reference to some homosexual men, or possibly males with variant gender identities who would today likely be figured as trans women. Wim Peumans and Christiane Stallaert note that the interpretation of *mukhannathun* as meaning "trans woman" is not uncontested, and that mainstream Islamic religious discourse has tended to define them as men "too old to be attracted to women" (Peumans and Stallaert 2012: 118). The hadiths on *mukhannathun* include one which refers to cursing men who dress as women, and another apparently instructing people to spurn the company of "effeminate" men and "masculine" women. However, there is also evidence in very early Islam of *mukhannathun* being considered peculiarly holy and blessed, or simply unremarkable. Given that *mukhannathun* were often given access to women and the domestic realm, and could perform "female" roles such as singing and playing music, but could also take part in public discourse in a way women could not, there may have been some perceived advantages attached to *mukhannathun* identity (Kugle 2010: 254).

Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle remarks, "Most early Muslims recognized that the *mukhannathun* acted in gender-ambiguous ways because of their innate disposition and that this was not in and of itself blameworthy" (Kugle 2010: 253). Early commentators in the first centuries after the foundation of Islam distinguished between *mukhannathun* who were merely effeminate and those who engaged in immoral behavior (i.e. same-sex sexual activity), and between those who acted because of their natural inclinations and those thought to have nefarious purposes (Kugle 2010: 253). At this stage, "genuine" *mukhannathun* were not condemned, but only those who "affected" effeminate behaviour against their own true natures. To some extent this anticipates more recent Islamic (especially Shi'a) accounts in which trans identity is constructed as a medical issue in order that medical intervention may be deemed the correct response to it (whereas if it were constructed

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<sup>1</sup> In early Islam, eunuchs were sometimes considered particularly or peculiarly holy, with special links to Muhammad and his companions given their important role as trusted servants and intercessors (Marmon 1995: 80), and this afforded them a respect which persisted into much later centuries (Marmon 1995: 84). Eunuchs were additionally unusual because they had been severed from their ties with their families of origin, and would not be able to have biological families of their own – rendering them peculiarly loyal and dependent (Marmon 1995: 86; Ayalon 1979: 70; Hathaway 2005: 1).

as a social issue, any surgical intervention would be considered unnecessary and thereby illicit – Altinay 2014: 116), as I discuss below.

Kugle notes that mention of *mukhannathun* recurs in eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad under ‘Abbasid rule. By this point, Islamic jurists were more interested in outlawing homosexuality than gender-crossing behaviour. However, since in legal decisions during this period “trans behavior was seen as a side-effect of same-sex desire” (Kugle 2010: 256), the growing stigma attached to homosexuality therefore became attached to trans people too. Whilst jurists of this period recognized that there were people whose *bodies* naturally varied from male or female, they did not believe that *gender* could also be naturally and licitly other than masculine male or feminine female.

In the present day, trans people face persecution and social ostracization in some parts of the Muslim world. In 1986, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, ruled that medically-mandated surgeries for trans people were legitimate in Islamic law (see Bahreini 2008; Alipour 2017a). Since the ruling, the Iranian authorities have funded gender confirmation surgeries. However, argues Raha Bahreini, this is less progressive than it may at first appear, since the apparent support for transition is actually grounded in a desire to erase homosexuality. Someone who appears to be attracted to someone of the same sex must in fact have, not a homosexual orientation, but a medical problem (namely gender dysphoria), so it is appropriate to “solve” it with a medical intervention – that is, surgery. Bahreini comments,

“The emerging discourse is still deeply troubling since it systematically regards homosexuality and more generally any sexual or gender non-conformity as unintelligible, perverse, and punishable by law, except for those willing to transform their ‘wrong bodies’ ... [Iran’s] permission of transsexuality and sex change operations is motivated by a goal that is more about assimilating gender atypical individuals into the heteronormative order than about broadening horizons for sex/gender possibilities.” (Bahreini 2008: 4)

In other words, Iran’s apparent acceptance of trans people and endorsement of their identity is still an exercising of governmentality and an attempt to write atypical identities into a normalizing framework. Although there have been good pragmatic effects of the ruling, such as allowing trans people who want to access surgery to do so, the wider effect has been to continue to pathologize trans as abnormal and in need of correction, which in turn, argues Bahreini, creates an environment inhospitable to variant sex and gender of other kinds (Bahreini 2008: 20). Similarly, of cases in Egypt and Saudi Arabia where gender confirming surgery has been allowed by Islamic authorities, Kugle comments,

“Such decisions are not necessarily progressive if they simply reinscribe gender apartheid and mask a very punishing approach to trans people (who do not actually undergo surgery to alter their anatomy) or gender-ambiguous people whose behavior goes against the norms of their local societies.” (Kugle 2010: 258)

In short, whilst *bodies* may be understood as naturally appearing other than clearly male or female – even if this is not understood to compromise the body’s actual *ontological* status as male or female, which can be revealed via surgery – one’s identity may only naturally and licitly be masculine if one is male and feminine if one is female. One’s behaviours sexually have to “match” one’s licit identity. Rüstem Altınay adds that, in Islamic states such as Iran, trans people who are “desexualized” find greater social acceptance than those who engage in “deviant” sexual behaviours (such as sexual activity with someone of their birth sex) (Altınay 2014: 116), and notes that the widespread embrace of certain high-profile trans people (notably the Turkish reality TV star Bulent Ersoy) rests on Ersoy’s habitation of “decent” norms of conservative femininity (Altınay 2014: 117; see also Altınay 2008). However, Altınay also warns against orientalist Western scholarship which assumes a “reductive caricature of a Muslim fundamentalism that forces gays to change sex” (Altınay 2014: 116), and notes that it is not Islamic societies alone which exhibit transphobia.

But if trans is still regarded with suspicion by most Islamic authorities, at least some Muslim interpreters are seeking alternative narratives. Kugle holds that Sufis – Islamic mystics – have come closer than other Muslims to adequately exploring God’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence, and that Sufi accounts of the divine-human relationship are of particular significance for discussions of gender and sexuality. He believes that the thirteenth-century mystics Aziz al-Nasafi and Ibn ‘Arabi understood maleness and femaleness as fundamentally to do with forces or elements rather than with biology (Kugle 2010: 236). This is, of course, not so far removed from the mainstream Islamic account of sexual energies as reflecting truths inherent in the cosmos and not just in the lives and bodies of individual human beings. However, this Sufi account may give more space for alternative manifestations of sex and gender. Although the spirit may be understood to be gendered since it is where one is most fundamentally oneself, Kugle argues that the spirit may also be understood as both male and female or neither male nor female, as well as the binary options (2010: 237).

Kugle believes that the prophet Muhammad’s own understanding of variant gender was more subtle and creative than that which was codified later by jurists and scribes of hadith. He therefore suggests that Muslims today should recover another approach than the one in evidence in the patriarchal classical medieval sharia in their accounts of trans, in dialogue with recent

developments in science and critical gender theory (2010: 258). Even medical doctors, he notes, sometimes appeal to sharia rather than modern science when making decisions about sex and gender for trans people (those who transition gender, socially, medically or both) and intersex people (those with physical variations such that they cannot be classified as male or female at birth), privileging genital appearance – and especially the penis – over other factors (2010: 258, 259). As he observes, there is some irony in the fact that the authorities privilege the genitalia when many trans people also feel the genitals are important and experience deep dysphoria because of their belief that they have been born with the wrong genital anatomy. But the authorities' focusing on genitalia ahead of gender identity nonetheless leaves no space for a more complex and less normalizing account of gender, or any acknowledgement that not all trans people consider genital surgery necessary or important for them.

Like Ayatollah Khomeini in 1986, Sheikh al-Tantawi of Egypt issued a fatwa legalizing gender confirmation surgery in Egypt in 1988. Mehrdad Alipour notes that this fatwa seemed to focus more on intersex (i.e. physical variation from binary sex) than on trans identity as such, and has therefore been understood by some interpreters as outlawing “sex-change” (Alipour 2017a: 96). Kugle believes that Tantawi's fatwa may be more open-ended, and contain more potential for nuanced accounts of trans, than its author realized:

“One's outward appearance may be deceptive, but one's inner essence is always true. This essence can be hidden by clothing or obscured by one's apparent genitalia, but once one discovers one's personal essence through experience, one should endeavor to live with integrity by displaying that essence socially and conforming to religious and moral expectations. If one needs to realign one's name, clothing, or genitalia in order to live with sincerity by the essence God has given in the form of the soul, then these external markers can be adjusted to conform to the needs of the essential person.” (Kugle 2010: 262)

By drawing on classical Islamic theological concepts such as appearance (*zahir*) and essence (*batin*), holds Kugle, Tantawi “goes far beyond his initial pronouncement that is limited to anatomical considerations. This potential is reason for optimism for trans Muslims” (Kugle 2010: 262). Trans people's self-actualization may therefore be understood as not in opposition to Islamic principles, but in deep accord with them (Kugle 2010: 262). Alipour agrees that it is possible to interpret Tantawi as holding that gender confirmation surgery is legitimate for trans people in order to reveal their true inner essence: it is not a change of sex, but an endorsement of the real sex as Allah created it (Alipour 2017a: 97).

Alipour remains more circumspect than Kugle is about the potential of Tantawi's fatwa, but believes that, by contrast, the Ayatollah Khomeini's pronouncements on trans from the 1960s onwards do leave open more space for conceiving of a perpetual third gender category in Islam. Alipour notes that, rather than mandating gender confirmation surgery for trans people (so as to avoid the appearance of "rebellious" homosexuality), Khomeini leaves this as a matter of choice, which, whether he intends it or not, gives trans Muslims an opportunity to live beyond binaries (Alipour 2017b: 172).

### Judaism

In the Jewish context, a strong emphasis on fixed and conventional gender norms, not least those concerning fertility and reproduction, but also involving participation in worship and ritual, family life, work and study, means that it has traditionally been important to know for sure whether someone is male, female or other. However, the assumption that maleness and femaleness are clear and self-evident means that there is no legal definition of them in Jewish law (*halakha*). What do exist, however, are legal definitions for non-males and non-females, who fall into several categories, including *tumtum* (someone whose physical sex is "hidden" or unclear), *androgynos* (with male and female physical characteristics), *aylonit* (someone who appeared female at birth but has reached adulthood without developing female secondary sex characteristics) and *seris hamah* (a "natural eunuch") (see e.g. Fonrobert 2007, Plaskow 2009).

Sarra Lev notes that the English term "eunuch" is used to cover a range of different Hebrew terms: *pesua dakka* and *meroah asekh* (which in the Hebrew Bible refer to someone with damaged testes); *kerut sofkehab* (someone whose penis has been cut off); and *saris*, further divided into *saris adam* (those made "eunuchs" through human intervention) and, as we have seen, *saris hamah* (those who are "eunuchs" naturally) (Lev 2004: 11-12). It is not always clear whether the rabbis consider these categories overlapping or distinct (Lev 2004: 63).

There are only about 25 texts in the tannaitic materials (including the Mishnah, a collection of oral traditions by rabbinic teachers, covering approximately the first two centuries CE, and the Tosefta, a supplementary collection of oral law from the late second century) which deal with the *pesua dakka*, *kerut sofkehab*, *saris adam* and *saris hamah* (Lev 2004: 59-60). Furthermore, the texts on eunuchs and those with crushed or torn genitalia are also few in the Bible itself. As a result, in the rabbinic literature,

"Although certain types of rhetoric appear, it is difficult to determine whether they were part of a general discourse, or whether they were unique to a few particular rabbis or specific texts ... It is

difficult to imagine that the texts we possess represent the entirety of the rabbinic discourse.” (Lev 2004: 60)

Lev suggests that the rabbis who produced the tannaitic texts were committed to being faithful to the Bible, but were “equally as committed to creating a schema which can be understood within their own culture, including the seepage from the larger literary context in which they function” (Lev 2004: 4). For the rabbis, unlike for Hellenized Jews and Christians (those influenced by Greek culture), argues Lev, eunuch figures did not become ciphers for querying gender as such (Lev 2004: 5). The Romans seemed suspicious of eunuchs for similar reasons as those causing suspicion of women, that is, explicitly gendered reasons: they were not men (Lev 2004: 15). For the rabbis, however, the possibility that eunuchs might be considered to challenge gender boundaries was not the most significant thing about them. Importantly, notes Lev, this does not mean that rabbinic accounts of eunuchs are not concerned about gender at all: concerns about who may licitly marry or partake in particular rituals do, of course, have gender implications, and the rabbis were undoubtedly invested in “the determination of boundaries and categories in general” (Lev 2004: 27). The key is that the rabbis did not consider the eunuchs to *cross* gender in the ways that people who “performed” a gender different from their sex did (Lev 2004: 21-22). In other words, despite being outside male norms, eunuchs were not understood as being, or trying to become women.

Leviticus 21:21 states that a priest (like an animal brought for sacrifice) may not be blemished in any way, and Deuteronomy 23:1 that no-one whose testes have been crushed or penis cut off may be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. The Talmud (the collection of legal and theological writings central to rabbinic Judaism) extends this to a ban on mutilating the male genitalia of any human or animal, and on sterilization for females. These verses have been used in opposition to gender confirmation surgery for transgender people, though it is not clear whether it is maleness or ableness that is the most important arbiter of perfection that would be compromised by the damaged anatomy. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert interprets the majority of the rabbis as holding that *tumtum* or *androgynos* status (terms used for different manifestations of what would now be called intersex, or VSC for variant sex characteristics) precludes an animal from being a legitimate sacrifice (Fonrobert 2009: 125). However, she comments, the issue is the appearance of the external genitalia (i.e. whether an animal “reads” as male). Avraham Steinberg agrees that “that which is decisive in Jewish law is only the *appearance of the external sex organs* and not the chromosomal analysis” (Steinberg 2003: 465). Lev argues that, because the ancients did not situate maleness in genitalia as such, the absence of (or damage to) male genitalia in eunuchs would not necessarily have been held to compromise a eunuch’s maleness in itself (Lev 2004: 19-

20). Lev believes that the most likely reason for the Levitical proscription on genitally-damaged men entering the assembly is because of their potential impurity, not because of any specific sexual or gendered reason. Given that this text does not use the existing term *saris*, it probably does not refer to eunuchs (however they are to be defined), but to those with other types of genital damage (Lev 2004: 101). The rabbis were probably concerned mainly to define explicitly who was “in” and who was “out” of the congregation; “imperfect” bodies represented a threat to the community (Lev 2004: 113).

If rabbinic accounts of personhood assume that human males are necessarily duty-bound to procreate, it is easy to see why surgeries which compromise reproductive capacity would be deemed problematic. In the present-day context, it is not insignificant that surgical and medical technologies still do not allow for making a post-operative trans person reproductive in their adopted sex. Gender confirming surgery therefore usually compromises fertility. Jon-Jay Tilsen notes that, furthermore, elective male castration may preclude a man from being able to give sexual pleasure to his wife, itself a religious duty (Tilsen 2013).

Hillel Gray (2012) notes disagreement between rabbis in the Ashkenazi Orthodox context today over whether genotype or phenotype should be the measure of halakhic (legal) sex for intersex people. Rabbis up to the present day have sought to make rulings about intersex people (with the effect of trying to fit them into a system which they might seem to challenge) because of their concerns about trans people, and, suggests Gray, did not quite appreciate that there are differences as well as overlaps between the phenomena. Genotype refers to chromosomes, which are invisible on normal observation of the body and require specialist analysis; phenotype refers to the usual visible appearance of the body, that is, the genitalia. As things stand, trans people’s halakhic sex is deemed to be the same after any gender confirming surgery as it was beforehand: gender confirmation surgery is not considered to have changed their sex. Gray suggests that a phenotypic account of sex, based on genital appearance rather than chromosomes, might open the way for the fuller inclusion of post-operative trans people in Jewish communities, and their halakhic recognition as members of their new gender. This approach is not unheard of: in the early 1970s, the Jewish ethicist Eliezer Waldenberg ruled that the phenotype should determine halakhic sex. Surgery on the genitalia would, he believed, change halakhic sex. Significantly, he determined that the same rule should apply to trans as to intersex people. In other words, gender confirming surgery for a trans person, altering their genitalia, would change their halakhic sex (Gray 2012: 130). Of course, notes Gray, before the twentieth century when chromosomal analysis became possible, the phenotypic account based on visual appearance was the only one available, and it was on the basis of visual appearance that intersex people’s sex would have been assigned if possible



(Gray 2012: 136). If altering the genitalia of intersex people did not alter their sex, this seemed to open the way to legitimizing surgery for trans people. Gray believes that this was why many rabbis after the 1970s opposed Waldenberg's phenotypic account (Gray 2012: 143).

Discussing the ethics of gender confirming surgery in Judaism today, Tilsen comments that although elective surgeries of any kind are generally not encouraged, it must be recognized that a procedure may come to be deemed necessary or therapeutic on emotional or psychological grounds, not just strictly physical ones. Although "it is not likely that most rabbinic courts would hear this argument sympathetically when applied to elective gender confirming surgery ... the value of elective surgery (body modification of any sort) in improving quality of life has been recognized, and may be permitted as long as it entails minimal risk" (Tilsen 2013).

In contemporary Judaism, particularly the Reform movement, there is extensive work being done within the community to ensure trans people are not inappropriately required to participate in rituals associated with their birth sex rather than their gender, and that their rights are respected (see e.g. the Central College of American Rabbis' resolutions at Commission on Social Action in Reform Judaism 2015). Particular concerns arise for some trans Jews around ritual bathing (see e.g. Lieberman 2009), gendered practices such as leading public prayers (see e.g. Weiman-Kleman 2018), and toward the end of their lives, as it is usual for a dead person's body to be prepared for burial by members of their birth sex and some trans people fear their families will not respect their wishes (see e.g. Greenhough 2009). Many trans and nonbinary Jews and their allies have sought to make alternative interpretations of biblical texts on sex, gender and personhood, holding that trans identity is not a mistake or shortcoming but a non-pathological variation (see e.g. Wenig 2009; Ladin 2012, 2018). Some have pointed out that changes to intimate anatomy can, far from being understood as rejection of a divine gift, chime with the covenantal symbolism of circumcision at the very heart of Jewish self-understanding (Aviv and Erlichman 2009). Some authors are circumspect about the overly-binary nature of some trans self-expression, and hold that multiplying genders is the best means to overcome gender-based inequity and injustice (Plaskow 2009: 204). Whilst some commentators focus on trans Jews' right of access to binary-gendered ritual spaces, and note that acceptance into binary spaces from which they had previously been excluded was an important source of affirmation post-transition, notably in the Orthodox context (Poveda Guillén 2017), others (e.g. Crasnow 2017) emphasize the need for distinctive innovative trans rituals rather than assimilation into existing ones. There is also acknowledgement that "despite ... equalizing measures, egalitarian Jewish communities have not actually collapsed traditional gender boundaries ... They still hold tremendous emotional weight" (Cohen 2009: 303).

### Transgender in Christianity

Whilst there has been acknowledgement of variant gender in Christianity across the centuries, the less gendered nature of some manifestations of Christianity in contrast with Judaism and Islam has meant less discussion of transgender in Christian canon law. With a few exceptions – ordination to priesthood being a notable example – there has been less ritual distinction made between men and women in Christianity than in these other faiths. However, since the late twentieth century there has been an upsurge in Christian theological responses to gender variance from both conservative trans-suspicious and liberal trans-affirming perspectives. There has been less attention paid to intersex/VSC, with exceptions ranging from Christians who are conservative and suspicious of the goodness of intersex bodies and identities (Cox 2018), through moderately conservative and partially-affirming (DeFranza 2015), to liberal and fully-affirming (Cornwall 2010).

In both the Roman Catholic Church and the conservative evangelical movement, there has been a sense that “gender ideology” is a morally-suspect movement linked with feminism and the destruction of family values. Gender transition is held to undermine what is purported to be a clear and irreducible association between biological sex and God-given identity. Conservative theologies of gender variance, and of gender more broadly, almost universally hold binary gender, rooted in binary sex, to be non-negotiable, and the “denial” of this “truth” to be an arrogant rejection of God-giveness at worst, and a sad delusion at best. Conservative evangelicals remain deeply influenced by the work of ethicist Oliver O’Donovan, whose writing on transgender in the early 1980s focused mainly on the question of how far it was legitimate for humans to seek to change the bodies God had made, and, if such changes did take place, how far the resulting bodies could be deemed veritably human (O’Donovan 1982). For O’Donovan, the artificial nature of trans people’s bodies obstructs proper communication of their reality, assumed to be their givenness as male or female. This emphasis on reality, fabrication and deception recurs in more recent evangelical treatments of gender variance such as Walker 2017 and Yarhouse 2015; Walker, for example, asserts that

“The best way to live is according to the blueprint that God designed; and by playing the part that God designed humanity to perform. As creatures, we can’t rewrite the blueprint of our design out of our own will. A plane’s engine cannot decide to be a wheel, because the wheel is defined with a different purpose in mind. We have neither the authority nor the ability to rewrite or reconfigure how God made his world. It’s his creation; we’re just living in it. And, since our bodies are part of his world, made by him, his authority extends to us ... When we as creatures reject the Creator’s

blueprint, we are ... rebelling against the natural order of how things objectively are.” (Walker 2017: 51-52)

For trans people to suppose otherwise, or for others to encourage them in this belief is, for Walker, a form of delusion. Trans identity, with its belief that gender and sex do not “match”, is, for Walker, a rebellious rejection of God’s truth and therefore “not compatible with following Christ” (Walker 2017: 146).

Roman Catholic critiques of transgender focus more on the putative association between rejection of the body and rejection of a divinely-mandated vocation to roles such as motherhood and fatherhood which are deemed to have cosmic resonances. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, held that failure to listen to the “language of creation” as manifest in sex would lead humans to self-destruct, adding,

“What is often expressed and understood by the term ‘gender’ ultimately ends up being man’s attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and ... to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit ... Man, as a creature [has] an innate ‘message’ which does not contradict our freedom, but is instead its very premise.” (Benedict 2008, para. 1)

Earlier he had criticized “the human attempt to be freed from one’s biological conditioning. According to this perspective ... all persons can and ought to constitute themselves as they like, since they are free from every predetermination linked to their essential constitution” (Ratzinger and Amato 2004, para. 3). In these accounts, biological sex is determinative and irreducible, and attempts to suggest that gender need not “match” it are denials of divine truth. Pope Francis, generally acknowledged to be more liberal than his predecessor, nonetheless seems to hold the line on gender transition:

“An ideology of gender ... denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman ... This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female ... Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.” (Francis 2016: 44-46)

However, there is space for more trans-affirmative teaching in Roman Catholicism building on the logic of an earlier pope, Pius XII, who suggested in the 1950s that removal of

healthy tissue from a body was legitimate if its primary purpose was to save life and if the tissue remaining in the body would threaten the integrity of the whole organism (Pius XII 1953). Some trans people and their allies have argued precisely that the retention of body-parts which cause dysphoria or distress does threaten the integrity (and continued existence) of the body as a whole given trans people's high rates of self-harm and suicide prior to transition (see discussion in Gremmels 2016).

Mark Yarhouse, an evangelical Christian writer on gender transition, is motivated by a benevolent pastoral impulse and a conviction that surgery does not actually lead trans people to be any less dysphoric or unhappy than before. Yarhouse's professional discipline of clinical psychology means that he writes primarily from a therapeutic perspective. He holds that trans identity is not something people choose, and should not be understood as a moral failing. However, he assumes gender variance is undesirable and a side-effect of a cosmic Fall, and over-emphasizes gender dysphoria to the exclusion of other kinds of trans experience. Indeed, trans-suspicious theological treatments of transgender often assume that gender variance is a problem for trans people, yet many trans people do not understand it in this way. Yarhouse advises that since trans identity is a form of delusion and lack of acknowledgement of the truth inhering in biological sex, trans people's best outcome will ideally be to "resolve dysphoria in keeping with their birth sex" (Yarhouse 2015: 137). Where this is not possible, he counsels pastors and other Christians advising trans people to take an anti-interventionist approach, with no surgery recommended unless absolutely unavoidable. In part this stems from his suspicion of people who have "made a commitment to a worldview and philosophy bent on deconstructing categories of sex and gender" (2015: 143).

Trans-affirming Christian theologies are often influenced by queer and other progressive theologies, and tend to appeal to the contingent and socially-constructed nature of gender. Some trans-affirmative theologians and interpreters appeal to biblical texts from both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to encourage trans people in their faith. These include passages from Genesis 1, which holds that male and female are made in God's image (and which some interpreters understand to mean that this might include both masculine and feminine elements in the same individual – see e.g. Wenig 2009, Ladin 2018); Psalm 139, which says that God has known and formed humans from even before their births (see e.g. Mann 2014); and Galatians 3, which holds that, in Christ, old divisions of ethnicity, social class and (significantly) gender no longer persist. Some trans people of faith have found it particularly important to seek trans "ancestors" in the Bible and to know that people who experienced variant gender were always "there" (Reay 2009). In Matthew 19, Jesus speaks about three categories of eunuchs: eunuchs from birth, eunuchs made

eunuchs by others, and eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Some interpreters have suggested that the different groups of eunuchs might represent intersex people (“eunuchs from birth” with variant physical sex characteristics) and trans people (“made eunuchs by others” via medical interventions) (see e.g. Kolakowski 1997a, Reay 2009). Moreover, Jesus does not speak of any of these groups of eunuchs in negative terms (Kolakowski 1997b, Hester 2005).

Justin Tanis, a trans theologian and academic, argues that gender should be understood as a divine calling or vocation, but considers that this could mean a calling out of one identity and into another. He holds that, in common with other callings, a realization about one’s true gender could emerge either suddenly or gradually. For Tanis,

“Calling is about a way of being – a calling to awaken to, realize, and manifest who we are. For trans people, our calling is to a way of embodying the self that transcends the limitations placed upon us. We physically and literally materialize who we are on the inside and bring it to reflection on the outside.” (Tanis 2018: 147)

Tanis holds two convictions about gender in tension: that it is fluid, shapeable by individuals, and subject to change; *and* that it is “beyond our control or volition ... We know it in our innermost beings, and it comes from a source that is greater than we are alone” (Tanis 2018: 149). This account challenges the trans-suspicious view held by some conservative evangelical commentators that trans identity stems from wilful individualism and rejection of a divine hand guiding Christians’ lives. For Tanis, “Our genders are not something external to ourselves that we are seeking, but rather arise out of God’s prayer for us” (Tanis 2018: 152). This is significant, since it is an example of an appeal to the givenness and non-negotiability of gender from a trans-affirmative perspective. It is striking that trans-suspicious and trans-affirming Christians alike appeal to such givenness: a key difference is that trans-suspicious theologians hold that gender must inevitably supervene on sex and that it is biological sex, manifested in genitals and chromosomes, that is beyond doubt and therefore beyond human volition either to reject or alter.

Some trans-affirmative responses seek to demonstrate continuity between contemporary trans people’s experiences of negotiating faith, and those of theological forebears, demonstrating that trans is neither a recent innovation nor a problematic break with Christian history. Rachel Mann (2012), for example, invokes themes of apophatic and mystical theology and points to resonances between her own journey of transition and the writings of Christians from across the centuries including Mechtild of Magdeburg, Thomas Merton, and Meister Eckhart. Mann’s exploration of key themes such as redemption, resurrection and rebirth sits alongside reflections

on broader questions of vocation and embodiment. In a 2014 essay, Mann explores the resonances between interactions of the inner and outer self in trans testimonies and practices of spiritual direction, suggesting that both Christian and trans identities concern being true to oneself, coming to know oneself better, and – for the trans Christian – being increasingly formed toward Christlikeness. This self-knowledge should not be understood as individualist self-obsession, but rather as a necessary precursor to the voluntary self-sacrifice to which Christians are called:

“Jesus said, ‘Those who seek to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’ ... One ripple that many may miss – simply because they have had little cause to question their basic identity – is that, in order to lose one’s life, one must have had one to begin with. That is, to give one’s life to God, to lose it, one must have some sense of *who* one is to begin with. In order to lose oneself, there has to be someone there to get lost.” (Mann 2014: 223-224)

Agency and self-direction are therefore important goods for (in particular) gender-variant people who may have found that their rights to exist and self-define have been undermined, sometimes on the grounds (as we see in a writer like Walker, above) that the belief one’s gender varies from that usually associated with one’s physical sex is a form of pathological delusion and a belief which should not be encouraged or trusted.

### Conclusion

There have been trans people in every society and culture, sometimes categorized as a subcategory of homosexual people, and sometimes understood as existing in their own right. Societies have had their own ways of regulating and managing gender diversity, whether by enforced erasure, ostracization, or giving a distinct and positive social role. Religious norms have been an important element of the way gender diversity is understood and, frequently, opposed. It is noteworthy that concern about unusual gender identities in some of the examples we have seen above seems to stem from anxieties not about *these* individuals themselves, but about what their existence means for “unremarkable” cisgender men and women, and – more importantly – the social, cultural, religious and especially theological norms that rest on the assumption that human sex is binary in nature and that gender must supervene on it. These kinds of norms, of course, affect cisgender people as much as gender-variant people.

Yet, as we have seen, a wide range of faith traditions, including some which tend to be theologically conservative about matters such as gender roles and sexual orientation, contain conceptual space for transgender, even if their pastoral responses to trans people themselves have been more mixed. Work remains to be done, in particular, on appropriate pastoral and spiritual

care for trans people whether or not they identify with a particular faith tradition (Cornwall 2019): religious denominations and congregations are themselves undertaking such work, but do not always recognize either that trans people already exist within their communities rather than needing to be “done to”, or that trans people who have had negative experiences with religious institutions in the past are unlikely to look to them for affirmation, validation or moral authority.

Islam, Judaism and Christianity alike recognize humans’ capacities to hone and shape their worlds, and in some contexts, hold that the responsible exercise of technology (including medical technologies) is a moral duty. Humans are animals with embodied creaturely limits. That does not mean that they may not contribute to shaping and directing their own bodies and identities. Yet all three traditions have tended to see sex as a bright line which communicates incontrovertible truths about human existence, and something which humans are not at liberty to seek to alter. In this chapter I have sought to point to the diversity of responses to trans identity within these faiths, including some trans-affirming ones: a reminder that religious bodies as well as individual human bodies are various, and that their own limits are always in negotiation. This is significant given the increasing numbers of trans people of faith who are speaking back to their traditions and seeking to demonstrate that gender variance need not be understood as in conflict with them. Anyone interested in the interactions of gender and religion cannot afford to be ignorant of the diversities of identity and expression trans people hold.

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