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2021

omnigender

A Trans-religious Approach

REVISED AND EXPANDED

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THE
PILGRIM
PRESS
Cleveland

This book is dedicated with love
to my immediate family:
Suzannah
Paul and Barbara
Miranda, Sarina, and Corrine.
Starting with them,
I seek to enact love
toward God, Her world,
and all the creatures in it.

The Pilgrim Press
700 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44115-1100
thepilgrimpress.com

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Grateful acknowledgment for permission to reprint from the following: Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976). Copyright © 1976 Yale University Press. William O. Beeman, "What Are You? Male, Merm, Herm, Ferm, or Female?" *Baltimore Sun*, March 17, 1996. Roz Kaveny, "Talking Transgender Politics," in *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (New York: Cassell, 1999). Copyright © 1999 Cassell.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mollenkott, Virginia R.
Omnigender : a trans-religious approach / Virginia Ramey Mollenkott.
p. cm.
"Revised and expanded."
ISBN-13: 978-0-8298-1771-3 (alk. paper)
1. Transgenderism—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Transgenderism—Religious aspects—Comparative studies. I. Title.
BR115.T76M65 2007
261.8'3576—dc22

2007036171

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Chapter Five

Omnigender Confronts the Scriptures and Church History



IN ADDITION TO the Scripture passages from the Hebrew Bible discussed in the last chapter, there are many passages in the Christian Scriptures that contain transgender images, and church history is replete with transgender figures. In this chapter we will examine some of the biblical passages, historical figures, and doctrines that have implications for transgender theology.¹ As we explore these sources, we will see the ways in which some Christians have denied these realities and participated in doublespeak in order to defend the binary gender construct.

As a beginning, I cannot resist mentioning the irony that, despite its conscious condemnation of transgender appearances and behaviors — especially its burning of witches, who were thought to have the power to change their sex — the church still dresses its male priests in full-length gowns or frocks (and “defrocks” them if they get too out-of-line), and still assigns to them the “feminine” work of preparing and distributing communion and washing up the “dishes” afterwards. If the medium is the message, what is the message here?

The Christian Doctrine of Jesus’ Virgin Birth

One of the primary narratives in the Christian Scriptures, the annunciation to the Virgin Mary and the subsequent birth of Jesus, introduces

1. For a breezy, readable survey of biblical transgender people (especially lesbians and gays) from a Christian perspective, I recommend Reverend Nancy L. Wilson, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

an intersexual theme into the heart of the Christian story. Let me explain.

In its September 1983 issue, the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* published an article by Edward L. Kessel, emeritus professor of biology at the University of San Francisco, entitled “A Proposed Biological Interpretation of the Virgin Birth” (129–36). In that article, Kessel explained that if we believe Scripture that Mary had never been with a man when she conceived Jesus, then “Jesus’ conception, gestation, and birth were parthenogenetic.” He cites the views of several research scientists who separately reached the conclusion that virgin birth is “probable among humans.” He also explains that virgin-conceived offspring are always chromosomal females, and that “because human beings have the same X-Y kind of sex determination found in other mammals, with the female . . . possessing two X chromosomes, Jesus was conceived as a chromosomal female.” And because “no animal can change the genotype that it receives at conception, Jesus remained female always in this chromosomal sense.”

How then to account for Jesus’ maleness according to the gospel witness? Kessel explains that Jesus underwent a sex reversal to the male phenotype, adding that “biologists are generally agreed that sex reversal, like parthenogenesis, may sometimes occur in human beings as it does in lower animals.” He describes several scenarios by which the sex reversal might have occurred, and several genetic scenarios concerning the probable genotypes of Mary and Jesus. But for our purposes, the important factor is Kessel’s conclusion: “The female embryo Jesus of the Virgin Conception and Incarnation became the two-sexed infant of the Virgin Birth who was the androgynous Christ, bearing both the chromosomal identification of a woman and the phenotypic anatomy of a man.”

Kessel goes on to champion female ordination on the basis of his findings: “No one can longer argue effectively against the ordination of women in the church on the grounds that Christ was a man. Christ was also a woman” — and to Kessel, that amounts to “a Perfect Human Being.”²

2. In 1988 Kessel incorporated and expanded his research into a book: Edward L. Kessel, *The Androgynous Christ*, privately printed and available only from the author.

No wonder Jesus of Nazareth has always been regarded by mystics as androgynous! And in the theology and liturgy of the Orthodox Christian Church, the wound in Christ's side is analogous to female genitals, so that Christ gives birth to "his" bride, the Church, through the wound in "his side, just as Eve was drawn from the side of Adam."³ Talk about transgenderism!

While Kessel himself is careful to deny that Jesus was bisexual, hermaphroditic, or pseudo-hermaphroditic (all of which he considers pathological and/or defective), I cannot help making a connection to the Genesis depiction of a God who is imaged as both male and female and yet is literally neither the one nor the other. A chromosomally female, phenotypically male Jesus would come as close as a human body could come to a perfect image of such a God. And since I do not share Kessel's view that hermaphrodites or intersexual people are necessarily pathological or defective, it seems to me that from the perspective of his findings, intersexuals come closer than anybody to a physical resemblance to Jesus — unless perhaps we grant that honor to post-operative female-to-male transsexuals who remain chromosomally female after their transition to maleness.

Certainly the least that can be said about Kessel's work is that if he is correct, any church that worships in Christ's name should be willing to let go of an inaccurate and unjust binary gender construct that does not allow room for a Christ Himself who is also Christ Herself!

Kessel's understanding of Jesus' birth as literally parthenogenetic accords well with a recent emphasis within the academic field of *theology* (discourse concerning the Goddess), an emerging field of study in

3. "Jesus," in *Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, and Spirit*, ed. Randy P. Luncunas Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Mariya Sparks (New York: Cassell, 1998), 190. See also Graham Ward, "The Gendered Body of the Jewish Jesus," in *Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter, and David Townes (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 180 and 187; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 199–200; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

England and elsewhere.⁴ Theologians understand the fabric of the cosmos to be "originally and fundamentally, metaphorically and actually, parthenogenetic — generating or reproducing without sexual union." Goddess-feminists understand sexuality to be "non-ordinary," referring "above all to the quasi-parthenogenetic power of women to generate power and matter in and of themselves."⁵

Similarly, Kessel's description of Jesus as phenotypically male and chromosomally female accords well with contemporary transgender politics. Professor Gerard Loughlin of the University of Newcastle puts it this way: "It is only in the complex, fecund and fluid matrix of Christ-become-the-Church that Christian theology may refigure masculinity. . . . Since the body of Christ is . . . both the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, the mother who nurtures her children, and each and every one of them, it cannot be supposed that Christian masculinity is [exclusively any] one thing. . . . This understanding of how identities are destabilized in Christ also explains the appropriateness of thinking Christ hermaphroditic, and in certain strands of medieval monasticism and mysticism. . . . Christ is at one and the same time male and female, masculine and feminine." Emphasizing that such an understanding of Jesus could bring about a "possible refiguring of our sexed identities," Professor Loughlin asks an important question: if "the male Christ is both feminine and masculine, can we any longer be certain as to what constitutes masculinity and femininity?"⁶

F. Scott Spencer points out that in Jesus' dialogues with women as recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus' conversational style tends to be "unstable," vacillating between assertions of his own authority and reaching out empathetically: "Thus he teeters between conventional male and female conversational styles, usually opening the discussion in the masculine, hierarchical mode of opposition and then ending in a more feminine, mutual

4. See Melissa Raphael, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

5. Melissa Raphael, "Theology and Parthenogenetic Reproduction," *Religion and Sexuality*, 214.

6. Gerard Loughlin, "Refiguring Masculinity in Christ," *Religion and Sexuality*, 410–11.

tone of connection.”⁷ Spencer also comments that “Jesus’ acts of touching, weeping, perspiring, and pouring in the Lukan passion narrative — all carried out with intense feeling (passion) — correlate with similar emotional displays by the anointing woman” of Luke 7:37–48.⁸ Since Jesus occasionally did the work assigned to women of his place and time, cooking for the disciples or washing their feet, he makes a wonderful champion for gender transgressors everywhere.

What about Jesus’ Sexual Orientation?

Like the vast majority of Christian commentators, F. Scott Spencer assumes that Jesus “led a life of total celibacy” — indeed, that Jesus is “the model ‘eunuch’ for God’s kingdom” (40). But the recent clamor created by Dan Brown’s novel *The DaVinci Code* and the film based upon it now has some people convinced that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. While that is perhaps doubtful, there can be little doubt that Miriam of Magdala “always walked with the Lord” and was Jesus’ sister, his mother and his companion, “as the Gospel of Philip proclaims.”⁹

Hence Jean-Yves Leloup introduces his translation of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*¹⁰ with this comment: “The Gospel of Mary, like the Gospels of John and of Philip, reminds us that Yeshua was capable of intimacy with a woman. This intimacy was not merely of the flesh, it was also emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. . . . By invoking the realism of Yeshua’s humanity in its sexual dimension, the Gospel of Mary in no way distracts from his spiritual and divine nature. . . .”¹¹

7. F. Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth: The Women in Jesus’ Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 100. In this book Spencer also points out some interesting male to female gender role reversals in Matthew (39), and some female to male role reversals in Mark (47–68).

8. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

9. *The Gospel of Philip* is one of the texts discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. The word translated “Companion” is *koinonos*, which can also be translated as *wife*. See Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Philip* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2003), 65.

10. *The [Coptic] Gospel of Mary* was discovered in Cairo in 1896.

11. *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, Coptic translated into French with commentary by Jean-Yves Leloup, English translation and notes by Joseph Rowe (Rochester, Vt.: Inner

So it would appear that Jesus was intimately close with Mary Magdalene, although we know precious little about any details of their relationship. However, far less popular attention has been bestowed on the possibility that Jesus was sexually involved with the beloved disciple. In fact, although the considerable New Testament evidence that Jesus engaged in such intimacy has been mentioned by clerics and artists from Aelred to Terrence McNally, the evidence has been met either with thunderous protest or smothering silence.

By far the most thorough and convincing case has been made by Theodore Jennings Jr. in *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003). With compelling attention to detail, Jennings shows that “the least forced reading of the texts that concern the ‘beloved disciple’ is one which supports that they refer to a relationship of love expressed by physical and personal intimacy — what we might today suppose to be a homoerotic or ‘gay’ relationship” (9). For instance, John 19:25–27 tells us that standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, his aunt, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple. Jesus addresses his mother: “Woman, here is your son”; and to the disciple whom he loved, Jesus says, “Here is your mother.” Although John has already made clear that Jesus’ mother had other sons (2:12 and elsewhere) and therefore is not in need of relatives, “she receives another son — one who becomes her son because he is the beloved of her dying son.” This seems to me the most logical, least forced meaning of Jesus’ action. Jennings comments that this action is Jesus’ “acknowledgment of the special relationship between [himself] and the beloved” (26–27).

True to his subtitle, Jennings describes several other arresting homoerotic narratives from the New Testament, responding with great sensitivity to the details of the text. Explaining them here would lead away from the major focus of this book, but I recommend reading Jennings side by side with the New Testament itself. It does seem relevant,

Traditions, 2002), 12. See also Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

however, for me to quote Jennings's summary of his own careful exposition of Jesus' words on three kinds of eunuchs (Matt. 19:10–12): "The saying of Jesus is scandalous, linking together hermaphrodites [intersexuals] or persons who engaged exclusively in same-sex practices, men castrated for purposes of prostitution, and persons who castrated themselves in religious frenzy. Like many of Jesus' sayings, this one is shocking in daring to link the reign of God with [what would have been judged to be] absurd or outrageous behavior" (153).

In *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*,¹² Will Roscoe covers some of the same territory as Jennings, although his subject is the entire sweep of religious history rather than a close reading of the Christian Scriptures. Roscoe explains that "gender difference, a certain degree of 'queering,' to use current jargon, is essential to shamanism...almost everywhere that shamanistic patterns are found" (127). And he points out that "many characteristics of Jesus' career are similar to that of a shaman," including his connection to mystery rites, and his suffering, death, and resurrection that resemble "typical patterns of shamanic initiation." Furthermore, "In the Gospel of Thomas and other early Christian writings, [Jesus] is credited with preaching the negation of gender — spiritual androgyny — another common element of shamanism" (197).

Roscoe explains that the Greek word *phileo* can mean "'love' in the sense of care and respect toward another, but is also used to denote the feeling of a man for his wife." It can also mean "to kiss." In the Gospel of John, *phileo* is used to describe Jesus' feeling for Lazarus (11:3) and also for the beloved disciple (68). Furthermore, Roscoe refutes the frequent assertion that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality in his discussion of the non-Greek word *raca* or *racha*, which Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount. According to Matthew 5:22 (KJV), Jesus said, "whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council." The word was a mystery until 1934, when a papyrus from Egypt was published that used Raca in reference to a particular person. The context in the

12. Will Roscoe, *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love* (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004).

papyrus indicates that the term *raca* was equivalent to the Greek word *malakos*, meaning "effeminate." Roscoe comments that if this is true, Jesus is admonishing people to avoid what today might be called "fag-baiting" or "gay-bashing" (200).

So: was Jesus a lover of men, especially one of his male disciples? Or the lover of Mary Magdalene? Or the lover of both? My own assumption is that Jesus was bisexual, or perhaps a lovingly affectionate celibate person; but the best advice I can give to readers is to check out all available evidence with an open mind and heart.

For instance, what should we make of this sequence in *The Gospel of Philip*?

The companion [*koinonos*] of the Son is Miriam of Magdala.
The teacher loved her more than all the disciples;
he often kissed her on the mouth.
When the disciples saw how he loved Miriam, they asked him:
"Why do you love her more than us?"
The teacher answered:
"How can it be that I do not love you as much as I love Her?"¹³

Certainly this passage indicates a physical and spiritual intimacy between Jesus and Miriam; but it also indicates that Jesus denies loving her more than he loves his male disciples.

Unless one assumes that all sexual expression is defiled and defiling, or that Jesus was not fully human, there is no reason necessarily to deny that Jesus had a sexual identity and engaged in sexual activity. As a matter of fact, *The Gospel of Philip* treats any act of trust-filled sex as belonging to the divine realm, "an act of theophany."¹⁴

One other factor should be mentioned. According to the sources we have, Jesus opposed the kind of "family values" that exalts the male above the female and the parents above the children. And when he cites an example of the greatest kind of love, it is not the love of husbands and

13. Jean-Yves Leloup, *The Gospel of Philip*, 83–84.

14. *Ibid.*, 22.

wives that he cites. Nor is it the love of other family members. It is the love of friends: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:11–13). As Will Roscoe says, "In place of stratified social relations, Jesus holds up the ideal of comradely love. This way of loving suspends existing hierarchies and transforms unequal relationships into egalitarian ones."¹⁵

At the very least, evidence concerning Jesus' sexuality and his teachings concerning love require vastly more openness to gender and sexual diversity than has been typical of Christianity and society for many a year.

Eunuchs, Homosexual Love, and Same-Sex Couples

As we have seen concerning Jesus' use of the word *raca*, it is not accurate to claim that Jesus never said a word about homosexuality. Another example of Jesus' concern for gender transgressors emerges when we understand the term *eunuch* not only in its literal but also in its symbolic meaning. Literally, the term *eunuch* refers to those who have been physically castrated; but the Bible also uses the term in its symbolic meaning of "all those who for various reasons do not marry and bear children."¹⁶ According to John J. McNeill, Jesus' reference to those who have been eunuchs from birth (Matt. 19:12) is "the closest description we have in the Bible of what we understand as homosexual."¹⁷ McNeill continues, "It should come as no surprise, then, that the first group of outcasts of

15. Roscoe, *Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love*, 75. See also Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Martin is especially strong on the historical connection between "family values" and patriarchal hierarchies of all kinds, and Jesus' opposition to them. True to his thesis that Scripture must be interpreted creatively from many different angles, Martin reviews all angles on Jesus' sexuality but concludes only that Jesus is "a figure of ambiguous sexuality."

16. John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 64. See also the Rev. Nancy Wilson's discussion of eunuchs in *Our Tribe*, 120–31, 281–85.

17. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 65.

Israel that the Holy Spirit includes within the new covenant community is symbolized by the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)." Unfortunately, Christian churches have not continued to embody the kind of inclusion that was practiced by Jesus and the early church and celebrated by Paul in Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer male and female").

Not only did Jesus pointedly praise all of those who for various reasons do not marry and bear children, not only was the baptism of one such person pointedly described in Acts 8:26–40, but Jesus performed a miracle on behalf of a Roman centurion who was distraught over the illness of a boy who may have been his lover (Matt. 8:5–13). Tom Horner points out that Matthew uses the Greek word *pais* to describe the centurion's servant. The word means *boy*, but it is "the same word that any older man in Greek culture would use to refer to a younger friend — or lover." Luke tells the same story in his Gospel (7:1–10), but being Greek and aware of how *pais* would be heard by his Hellenistic readers, Luke uses the word *doúlos* (slave) three times to identify the boy. Matthew, less aware of Hellenistic nuances, has probably used the nearest Greek equivalent of what the centurion actually said: *my pais* — *my boy /my friend /my lover*. Certainly the great concern of the centurion would seem unusual if the boy meant nothing more to him than an ordinary slave. And as Horner points out, "If the homosexual element were present, he [Jesus] was not disturbed by it. Instead, he was overwhelmed by the man's faith, which is clearly the paramount element in the story."¹⁸

Perhaps Jesus' sensitivity to those of outcast or subordinate status in his society stemmed from his awareness that as a person born outside of wedlock (whether parthenogenetically or through illegitimate sexual intercourse), he would have been classified as lacking "proper covenant relationship" in the house of Israel. "Bastards," the fatherless, foundlings, and eunuchs were not permitted to enter the temple, and Jesus no doubt knew he would have been classified as one of them.¹⁹ How ironic that

18. Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 122.

19. Jill L. McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response* (New York: Haworth Press, 2004), 5–6. See also Andries Van Aarde, "Social Identity, Status Envy, and Jesus' Abba,"

so many contemporary churches classify gender transgressors as outcasts in the name of Jesus, who would have been himself an outcast, and for similar reasons!

Close attention to scriptural detail would provide churches with the information that not just once, but twice the New Testament pays tribute to a transgender and homoerotic prophet by quoting him in a positive context (Acts 17:28, Titus 1:12). His name was Epimenides, and it was the author of Titus who called him a prophet. In his study entitled *Greek Divination* (1913), William R. Holliday aligned Epimenides with the transgender shaman Tiresias, who changed sex several times and wore the clothes of both women and men simultaneously. The Jerusalem Bible and other reliable sources attribute to Epimenides these two quotations as used by the apostle Paul, who identified their author as "one of your own poets" and as "a prophet."²⁰ The fact that a transgender person is accorded the singular honor of two positive quotations in the canonical Scriptures should be enough to silence the critics of gender-variant people, especially those critics who claim that the Bible is without error and inspired word-for-word.

Mary Rose D'Angelo adds yet another cautionary note for those who insist the Bible is uniformly negative about any committed love outside of heterosexual marriage. D'Angelo, who teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame, writes about "the early Christian practice of missionaries working in couples," some of whom were married but many of whom were same-sex couples. Describing a first-century sculpture of two women, Eleusis and Helena, clasping hands (a sculpture which was later recut to remove the women's veils and make them look like a male and female with a wedding ring), D'Angelo explains that "what [the] handclasp announces is a commitment between women: not necessarily a commitment that

Pastoral Psychology 45 (1997): 451–72; Donald Capps, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000); and Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

20. Virginia R. Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 50. See also the sources listed in nn. 10 and 11 on p. 175 of *Transgender Journeys*.

is exclusive or primarily erotic in character, but one that is major, that bears the weight that a family commitment would have borne."²¹ In this context, D'Angelo discusses the partnerships of Tryphena and Tryphosa (Rom. 16:12), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), and Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:19).

D'Angelo comments that "the choice of women to work and live together rather than with a man emerges as a sexual as well as a social choice." And she quotes with approval Bernadette Brooten's speculation that in Romans 1:26–27, Paul's remarks about homoeroticism arose in part "from the need to defend the early Christian mission's practice of missionary couples, including his own practice and the women cited in Rom. 16:12 and Phil. 4:1–2."²² D'Angelo adds, "Like female leadership in the early Christian mission, the practice [of female partnerships] raised the spectre of the unnatural woman who plays the role of a man."²³

While D'Angelo makes no claim that the partnerships were necessarily what we today would call lesbian, or that either or both of the women partners would today be described as transgender, she emphasizes that the commitments between these women were real and strong and only represent "the tip of a very deeply submerged iceberg."²⁴ Women's New Testament missionary partnerships form one more reason why it is perilous to claim that the Bible says nothing good about same-sex love and/or transgender roles.

21. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *Que(e)rring Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 444.

22. *Ibid.*, 453.

23. *Ibid.*, 454.

24. *Ibid.*, 454. For abundant evidence that lesbian marriages were well known in New Testament times, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). To the degree that they wanted to be effective missionaries, the female couples D'Angelo describes would of necessity have been closeted, because most ancient writers from all traditions and philosophies disapproved of female homoeroticism. Their reasoning demonstrates my argument that same-sex lovers should regard themselves as *gender* transgressors: homoeroticism was wrong not so much because of *sex* as of *gender*. To ancient thinkers, "the natural order" included strict "gender differentiation in appearance, and . . . man as . . . ruler of the woman," all of which was violated by women who loved women (356).

Transgender Imagery in the New Testament

Years ago, long before I had any conscious interest in transgender issues, I noticed that the New Testament epistles addressed all members of various local congregations as members of God's family and therefore as brothers (as in, for instance, Rom. 14:10 or 1 Cor. 6:5–6). Clearly there were women in the congregation at Rome (16:3–15) and Corinth (1 Cor. 11:2–6) and elsewhere; so there were many "female brothers" in the early Christian community. At the same time, I noticed that the New Testament depicts all believers, viewed collectively, both as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25–27) and as members of Christ's body (Eph. 5:30). If the body of Christ is assumed to be a male body, then Christian women, by putting on Christ like a garment, are imaged as either androgynous he/shes or as transvestites.

And if Christ's body is assumed to be a male body (as the power structures of many churches would still seem to indicate), yet the church itself is assumed to be female (as the numbers in the pews would still seem to indicate), then the church itself is a he/she, a transgender entity. Furthermore, since the men in Ephesus were called Christ's bride — and by extension, all Christian men were called Christ's bride — then the New Testament has used imagery of a same-sex marriage in which a "male" Christ marries not only Christian women but millions of male brides. John Donne, the great seventeenth-century poet and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, fearlessly made use of this imagery when he asked God to use a battering ram on his stubborn heart, indeed to "ravish" (rape) him, because his will was so conflicted that he could not easily yield to his Divine husband.²⁵

Of course, I was aware that this imagery resulted more from subsuming women into male identity (immasculating women²⁶ or else depicting male souls as female) than of deliberate gender blending. And as a member of a Plymouth Brethren Assembly during my youth, I heard vastly more

25. John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 10, 'Batter my heart, three-personed God,'" in *John Donne*, ed. John Cary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 177–78.

26. Natalie Watson, "A Feminist Critical Reading of the Ecclesiology of 'Lumen Gentium,'" in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* ed. Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 77.

about everybody, including women, being "brethren" than I did about everybody, including men, being "Christ's bride." So one time when I was addressing a large conference of people from the Church of the Brethren, I quipped that we Christian women would be more willing to identify as "brothers" if more Christian men were willing to identify as "Christ's brides." Unfortunately, the women in that conference felt so oppressed by their supposed inclusion in the term *brethren* that after my speech a group of them literally backed me against a wall, tears in their eyes, entreating me never to say that again. And recognizing their pain and rage, I never did.

Now, however, that I am trying to open religious minds toward a more fluid concept of gender, I am returning to that transgender imagery for another look. Natalie Watson of the Cuddeson Theological College at Oxford, England, has commented that although "the disembodied androgyny that is created by identifying the essentially feminine church as the body of the male Christ appears absurd to a feminist understanding of embodied reality, it points to the significance of considering the relationship between ecclesiology and bodies, essentially between ecclesiology and women's bodies."²⁷ That's certainly true; but the transsexual imagery also asks us to consider the relationship between the church and gendered bodies of all sorts — male, female, and everybody in between.

We have already seen that Jesus of Nazareth is not exclusively a male Savior after all, judging from his/her parthenogenetic birth. Now we see that Holy Scripture depicts Christian men as his/her brides and Christian women as his/her brothers. At the very least, such biblical gender blending ought to encourage those who take Scripture seriously to become less rigid about gender identities, roles, and presentations.

Consider also Jesus' implication that his/her suffering on the cross was to initiate the labor pangs (travail) of bringing forth a New Humanity (John 16:21–22). Referring to the onset of a woman's painful contractions as the moment when "her hour is come," just minutes later Jesus announces that "the hour is come" (John 17:1) and goes forth to face his trial and

27. *Ibid.*, 80.

crucifixion.²⁸ Similarly, Paul writes of himself as a mother in labor suffering the pangs of giving birth (Gal. 4:19).

Consider too that the early church understood Jesus to be the human embodiment of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, almost always depicted as female in the Hebrew Scriptures. Apparently Jesus understood himself that way also, responding to his critics with words that identified him with Sophia herself: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt. 11:19, NRSV).

And consider the fact the Jesus himself/herself is called the "son of man" because of his *mother*, not because of Joseph.²⁹

For that matter, would the frequent biblical imagery of God as female have been included in the canon of Scripture if all the people made in His/Her image were required to be exclusively one or the other? This is not the place to repeat all that I wrote in my 1983 book *The Divine Feminine*. It is easily available, as is a vast amount of other feminist scholarship about the nature of God Herself, who is also God Himself and God Itself.³⁰

Brigitte Kahl's essay, "Gender Trouble in Galatia? Paul and the Rethinking of Difference" in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* is a fascinating description of the way Paul in Galatians "consciously or subconsciously constructs gender and other identities by confusing them," blurring boundaries in a way that "implies a tremendously transforming potential, which mostly has been kept under cover throughout the centuries of Christian Pauline interpretation" (73). She argues that Galatians 3:28, "Paul's most fundamental statement on border-transgressing unity of race, nation, class and sex, is not just to be considered as a lighthearted

28. Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 16–17. *The Divine Feminine* is now out of print. Copies may be ordered from the author at jstvm@warwick.net; and the entire book is available for reading or downloading at www.questia.com, a twenty-four-hour academic library of over fifty thousand books and thousands of journal articles.

29. This was first pointed out in 1622 by Marie de Jars de Gournay in "Egalité des hommes et des femmes"; see Elizabeth Gossman, "The Image of God and the Human Being in Women's Counter-Tradition," *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* 40.

30. See especially Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

aside but as an integral part of the Pauline text — even if Paul quoted it from somewhere else" (59).

Stating that "the oneness of Jew and Greek, slave and free, and male and female proclaimed in Galatians 3:28 seems to produce something like a masquerade of identities" (61), Kahl cites many illustrations: Paul's becoming a mother (Gal. 4:13), slaves becoming free with a freedom defined as enslavement to one another (Gal. 5:13), non-Jews transmuting into Jews (Gal. 3:7, 29; and 4:31), Jews presented with an Arab grandmother, Hagar (Gal. 4:21–31), "difference that is not opposed to sameness/identity but to non-difference, implying pluriformity and oneness-in-difference" (65), and non-Jewish men who become Jews but remain uncircumcised, "a description previously reserved for Jewish women" (72).

It is certainly true, as Kahl charges, that "by 'clothing' Paul with a Christian identity in the later sense, and after driving the circumcised out of the church, we have silenced and buried this highly challenging discourse on identity and difference, which today could be one of the most precious contributions of Paul to the dialogue of religions and cultures, especially to the Jewish-Muslim-Christian encounter" (71).

But for my purposes in this book, it is Kahl's emphasis on the pluriformity and the depolarizing effect of Galatians that is helpful: "The symbolic superiority of male over and against female, which is marked by circumcision, loses theological foundation and dignity" (71). Kahl muses that non-circumcised Jewish men "must have been perceived as 'different,' irregular, even abnormal . . . not real Jews and not real men . . . Maybe a 'third sex' in between?" (72). Maybe as irregular as intersexuals? Transsexuals? Transgenderists? In Christ, no male and female: It is time for Christianity to regain Paul's vision.

Transgender in Church History

Turning to the history of Christianity, we discover that the Irish Catholic abbot Saint Abban (fifth century C.E.) performed a miraculous transsexualizing of a girl into a boy on behalf of an older couple who were

desperate for a male heir. This transsexual miracle proved no bar to canonization, for Saint Abban's feast day is celebrated on March 16, although some sources say October 26.³¹ We may also be surprised to find that the church has canonized many female to male saints — women who cross-dressed, lived, studied, and worshipped as men throughout adulthood or for significant lengths of time. Leslie Feinberg claims to have uncovered more than twenty such transgender saints.³²

Among them was Saint Pelagia, who had been a courtesan in Antioch before she converted to Christianity and began to identify as Pelagius. When the "wise brother Pelagius," monk and eunuch, was discovered after "her" death to have female anatomy, the mourners chanted, "Glory be to thee, Lord Jesus, for thou hast many hidden treasures on earth, female as well as male." "Her" transgender identity did not prevent canonization, and Pelagius/Pelagia's feast day is October 8.³³

There is also Saint Marina, who assumed the name Marius in order to become a monk. Evicted from the monastery when a woman accused "him" of fathering her child, Marius brought up the child without disclosing "his" gender of birth. Despite the discovery of "his" femaleness after death, Marina was canonized some time later — not as St. Marius, but as St. Marina.

Saint Eugenia of Alexandria was a noblewoman who adopted Christianity, took a male identity, and entered an abbey. When another woman tried to seduce Eugenia, and failing that accused "him" of making sexual advances toward her, the abbot revealed "his" femaleness. After dying a martyr's death, Eugenia was canonized despite full awareness of his/her transgenderism.

Saint Anastasia was a sixth-century Byzantine noblewoman to whom the Emperor Justinian was attracted. To escape his attentions, Anastasia

31. "Abban, Saint," *Cassell's Encyclopedia*, 39.

32. Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 71.

33. "Pelagia, and Saint Pelagia," *Cassell's Encyclopedia*, 264. Unless otherwise indicated, information about other Christian transgenderists is drawn from this fascinating volume.

withdrew into a convent; but when Justinian began to search for her after his wife's death, Anastasia took a male identity and became a hermit monk. Her feast day is March 10.

Saint Galla was a Roman noblewoman who became a hermit monk on Vatican Hill after her husband's death. To do that she, of course, had to assume a male identity, and legend has it that no sooner had she done so than she began to grow a beard. She is fêted on October 3 or 5.

Similarly, St. Paula of Avila was miraculously granted a beard and possibly a complete sex change when she asked Christ to shield her from a man who was pursuing her sexually. Known as St. Paula the Bearded, she is fêted on February 3.

Saint Wilgefortis, whose name means "strong virgin," was also granted a long beard when she asked Jesus to save her from the marriage her father had arranged. Determined to marry her off anyway, her father forced her to come heavily veiled to the wedding ceremony. But when the veil was lifted, her suitor was horrified by the beard and refused to go through with the wedding. Her father had her crucified, no doubt for her "unnaturalness." Her feast day is July 20.

And let us not forget St. Joan of Arc (1412–31), who was told in a vision that she was to relinquish female attire and behavior in order to assume a transgender, Amazon-like identity as a warrior for France. When she was on trial at Rouen and sufficient evidence could not be found to condemn her as a witch, it was her insistence that her cross-dressing and soldiering were divinely inspired that subsequently sent her to the flames. Executed on May 30, 1431, she was found innocent of heresy in 1456 and canonized in 1920. Ironically, her feast day is May 30, the same day the canonizing church had permitted her enemies to burn her to death.

Except for St. Joan of Arc, the many female-to-male transgenderists who were canonized as saints lived during the Middle Ages; yet throughout that period the church continued to invoke Old Testament laws against same-sex love *and cross-dressing*. How could that be? Was it Janus-faced deception, as in the case of the many powerful bishops, archbishops, and even popes who pretended celibacy but carried on active sex lives? I don't think so. For one thing, Christian women were often told on the basis of

Matthew 22:30 that if they embraced celibacy on earth, their reward would be to become males in heaven. (The unmarried male clerics apparently reasoned that if there is no marriage in heaven, that must mean that everyone there is free from the temptations of lustful female sexuality.) Even during this life, “by renouncing the body and sexuality and following ascetic ideals, women in effect transcended their femaleness” and “became, so to speak, ‘honorary males.’”³⁴ Therefore, although to my knowledge the church never canonized a male to female transgenderist, sometimes the hierarchy was willing to assume that certain Christian celibate women had made the transformation to maleness early, so to speak, before reaching heaven. From another perspective, ascetic transvestite women were viewed as having obeyed injunctions like that of Romans 13:14: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires” (NRSV, emphasis mine). Hence, their transgenderism was no bar to canonization.

Even churchly language in praise of women was sometimes what we would call transgender. For instance, Bishop John Chrysostom heaped praise on his patron, the wealthy ascetic Olympia, by exclaiming about her, “Don’t say ‘woman’ but ‘what a man!’ Because this is a man, despite her physical appearance.”³⁵ This discounting of *women’s* spirituality by co-opting it for maleness is yet another result of patriarchal gender dualism: If maleness and masculinity are construed as superior, rational, and noble, what is left for femaleness except to be inferior, irrational, and degraded?

Add to all this the closely guarded secret that throughout church history, there have always been a large percentage of gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgender pastors, nuns, and priests. Some of the gay priests have even risen to the pinnacle of the hierarchy: For instance Pope Paul II, (1417–71), who was known for his effeminate behavior, vanity, beauty, and extravagant clothing, is said to have died of a heart attack during

34. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 210.

35. *Ibid.*, 211.

homosexual intercourse. His successor, Pope Sixtus IV (1414–81), whose good works included founding the Sistine Chapel, granting asylum to Spanish Jews, and establishing the first hospital for orphans, appointed his nephew and beloved, Raphael Riario, to the offices of Papal Chamberlain and Bishop of Ostia.³⁶ Furthermore, according to many scholars, a cross-dressing heterosexual woman was elected Pope during the mid-ninth century: Pope Joan, her papal name being Pope John VIII, Angelicus (853–55). S/he died in childbirth or shortly thereafter.³⁷ And the church’s insistence that s/he never existed is symbolic of the religious erasure of transgender experience.

As for nuns, the case of Sister Benedetta Carlini (1590–1661) has been well documented by Judith C. Brown in *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).³⁸ More general coverage is offered by Rosemary Curt and Nancy Monahan in *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad Press, 1985).

Concerning gay or lesbian Protestant pastors, a readable and compelling survey is provided by Dann Hazel in *Witness: Gay and Lesbian Clergy Report from the Front* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

My point here is simply that it makes no sense for contemporary Christians or Jews to recoil from an omnigender construct because they associate a rigidly binary gender system with orthodox beliefs and practices and associate transgenderism (including homosexuality) with “pagan unbelief.” Although guilt by association may seem a useful tactic, there have been so many honored and honorable transgenderists (including

36. See “Paul II, Pope” and “Sixtus IV, Pope,” *Cassell’s Encyclopedia*, 263, 306–7.

37. “Joan, Pope,” *Cassell’s Encyclopedia*, 191–92. The evidence for Pope Joan’s reign, both pro and con, is described by Peter Stanford in *The Legend of Pope Joan: In Search of the Truth* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), including the fact that amid busts of the other popes, a statue of Pope Joan stood in Siena Cathedral until it was removed in 1691. Interestingly, Stanford mentions (133) that a group of exiled English Catholics in Antwerp in 1566 admitted that Pope Joan had indeed existed, but that not only was she a cross-dresser, she was hermaphroditic (intersexual).

38. Since Benedetta was said to take on the appearance either of Jesus or a beautiful adolescent male, along with a deepened voice, when she made love to Sister Bartholomea, s/he was transgendered as well as lesbian.

homosexuals) during the course of Jewish and Christian history that the guilt-by-association argument will no longer work for any rational person.

Prohibition of Genital Surgery

Deuteronomy 23:1 reads, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord" (NRSV). Does this mean that even men injured in an accident through no fault of their own were prohibited from entering the temple? Apparently, yes. But it must be noted that the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah advocated restoring congregational membership to such men:

...do not let the eunuch say,
 "I am just a dry tree."
 For thus says the LORD:
 to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and who hold fast my covenant,
 I will give, in my house and within my walls
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off. (Isa. 56:3b-5)

Notice the pun in that final phrase! Isaiah's words have given comfort to many thousands of people who for many reasons cannot or do not marry and have children — intersexuals, transsexuals, lesbian women, and gay men among them.

For our purposes at this time, the Big Question is whether Deuteronomy forbids gender reassignment surgery and, if so, whether that law should be applied to contemporary transsexuals. Leslie Feinberg, who calls him/herself a "Jewish, transgender, working-class revolutionary" and who has undergone both female-to-male surgery and its reversal, assumes that Deuteronomy 23:1 does indeed prohibit sex-change surgery. But he/she

considers such laws "trans-phobic" and "gender-phobic," written sometime between the eleventh and seventh centuries B.C.E. and no longer applicable. She asserts that the very presence of such laws does, however, indicate that self-castration and sex-change were widespread enough at that time to be a religious issue.

Feinberg argues that like the prohibition against cross-dressing, the one against genital surgery stemmed from repudiation of cross-gendering among priests of the various goddesses. The prohibitions were also part of a worldwide consolidation of patriarchal rule that required making class distinctions between women and men and eliminating any blurring or bridging of those categories. In order to accomplish that patriarchal consolidation, the communalism of goddess-worshiping societies had to be overthrown in favor of the private ownership of property and the accumulation of wealth.³⁹ This is *not* to say that the Jews invented patriarchy. They were not the first society to organize into class hierarchies — and the patriarchal system that manifested itself in Hebrew culture was at the same time manifesting itself all over the world.

Nevertheless, the Hebrew Scriptures do reflect the rise of a patriarchal ruling class, and they do imply that rules against genital surgery were related to the self-mutilations practiced by some of the priests in Canaanite religion (for instance, Deuteronomy 14:1 [NRSV] says, "You are the children of the Lord your God. You must not lacerate yourselves").

So if Feinberg's assumption is correct that Deuteronomy 23:1 is indeed a trans-phobic law prohibiting sex-change surgery no matter how it is achieved or how desperately it may be needed, there is no longer any need to apply it that way. Judaism is no longer in a survival mode, it

39. Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 50–51. I do not agree with those who dismiss Feinberg as Marxist because of her insistence on the redistribution of wealth. Although she may in fact identify as Marxist, a concern about economic justice is far larger than any one thinker such as Marx; and the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union does not excuse us from seeking to solve the horrors of hunger and poverty. In my opinion, Feinberg is like a Hebrew prophet (see Isa. 58, for example). If Feinberg is exclusively Marxist, then so is Shakespeare (see *King Lear* III. iv. 33–41; IV. I. 60–73; etc.); so was Jesus (Luke 6:24, etc.); and so am I.

is clearly differentiated from other religions, and patriarchal power and capitalistic economies have triumphed to a fault.

As for Christians, the conservative *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, edited by Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962) makes clear that no ruling against sex-reassignment surgery should apply within the Christian community: "In New Testament times such disabilities [i.e., being a eunuch, having endured accidental or deliberate castration] no longer enter into consideration even in the external administration of the church (cf. Isaiah 56:4-5 and Acts 8:27-38)" (186).

Jesus' words about eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 reveal an accepting, respectful attitude that ought to be the norm for the modern church: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth" includes at the very least all intersexual people; "and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others" includes post-operative transsexuals; "and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" includes not only pre-operative and non-operative transsexuals but all other transgenderists, celibates, and homosexuals who do not engage in reproductive sex. The kingdom of heaven is located within us (Luke 17:21); so perhaps what Jesus means by being eunuchs "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" is the Jewish counsel of being true to one's deepest nature. As Jesus went on to say, "Let anyone accept this who can."

But Sally Gross, an intersexual scholar, offers a startlingly different perspective on the meaning of Deuteronomy 23:1 — namely, that it explicitly forbids the removal of gonads and the reshaping of a "too large" clitoris and other such surgeries that are routinely performed on intersexual babies and children. Writes Gross, "Biblical literalists should be persuaded by the letter of Scripture to be very suspicious indeed of genital surgery imposed upon intersexed infants when no intrinsic risk to life and physical health demands it."⁴⁰ Rather than arguing that intersexuals are required by Scripture to seek surgery that will fit them acceptably into society's binary

40. Sally Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture," *Theology and Sexuality* 6, no. 11 (September 1999): 74.

gender system, Christians like Charles Colson should show their respect for an explicit scriptural prohibition against genital surgery of a cosmetic nature. And they should show their respect for the Creator's biodiversity by welcoming "the notion of a spectrum which includes people who are intersexed."⁴¹

I heartily agree with Gross's conclusion: "Biblical literalists are indeed arguably bound by Scripture to respect the sense of many people who are intersexed that violence was done to them by the imposition of what was in effect cosmetic surgery, and to accept that it is right and proper that those who are born intersexed are enabled to remain physically as they are and to identify as intersexed [if they so desire]."⁴²

And obviously, if proper attention to scriptural injunctions requires movement toward omnigender acceptance by all who take the Bible seriously, then human compassion and empathy require such movement by everyone else as well. Indeed, the movement is already underway not only in Judaism, as we saw earlier, but also in Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity. In Catholicism, the Vatican continues to tighten the reins, describing the homosexual orientation as an "objective disorder" and characterizing all extramarital sexual activity as aberrant; and in 2000, the Vatican released a secret document to papal representatives in every country stating that sex reassignment surgery does not in fact change the person's birth-gender, because the new organs lack reproductive function. American Catholics increasingly depart from the Vatican perspective, unaware of the transsexual ruling but with 45 percent currently believing that "homosexuals can be good Catholics," according to recent Gallup research.⁴³ In Protestantism, church debates over the meaning and place

41. *Ibid.*, 71-74.

42. *Ibid.*, 74.

43. Charles Austin, "Christians Grappling with Sin's Shifting Face," *The Record*, March 8, 2000, A-1 and A-14; Denise and John Carmody, "Homosexuality and Roman Catholicism," in *Homosexuality and World Religions*, ed. Arlene Swidler (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1993), 144. The secret document is described by John Norton in an unpublished handout from the Vatican City Catholic News Service, entitled "Vatican Says Sex Change Operation Does Not Change a Person's Gender," dated January 14, 2003.

of sexuality have become so intense that according to the World Council of Churches, “apparently God is calling us to rethink it.” Presbyterian ethicist Marvin Ellison comments that, in all probability, “the great divide is not denominational but rather theological-ethical in character,”⁴⁴ a phenomenon I have explained in a previous chapter.

Avoiding Christian Doublespeak

I predict that despite the mounting evidence presented in this book and elsewhere, some Christian leaders will oppose omnigender with the same doublespeak that has characterized the narrower discussion of homosexuality and the church. Other religions will no doubt replicate Christian problems in their own ways, but I want to limit myself to the controversy I know best.

Gerard Loughlin’s critique of gender and ethics in the influential theology of Karl Barth provides an excellent example of Barth’s Christian doublespeak.⁴⁵ Loughlin makes clear that binary gender is a non-negotiable aspect of Barth’s theology: “Each of us is either male or female, while at the same time being oriented to the sex we are not.”⁴⁶ Barth writes, “In obedience to God, man will be male or female” because God created “an inward, essential and lasting order of being as He and She, valid for all time and also for eternity.”⁴⁷ Yet Barth, writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, also insists that women must not define themselves in terms of “traditional preconceptions” or the “uncalled for illusions of man.” Like every man, every woman must construct her own identity — but in doing so, she must “always and in all circumstances be woman . . . she must feel and conduct herself as such and not as man . . . is the command of the

44. Marvin Ellison, “Homosexuality and Protestantism,” *Homosexuality and World Religions*, 171.

45. Loughlin, “Sex Slaves: Rethinking ‘Complementarity’ After I Corinthians 7:3–4,” *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* 173–92.

46. *Ibid.*, 182.

47. As quoted by Loughlin from Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics III/4*, *ibid.*, 183–84.

Lord, which is for all eternity directs both man and woman to their own sacred place and forbids all attempts to violate this order.”⁴⁸

Which is it, I want to ask Karl Barth: Are women and men free to feel their authentic feelings and to become fully realized selves, the selves we most deeply recognize ourselves to be? Or must we hew to our society’s male-female polarities, imagining them to be God’s will “for all time and also for eternity?” Barth tries to have it both ways; but in practice, that is impossible for millions of people. Barth’s doublespeak reminds me of men who coached girls’ sports teams in the mid-twentieth century, insisting that the girls must play to win but also insisting that they must always behave like ladies, preferably never even perspiring.

A further illustration of what I mean by Christian doublespeak comes from a well respected mainline Protestant book by Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Touted as showing “how the New Testament provides moral guidance on the most troubling ethical issues of our time,” Hayes’s book uses as test cases the issues of violence in defense of justice, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, anti-Judaism and ethnic conflict, and abortion. His treatment of homosexuality shows little or no awareness of the transgender movement, but it is enough to clarify what his position on omnigender would no doubt be.

I chose Hayes’s book because there is so much good about it that the doublespeak is all the more painful. Here’s an instance of the positive aspects of this work: Hayes admits that homosexual behavior is a minor concern in the Bible — “perhaps half a dozen brief references in all of scripture” — and then makes this excellent statement:

What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully, but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents in the right place, not overemphasizing peripheral issues. (Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of

48. *Ibid.*, 183.

homosexuality were devoted to urging the wealthy to share with the poor! Some of the most urgent champions of biblical morality on sexual matters become strangely equivocal when the discussion turns to the New Testament's teachings about possessions.) (381)

To which I say a heartfelt *Amen*.

But when it comes to actual exegesis of biblical references to homosexual acts, Hayes refuses to wrestle with the scholarly evidence that disagrees with his gay-negative interpretations. Instead he sweeps aside all such evidence by calling it "wishful" — not in his own voice, either, but in the voice of a non-self-accepting gay Christian named Gary, spoken when Gary was dying of AIDS. The few times Hayes refers to the work of "gay apologists," his dealings are sketchy, non-contextual, and sometimes appallingly inaccurate. Perhaps the most astonishing example is his statement about John Boswell's award-winning *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Hayes claims that "as Boswell's study amply documents, the mainstream of Christian ethical teaching has been relentlessly hostile to homosexual practice" (397). My friend and colleague John Boswell has long since gone to his reward, but he would have been most surprised to learn that *that* was the point of his book!

That Hayes would oppose an omnigender paradigm is evident from his assertion that Genesis 1 and 2 "describes man and woman as created for one another" and that "thus the complementarity of male and female is given a theological grounding in God's creative activity" (386). Ignoring the verifiable fact that thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians live beautifully ethical and faith-filled lives, Hayes makes an ugly claim on the basis of his interpretation of Romans 1: "When human beings engage in homosexual activity, they enact an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality: the rejection of the Creator's design" (386). Are intersexual newborns also a "sacrament of antireligion" because they too reject the Creator's design?

And this brings us to the topic of doublespeak. Hayes admits that "self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual

behavior itself" and that "no one has a secure platform to stand upon in order to pronounce condemnation on others" (309). Those seem to me amazing admissions from an author who has just defined my highest and holiest expressions of love to be sacraments of antireligion! When I was thirteen, I attempted suicide because of judgments like that. I marvel that people like Hayes seem unconcerned about the thousands of suicides and murders that are prompted by their rhetoric.

Elsewhere, in his discussion of abortion, Hayes argues that "as God's creatures, we are stewards who bear life in trust. To terminate a pregnancy is not only to commit an act of violence but also to assume responsibility for destroying a work of God 'from whom are all things and for whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8:6)" (450). Leaving aside Hayes's non-contextual condemnation of that which under certain circumstances might be more loving than giving birth, I wonder whether Hayes views intersexual, homosexual, and transsexual fetuses as the work of God which ought not to be destroyed? If they (we) exist "from God" and "for God," how dare anyone consign them (us) to lives without loving companionship, consigning them (us) to nothing warmer than "disciplined abstinence" (403)?

Hayes says that "even if it could be shown that same-sex preference is somehow genetically programmed, that would not necessarily make homosexual behavior morally appropriate" (398). So, according to Hayes, even if the Creator has genetically programmed His/Her creations to love people of their own gender, for them to obey the Creator's program would be morally reprehensible! See what I mean by doublespeak?

Furthermore, Hayes must surely be aware that some Christians have proudly announced that if a "gay gene" is ever isolated and can be determined *in utero*, they will seek to abort such fetuses. Whether or not he intended to do so, Hayes's remark about genetic mis-programming lends moral support to such attitudes, contradicting his own stance regarding abortion and the use of violence to support a "just cause." Doublespeak again!

Ultimately, I wish Hayes were able to stay consistent with his own best insights. In the context of racial and ethnic differences, for instance, Hayes asks:

How is it possible for the community of Christ's people to participate in animosity toward "outsiders"? If God is the Creator of the whole world who will ultimately redeem the whole creation — if the death of Christ was the means whereby "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace though the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20) — then how can the church that is called to bear God's message of reconciliation to an unredeemed world (2 Cor. 5:17–20) scorn or reject people of any race or tongue, whether they are Christian or not? (441)

Indeed!

And, I would add, how can the church that is called to bear God's message of reconciliation scorn or reject people of any sexual orientation or gender identity? I believe that moving toward an omnigender construct is a work of reconciliation and making peace.

Chapter Six

Precedents for Increased Gender Fluidity



SINGER JANIS IAN, who has been partnered with a woman for over seventeen years, was outed by *The Village Voice* in 1976 and was once rejected for an appearance on *Prairie Home Companion* because, they said, she didn't represent "family values." But she comments that being "out and proud" really hasn't hurt her career that much, because she's been able to work worldwide, and "Europe, Japan, Australia could really care less what my gender preferences are." She observes, "When you're an artist, and you start leaving your own culture to perform in other cultures, you suddenly realize how much of what you think is right and wrong is just culturally imposed."¹

Although it might be a little much to say that any recent culture has embraced transgender people as within the "standard range of human variation," there are and have been many cultures that are more gender-flexible and inclusive than our own. In some cultures, transgenderism is recognized simply as a personal attribute. In others, it is considered a by-product of religious ecstasy. And in still others, it is acceptable as a response to particular economic circumstances, such as the case of a family with only one child, a daughter, who is needed to care for cattle and must be granted male status in order to do so.² In this chapter, I hope

1. John R. Killacky, "Janis Ian: 'Society's Child,' After All," *The Gay & Lesbian Review* (July–August 2006), 49.

2. Roz Kaveny, "Talking Transgender Politics," in *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (New York: Cassell, 1999), 157.