

Gender Identity Navigation: The Challenge and Perspectives of Transgender in Christian Gender

Chao Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Durham University, Durham, DH1 3LE, UK*

a. hairti@foxmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This article explores the connection between transgender identity and Christian gender, defining sex, gender, and sexuality while analysing the social aspects of gender identity. From this analysis, the article considers contemporary arguments put forth by Christian churches and theologians either in support or opposition to transgender identity based on Christian gender perspectives, including essentialism, traditional gender norms, queer theory, and exegesis of scripture. Whilst there may be a perceived tension between transgender identity and traditional Christian notions of gender, this article aims to highlight the diversity of Christian perspectives on gender. In fact, certain theological viewpoints endorse the inclusion of transgender individuals and challenge established gender norms within the faith. These perspectives encourage discussion and introspection within the religious community, contributing towards a more diverse and inclusive understanding of Christian gender concepts.

Keywords: transgender, intersex, Christian gender, gender studies, queer theology

1. Introduction

As time goes on, it seems that transgender and other ‘non-mainstream’ gender concepts are becoming more and more visible to the public. It must be said that even though concepts such as transgender have been discussed and researched for some years, the controversy over transgender itself has remained abundant in recent years. It is only in the last few decades that transgender itself has begun to be defined less as a pathological, psychological illness requiring treatment [1]. However, for many places and regions, transgender is still seen as a pathological and ‘abnormal’ condition, and it is clear that, especially in religious and theological circles, the views and definitions of transgender comprise a more complex and sensitive subject. As an influential religion, Christianity’s theological views and discussions on transgender, and the relationship between transgender itself and the concept of gender in Christian theology, are worth studying. Therefore, the topic of whether the concept of transgender is in conflict with Christian gender, or under what circumstances it creates a certain challenge to the concept of Christian gender, will be the focus of this paper.

Firstly, this article will clarify the distinctions between sex, gender and sexuality, leading to the basic concept of transgender and, to some extent, a brief description of the nature and characteristics of transgender. Secondly, this paper will focus on the dominant view of transgender among some contemporary churches and theologians, based on ‘traditionalism’ and gender binary essentialism, and from this will lead to the concept of Christian gender in this perspective and how transgender

challenges the Christian gender in this perspective. Finally, this paper will consider the biblical and early Christian texts and combine them with the views of contemporary scholars and theologians to discern another perspective on the idea of transgender in the context of Christian gender. It will also analyse and discuss from a different perspective whether and in what sense transgender poses a challenge to Christian gender and in what sense it is compatible with the concept of Christian gender.

2. Sex, Gender, Sexuality and the Ambiguous Concept of Gender

In order to identify and further analyse the concept of transgender, it is necessary to first clarify the definitions of sex, gender and sexuality. Susannah Cornwall, in her book *Theology and Sexuality*, briefly analyses the relationship and differences between sex, gender and sexuality. Sex refers to a biological definition of male or female, or an intersex with both male and female sexual characteristics (or chromosomes). Cornwall points out that in this original definition, sex was related to the biological characteristics of a person's nature and was not defined according to the person's own feelings and self-identification [2]. She also posits that *sexuality* has two meanings, one referring to a person's sexual orientation and the other to everything related to sexual stimulation and the act of gender itself and that the meaning of *gender* is someone's social identity and self-gender identity as a male, female, queer or others [2]. In some cases, a person's gender identity does not match that of sex. For example, some people whose sex or sexuality was 'female' at birth may personally identify as male and live their lives as male socially—as such, Cornwall points out that gender is a social category rather than a biological one, as the performance of gender is about how society perceives someone and how someone positions themselves in society [2]. Transgender, on the other hand, is closely related to a person's orientation towards personal gender identity; as mentioned above, a person whose sex is perceived differently from their gender and who has perhaps developed some degree of gender anxiety or undergone gender-replacement surgery can be called transgender [2]. Watts also provides a brief overview of the concept of transgender, stating that the essence of transgender is the desire to be assigned to the opposite gender, and that this opposite gender is generally speaking the gender of their essence [3]. At the same time, most transgender people want their bodies to conform to their gender self-identity¹, and want their gender self-identity to be presented to society first and foremost and to gain acceptance [3].

On the other hand, the analysis and study of intersex is very important for the study of transgender. Since an intersex person may be born with a clear expression of both male and female sexuality, or with a less obvious appearance of intersexuality but with a chromosomal expression of intersex, the sex of intersex is in some ways 'ambiguous' [4]. In the case of transgender, on the other hand, since in most cases the innate biological sex or sexuality is clear, this contrast in terms of innate biological sex seems to delineate the relationship between intersex and transgender quite clearly. In this context, due to the 'ambiguity' and 'clarity' of 'inborn' sex, there seems to be a significant difference in the people's views on gender reassignment surgery for the intersex and for the transgender. The main reason for this controversial nature, Watts suggests, is that if a particular sexuality or gender identity has a biological basis, then it is 'natural' and therefore acceptable in ethical and moral circumstances [3]. In a sense, therefore, because intersex gender reassignment surgery is 'necessary', i.e., the transition from 'ambiguous gender' to 'clear gender', it is a 'socially acceptable' and 'socially moral' act and therefore acceptable. Transgender, however, is an 'unnatural' and therefore unacceptable transition from one biologically distinct gender to another that is different from the original biological structure. Thus, Watts notes that support for the prioritisation of gender over innate biological factors is the main trigger for support for transgender [3]. Naturally, perhaps, as Watts suggests, the current society is too rigid in its particular ways of distinguishing between men and women, and therefore is

¹ Hence the need for gender reassignment surgery.

the main reason for the concept of transgender [3]. As Butler argues, because gender itself is constructed, identity is an illusion and transgender is a constructed outcome within a gender binary framework [5], so terms like transgenderism are not describing the real world, but are simply a constructed outcome. However, this may be in part only one reason –for many transgender people, the biological sexuality they present to society is an important aspect, and it is also clear that many transgender people are not only troubled by ‘gender constructs’, but are also inherently worried and anxious about their sexuality. Thus, transgender is, in some cases, not just a concept constructed via social constructionism [3]. In any case, the complex issues that transgender itself raises have always been richly discussed. In the case of contemporary Christianity, which seems to be constructed within the framework of gender binary essentialism and ‘naturalness’, there is no getting around the question of the existence of transgender and the inter-church view of transgender, and whether transgender itself poses a challenge to Christian gender.

3. Contemporary Christian Churches and Theologians’ Objections to the Concept of Transgender and the Reasons for Them

Cornwall notes that many churches, as well as Christian theologians, often assume that, in general, the three aspects of sex, gender and sexuality must be combined in a particular way [2], and that innate sex itself must be paramount. gender and sexuality need to be compatible with sex. Thus, for the contemporary church, LGBTQ+ seems to undermine and problematise heteronormativity and biological essentialism to some extent. Cornwall suggests that, to some extent, most Christian churches’ understanding of transgender is based on the idea that transgender is a spiritually pathological problem and recommends treatment rather than gender reassignment - one example of which is the 1991 Church of England publication *Issues in Human Sexuality* [4]. It seems that in this report, the Church of England exhibits a clear gender dualism and essentialism. And while transgender is not discussed in detail in this report, transgender certainly challenges the notion of Christian gender as perceived by the Church of England:

‘In heterosexual love...personal bonding and mutual self-giving happen between two people who, because they are of different gender, are not merely physically differentiated but also diverse in their emotional, mental and spiritual lives. [6]’

Cornwall points out the profound heteronormativity displayed in this report. The issue of ‘clarity’ and ‘ambiguity’ in relation to sex has already been discussed above. What is clear is that the Church of England seems to have taken a very clear view on the issue of gender in this report - that the sex of transgender people themselves is ‘clarity’, sex itself and the aspect of gender identity is not something that humans themselves can influence, but is God-given [4], therefore transgender is a matter of psychological disorder that seems to be under the Christian gender horizon and not to be treated normally. In contrast, the Evangelical Alliance’s report seems to offer a more detailed and diverse reading of transgender. However, in this report, transgender also seems to be, for the most part, committed to being interpreted as unnatural and as an acquired ambiguity and transformation of sexuality within the context of a clear gender identity, which is largely indicative of its dualistic and essentialist conception of gender. The Evangelical Alliance document also finds evidence of a conflict between the concept of transgender and Christian gender in Genesis 1:27. The document argues that

‘The notion of a given, created, dimorphic humankind, as expressed in the book of Genesis, and the sanctity of a complementary relationship between male and female, is fundamental to Christian thought’ [7]

And while demonstrating a profoundly heteronormative orientation, this report also emphasizes

the gendered nature of male and female creation through the biblical verse Genesis 1:27 NIV 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' highlights the gendered nature of male and female creation through God [4], and thus links transgender with psycho-logical disorders and sin. Cornwall thus again suggests that in the different contemporary Christian churches, there is nevertheless an emphasis on the unnaturalness of trans gender in most churches, and in a sense an either/or conception [4]. Unlike Cornwall's formulation, Watts argues that, to some extent, the Evangelical Alliance's document is more explicit about the biological influences that may be present in transgender [2]:

many argue that physical differences such as these indicate that transsexual people are born 'different' and that their physical appearance indicates that there are other physiological differences, such as brain structure and function [7].

However, even though the report acknowledges to some extent that transgender has a degree of physical component, it still attributes much of the cause of transgender to the psychological level. At the same time, Watts notes that the report seems to imply that transgender places the role of psychological factors above physical reality, and that transgender itself is a false consciousness and an escape from the nature of God's creation - thus transgender even shows a degree of 'agnosticism' [2]. This evangelical report tends to conflate what they perceive to be the nature of transgender self-perception - the soul-body gender dichotomy described above - with Gnosticism [2]. This seems to be one of the reasons why the report argues to some extent against transgender due to 'psychological factors' - as if the Gnostic perception of the dualism of good and evil is clearly reflected in the theory that 'soul and body are not the same gender'. It is clear, however, that dualism seems to be a much broader movement of thought than Gnosticism [2].

In the view of these documents, except in the case of intersex, there should be no doubt about one's sex also gender from birth, and therefore transgender is primarily a psychological problem that can be resolved through psychotherapy - even in the sense that 'gender inversion' is a result of sin and Gnosticism on display. Thus, at least in the view of the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance, transgender shakes the sanctity of gender relations between men and women, shifting them from clear ends of the axis to a blurred 'middle ground' that challenges the Christian concept of gender.

For the Catholic Church, transgender is a relatively complex issue. The issue of transgender does not seem to be openly mentioned in the public discourses and official documents, but a glimpse of the mainstream attitude towards transgender in contemporary Catholicism can be obtained from some of the documents on gender issued by other Churches and from the views of theologians. Indeed, there are many Catholic views which consider transgender itself to be a major challenge and 'threat' to the concept of Christian gender. This will be analysed in detail below.

According to the 2019 publication of the Holy See, Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education, it is possible to conclude, first and foremost, that the current basic Catholic view of the concept of gender - as mentioned above in the documents issued by the Church of England and the Evangelical Church, the Holy See also considers that sex is a fundamental part of one's personality [8], and any tendency to wish to dissolve the biological differences between men and women is a lost and destabilising one [8]. Thus, transgender is in a sense destructive of the nature of innate sex. David Jones suggests that the only reference to a view on transgender surgery in any public Vatican document is a passage in a charter for medical workers written back in 1995 [9]. In this passage, the Holy See seems to view sex reassignment surgery itself as an act as bad as abortion, and attributes the transgender element purely to the psychological and spiritual. Transgender surgery itself seems to be defined as an 'intrinsic malice' [9]. At the same time, Catholic scholar Edwin Healy argues that transgender itself does not change one's essential sex and that, when considered in the

context of marriage, transgender undermines the notion of ‘valid marriage’ as recognized within Catholic theology [10]. Since men and women are by nature complementary in gender, and transgender people do not really change their sex per se, it is likely that transgender marriages are likely to be essentially a ‘same-sex marriage’ - that is, invalid. Jones also refers to the Pope’s condemnation of the idea that ‘gender is a social role that can be chosen of one’s own free will’ [11]. This formulation leads us even further into a gender essentialist view based on God’s creation and dispensation: People need to accept their sexual identity as God created it, rather than disregarding God’s creation and ‘assigning’ their own gender identity. In this context, transgender does seem to have had a greater impact on the ‘nature of human identity as created by God’. Jones provides a certain summary of the state of transgender in the context of contemporary Catholic theology – because of the Catholic understanding of the relationship between body and soul, human gender identity is not based on individual choice and social guidance, but on God’s primary creation and dispensation, and that transgender inevitably leads to the creation of a false gender identity [12], and this is harmful.

In another perspective, Franks offers an in-depth analysis and exploration of the opposition to the idea of trans in contemporary mainstream Catholicism in terms of a comparison of the aesthetics of Deleuze and Balthasar and John Paul II. Franks seems to wish to suggest that transgender itself was, for Balthasar as well as John Paul II, an aesthetic disfigurement of what they saw as inherent in Christian gender [13]. As stated above, Franks argues from the perspective of Catholic scholars that transgender itself is denoting a false concept [13] and that trans itself undermines the natural aesthetic structure in Christian gender. The bodily expression of the person seems to be central to Catholic gender aesthetic represented by Balthasar and John Paul II, which represents the Catholic theological understanding of the nature of gender [13]. Franks affirms that the innate gender of the human person is extremely important because in God’s created and redeemed order, both male and female marriages play a revealing role [13] expressive of the order of God’s creation as well as the language of beauty. Nevertheless, in a sense transgender may threaten a Catholic gender aesthetic closely related to Christian gender, for transgender relegates the body from a window of God’s expression to a passive embodiment written only out of human desire, and this threatens the truth and beauty of the human body [13].

And the views of Oliver O’Donovan, a scholar who dismisses transgender to a certain extent, must be mentioned. As an essentialist, Donovan argued that transgender, and in particular transsexual surgery, threatened the integrity and bodily integrity of the human person, and that the surgery would enhance the ‘cult of autonomy’ [14]. According to Donovan, to know one’s body is to know that one can only do certain things because one’s freedom must be responsible for a particular form, which is one’s form of experience in the material world [14]. O’Donovan argues that the transgender view contradicts the Christian view that the human body and soul are unified; in addition, for him transgender itself seems to be a continuation of Gnosticism [14] and a dangerous dichotomy between the human soul and the physical body. In sum, O’Donovan’s position seems clearly to be that one needs to accept one’s innate bodily gender identity as a given and unchangeable.

From these scholars, as well as from the mainstream view of the Church, it does seem that transgender itself challenges the concept of Christian gender to a large extent. However, on the other hand, this does not seem to be the case.

4. Possible Convergence of the Concepts of Transgender and Christian Gender

From the arguments in the previous section, there appears an irreconcilable contradiction between transgender itself and the notion of Christian gender. Coakley notes that in a traditionalist theological perspective, gender ‘matters’ primarily because it is in some way distinct from embodying the relationship between human beings and God and others, and thus its significance seems

fundamentally related to the role of humans as ‘images of God’ [15].

However, many scholars have suggested another perspective – that in the Bible and in early Christian texts, the concept of Christian gender itself does not seem to be rooted in strict gender essentialism alone, but that from another perspective, a convergence and harmony can be achieved between transgender itself and Christian gender.

Firstly, in the case of Genesis 1:26-7, which has always been used to argue for the immutability of human gender, it is nevertheless likely that the author of Genesis understood ‘male’ and ‘female’ differently from the modern understanding of the concept, given the antiquity of the Genesis chapters. Watts suggests that Genesis 1.27 may have been over-interpreted. The Evangelical Alliance report, for example, argues that Genesis 1.27 makes it clear that anyone who thinks they are a woman trapped in a man’s body must be ‘fundamentally mistaken’ [7]. However, the text can also be read as suggesting that despite the distinction between male and female being part of the created order, the distinction between male and female directly and perhaps is not an immutable feature, but can be a gift, and at the same time the distinction can have the possibility of exceptions in after being created [2]. For example, since the very existence of intersex is evidence of a natural ‘ambiguous’ gender other than male and female – and if intersex can be counted as an exception to the creation of male and female – then the existence of transgender can also be defined as a ‘natural exception’ that should be allowed [3].

Cornwall notes that there seems to be an assumption that the Bible itself contains traces of queer [16]. For example, first of all, in a large number of Pauline letters, some more queer-oriented admonitions can be found. Some scholars have pointed out that there is a wide gap between the inconsistencies of Pauline letters with regard to gender issues, etc., and that it is possible that some of the later epistles were composed by people in the community under Paul’s name rather than in his own handwriting [16]. In an early Pauline epistle, relatively presumably written in Paul’s own hand, St. Paul states that *‘o in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ...There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’* in Galatians 3.26-8, NIV.

This section, on the other hand, is quite obviously very different from the currently perceived Christian gender essentialism, with its clear and immutable gender distinctions. In this section, St Paul’s exhortation seems to lean more towards a theology of gender in the queer vision - gender is fluid and neutral, not necessarily at the poles of the axis.

Kolakowski notes that there are several passages in the New Testament that demonstrate that early Christians had a positive view of ‘unnatural’ gender roles such as castrati. ‘unnatural’ gender roles, and even that these castrati could be defined in some way as the ancestors of contemporary transgender [17]. And Cornwall points out that in Matthew 19, Jesus describes several different types of eunuchs: some were born eunuchs², while others became eunuchs for various reasons³, and others became eunuchs by voluntarily renouncing earthly marriage in order to enter the kingdom of heaven [16]. In the time of Jesus, these predecessors of intersex and trans were accepted by the Christian community, and it seems apparent that Christians today should do so even more. At the same time the passage proves that there is no direct contradiction between trans and Christian gender, Lewis Reay argues that because everything God created is good, and because passages depicting the acceptance of eunuchs exist in the Bible, it is because of the existence of trans that one should question the essential binary structure of gender [18].

Coakley, on the other hand, uses the comments of Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28 by Gregory of Nyssa as an early church father to demonstrate that gender fluidity and non-absolute duality was not in itself a very rebellious reading in the early Christian period. Gregory of Nyssa argues that the

² Perhaps comparable to intersex in some way.

³ Which could be seen as the predecessor of transgender.

original creation consisted of genderless beings, and in his work *On the Creation of Man* he notes that it was only after the Fall that male and female were distinguished [19]. Such a reading is in keeping with St Paul's statement that there is no male and no female in Christ. And in the post-apocalyptic period, Gregory of Nyssa notes that humans will once again be asexualized, thus gaining the angelic status that was originally part of human destiny [19]. That is to say, the writers of the early patristic period did not all but conceptualize the gender binary of the human person either⁴. Coakley notes that Gregory of Nyssa, while still basing his discussion on the gender binary due to the times [19], insists in *The Life of Moses* that gender is fluid and voluntary, while, at the same time, in the commentary on the *Song of Songs* by Gregory, Gregory finds in it the conversion and reversal of the genders that can arise at any time in the relationship with Christ, Christ as Sophia and Christ as the Bridegroom appear in turn [19]. In addition, in the time of Gregory of Nyssa, having such a view is evidence that trans itself is not fundamentally antithetical to, or challenging to, Christian gender, but rather that there is a deep correlation.

It can be concluded that although it seems that the relationship between sex and gender has always been bound more and more tightly under traditional essentialist Christian gender theory, the evidence above would suggest that this has not always been the case [4]. The development and relationship of Christian gender in Christian theology is complex and not generalisable, and the relationship between the sexes within Christianity is not always, as one might think, one of perpetual opposition and complementarity, and there must be consistency between sex and gender without allowing for any fluidity [4].

In addition, Loughlin points out that, in a sense, if nature is seen as a larger trope of the artificial, so long as someone (say, intersex) is able to choose their own gender, then all humans are essentially able to make choices about their own gender [1]. If viewed from Butler's perspective, unlike traditionalist theologians such as O'Donovan, who placed nature above society, it is society that produced nature, not the other way around [1]. In this perspective, therefore, the social nature of the person is greater than the natural nature, and the primacy of the gender identity of the transgender is greater than the primacy of his or her birth sex. Even though the status of transgender people remains controversial in many Christian churches, while many theologians have critically discussed trans based on gender binary essentialism and naturalness, gender identity itself is not either/or, but is much about embodying richness, as in nature [1].

5. Conclusion

This article critically discusses whether and to what extent transgender itself has influenced Christian gender from a variety of perspectives. Firstly, the paper begins with a brief overview of the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality, and sets the scene for the subsequent elaboration of the relationship between Christian gender and transgender. Secondly, the paper elaborates on the theological justifications of the contemporary churches and theologians who oppose the concept of transgender, based on the concept of gender binary essentialism, and how, in their vision, transgender challenges the concept of Christian gender. Finally, the paper switches perspectives, starting from the original Christian biblical texts and the early Christian patristic period, and going in another direction; this is combined with the perspectives of scholars and theologians who support transgender, to elaborate the conclusion that transgender does not necessarily challenge the concept of Christian gender in a certain sense, but rather that the two ideas are compatible to some degree.

All in all, like the relationship between Christian gender itself and transgender, there are various interpretations of whether transgender poses a particular challenge to Christian gender due to the differences in theological concepts and perspectives and the inherent complexity of the two

⁴ Aquinas had in fact said something similar - that genitals and hair are unnecessary in the kingdom of heaven

formulations of gender. Christian theology is diverse, and its derivative theories of gender, such as gender binary essentialism and the relatively new theology of the cool child, are themselves very different, and the direction of their internal readings of biblical and traditional texts suggests a different connection with transgender. Therefore, to discuss the direct relationship between Christian gender and transgender and its possible challenges, it is essential to start from a different theory and perspective. In recent years, although religious and social views on transgender remain somewhat limited and transgender has only been de-pathologized for a few years, there is undeniably a growing maturity toward and acceptance of transgender in society. At the same time, in a way, since the early Christian concept of gender does not seem to be based entirely on gender binary essentialism, but is more inclusive and fluid than most people think, it is possible to conclude that in the future, with the advancement of relevant academic research, more and more churches will be theologically accepting and inclusive of transgender.

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