

Complicating Genders – Revd Sharon Ferguson

Thanks and appreciation for Adrian’s insights – he had many interesting points but as time is limited I will focus on just two areas:

1. Dimorphic sexuality/gender binary

2. Challenging the Binary

In particular I want to look at the impact of the sex models and theological support for limited expression of gender as male or female and also the theological support for understanding human beings as not either/or.

1. Dimorphic sexuality/Gender Binary

Both one-sex and two-sex models divide human race into two genders – male and female – with male as superior

This division has an effect on intersex and trans people as well as negative impact for both cis¹ men and women.

However, as Adrian has pointed out the way we understand our world is usually framed by what we think we already know and consequently we have something of a chicken and egg situation. Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* says, “To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that ‘anatomy’ and ‘sex’ are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown.)”²

The reality of trans and intersex people questions the validity of the simplicity of a binary gender system but sexual dimorphism pervades our thinking and being from the moment of birth.

In February 2015 there was an article in *Nature*³, the international weekly journal of science, in which Claire Ainsworth reported that ‘the idea of two sexes is simplistic. Biologists now think there is a wider spectrum than that.’ She goes on to quote John Ackermann, who studies sex development and endocrinology at University College London’s Institute of Child Health: ‘I think there’s much greater diversity within male or female, and there is certainly an area of overlap where some people can’t easily define themselves within the binary structure.’

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott⁴ reports that ‘one person in every 500 has a karyotype other than XX or XY’, and according to equalities lawyer and trans-activist, Stephen Whittle⁵, ‘currently medicine recognises over seventy different intersex syndromes, and one in every two hundred children will be born with some sort of intersex matrix.’

About 1% of births show some anomaly in sex differentiation.

¹ Cis/Cis gendered – this is a term used to describe people who are comfortable and present in the same gender to which they were born.

² Butler, J., *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, 2004

³ <http://www.nature.com/news/sex-redefined-1.16943>

⁴ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender, A Trans-religious Approach*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2007

⁵ Stephen Whittle, “The Becoming Man,” in Kate More and Stephen Whittle (eds) *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siecle*, New York: Cassell, 1999

The gender binary has been considered 'natural' for so long that Mollenkott comments on how 'even people with a transgender core identity have been socialized to prefer binaries and to fear difference.'⁶

Theological support for the gender binary

Religion legitimises social institutions by 'bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status.'
Berger⁷

One-sex theory = Genesis 1 – 1:26 *'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea.... 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.'*

Two-sex theory = Genesis 2:17 *And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.'* 18 *And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. ...*

21 *And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; 22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. 23 And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'*

Support for heterosexuality and dominance of male = 3:16b *'and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.'*

2. Challenging the Binary

Genesis

One-sex model – no equality - females as imperfect males – still stress on only two genders and yet the Galenic view of physical sex offers a spectrum of genders as Laqueur points out 'Within this conceptualization of physical sex difference as a gradual and hierarchic difference, hermaphroditism was only a logical intermediate state of development.'⁸ However, people were still assigned as male or female at birth and expected to fulfil the acceptable social, religious, educational, and sexual roles.

With the Two-sex model – no equality – female distinctly different and inferior to male. Sex becomes a 'category' to which people belong and the expected gender roles are now reinforced.

Genesis 1 - there is no distinction between male and female, both blessed and instructed to care for the earth and multiply. Both made in image of God.

Genesis 2 – male created first and female taken from male and given to male for support. Used as proof of subservient nature of female. Further support from Genesis 3 that male rules over female.

Genesis 1-3 supportive of the gender binary and so often used to justify hierarchical social orders

Alternative readings of Genesis –

Rabbinic tradition of Adam as hermaphrodite/androgynous – containing fullness of both male and female.

⁶ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender, A Trans-religious Approach*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2007, p.72

⁷ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books, 1990, p.33

⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard University Press, 1992

Use of plurals to refer to Adam.

Genesis 1:26-27 (KJV)

'And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea.... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he **them**.'

Genesis 5:1-2 (KJV)

'This is the book of the generations of **Adam**. In the day that God created **man**, in the likeness of God made he **him**; Male and female created he **them**; and blessed **them**, and called **their** name **Adam**, in the day when **they** were created.'

Origen

Origen 1 (15) talks about male spirit and female soul

Homily by Origen 1 (15)

'But let us see also allegorically how man, made in the image of God, is male and female. Our inner man consists of spirit and soul. The spirit is said to be male; the soul can be called female. If these have concord and agreement among themselves, they increase and multiply by the very accord among themselves and they produce sons, good inclinations and understandings or useful thoughts, by which they fill the earth and have dominion over it.'⁹

Gnostic Gospels

Gospel According to Philip v.63 – 'the days when Eve was in Adam, death did not exist. When Eve was separated from him, death came into existence. If he re-enters and takes it unto himself death will not exist.'¹⁰

Gospel According to Thomas v.22 – Jesus told the disciples that 'when you make the two one That you might make the male and the female be one and the same' then they would 'enter the kingdom of heaven'.¹¹

Gnostic Christians attracted to the notion that redemption in Christ was a return to a primordial union that existed prior to Adam's separation from Eve.

The Kabbalah

Two parallel worlds – the upper world of peace and harmony and the lower world of separation.

These are dynamically connected so that actions in one world have consequences in the other. Thus Adam and Eve's separation mirrors the separation of God's male and female parts. Humankind's task therefore is to reunite the female with the male. Such gender integration in the lower world becomes effective in the upper world, restoring cosmic harmony and balance.

⁹ Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Shearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.122

¹⁰ Andrew Phillip Smith (trans.), *The Gospel of Philip*, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2005, p. 65

¹¹ Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer (trans.), *The Gospel of Thomas*, The Nag Hammadi Library, www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html

Galatians 3:28 (NIV UK)

'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

As Adrian Thatcher pointed out, Galatians is often understood as bringing about 'unity in masculinity' which is how the 'abolition of dimorphic sexuality' will be achieved.

Galatians 3:28 talks about various divisions - Jew or Greek, Slave or Free - everyone will not become Jewish so why should everyone become male?

As a Baptismal statement it is meant for our current life not only our resurrected life.

'Somehow the act of Christian initiation reverses the fateful division of Genesis 2:21-22. Where the image of God is restored, there, it seems man is no longer divided – not even by the most fundamental division of all, male and female.'¹²

Final comment

'Since God is "beyond gender", or "the genderful God", it is to be expected that women and men are thought partially to reflect the divine being.' – *Adrian Thatcher*.

'the sex of a human being is located much more in his soul than in his body.'¹³

As embodied souls reflecting the divine being which is 'genderful' then we all contain the fullness of gender regardless of our physical sex.

¹² Wayne Meeks, 'The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity' in *History of Religions*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Feb., 1974), pp. 165-208 Published by: The University of Chicago Press, p.185

¹³ Hirschfeld, *N.O.Body – Aus einem Mannes Mädchenjahre*, foreword by Magnus Hirschfeld (Berlin: Hesperus Verlag), 1907, p163