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TRANSFORMATIVE CREATURES: THEOLOGY, GENDER DIVERSITY, AND HUMAN IDENTITY

by Susannah Cornwall

Abstract. Gender transition may be figured as part of a broader creaturely process of being partners in our own becoming. Gender transition is explored through the lenses of transformation (including comparisons with theosis and with religious conversion) and neurodiversity. Humans are transformative creatures; trans and gender-variant people, like others, have the power to curate their own identities and are on a journey toward perfection. Our nature as humans, including our sexed and gendered nature, is not over-and-done-with. In this sense, our active building and shaping of our identities and body-stories is not a rejection of a divine blueprint for human existence, nor an exercise of illegitimate human hubris, but rather a licit creaturely form of generativity.

Keywords: gender identity; neurodiversity; transformation; transgender; transition

Introduction

Some of those theologians suspicious of the phenomenon of gender transition suggest that it represents a rebellious rejection of a divine plan for human lives. They invoke terms such as "blueprint" (Walker 2017,

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51–52) to hold that only gender identities that supervene in typical ways on sexed bodies may be understood as licit. Yet positions like these take too little account of all the ways in which we ourselves as creatures are transformative. Christians can be understood as curators, not just receivers, of our own lives and traditions. Being creaturely is profoundly formative of being human, yet we are also partners in our own becoming. What has formed and continues to form us as creatures is itself multiple, mixed, and boundary-crossing. As formative creatures, humans have peculiar power to set agendas for non-human creatures and, concomitantly, a peculiar responsibility to exercise this power responsibly. In order to be truly formative of humans, Christian constructive theology must take into account multiplicities of human embodied experience. This includes theologies attuned to the reality and nonpathology of trans and gender-variant people (who are no more than anyone else empty vessels just waiting to be filled). In this article, I will suggest that gender must be figured according to a proleptic and provisional way, as something that we receive but also shape and hone. If we understand gender variance via the lens of euphoria rather than dysphoria, there is more scope to celebrate the variety of its manifestations without apotheosizing it. It is in this way that theology is transformative.

Later I discuss some work on the correlations between trans identity and neurodiversity, and suggest that this connection is a salient reminder that received wisdom is not always incontrovertible and that minority reports can help attune us to things we are so used to seeing and accepting that it no longer occurs to us to notice or interrogate them. First, I consider some ways in which appeals to transformation are at the heart of the Christian tradition, showing that shifts in gender presentation may be understood as being in continuity with wider appeals to unfolding revelation.

Christianity and Transformation

Christianity contains extensive resources for explicating devastating transformations. As recent theological engagements with some more remote theological forebears make clear, transformation recurs as a theme across the tradition. We see what it means to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, as in John Chrysostom (Naidu 2012); we see resources for understanding Christianity as a process of becoming transformed into more joyful and passionate existence via dynamic dialogue with God, in tension with the undermining of our reason and correspondence to Christ because of sin as in Kierkegaard (Torrance 2016); we see Paul wrestling with grace and agency as he works out what it means for his identity to be profoundly changed (Wells 2015), as when he holds in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that “all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed … from one degree of glory to another.” We see, especially in the early theologians, including Athanasius,

Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, frequent appeals to theosis and deification; a recent scholarly uptick in interest in theosis in general, across various theological traditions (in e.g., Kärkkäinen 2004; Kharlamov 2012; Cooper 2014; Sidaway 2016); and arguments that theosis might be understood as an organizing principle across recent theological giants' work (e.g., Habets 2016 on T.F. Torrance). We see appeals to transformation toward virtue, and to humans' own transformative capacities via their self-recognition and self-direction, in Schleiermacher (Mariña 2008), the process theologians, and beyond. In all these instances, there is tension between how far such transformation depends on the works of God and how far on human agency and initiative, and between constitution of identity by the self and by their community. Yet across the tradition, even where identity in general is understood as changeable and transformable in God, sex and gender have often seemed like non-negotiables, not only accidents of our creation but synecdoche for our very ontology. The existence of these resources does not in itself mean that Christians will manage to use them to end the tyranny of the gender binary.

But there is also space in the tradition for understanding Christianity as inherently about ongoing unfoldings of identity, continuing appeals to transformation. Alex Clare-Young has recently written of their conviction that it is precisely in and through their gender identity that they have a deeper understanding of the vocation to which all Christians are called: "My gender identity is woven through my sense of calling. Transformation, change and new life are at the heart of the Gospel and are all facts of life for trans people … I am called because of, not despite, my transness" (Clare-Young 2019, 78). For Clare-Young, this is highlighted by their own nonbinary journey, which has led them to hold that their "refusal" to "settle" in a fixed identity has given them particular capacity to love and minister to others and to appreciate that all identities are ultimately in flux. Shifts in identity, even quite drastic ones, need not be figured as alien to Christianity, and, indeed, there are affinities between gender transition and the ruptures from and breaks with former identities experienced by those who undergo religious conversions. Indeed, despite the obsessions with surgery and gory details with which media coverage of gender transition is often replete, gender transition is habitually somewhat less violent than religious conversion (though trans people and religious converts alike frequently find themselves at the very real sharp end of retaliatory violence from those, sometimes from their former communities, who object to their transformations).

Mathias Wirth (2019) suggests that gender transition might fruitfully be analyzed alongside religious conversion, since both phenomena imply the cessation of one identity in favor of another, yet Christians do not tend to be suspicious of converts to their faith the way they sometimes

are of trans people. For Wirth, conversion is evidence that Christians do not actually consider identity so fixed or monolithic as they might claim (Wirth 2019, 2). Of course, one of the difficulties with aspects of Wirth's account is that many trans people experience transition as an act of continuity, not severance: that they are only now expressing who they always were. Yet many friends and relatives of people who transition clearly do experience the transition as severance (and often as loss). This might be interpreted as a clash of autonomies: that of the trans person and that of their invested people. This is even starker when it is presented as a clash of goods or truths—as, for example, when gender-critical radical feminists say that their autonomy to tell the "truth" about a trans person's sex is not being respected, and it becomes a matter of whose goods trump whose.[1]

As Wirth notes himself, there are forms of understanding of conversion that are about return to an original primal state, which for some reason had not been able to be fully expressed or realized but was nonetheless always present (Wirth 2019, 3), but this seems to undermine the extent to which conversion (whether of gender or religion) is freely chosen (Wirth 2019, 5). Yet Wirth is right that there are ways in which gender transition and religious conversion have striking parallels: both are simultaneously public and private; both involve acknowledging endings as well as beginnings; both involve agential volition as well as more passive acceptance of an external power; both appeal to a new identity in its fullness and yet recognize that it must also be grown into (Wirth 2019, 7). And, of course, not insignificantly, conversion frequently involves changes to the body, notably via male circumcision in Judaism and Islam (Wirth 2019, 9). Importantly, the thing about conversions is that they can happen in various directions, "into" and "out of" particular traditions. In terms of religious conversion, there will always be some who do not accept the truth of the individual's new reality but consider them perpetually apostate. It is rare, though not unheard of, for converts to return to their original faiths: or, we might say, to detransition. The fact of the return need not undermine either the reality of the conversion experience while it was happening, nor the goodness of the time spent avowing an identity that differs from the one the individual ultimately comes to profess.

Conversion is also an important image for Regina Ammicht Quinn, who notes that it can fruitfully mean a turning-away from certainty, including the certainty that a given individual is always and forever a man or a woman, or that body, gender, identity, and desire must mutually "fit" (Quinn 2016, 458). Christianity, too, in fact, holds Quinn, needs to be "converted" toward faith in a God greater than human attempts to maintain order: converted, in fact, toward a grand creative disorder (Quinn 2016, 459).[2] In his essay on the development of Christian doctrine, John Henry Newman holds,

> A great idea … is elicited and expanded by trial … Nor does it escape the collision of opinion even in its earlier years, nor does it remain truer to itself, and with a better claim to be considered one and the same, though externally protected from vicissitude and change … It tries, as it were, its limbs, and proves the ground under it, and feels its way. From time to time it makes essays which fail, and are in consequence abandoned. It seems in suspense which way to go; it wavers, and at length strikes out in one definite direction. In time it enters upon strange territory; points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and fall around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. (Newman 1878, 40)

Newman is not a theologian with whom I find affinity in all respects, to say the least; but his description of the growth and expansion of ideas is instructive and has wider application. There is no shame in having changed one's mind: indeed, to have done so might be deemed to have exposed an emergent idea or conviction to proper scrutiny, weighing, and testing how it sits within one's conceptual universe.

It is significant that within the Christian tradition there has been a long-lasting commitment to body-soul-spirit unity: indeed, it is precisely on these grounds that commentators like Mark Yarhouse (2015), Oliver O'Donovan (1983) and Andrew T. Walker (2017) have held that gender transition is not ideal, since it seems to set up or reinforce the possibility of separating them. Yet we can also hold to the idea of body-soul-spirit unity from a trans-affirming perspective, and note, with theological forebears such as St Macrina, that body and soul unfold *together* and that the soul animates and nourishes the body without being separable from it (see discussion in Brown Dewhurst 2020, 448).[3] There are two implications that proceed from this latter position. First, a soul that does not nourish the particular body, but which renders life in the particular body unliveable, is a sick soul. (Yarhouse would say that that means the best therapeutic approach is to treat the soul until it is no longer sick, so the person may live peaceably in their unchanged body. One could say, conversely, however, that the sickness lies not in the soul as such but in its lack of fitness for this body.) Second, it is questionable whether we can appeal to a soul-self that precedes the body in order to justify not making changes to the body (i.e., whether we can justly argue that a trans person seeking to make their female body male is betraying their "real" female self).

E. Brown Dewhurst draws, further, on the argument of Macrina's brother Gregory of Nyssa that it is body and soul together that constitute the self, and on his musings on which body represents the "real" self in a world of physical transience, change and decay (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 449–50, in conversation with Gregory's *De Anima et Resurrectione*, which records his dialogue with Macrina on her deathbed). If the

resurrected body bears little or no resemblance to any of the manifestations of the bodies we have had on earth, asks Gregory, how will we know ourselves in the new creation—and if we do not, how far are our resurrected selves really in continuity with our present embodied selves (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 451)? Macrina's response is that attachment to any manifestation of the body pre-resurrection is attachment to personhood "under the effects of evil" (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 451). So,

> Macrina argues that our identity *is* bodily, but that the sufferings and passages of time that alter our bodies mean that we are an imperfect version of ourselves in this life. Who we will be at the resurrection will be free from the influence of evil and the ravages of impermanence. The passing of time is an effect on us, and is not essential to who we are. We are more than the sum total of what is done to us and happens to us. Importantly, this means that there is still a wholeness to us as persons even when time and the changes of this world disfigure us. (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 452)

It is perhaps not surprising that Macrina, near death at the time of this exchange, hopes for a body beyond the ravages of bodily suffering and pain, and holds that her own self is not limited by "disfigurements" in time. As Brown Dewhurst notes, though, Macrina's account of true human nature is strikingly detached from many of the manifestations in which identity is commonly held to be most authentically expressed, such as sexual relationship and birth (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 453). We might also want to push back a little at the idea that impermanence and transience are inherent ills. Appeals to goods such as permanence, faithfulness and stability are familiar in both theological discourse and in discourses underlying social cohesion (which is part of the reason for people who transition gender having, in many jurisdictions, to swear that they intend the change to be permanent). However, both trans-affirming and trans-suspicious commentators might be able to share a conviction that there are times where uncertainty and fluidity are precisely a positive thing: as, for example, when a gender-variant prepubertal child expresses a desire to explore social transition, but where the question of whether this will turn out to be a permanent change is left open. And is there not, after all, something properly creaturely about impermanence?

That said, as Brown Dewhurst explores, Macrina's account helps make sense of the ways in which we may experience simultaneous attachment to and detachment from our bodies (which we might interpret as both a longing for and a realization of the impossibility of accessing an "original" creation unmarked by sin). If it is possible to conceive of an embodied human nature unravaged by sin, we need not be overly attached to our bodies as they are now; yet we can still hold that there is *something* about embodiment, which is inextricable from our experience of selfhood: so we might justly be disturbed "if someone were to propose giving us a

completely new body on the grounds that our cells die and are replaced all the time anyway" (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 458). Ethically, Macrina's account makes it possible to maintain an attachment to and affirmation of materiality and embodiment in principle without getting hung up on any particular manifestation of embodiment given its transience (Brown Dewhurst 2020, 459).

Our ends—our virtues, destinies, and goals—cannot be understood as in any uncomplicated sense ahead of us, any more than the truth about us can be found in a once-and-for-all, over-and-done-with moment of blueprint-generating creation. The goods to which we aspire, then, are not only the ones we cannot grasp, the ones in a mystic future time that might never come, but also those we build here and now, in continuity with and discontinuity from what we have already been and what we may yet be. As Alistair McFadyen has suggested, the doctrine of the image of God might be understood performatively and indicatively (McFadyen 2016, 120; cf. McFadyen 2012): not as communicating something static about humans, but something active and dynamic. Our nature as humans, including our sexed and gendered nature, is not over-and-done-with, and cannot be invoked independent of the context in which the invocation is happening and the human life is being lived out. In this sense, our active building and shaping of our identities and body-stories is not a rejection of a divine blueprint for human existence, nor an exercise of illegitimate human hubris, but rather a licit creaturely form of generativity.

Trans People's Identity and Neurodiversity

Next, I want to turn to questions about the extent to which transforming our perspective allows us to attune ourselves differently to what constitutes health. Querying the taken-for-granted need not signify brokenness or inadequacy: in fact, coming at things from a new angle can allow us to appreciate a broader range of perspectives on normality and help us to understand that what are taken for granted as goods for a majority do not necessarily function in this way universally.

A wide variety of explanations for the apparent connection between gender diversity and neurodiversity have been offered, though sometimes in ways that pathologize either or both. These explanations include the suggestion that autistic people have an impaired capacity for empathy, which might decrease the likelihood that they will live with an uncomfortable gender role simply for the sake of the comfort of others; and the suggestion that autistic people, who often seek clarity and precision, may be more invested than neurotypical people in finding precise gender categories that do justice to their identity (Jack 2012).[4] Jordynn Jack argues that gender, as a social and rhetorical system, goes hand in hand with other such systems, and those who find themselves rejecting other such systems may

consciously or unconsciously reject gender too, so that "Individuals with autism may not recognize gender in the first place or may learn to do so later in life" (Jack 2014, 191).

Y. Gávriel Ansara and Peter Hegarty (2011) argue that people on the autism spectrum, who tend to be very conscious of things that seem to them illogical, unjust, or unclear, may simply have less tolerance than others for letting what appear to them to be arbitrary social norms (including gender conventions) go unchallenged (see also Kristensen and Broome 2015). As a corollary, autistic people may be more willing to disclose gender variance and less reserved about seeking medical intervention for their gender diversity than neurotypical people, arguably more in thrall to social norms, might be (Kennedy 2013). Laura Jacobs and her colleagues (Jacobs, Rachlin, and Erickson-Schroth 2014) argue that a tendency to be impatient about ambiguity, in tandem with a propensity to hold to rigid ideas, might make it harder for autistic people to form binary gender identities if they are keenly aware that aspects of their behavior and interests are not usually associated with someone of their sex. If female children have an overly fixed view of what girls "should" be like, say Jacobs et al., they may conclude that since they do not feel this way, they cannot really be a girl. Similarly, Pasterski, Gilligan, and Curtis claim that autistic individuals' "tendency to be naive, immature, and inexperienced in socializing may lead an individual, male or female, to conclude that s/he does not fit in with his/her cohort, and that s/he would better fit in with the opposite gender" (Pasterski, Gilligan, and Curtis 2014, 391). In other words, they suspect, a sense of difference from their peers that many young people experience may be attributed, by young people on the autism spectrum, to being gender diverse, when in actual fact, it is a common part of adolescence. That said, Pasterski, Gilligan and Curtis found that the correlation between trans identity and the autism spectrum was not limited to adolescents but existed in adults too.

Turban and van Schalkwyk (2018), however, believe that the link between autism and trans identity may have been overstated. They note that although several studies (e.g., Strang, Kenworthy, and Dominska 2014; Janssen, Huang, and Duncan 2016; Van Der Miesen, Hurley, and De Vries 2016) find higher than average rates of "gender variance" among young autistic people, in many cases, these adolescents had not received a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Turban and van Schalkwyk argue that simply expressing that one *sometimes wishes* one was the opposite sex (perhaps because one knows that one's hobbies or interests are more usually associated with people of another sex) does not constitute gender dysphoria. Indeed, it might, rather, express frustration or distaste at the social limitations placed one's own sex: a tomboyish girl might think, "I wish I were a boy – not because I inherently despise being a girl, but because being a boy seems a better prospect given expectations for girls

and for boys in my culture." Noting the studies that seem to find that gender-variant young people are more likely to experience social or behavioral problems (e.g., Pasterski, Gilligan, and Curtis 2014; Skagerberg, Di Ceglie, and Carmichael 2015; VanderLaan, Leef, and Wood 2015), Turban and van Schalkwyk hold that these might result not from a congenital autism spectrum disorder, but as a result of emotional deprivation and social stigma specifically connected with being trans. The authors of one such study note themselves that the presence of various psychological vulnerabilities in young people with gender dysphoria could be a result of social stigmatization of their identity, rather than the identity itself (Bechard, VanderLaan, and Wood 2017, 685).[5] In other words, it is not surprising that social relationships might be impeded when one has suffered stress, rejection and bullying on the grounds of one's gender—but this (like wishing one were a boy in a society where boys have more opportunities and privileges than girls do) is a contingent rather than an absolute situation, and does not mean one is autistic. Clearly, however, it is not uncontroversial to hold, as Turban (2018) does, that young trans people who exhibit apparent "social deficit" signs of autism might simply stop exhibiting them if they felt accepted in their gender identity, since this suggests that non-autistic outcomes are preferable and itself betrays neurotypical bias. Turban's hope that apparently autistic young people might, with compassionate treatment, turn out not to be autistic, is not a million miles from Mark Yarhouse's hope (as in Yarhouse 2015) that apparently trans young people might come to make peace with their biological sex.

Advocates for autistic people frequently emphasize the fact that the neurodiversity is an integral part of the autistic individual and that it is not meaningful to try to conceive of the person without the autism. It is "baked in." The person's autistic characteristics are part of who they are, not something that could be removed without changing their personhood. This of course has important implications for theologies of eschatology and resurrection identity, perhaps even more so than the significant extant theologies on disability (e.g., Yong 2007; Reinders 2008; Creamer 2009; Haslam 2012) and dementia (e.g., Swinton 2012). Neurodiversities like autism are, arguably, as much of a superpower as an impairment. However, Dirk Evers holds that,

> Given that autism can be an objective burden to human lives, and given that there may be human-made causes for autism, which should better be avoided, nobody should *construct* autism as uniformly non-pathological, which is an act of domination itself and in danger of paternalism. On the other hand, nobody is in a position to draw a clear boundary between autism that is non-pathological and autism that is pathological. The individual must have priority. (Evers 2017, 168)

Whether or not it can be demonstrated that trans identity and a neurodiversity like autism are related to each other in terms of *causation*, the notable overlap between the individuals experiencing such identities makes the *correlation* worthy of further reflection. Trans people have, similarly, held that their gender variance is as much a part of them as their eye color, and that without it they would not be truly themselves.

But there are areas of potential from the neurodiversity movement, which are helpful in finding constructive ways forward for theological accounts of variant gender. One is its keen recognition that norms of illness, pathology, functionality, and health are deeply cultured and contingent, and, as Evers glosses, are "far too often not in accordance with human dignity and self-fulfillment, but serve political, ideological, religious, or economic goals" (Evers 2017, 169). Another is its highlighting of the ways in which diagnosis and management can become ways of disappearing or selecting out particular pathologized differences. Additionally, neurodiversity advocacy notes the importance of autistic people's "right to make decisions on their own behalf, even when their condition might call their competence into question. It includes the right to make mistakes" (Evers 2017, 169). In other words, well-motivated attempts to "protect" people deemed vulnerable are not immune from patterns of paternalism and control.

Evers persuasively holds that, in a cultural context where categories of normality, nature, and health are recognized as constructed, contested, and plural, human nature is best understood as a set of variants more or less amenable to feeding into the "good life" (Evers 2017, 176–77). In terms of theological anthropology, human identity is not given and sewn-up, but a calling in response to which humans develop (Evers 2017, 177). This, then, does not answer for us as Christians or as humans more broadly the question of how to judge what is and is not good or desirable. It does not help us negotiate where to set the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable variation. It does not short-circuit the hard work of making moral assessments. Nonetheless, it will inform *how* we approach these questions. For Evers, this is best done as an apophatic or negative theological anthropology, which recognizes humans' calling to live up to the image of God in them but does not delineate exactly how this must be done—for, like the God in whose image they exist, humans are indefinite and indeterminate (Evers 2017, 178). The image of God rests not in particular abilities, genders or sexualities, but in humans' existence as grounded in God (thus far Evers follows David Kelsey). Crucially, for Evers, "Being created is not the same as being designed and produced. Existence is a calling and not a given property" (Evers 2017, 179). The biblical creation accounts do not assume that creation is an end, but rather a beginning: it is not complete from the start. "In the Christian, biblical perspective, there is no ideal of perfect goodness, no given norm of naturalness, no

unchallenged notion of normality. Creation must always be defended against chaos, and it comprises construction as well as destruction" (Evers 2017, 179). All this means that "an unusual mental condition may be experienced as a burden, a challenge to oneself and to others, but it must not be seen as defect, failure, deformity, or, in a religious perspective, as deviance from the will of the creator" (Evers 2017, 180). Here, Evers is still talking about autism, but, given the frequent assessment of gender diversity as mental health impairment across much conservative theological discussion of it, Evers' account is incisive with regard to trans identity too.

Indeed, Evers himself has pointed to implications for trans theologies in Evers 2016. Here, he usefully outlines a trans-theological anthropology of gender as emerging, unfolding, a lifelong vocation to be explored. Just as God is diverse, so humans image God in their diversity, including gender and sexual diversity (Evers 2016, 479). Following Charles Taylor (1985), Evers emphasizes humans' nature as "self-interpreting animals" (Evers 2016, 466). Human self-understanding is direction-oriented and sense-oriented: we are sense-making creatures who seek reason and purpose, yet also experience our choices as constrained and not totally free (Evers 2016, 467).

For the purposes of tracing connections between gender diversity and neurodiversity, Melanie Yergeau's concept of "neuroqueerness" is particularly helpful—especially given that she figures autism as conscious identity rather than involuntary impairment or deficit. Like trans and other LGBTQI people, she argues, autistic people frequently experience being denied the agency to be the primary authorities on their own lives and experiences (Yergeau 2017, 1), and their capacity for licit expression is frequently undermined. Like trans people, autistic people often have to think hard about whether to disclose their status, largely because they may be aware that, if they do so, others will rush in to populate this label with meaning, not trusting the trans (or autistic) person to be able to do so reliably themselves. Yergeau figures autistic people not as those who *cannot* fit into neurotypical modes of speech, action and behavior, but as those who consciously reject them. Neuroqueer persons are "unoriented toward all that is normative and proper, whether empathy or eros or gender" (Yergeau 2017, 27). Again, we can see parallels here with trans people more specifically—neurodiverse or not—who have actively chosen not to live within or perpetuate what they understand as problematic and fatally compromised gender systems. Holding that people are only a certain way (autistic, trans or gay, for example) because they cannot help it does its own violence: it paints such identities as so undesirable, so unthinkable, so abject, that no-one in their right mind could possibly choose them (Yergeau 2017, 2). The next step, for Yergeau, is the crucial one: where such an identity or behavior can be represented as involuntary, it can easily be

characterized as less than human (Yergeau 2017, 10), where humanness is too-quickly associated with rationality, agency, and intentionality.

Conclusion

It is formative of us as persons that we are also creatures. This is part of what constitutes us. Yet being creaturely does not diminish our capacity for creation and generativity in our own right. Many trans people are onto something crucial: that is, that we are more powerful as creatures than we have dared to know, and that certain of the limits we have as humans persist, in large part, because we commonly accede to them, rather than because there can be no other way. Although gender transition as a phenomenon is often accused of commodifying and capitalizing on bodies and their enhancement, there is a sense in which gender transition is profoundly anticapitalist. It refuses the dogma that there is no alternative to the systems in which we find ourselves.

Humans are, then, in many senses, transformative creatures. That is: we are *transformative* creatures, with the agency and capacity that this implies, as well as inheritance of the cultural scripts, which we have all been handed for better or worse (Cornwall 2017). We are *trans*formative creatures, in the sense that what has formed us and continues to form us is itself multiple and boundary-crossing (in the sense that transition is about moving from one thing to another). We are trans*formative* creatures, in that we do have peculiar power and agenda-setting capacities for others, forming them as well as ourselves in the process (notably through the influence that human activity has on the rest of the ecosystem—which is why it matters so much that we exercise this power responsibly). And our creatureliness and the theologies that rest in it are *also* formative of us, which is (one reason) why it is so important that trans and gender-variant people are not excluded from theological anthropology. Trans and gender-variant people, no more nor less than others, after all, are on a journey toward perfection.

Some versions of the General Confession from the Book of Common Prayer used in Anglican churches hold that, on the grounds of our various sins of commission and omission, "there is no health in us." In this time between the times, we are frequently conscious of the ways in which our bodies, souls and spirits tire and struggle, exacerbated by illness, depression or injury. The root of the term as used in the BCP gives us words for health in this sense—mental, physical and spiritual health—but also for wholeness, not to mention holiness. Thus can health be a synonym for salvation (Bray 2018). Some versions of the BCP omit the phrase, perhaps because it seems overly condemnatory and perhaps even to diminish the efficacy of divine grace (Bray 2018). In Christ, *everything* has changed—*even* that which appears to have stayed the same. Common sense is common (in the sense that it represents frequent, widely held claims), yet not

absolute. Common does not mean universal: common sense purports to stand for a common good, yet it is strikingly difficult to come to agreement about what this looks like since we all have skin in the game and a tendency to protect and represent our own interests. Because in Christ *everything* has changed, *even* that which appears to have stayed the same, the way things appear to be is not always the way they actually are. This is not to dismiss or diminish our conventions: these are our precious and dearly held ways of muddling through our world. But: there is *no* health in us. There is *nothing* that is so perfect that it does not require redemption in and through Christ. There is *nothing* that Christ's saving grace and work does not touch because there was *nothing* that was not caught up in the web of sin and was therefore not in need of redemption. I am sympathetic to Daniel R. Patterson's contention that conservative Christians have wrongly tended to model their theologies of gender on Adam and Eve—per the "orders of creation"—than on Christ and his thoroughgoing displacement of them (Patterson 2017): that is, in Lutheran terms, on the "orders of redemption." This kind of theology comes, I suggest, from a good impulse to value materiality and continuity between the goodness of bodies and sexes instituted in creation and bodies as we continue to know them. Yet, as Patterson shows, where there is an attempt to trace an unbroken tradition back to Genesis, there is too little acknowledgement of the capacity of Christ to disrupt and to do a new thing.

This is particularly important when it comes to sex and gender because the story that trans-suspicious conservative evangelicals, trans-suspicious conservative Roman Catholics, and gender-critical feminists tell is so compelling to many people: it seems so obvious, so self-evident, that human beings have two types of sexed bodies and that we have tended to organize ourselves and our societies in ways that reflect this. Even so, in Christ, everything has changed, even that which appears to have stayed the same: the concreteness of our newly healthful reality is our health and our salvation. Just as our legacy no longer, if it ever did, depends on our leaving behind children, so we may now sit lighter to the self-protective, hedging, demarcating work that binary sex and gender used to do for us. In Christ, sex and gender need not be predicated on fear, threat, or lack: they are a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Many trans people, like many cis people, will find their present state painful, and yearn to cast off their "earthly tent": for in this tent they groan, longing to be clothed with their heavenly dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:1–2). As creatures, we may experience our bodies as burdensome, and long, as humans, for a time when they will no longer be sources of pain or targets for attack. But our bodies, already made anew—already made to signify differently—have yet another transformation to come: that is, a *transfiguration*, an entry into a yet more perfected form. Those who currently feel at home in their bodies, and those who currently feel alienated

from their bodies, may both and alike hope for and look to this transfiguration. And, as one reading of Paul hints, it may be those currently *most* at home in their bodies—those, perhaps, who not only experience no gender dysphoria but do not understand how anyone else could either—who are least able to walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:6ff) because they are least aware of the disjunction between transfigured bodies and their earlier versions. In light of Christ's death and resurrection, urges Paul, *everything* has changed—*even* that which appears to have stayed the same. "From now on, therefore, we regard no-one from a human point of view"—that is, "according to the flesh"—and that includes our regard for Christ himself, for "we know him no longer in that way" (2 Corinthians 5:16). We need not cling to our bodies, and we need not to relate to God in Christ in these bodies, as we used to understand them. We might be called to let go of, especially, the notion that our ontology is grounded in our biology: our outer nature (our biology?) is, after all, wasting away, even as our inner nature (our sense of self—even, anachronistically, our identity?) is being renewed, "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16–18). Trans people, whose identity, agency and capacity for self-knowledge are frequently treated with suspicion, might justly feel, with Paul and Timothy, that they "are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet … well known; … as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; … as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Corinthians 6:8–10).

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Notes

1. In 2019, a gender-critical radical feminist, Maya Forstater, lost her case at a London employment tribunal. The Centre for Global Development, a thinktank working to alleviate poverty, had chosen not to renew Forstater's consultancy contract, following tweets in which she maintained the right to refer to trans people using pronouns associated with their biological sex on the grounds that she did not believe trans women were women and that no one should be compelled to say things they did not believe. See Bowcott (2019). The judge, James Tayler, ruled that Forstater's belief did not fall under the definition of a religion or belief that would constitute a protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, whereas trans people under the Gender Recognition Act 2004 did have a legal right to be recognized for all purposes in their gender of affirmation. Tayler concluded that "the Claimant's [i.e. Forstater's] view, in its absolutist nature, is incompatible with human dignity and fundamental rights of others" (in

Employment Tribunals 2019, 24). He added, "It is a core component of [Forstater's] belief that she will refer to a person by the sex she considered appropriate even if it violates their dignity and/or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. The approach is not worthy of respect in a democratic society" (in Employment Tribunals 2019, 25). In 2021, this was overturned in an appeal tribunal: judge Akhlaq Choudhury said people had the "right to believe … that as a matter of biology a trans person is still their natal sex", and that even if this belief was "profoundly offensive and even distressing to many others" it "must be tolerated in a pluralist society" (Employment Appeal Tribunal 2021, 55). However, added the tribunal panel, "This judgement does not mean that those with gender-critical beliefs can 'misgender' trans persons with impunity" (2021, 56).

2. That is, Christianity requires conversion "die Bekehrung zu einem Gott, der größer ist als menschliche Ordnungsversuche, und die Bekehrung zu einer grandiosen und wundervollen Schöpfungs-Unordnung" (Quinn 2017, 459).

3. Macrina, a fourth-century woman religious, was a sister of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, the latter of whom left the fullest extant record of her life and beliefs (in his *The Life of Saint Macrina* – Corrigan 2014).

4. Jordynn Jack describes this creation of a diversity of possible gender options as a form of copia, something which "provides a strategy of invention, a rhetorical term for the process of generating ideas. To be specific, *copia* involves proliferation, multiplying possibilities so as to locate the range of persuasive options available to a rhetor" (Jack 2012, 3).

5. They also note that in their own study there was no control group of young people *without* gender dysphoria—that is, no proof that the rates of psychological vulnerability among young gender-variant people differed from those of any other group of young people who might have been referred to a health research unit (Bechard et al 2017, 685).

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