**Telling Stories About Intersex and Christianity: Saying Too Much or Not Saying Enough?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract** Intersex conditions (those where an individual’s body cannot be classified as male or female) have received almost no attention in theological or church circles. This paper draws on empirical research with ten intersex Christians, suggesting that their stories are of relevance to broader theological discourse about sex, gender and sexuality. In a narrative theological framework, stories constitute and reinforce worldviews. Christian communities which invest only clearly-male or clearly-female bodies with legitimacy and cosmic significance risk eliding other types of body-story.

**Keywords:** Intersex, complementarity, sexuality, story, narrative theology

Intersex conditions, when someone’s physical characteristics mean their body cannot be categorized as male or female, are rare. Fewer than 300 people born in Britain each year have conditions of this kind. But a condition’s frequency is not always a good arbiter of how much attention it receives: critics object that whilst “sexy” testicular and breast cancer garner disproportionate attention, bowel and anal cancer – common cancers with image problems –receive far less notice and funding (Arnst 2007; Browne 2001; Hiley 2010; Sulik 2011). Until recently, intersex received almost no attention in theological or church circles. However, the experiences of intersex people have implications for theological understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and personhood which go far beyond what intersex’s relative infrequency might suggest.

In 2012 I conducted empirical work with intersex Christians in Britain, exploring their self-identification as intersex and Christian, and their experiences of talking about intersex with others.[[2]](#footnote-2) I wanted to know whether – in common with some intersex Christians whose stories I had heard – they had encountered suspicion if they discussed their intersex condition in church contexts. Only ten individuals participated; the findings cannot be maximized in any statistically meaningful way. However, they provide a snapshot of these individuals’ experiences – which were, contrary to my expectations, mostly very positive. But this raised interesting questions in itself. Given the compassionate, warm responses of individual ministers and congregations, why do British denominations overall seem to say so little about intersex? Does an apparent lack of public theological talk about intersex contribute to some intersex individuals’ feelings of invisibility?

The Church of England does mention intersex in its documents on human sex, gender and sexuality. *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (2003) contains a chapter on transgender which briefly acknowledges intersex. However, intersex’s treatment there is somewhat lacking. By engaging with it only to prove that transgender is not physical in the same way – and, by association, that transgender is not “real” as physical phenomena are – *Some Issues* fails to give space to the specific questions and challenges faced by intersex people and posed to theological anthropologies (Cornwall 2009).

It might be countered that this is wholly appropriate. Since intersex is biological, and should not be confused with questions of sexual orientation and gender identity, surely we should not expect or desire a very developed discussion of it in a document focussing on sexuality and gender identity. But if that is the logic here, then why bring intersex into the discussion of transgender at all? It seems to me that, by doing so, the writers acknowledge that intersex *does* have implications for discussions on gender and sexuality – yet only when it can be used to query transgender. Intersex’s broader implications – disrupting sex’s stability and “self-evidently” binary nature – are not discussed.

Significantly, in its recent submission to the Government’s consultation on same-sex marriage, the Church of England appeals to “biological complementarity” to justify its assertion that marriage can only take place between people of “opposite” sexes. There is no acknowledgement that biology itself is complex and multiple. The submission cuts a whole swathe of people from signification. Symon Hill comments,

“The Church of England leadership do not seem to have noticed the reality, diversity and uniqueness of the human beings they are called to serve … About one in every 2,500 people are born intersex. Has the Church of England nothing to say about them, let alone to them?” (Hill 2012)

Those in authority in the churches may indeed be well aware that intersex exists, may well take it into account and engage with it at a sophisticated level. But if this awareness and sophistication does not visibly influence the accounts of sex and gender which appear “publicly” as “the Church of England” line, then, to put it bluntly, so what? It is unclear what “biological complementarity” in the submission means, but it seems to be more than just reproductive capacity: the submission suggests that biological complementarity is “seen most explicitly” (Church of England 2012: 3) in reproduction, implying that they are not identical. What “biological complementarity”, then, do heterosexual couples uniquely possess? Is genital anatomy being privileged as a site of ontology? Some conservative theologians, like Robert Gagnon, argue that the “anatomical fittedness” of the penis and vagina demonstrates that they are “made for each other” (Gagnon 2001: 365). Importantly, intersex people have a range of different genital anatomy: indeed, many have external genitalia indistinguishable from those of non-intersex males and females. But for others, their genital anatomy is “ambiguous”, unlike that of males or females, and may make penetrative vaginal intercourse difficult or impossible. Is it really genitalia, for the Church of England, in which similarity and difference most profoundly inhere and on which a whole theology of marriage must rest?

Unlike the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church makes no mention of intersex in its publicly available teachings. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that human beings are unities of bodies and souls, created to be men or women (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p6.htm). There is a high place for difference as reflecting God’s image, but little or none for variation from unambiguous manhood and womanhood. Bodies and souls are one: to be “souled” man means to be sexed male, and to be “souled” woman means to be sexed female.

A charitable interpretation of the Vatican’s silence on intersex might be that it recognizes that rare, exceptional cases cannot be easily legislated for, so has not made a blanket ruling on, for example, whom intersex people may legitimately marry. The Vatican’s alleged assessment of transgender as “a psychic disorder of those whose genetic makeup and physical characteristics are unambiguously of one sex but who feel that they belong to the opposite sex” (Norton 2003)[[3]](#footnote-3) might, in this interpretation, hint at an awareness of the existence of people whose genetics and morphology are *not* unambiguously of one sex: that is, of intersex people.

We might conjecture that the Vatican has chosen not to pronounce publicly on intersex because it realizes that intersex is more complex than it is qualified to pronounce upon. That makes sense. But does it also mean a failure to engage, theologically or pastorally, in outward-facing teaching, with the realities of intersex people’s experience? Among my interviewees, several noted their feelings of “aloneness”:

“I thought I was the only one in the world, you see. In fact for a long time I used to comfort myself with the thought that actually I was an alien child. And I spent most of my childhood waiting for the mother ship to come back for me, to take me away.” (David Forrester)[[4]](#footnote-4)

“I don’t like the word lonely, but one’s alone. And luckily I have a personal relationship with God … I wouldn’t be able to deal with it if I didn’t have a personal belief system. Because it is kind of lonesome.” (Anthony Unwin)

An apparent continued lack of acknowledgement of intersex by Christian denominations is likely to perpetuate such feelings of isolation and aloneness. Failure to acknowledge intersex may sometimes stem from a simple lack of awareness of its existence: one participant commented,

“Except when I have approached [my] elders or minister to discuss it – [there has been] no mention of it … Sometimes I have wondered if this is because it is ‘unmentionable’ or if it just comes from ignorance!” (William Warner)

Denominations including the Methodist Church are now discussing intersex in the context of broader debates on gender and equalities: the question is how best to feed this discussion into training and resourcing for clergy and lay people.

It might be argued that intersex is a minority issue, and that the best people to educate others are intersex people themselves. There is much to recommend this perspective. However, my participants were divided on the wisdom of becoming “celebrity advocates”. Some had participated in television and radio programmes on intersex under their own names; some had spoken to selected people; some were wary about discussing intersex at all, especially in church contexts. Those who did advocate talking about intersex felt it would help others:

“If I can help anybody else … to make their journey easier, I’d be only too willing … I think [intersex] opens the book right up … The only way the world’s going to move forward … is if this is unlocked and brought into the open.” (Rowan Downey)

“I don’t think [Baptists] know a great deal [about intersex]. Because it’s always been a taboo subject. It’s always been swept under the carpet, and that was one of the reasons I did the TV documentary … , to try and bring it out from under the carpet.” (Matthew Lawson)

“I really hope that by talking about this in lots of different ways, be it on a national magazine programme or in academic text, that we can improve the opportunities of future intersex people.” (Sarah Graham)

“Talking to you – one of the reasons I’m doing this is because I think this needs bringing out. A huge stigma and a huge shame people carry … If by doing this I can lift the burden off somebody else’s shoulders slightly, I would have done something worthwhile.” (John Christie)

“I actually feel that … God has made me like this for a reason … Part of my mission, if you like, is to educate … the Church … in the whole awareness … of these sort of conditions … I think there is a great education to be done, and … I think that that is something I should be doing. Being intersex has allowed me to be in a position where I can do that.” (Seren Fisher)

Those who did not want to discuss intersex publicly cited various reasons:

“I don’t feel personally that I need special consideration … As long as there’s a women’s bathroom and a place to change babies and somewhere to sit if your children are really not into sitting in the Mass, then that’s all I really care about and I don’t feel like I need anything special.” (Poppy Hodges)

“I began to speak more openly about my specifically intersex condition … I got a little bit scalded and so I stepped back a bit. The church that I go to is very gay-friendly. It’s not predominantly gay, it’s mostly men and women married, and I don’t really want to talk about that, my intersex identity, there. I’m pretty much open about being not straight, and I’m not bisexual either, but I don’t really feel the need to identify any further with people unless I am getting intimate with them … There are a lot of things in life that [I’m] just never going to be able to explain to people. I’m okay with that now. There were times in my life where I wanted to convince everybody. I used to be politically active … Trying to change people’s minds and opinions and getting change in the world. And now that I’m in my forties I just want to live a quiet life and I don’t want bother … I think … there [needs] to be more information and education. But I’m not willing to be the one that has to break people’s minds open … I need to do something else with my life.” (Anthony Unwin)

Another participant noted that, for his own psychological wellbeing, he had not wanted to over-emphasize his genetic chimerism:[[5]](#footnote-5)

“There are, as it were, professional homosexuals and professional transsexuals, who want to go out there and define their life in terms of that leading characteristic; then there are others who say, ‘No, it’s not that big an issue’. And actually making myself comfortable with it not being a big issue has been most important. So, no, I’m not going out saying, ‘Wahey, look at me, I’m different!’ But on the other hand I am not going to, if the issue came up in some way, deny I am me.” (John Christie)

Reflection on talking about intersex must also consider what such talk aims to achieve. Talking might raise awareness, advance a particular agenda, or be therapeutic for those involved (Still 2008). One participant believed talk about intersex was secondary to internal self-acceptance:

“My own feeling about my intersex condition is central. Basically I don’t give a toss what anyone else, within my church or outside it, thinks about intersex. I think that expecting other people (be it partners, friends or institutions) to make you feel better about having an intersex condition is a dangerous trap, which leads you nowhere and can put a lot of pressure on others, especially life partners. It is not their job to provide you with a stamp of approval. Nor is it the Church’s. There is no short cut on the personal journey of reconciliation with one’s particular humanity, strengths, limitations, warts and all, for any human being. You can’t delegate the responsibility for this journey of self-acceptance to others.” (Vanessa Whitworth)

For most other participants, however, feelings of being acknowledged as acceptable and non-pathological persons were central to their faith journeys. Indeed, scholars of intersex suggest that talk about intersex significantly increases intersex people’s self-esteem and psychological wellbeing (Hester 2006: 52; Karkazis 2008: 233-5). Brian Still, analyzing online intersex support communities, argues that, whilst “bonding enables intersex people to reach out and feel less alone, we also should see bonding as productive beyond the individual” (Still 2008: 90). Such groups “also generate a culture that offers … alternative representations of what it means to be intersexed, and the presence of such meanings play a role in regulating the production of culture beyond” (Still 2008: 91). For many scholars and activists, talk about intersex has involved strong challenges to the early corrective surgery paradigm[[6]](#footnote-6) and the notion that intersex bodies are inherently pathological, problematic and to be corrected (Dreger 1999; Preves 2003; Holmes 2008). Sharon Preves comments that intersex support groups are crucial in allowing people to access information unforthcoming from medics, providing role-models of people with similar conditions, and being a site for new, positive outworkings of selfhood (Preves 2003: 126-133). It would be a pity if Christians’ sometimes seeming lack of engagement with intersex meant that intersex people’s spirituality and faith could not easily be integrated into this broader promotion of wellbeing.

Telling stories in theology and the world

Saying nothing, especially on a subject about which one feels ill-informed and ill-pronounced to judge, might be a sensible and even positive moral choice. There might be sound reasons not to say too much about intersex. But institutions which do say plenty about sex, gender and sexuality, and publicly endorse only the perspective that human sex is always clear and unambiguous, might be considered disingenuous if they do not also disseminate well-informed engagements with intersex. If a Christian denomination ascribes cosmic and ontological meanings to human sex, it should also take into account that not all human sex fits the typical model.

As Still notes,

“Not being able to tell a story, or not being able to tell one that can be heard by others, means more than just not being able to express one’s feelings. Because stories help to shape our perceptions of who we are and of what we believe to be right or true, those persons who cannot tell their stories lack power to influence beliefs, to challenge and shape the truth.” (Still 2008: 40)

In his book on narrative theology, Gerard Loughlin comments, “As I recount my life-story, my story produces the ‘I’ which recounts it. I tell the story by which I am told. And since I am part of a larger community – one in which others tell stories about me, just as I tell stories about them – I am the product of many inter-related narratives, as is everyone else” (Loughlin 1996: 18). Stories, he comments, are what constitute our world and our understanding of it. When stories change, society changes. Importantly, for Loughlin, stories are also provisional: God’s story has not yet ended, but is still unfolding in and through Christians’ lives. Even the Church must recognize its own penultimacy (Loughlin 1996: 24) – and, we might add, the penultimacy of the stories about sex and gender it has often sanctioned, endorsed and promoted. Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell add that story has particular implications for Christian ethics, because narratives form moral character for individuals and communities. They note,

“Our experiences always come in the form of narratives that can be checked against themselves as well as against others’ experiences. I cannot make my behavior mean anything I want it to mean, for I have learned to understand my life from the stories I have learned from others.” (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997: 168)

Stories about what is moral and good are communal ones, in which individuals are formed. But they are also formed *by* the individuals, the moral agents, who tell and retell stories. Through the behaviour of individuals and communities, we come to endorse particular stories as “better” than, or more truthful than, alternative accounts (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997: 180). Importantly,

“Stories which … offer ways to see through current distortions can also … empower us to free ourselves from destructive alternatives, for we can learn how to see a current ideology as a distortion by watching what it can do to people who let it shape their story.” (Hauerwas and Burrell 1997: 186)

The stories we *tell* are themselves *telling*: they point to the assumptions, norms and models we carry with us, and betray or show up the theories with which we are working.

Those of us in the West have been influenced by the stories we have been told about the self-evident and clear nature of human sex, in its binary presentation as male and female. Those of us working in a Christian theological tradition may have encountered particular cosmic as well as social importance attached to this narrative, with this model presented not just as the way things happen to be, but as the only and specific way they could have been given the pattern of human sex ordained and intended by the creator God. But as Hauerwas, Burrell and others realize, stories are dynamic and can be changed. We are not simply passively shaped by our social and theological stories. We are sometimes struck by apparent inconsistencies between the story passed down to us – the story that has shaped us – and other evidence in the world around us, which might cause us to question or reflect differently on the received version of the story. This takes imagination and, sometimes, a creative leap of faith, influenced by the broader ethical principles of the communities in which we find ourselves nurtured: “We can only act within the world we can envision, and we can envision the world rightly only as we are trained to see” (Hauerwas 1983: 29). Christian communities with a deep commitment to telling stories which invest only clearly-male or clearly-female bodies with legitimacy and cosmic significance might risk eliding other types of story. Being “trained to see” might, therefore, in future, include being trained to read and interpret “atypical” bodies differently: not as unproblematically pathological, but as testifying to the variety and diversity of the world.

Christians often tell stories in which clearly-sexed male or female bodies reflect God’s intent in the orders of creation more truthfully than intersex bodies. But intersex people have their own stories to tell, and – whether or not any individual intersex person feels that talking about intersex is their vocation – the Church needs to listen. If the memory and story of Jesus are embodied by those who share in it, then the body of Christ is also an intersex body, constituted and subverted by those intersex Christians whose lives are testimonies of the place faith has held in their journeys.

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1. This article is based on the text of a paper I presented to the University of Chester Theology and Religious Studies research seminar in January 2013. I am grateful to all those who engaged via questions and comments on that occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This research formed part of the project which I lead at the Lincoln Theological Institute, University of Manchester, entitled Intersex, Identity, Disability: Issues for Public Policy, Healthcare and the Church, running until 2014 (http://lincolntheologicalinstitute.com/intersex-identity-disability/). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Vatican’s statement on transgender has not officially been made public. In 2000, a document produced by the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation was sent secretly to papal representatives, and, in 2002, to the presidents of bishops’ conferences. In 2003, John Norton of the Catholic News Service reported that the document defined transgender as outlined above. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Research participants’ names have been changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Genetic chimerism involves a mixture of XX and XY cells in the same individual, and may cause some internal or external genital ambiguity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. From the mid-1960s until the mid-1990s, many infants born with atypical genitalia in Europe and North America underwent initial “corrective” surgery soon after birth, often without the full knowledge or consent of their parents. This surgery sometimes involved invasive and irreversible procedures, such as the removal of all or most clitoral or penile tissue. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)