

“Living in a Shell of Something I’m Not”: Transsexuality, Medical Ethics, and the Judeo-Christian Culture

Mathias Wirth¹

Published online: 9 July 2015
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

Abstract A surgeon participating in a 2008 congress on the topic of trans-identified people posed the question of whether doctors would have to defend themselves when “judgment day” comes for having employed surgical means to turn men into women or vice versa? What might be viewed as a certain level of (medical) irrationality surrounding transgender life, coupled with widely documented cases of violence directed at these groups may well partly be attributable to the deeply internalized doctrine of creation in Judeo-Christian culture. Objections, however, to the use of transgender medicine “in the name of normalization” cannot relate to the biblical tradition, for there is no normative concept of gender and no text whose scope is to articulate theory of gender. In the vast expanse and freedom of the Judeo-Christian creator there is space for diversity, variations, and, above all, for the development of individual freedom.

Keywords Beliefs · Discrimination · Gender · Religion · Transgender

Introduction

Transgenderism as the “personal project of gender transition” (Connell 2012, 858) arises from the strong belief that major incoherencies of the sexual body and gender identity call into question the rigid and discrete categories of male and female. Conversely, the binary gender system threatens the belief and practice of fluid and malleable gender projects in transgenderism by canonizing an immutable gender dichotomy. This normative concept of

This article was held as presentation to the 9th UNESCO World Conference Bioethics 2013.

✉ Mathias Wirth
m.wirth@uke.de

¹ Department of History and Ethics of Medicine, University Medical School Hamburg-Eppendorf, Martinstr. 52, 20246 Hamburg, Germany

gender with its naturally exclusionist view can ultimately lead to gender-based violence. The proponents of this normative stance invariably claim that intersexual or transsexual people are deviant and abnormal (*ibid*). Judith Butler recalls the story of a young man living in Maine. His life story was hugely influential in terms of Butler's thinking on gender. Over time this young man, whose way of moving his hip noticeably from left to right became accentuated over time, felt that he was subjected to aggression and ostracism because his manner of walking was at odds with gender constructs and gender behavioral codes. Eventually, the hostility directed toward him as a result of his difference escalated, ultimately culminating in his murder. Sadly, there are numerous examples that highlight violence seemingly motivated by even the smallest act that is perceived as queer-to-gender norms. Butler also cites the story of John who became a central figure in the wider debate on gender thinking. Many theorists sought to construct gender-related arguments around the story of this child who was born a boy but during surgery to rectify his phimosis, the surgeon accidentally burned the penis, rendering it non-functional. The decision was then taken to raise John as Joan, as having a non-functional penis in this child's environment meant that raising John as a boy was deemed to be an untenable position. Although subsequently raised as a girl and despite having all the endocrinological and surgical preparation (removal of the testes) for having a neo-vagina if he later wished, he continued to exhibit typical boy-like behavior. This, however, resulted in severe aggression toward John who had to live as Joan. Butler retells that in school Joan used to urinate while standing ("cross-gender behavior"). Since John's classmates exhibited murderous impulses toward John/Joan for the act of urinating like a boy, it can be observed that girls also react aggressively to unusual gender behavior and that aggression toward gender non-conformists is by no means the preserve of boys (Butler 2001; Klöppel 2010).¹ Significantly large numbers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual people have experienced comparable levels of hatred to that experienced by John (Connell 2012; Rosen-Berry 2008).²

What might be viewed as a certain level of irrationality surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexual life, coupled with widely documented cases of violence directed at these groups may well partly be attributable to the deeply internalized doctrine of creation in Judeo-Christian culture (Karle 2006; Schickendantz 2007). According to the Judeo-Christian narrative of creation, God intended humans to be either male or female and assigned them the task of reproduction. Non-conformity with this strict binary concept of gender and sexual orientation which in itself is not conducive to natural reproduction appears to oppose the first book of Moses and its creation narrative. This religiously rooted gender belief was and still is of enormous importance in terms of gender thinking; although this thinking might be secularized in many contexts it still partially answers the question as to why there is noticeable and widespread refusal to deviate from

¹ Aggression against different gender behavior is also a very current example of what Theodor W. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School thought about the aggression causing the same angst that otherness often causes (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987). Also French phenomenology with Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida taught the dignity of uniqueness and noticed the hegemony of sameness (Rosen-Berry 2008).

² The prevalence of the aforementioned groups is noticeably different; transsexuals in particular are a very small group with an incident rate rising from 1:42,000 up to 48,000. Nevertheless the number of gender surgery is increasing. In Germany there are about 150 sex change surgeries a year (Winand 2013). Obviously there is a confusion about the number of transsexuals, since the prevalence from 1:48,000 does not explain how the number of transsexuals currently living in Germany could rise from 2000 to 6000, whereas the frame of 2000–6000 also appears vague (Sonnenmoser 2008). Also Reid Vanderburgh mentions incidents that rank from 1:9000 up to 1:100,000 (2009).

established gender norms, as well as a marked hostility toward persons who are perceived as transgressing these very gender norms. Transsexuals' claim that they were born in the wrong body is considered the gravest affront to the narrative of creation. Thus the entire issue of transgenderism can certainly be viewed as a threat to Judeo-Christian culture (Ant 2000): one doctor participating in a 2008 congress on the topic of trans-identified people posed the question of whether doctors would have to defend themselves when "judgment day" comes for having employed surgical means to turn men into women or vice versa?

What is striking is the correlation between a rather crude Judeo-Christian and also commonly held opinion on the unchallenged status of binary gender that causes aggression, oppression, and segregation. Implicit or explicit violence against minorities, however, can certainly be seen as an even more egregious offense to Judeo-Christian ethics:

The bible is very clear in its rejection of hatred and violence toward minorities, which in biblical times included widows, orphans, and foreigners which among others formed the group of the *anawim*, i.e., the poor. Throughout scripture one can find evidence for ethical calls to protect these marginalized minorities (Jüngel 2000; Lévinas 1991; Stone 2001); in tradition with liberation theology it is queer theology which casts a light onto another group of potential *anawim*, those at the margins of hetero-normative prejudice (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007; Stuart 1997). Whereas on the other hand, gender and sexual issues are attributed scant or little importance in scripture and while the interpretation of the gender theme in the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is widely discussed it is never a core theological matter.

A significant number of transsexuals, approximately thirty percent, are suicidal³ since they are frequently not integrated in society and are also more likely to experience isolation, unemployment, discrimination, and feelings of self-hatred (Clements-Nolle et al. 2006; Connell 2012; Kenagy 2005; Rauchfleisch 2012). If Judeo-Christian bioethics is to form a meaningful part of the overall gender debate it seems a basic precondition needs to be accepted. That precondition is the acceptance of prioritizing the suffering of those affected by cross-gender issues. Otherwise, the very notion of Judeo-Christian ethics demands to be called into question. Centering the debate strictly on a biblical concept of sexuality and gender is of questionable value and moreover there is little biblical evidence to support the rigid binary gender system with its exclusionist view on reproduction and the genitals, especially the penis (Hero 2012). It is somewhat surprising and refreshing to learn that a theological inquiry that eschews gender stereotypes but takes into account the entire Judeo-Christian tradition and value system could provide the common framework needed to create a fruitful dialogue between that said tradition and those within the field of queer theory. The biblical movement of freedom and salvation does not grant legitimacy to aggression against the singularity and uniqueness of anyone while biblical theology is in no way consistent with any philosophical notion of privileging homogeneity over difference.

³ Winand (2013) recalls that the suicide rates of transsexual people are nine times ("male-affirmed" transsexuals) or even fourteen times ("female-affirmed" transsexual) higher than average. Social marginalization especially of children, youth, and adults with transgender identity that often leads to self-hatred, the wish to be invisible and severe confusion about the self needs even theological ethics to speak against all kinds of neglecting transsexuals (Vanderburgh 2009). See for replacing the male-to-female or female-to-male terminology *ibid.* 136: "[...] trans children [...] have never identified as the gender assigned to them at birth and are therefore not moving from one gender to another, but into an affirmation of the gender they have always known themselves to be."

Method

This small introduction to the complex issue of transgenderism viewed from a Judeo-Christian perspective intends to critique any religious ignorance or intolerance of sexual minorities and represents another theological inquiry that seeks to highlight general biblical and dogmatic insights into why transsexuals need in no way be viewed as antagonistic to divine order. Theological statements on queer topics since the 1990s (Schippert 2011) have tended to focus on hints of the Jewish and Christian tradition regarding queer people and queer thinking (Cheng 2011; Wilcox 2012),⁴ being in danger of violating such traditions which did not want to elaborate any theology of queering gender in the modern sense; however, it can be read through such a viewpoint⁵ as through others, for there is not “one” Christianity and not only one gospel, as Elisabeth Stuart points out (Stuart 1997). Nevertheless, within the biblical tradition there are some aspects of queerness which are uncovered (Schippert 2011), and while some queer aspects still need attention (Cornwall 2011),⁶ a wider concept of plurality within the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is obvious (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007) and allows for positive recognition of queerness as a derivate of freedom without the need of finding precise queer contents within the bible. This approach focuses on major theological insights that can easily be applied to the project of queering gender. There is thus far less impetuous within theology, to apply the theology finding of “acceptance of otherness” as a key in understanding the relationship of God and mankind on anthropology and ethics. So far, theology that does not concretize “acceptance of otherness” suffers, in the words of Isherwood (2001), appears as “Cataract Theology”; she is speaking about “Cataract Christology” when theological issues are seen only “[...] dimly and as if from afar.”

Rethinking Gender and Transgender Issues and the Position of Judeo-Christian Theology

Children with transgender identities reveal that transgenderism is not merely a form of deviating sexuality but rather a fundamental question of personal identity that manifests itself at a young age (Vanderburgh 2009). Initially parents frequently assume they are raising a gay or lesbian child and mistake trans-identity for an “extreme” kind of homosexuality (ibid). Parents are typically unfamiliar with trans-identity behavior. It is crucial to differentiate between cross-gender behavior and behavioral patterns that can be

⁴ Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003), having her theological point of departure in the tradition of liberation theology, uncovers sexual connotations throughout the dogmatic tradition of Christendom and shares her theories on Christ as a voyeur, queer, etc. Sheffield (2008), for instance, attempts to build an argument on the “Chalcedic body” of Jesus by showing a certain queerness and ambiguity of his bodily myth, cf. Sheffield (2008).

⁵ Such a viewpoint, the queer theology lens with its postmodern influence (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007), focuses on “[...] a political and sexual queering of theology which not only goes beyond the gender paradigm of thinking of the early years of feminist theology but also transcends the fixed assumption of Lesbian and gay theology. [...] Queering theology that is, the questioning of the (hetero) sexual underlying of theological reflection [...]. [...] Queer Theory has deregulated the binary myths of the subjects of theology, and in doing that, has de-regulated our representation of God.” (ibid. 305–306).

⁶ It has eloquently been written, for instance, about 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and Paul’s attitude toward homosexuality. What is made more difficult here is that *arsenokoites* and *malakos* cannot be easily translated and be termed “homosexuals.” What is meant in Paul is not a loving homosexual relationship but anal rape, and cultic prostitution (Cornwall 2011).

attributable to other causes such as the narcissistic desires of parents, sexual abuse of children, schizophrenia or Asperger's syndrome (Atwood 2007; Rauchfleisch 2012). When transgender behavior persists over time and across a range of situations it should be recognized as transgender identity and putting the well-being of those children above everything else is key, Reid Vanderburgh suggests (2009). Protecting cross-gender children and their innermost felt transgender identities are ethical issues of the utmost priority for there are few places in society where they can safely express their identity and they are at great risk of both verbal and physical abuse, mainly from peers. Adorno's remark that "There is no true living in the false" (Adorno 1998, 43) can equally be applied to transgender issues, forcing theological ethics to guide Judaism and Christianity and others to understand the (theological) dignity of the diverse which leads to a concrete practice of accepting and indeed honoring the difference of the different which in turn means asking what might be good not for me but for the other, as Phil 2:3–4 asks (Jüngel 2000).

In the 1960s clinics first began to operate on genitals and perform sex changes in response to the so-called gender identity disorders (Connell 2012; Rauchfleisch 2012) a step which was, and remains, a "revolutionary thing" (Rivera 2002, 81) since the tendency to frown upon any form of genital mutilation appears to be a widely held societal view and is not restricted only to those of a religious persuasion. Curiously, while the objection to sex-change operations is a prevalent view the same does not hold true for cosmetic surgery which is not widely seen as such an affront upon creation. Apart from the debate that was and is clinical, surgical, and psychiatric in character, a parallel debate arose, which often employs transgenderism to make claims on the misleading notion of the stability of the biological sex dichotomy.⁷ If gender behaviors are a cultural construct determined by biological sex then gender is not a dogma, since culture is historical, changing, and contingent and can be misleading. Again Judith Butler, a leading thinker in the queer gender debate, discovers "the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler 1990, 137). In what might be called the Western world, especially in urban contexts, there is an increasing acceptance of non-normative gender identity, where terms such as trans are classed as "umbrella terms." As already mentioned there remains religious and social reservations against queering gender that also finds some philosophical support. The philosopher Grosz (1994), for instance, takes transsexual imaginations as an example that it is impossible to escape corporeality saying real change of gender is impossible. And Stanley (2000), a sociologist, ridicules the specific desire of transsexual people, calling it ludicrous, and asks why they do not want to become zebras or cherubs instead of women⁸—a question that already reveals how closely linked genders actually are, since no human really wishes to become zebra or a cherub, which Stanley does not take into account. There is a huge difference between wishing to become or be recognized as a certain gender or none within one's own species and becoming an animal or a transcendent figure. Furthermore, there are

⁷ Stanley Stone (1991) with her suggestion of not understanding trans as a third gender but as a different genre must in her attention to gender differences be remembered as being against (feminist) critique that holds that transsexuals were not interested in gender difference but stress gender stereotypes (Wilton 2000). There are also transsexual people who understand themselves as a third gender and do not say that they are trapped in a false body; they feel like neither man nor woman and instead identify as some third category (Ruttenberg 2002).

⁸ Also Mastroeni (1985) argues that sex and gender change is as possible as a European turning Chinese. Whatever one might do, he or she will remain a European, which is also not true because people can immigrate and legally become Chinese. What is also highly critical about the opinion of Mastroeni and Stanley is that she judges upon the suffering of others and claims that they suffer for a false thing. But there is no false suffering, and judging on this means taking God's point of view; that is, looking through the person (Sölle 2006).

therapists who do not accept that transgender identity really exists and understand therapy for transgender people as helping the client pretend to be what he or she desires (Vanderburgh 2009).⁹

The starting point within Judeo-Christian circles for criticism—or what might even occasionally pass for hysteria of gay/transsexual issues—begins with biblical references and frequently with the argument that the bible denounces homosexuality. If (fundamentalist) Jewish and Christian groups consider homosexuality to be wrong on the grounds of it being a sin, then, by their logic, their rejection of transsexuality should be even more vehement as, by their reasoning, transsexuals are not only attracted by a false object but dare to accuse God of having provided the wrong body. There are two biblical verses frequently mentioned purporting to condemn the transsexual lifestyle. The first is Lev 22:24 that forbids giving God any sacrificial animal that has injured or missing testicles. The second is Deut 22:5 that bans cross-dressing, calling it an abhorrence to God. It is hardly surprising that neither verse is referring to transgenderism. Astonishingly, Hebrew tradition knows about four other sexes beside the usual male (*zachar*) and female (*nekevah*) appearance that also appear in Talmud: *tuntum* (sexual signs are indeterminate or obscure), *androgynos* (male and female gender signs exist as in intersexuality), *saris* (born as male, develop female traits), and *aylonit* (born as female, develop male traits) (Fonrobert 2009; Rosen-Berry 2008).¹⁰ It is also remarkable that these four additional Talmudic genders are referred to hundreds of times within Mishna, Talmud, the classical Midrash, and codes of Jewish law. Mishna and Talmud mention *androgynos* 149 times and 350 references can be found in classical Midrash and law codes. The same can be observed for *tuntum* (referenced 181 times in Mishna and Talmud, and 335 times in Midrash and law codes), *aylonit* (referenced 80 times in Mishna and Talmud, and 40 times in Midrash and law codes), and *saris* (referenced 156 times in Mishna and Talmud, and 379 times in Midrash and law codes), as Kukla (2006) did. From this perspective, it can be argued that the phenomena of transsexuality and intersexuality are by no means insignificant. In fact, important figures of the Hebrew bible belong to the non-binary genders, such as Adam (Gen 8:1) who can only be classified as *androgynos*, since he is said to have been both male and female before Eve was made out of him. Moreover, Abraham and Sarah, in the Babylonian Talmud, are claimed to have both been *tuntums* (Yevamot 64a), which could refer to their closeness to God who is also neither male nor female. However, such describable gender diversity in Jewish tradition should not undermine the cardinal assumption of gender binarism and tight gender grid which characterizes the Mishna for instance, the fundamental first text of the Rabbinic movement. Nevertheless, what is vital here for a lucid interpretation of an overall rigid gender system is its purpose, which according to Charlotte E. Fonrobert is not to establish gender essentialism or ontological sexual categories but to echo the focus on reproduction. Thus, Fonrobert concludes, although the main texts of the Rabbinic tradition address the ambiguity of gender signs, they still reinforce bias toward gender dualism due to their hopes for fertility, plentitude, and the future (Fonrobert 2009).

⁹ “Only in this area of gender dysphoria do we attempt to help patients by pretending to change reality. It is, after all, pretense because genetic gender is not changed.” (Ruttenberg 2002, 620). This sort of approach reveals a genetic-reductionist understanding of gender. Although it is true that the genetic configuration cannot be changed, the crucial question is what does that mean to gender identity which is not a simple epiphenomenon of genetic code?

¹⁰ Generally speaking there is gender reversal throughout the history of myth, religion, and literature (Ramet 1996) and especially within the Jewish-Kabbalistic tradition (Michaelson 2012).

It should be remembered that in both Judaism and Christianity a positive approach to queer people can develop in ritual gesture. Ruttenberg (2002), for example, reports the *mikveh* of a female-affirmed Jewish Trans person and a very enlightened Jewish community and the experience of acceptance. Despite this, it cannot be refuted that transgender children who are just beginning their social transition are often met with discrimination aggression in churches and religious circles (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007); Hero 2012; Stuart 1997), although synagogues and churches, theologically speaking, could and should be places of refuge where transgender children and transgender adults can express their true identity, for the God of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament can be argued to not focus on gender behavior but rather on the people's hearts, and revealed that difference is part of his inner divine life which is reflected through diversity.

At present there is a development within psychiatry that is beginning to deny the pathological status of transgender feelings (Rauchfleisch 2012; Vanderburgh 2009). However, transsexuality in the DSM-IV and in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) is still considered to be a gender identity disorder (F64) and is still listed alongside other personality and behavioral disorders (F6). There are psychiatrists who state how healthy one must be to overcome all the challenges that are presented by trans-identity which of course questions the classification of transgender according to the ICD. Although this anti-pathological view of transgenderism has widespread acceptance within the field, official recognition of this position within the ICD will, in all likelihood, require a equivalent time frame as that required to change the status of homosexuality, which was previously classified as a sickness within the ICD (Winand et al. 2013; Kress 2000).¹¹ This newer development within the field of clinical psychiatry must be carefully taken into consideration by theological ethics. For Judeo-Christian bioethics it is a logical consequence of recent depathologization of transgenderism noted within the psychological sciences that demands a theological–ethical interpretation that can no longer treat trans-identity as a disease or a sin. Judeo-Christian bioethics can only meaningfully participate in the current discussion under the condition that the former has fully accepted a diverse gender concept.

Transgender Imaging God and the End of the Sacrosanct Genitals

In Genesis, God's word on man and woman appears to place human genitals into the area of God's holy will. It would seem as if God was mostly preoccupied with the penis: during circumcision the penis turns into the corporal manifestation of the bond (*berit*) between God and man. Within many Jewish and Christian denominations entrance into religious office is exclusively reserved for males. This focus on the possession of male genitalia finds further expression in the practice of Christian celibacy that prohibits the sexual use of the sacerdotal penis. Through biblical protology it can be shown that this religious focus on the genitals has no real biblical justification.

Another pertinent issue theology of creation has to confront when it comes to a theological debate on transgenderism. "Living in a shell of something I'm not"¹² is how one transsexual described the psychological condition of feeling trapped in the wrong body

¹¹ In the diagnostic and statistical manual (DSM) homosexuality was removed in 1973 (Vanderburgh 2009).

¹² Quoted from a letter written by an 18-year-old transgender person to Harry Benjamin (published in Hill 2008, 156).

(Hill 2008).¹³ This could be interpreted as an accusation against God and must surely be thought of in protology as theology of creation, especially if this transgender claim is understood to be a variant of the norm and not seen as a deviation (Hero 2012).

Both aspects have to be considered in the following and are covered when talking about (a) the specific blessing of man and woman in Genesis, (b) what exactly mirroring the image of God in humans is and (c) the *dominium terrae* as question about the influence of man on nature.

(a) The First Book of Moses (Gen 1:28) separates the blessing of the person from blessing reproduction and offspring (Jüngel 2002; Karle 2006; Zimmerli 1967). This differentiation is crucial since the importance of reproduction made heterosexuality the blessed and normative concept of sexuality (Cheng 2011). What is remarkable is that the blessing regards bearing children as God's constant attempt to see the world anew. The fact that persons perceived as being or who consider themselves to be queer usually cannot participate in reproduction does not deprive them of God's blessing since God blesses people in the first instance as human beings, not because of any act, such as fulfilling reproductive roles. Arguably, the naming of man and woman (Gen 1:27) could be understood as a merism, as a figurative use of contrasting opposites, like young and old or far and near, to express a totality. In that case man and woman could be seen as a pair that symbolizes the whole of humanity and all its (gender) diversity, as mentioned in the First Book of Moses (Weidmann-Schneider 2001).

(b) Being made like Elohim (Gen 1:26–27) as the divine image (*b'tzelem Elohim*) naturally provokes the question as to what exactly that means. There are two attributes that can be found throughout the biblical tradition which elaborates how Israel mainly thought of Elohim. Elohim was thought of as good and wise (2. Sam 14:17–20; 1 Sam 29:9). This implies that, while Israel refers to God often in male terms, they did not actually situate God within gender categories. What follows, according to Gerhard von Rad is that, God was not thought of as anthropomorphic whereas humankind was thought to be theomorphic which is of theological importance to the gender question (von Rad (1958)).¹⁴ In other words, the entire question of gender, which seems to feature greatly in Hebrew and Christian traditions, experiences refusal through the theological observation that being *imago Dei* does not mean mirroring a certain gender but mirroring goodness and wisdom. Hence, the sacrosanct assumption of gender and genitals is not applicable to the tradition of *b'tzelem Elohim*, because gender categories do not play any vital part within this religious description.

The most important anthropological term, usually completely unrelated to gender, is *nepesch*, which is understood as the vivid that lives in the body but is distinguished from it (Frettlöh 2002). As the living is a principle in biblical anthropology and freedom is a sign of the vivid, transgender lifestyles could be seen as the work of *nepesch* to make even gender a fundamentally vivid space.¹⁵ It cannot be maintained that solely heterosexual and

¹³ As mentioned above there are also transsexual people who do not feel like they are in the wrong body but say they feel like a third gender beyond male and female (Ruttenberg 2002).

¹⁴ Crüsemann (2003) remembers Deut 4:15–16 where God on his mountain reveals without appearing as man or woman. Thus in Hosea 11:9 it is said that God is God and not a man.

¹⁵ Rauchfleisch (2012) finds the gift of imagination an idiosyncrasy of transgender people who are extraordinarily talented as homo imaginosis who can imagine being different and living differently. The vividness of their thinking finds its innermost expression in fundamental desires. Rauchfleisch calls transgender people those having big desires. Their tremendous desires, their imagination upon the body as signs of the vivid spirit as well as their dreaming are of theological dignity.

reproductive people qualify as images of God (Genesis 1:26).¹⁶ This argument has its starting point with the fact that the Hebraic word for “image” in Genesis 1:26 is a plural which in turn might well reveal something about the plurality of God (Rosen-Berry 2008) who is neither male nor female (Ratzinger 2007) and as such could be said, if anything, to be closer to the transgender as opposed to the strict binary gender model. It was Hans Küng who dared to name God a “trans-human, trans-sexual last reality” (1974). Although it may be stretching the argument somewhat, Emmanuel Lévinas suggested that the archaic sound of the ontological difference of man and woman in Genesis 1:27 could rather be understood as saying that the combination of male and female aspects forms us as humans in the image of God (Lévinas 2008)¹⁷; such an interpretation could pave the way for a new theological openness toward the experience of fluid gender conceptions.

Taken from a Christian perspective, the dogma of the Trinity also instructs us to appreciate the difference inherent in God and allows us to recognize these differences and the very concept of difference itself as positive (Jüngel 2000). Applying the principles found in the Trinity to the wider spectrum of differences would, one feels, logically include gender differences also (Cheng 2011). Eberhard Jüngel (2000) strongly posits the idea that a theological awareness of the difference in God must have an impact on a positive validation of the difference within humanity as it mirrors divine being.

(c) The *dominium terrae* (Genesis 1:26–28) grants humanity supreme responsibility for earth when appointing man as lord of creation, which addresses every human and causes an egalitarian anthropology (Karle 2006). This is not to be confused with the right to merely exploit the earth’s resources but rather entrusts mankind the role of guardian and the task of making earth a place of peace. In the theology of Eberhard Jüngel this signifies justice for all creatures and the right to live as their true selves under *shalom*. Therefore the *dominium terrae* implies that earth might not be an empire (*imperium*) but rather a *dominium* which is an empire in *shalom* (Jüngel 2000). The rite of offering the sign of peace in the synagogue (*shalom alachem*) or in church (*pax vobiscum*) imagines *shalom* that addresses the unique otherness of my opposite and is not bound to any restriction; peace is unconditional and for everyone and creates the freedom for the other to be different (Cheng 2011; Jüngel 2000; Moltmann 1991).

Finally, it must be stressed that by the act of creation God granted mankind freedom, an intentional granting of autonomy so solemnly given that God binds himself to upholding it and does not interfere in the deeds of mankind save for when mankind pleads for intercession. The biblical view reveals Adonai actively supporting the idea of personal liberty. The creation narrative gives an account of humanity that is created unchained and free. The exodus as a struggle for emancipation underpins the origin of the biblical movement and inspires the entire First Testament. Plurality came with the act of creation, an act the purpose of which was to love God, who Himself seeks the people’s love (*condilectus*) that will only become reality under the circumstances of freedom.¹⁸ Creation begot freedom

¹⁶ Frettlöh (2002, 2009) highlights that all possible differences between humans dwindle in importance when compared to the dignity the person gains as the image of God. The dignity pattern is rather simple: what is human has the full dignity one can have whilst being in the image of God (Gen 9:6; Col 3:10; Jac 3:9).

¹⁷ In another interpretation it can be held that the distinction of male and female in Genesis recalls the constitutive difference in mankind (Frettlöh 2002), which is also of great importance for the gender debate and the question of a theological way of integrating diverse gender concepts into its thinking.

¹⁸ From here could arise a theology of the vivid that maintains that God’s creation is malleable, full of spontaneity, and self-moving as it is not a death creation. Seeing it this way could also open up space to understand formats that leave gender binary behind as an expression of a living creation. A theology of the living could inaugurate a fruitful dialogue with a “Philosophie des Lebendigen” (Frettlöh 2002; List 1997).

and freedom begot diversity and overtime a diminishing of this very diversity and a movement toward sameness and uniformity can be seen as endangering God's creations and human freedom. To put it sharply, is it not conceivable to understand gender deconstructionism and people striving to live beyond the rigid and normative gender beliefs as a modern day exodus-group leaving the tyranny of a narrow, binary, and rigid gender regime behind? Such an interpretation opens a space for thinking the different of the different.

Thinking the Difference of the Different

It cannot be denied that the marginalizing instinct prevalent in many areas of society in family, school, church, sports, the workplace, etc. toward transsexuals is a strong contributory factor in creating the feelings of self-loathing many transsexuals often experience (Vanderburgh 2009). It is more than possible to view the Christian theology of salvation as an antidote for any kind of self-loathing, for the central belief behind such theology is that through faith mankind has the full and unconditional acceptance of God (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007). The foundation for a community with God is dependent on God's grace and will alone. Hence, there is nothing man can do to destroy this community with God. It follows that as mankind cannot shatter or even threaten the foundation of this community there is no necessity to exclude any portion of mankind from this very community with God (Cheng 2011).¹⁹ In this light an invitation is extended to all homosexual, bisexual, intersexual, and transgender people to partake in this community. The only specification for inclusion within this community then must be understood as the full acceptance of the complete individual, not any perceived standards or norms decided upon and imposed by a select group of individuals but God's grace alone (Jüngel 1998).

Furthermore, it is the otherness of God who created the otherness of earth and humanity and thus appears as maintenance of this otherness (*creation continua*) and is not a threat to the difference of the different that God as the savior remains (Jüngel 2000).²⁰ His salvation as non-conditional love is a tremendous affirmation of alteration since there is no change needed to find God's mercy (*sola gratia*). This indication of the gratuity of love lends impetus to the idea of affirming the difference of the different and makes the Judeo-Christian community a "Gemeinschaft gegenseitigen Andersseins" (community of mutual difference) (Jüngel 2000, 223) that should not exclude any personal difference such as transgender identity. This highly theological and positive status of difference must create a religious climate where no one should feel fear, shame, or self-hatred for being different in the face of the God shared by Jews and Christians who is pure difference (Jüngel 2000).

Conclusion

This anthropological and ethical study in no way intends to diminish the difficulties sex realignment, and "transsexual medicine" represents for a transgender person in terms of psychological and social challenges. Moreover, endocrinological and surgical interventions

¹⁹ Tietz (2005, 144) points out: "Es gibt nichts am Menschen, was diese Gemeinschaft, die Gott in Jesus Christus mit dem Unannehmbaren eingeht, zerstören kann, hat sie doch ihren Grund allein in Gott. Deshalb braucht nichts am Menschen aus dieser Gemeinschaft ausgeschlossen zu werden."

²⁰ Hence alteration can be seen as the new paradigm in theology and philosophy; Habermas, Lévinas, Ricoeur, Marion and others stress the dignity of otherness (Knapp 2006; Schickendantz 2007).

are anything but ethically neutral areas (Connell 2012; Rauchfleisch 2012). An ethical debate is still required which includes such considerations as what constitutes best care; how is counseling best approached; and when is medical intervention necessary or justifiable since surgery as an extreme alteration of the body is only justified when adhering to state of the art and with the consent of the adult patient affected. Caution is doubtlessly advisable in all surgical and endocrinological procedures but of paramount importance when it comes to irreversible surgical sex realignments.

When considering the use of transgender medicine, the pain, suffering and potential side-effects likely to be experienced by those affected, and the awareness of social pressure of having to fit into a gender role (Butler 2001)²¹ might be critical ethical points to consider. Objections, however, to the use of transgender medicine “in the name of normalization” (Butler 2001, 628) cannot relate to the biblical tradition, for there is no normative concept of gender and no text whose scope is to articulate theology of gender. A few rare references on gender roles have to be seen in their historical and cultural context (“amalgam”), and feminist theology has shown how often the bible speaks of woman and begins to depart from gender boundaries, not infrequently criticizing social injustice as a major topic not only of old testament prophecy; doing justice to the inner suffering if transgender people could be seen from here (Vanderburgh 2009).

Objections against sex realignments “in the name of nature” (Butler 2001, 628) cannot find support in the biblical tradition because nature is not presented as a normative concept (Torjesen 1996).²² The creator’s act of creation presented mankind with the possibility to carefully and responsibly utilize the resources of nature, which partly involves viewing nature as an object that can be examined, experimented with, and transformed when the intelligence of man allows for it. This might be part of the theological saying of the goodness of earth which prefigures the genius of man to develop it. The use of tooth paste or prosthesis, for example, is clearly “unnatural,” but it is somewhat difficult to build an ethical case against their use on the grounds that this transgresses certain laws of nature or creation. There are a multitude of examples illustrating how we frequently circumvent the “laws” of nature and the “natural” limitations of our bodies, through sports, the use of cosmetics, anti-aging medicine, and cosmetic surgery, to name but a few. The history of humankind would strongly support the view that there is a strong and innate human will to alter and improve ourselves and our surroundings. Arguably transgender medicine can be seen as a quite sustained intervention on the body which addresses the specific suffering of the transsexual person but need not be understood as something ontologically different from other corrections of the body simply because it applies to the genitalia.

In view of the suffering that trans-identified people show, being torn between their biological sex and their psychological identity, ethics can neither remain silent nor retain their illusion of ambivalence which covers what is widely perceived as a negative position on the matter. When confronted with the misery of trans-identified people there is no real alternative for theological ethics other than a reappraisal of its own convictions concerning sexuality and creation in order not to reinterpret or reject the deep longing of transsexual

²¹ Butler in her text on John/Joan as mentioned in the introduction asks what it means if John dressed in girls’ clothes states “I looked at myself and I said I don’t like this type of clothing.” Now Butler questions this to make the social influence that informs our consciousness evident: “To whom is John speaking? And in what world, under what conditions, does not liking that type of clothing provide evidence for being the wrong gender? For whom would that be true? And under what conditions?” What arouses Butler’s curiosity is how certain things such as toys, games, and clothing contribute so much to being male or female and how strongly cultural influence influences the way people behave in more masculine or feminine ways.

²² See the biblical figures Perpetua, Felicity, and their cross-gender behavior.

people. Trans-identified people do not live in a no man's land concerning creation. Regarding a theology of creation it holds true that sexuality should not be limited to the narrow boundaries that are characterized by the dichotomy: heterosexuality and inalterability. Within the notion of creation that regards freedom as a matrix (approving of difference in the sense of its being diverse), there is no reason to reduce the theological creeds as to sexuality, being a creature (*Geschöpflichkeit*) and similarity to God in the sense of a culture that only approves of a heterosexual-oriented duality of the sexes (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007). In the vast expanse and freedom of the Judeo-Christian creator there is space for diversity, variations, and, above all, for the development of individual freedom. In this process of shaping freedom, a Judeo-Christian-inspired bioethics is able to participate as an authority in helping trans-identified persons by approving of their diversity, thus seeking to promote a legitimization of the transsexuals' search for a worthy life without despair, depression, and suicidal tendencies in the light of the future of their God.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1998). *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 4). Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M.
- Althaus-Reid, M. (2003). *The queer god*. London: Routledge.
- Althaus-Reid, M., & Isherwood, L. (2007). Thinking theology and queer theory. *Feminist Theology*, 15, 302–314.
- Ant, C. (2000). *Transsexualität und menschliche Identität. Herausforderung sexualethischer Konzeptionen*. Münster: LIT.
- Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to Asperger's syndrome*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2001). Doing justice to someone. Sex reassignment and allegories of transsexuality. *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7, 621–636.
- Cheng, P. S. (2011). *Radical love. An introduction to queer theology*. New York: Seabury Books.
- Clements-Nolle, K., Marx, R., & Katz, M. (2006). Attempted suicide among transgender persons. The influence of gender-based discrimination and victimization. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, 53–69.
- Connell, R. (2012). Transsexual woman and feminist thought. Toward new understanding and new politics. *Sign*, 37, 857–881.
- Cornwall, S. (2011). *Controversies in queer theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Crüsemann, F. (2003). *Maßstab: Tora Israels Weisung und christliche Ethik*. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser.
- Fonrobert, C. E. 2009. *Gender identity in Halakhic discourses. Jewish woman*. A comprehensive historical encyclopedia 2009 (<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gender-identity-in-halakhic-discourses>), viewed on 12 June 2015.
- Frettlöh, M. L. (2002). *Wenn Mann und Frau im Bilde Gottes sind. Über geschlechtsspezifische Gottesbilder, die Gottesbildlichkeit des Menschen und das Bilderverbot*. Wuppertal: Fodeus-Verlag.
- Frettlöh, M. L. (2009). *Gott Gewicht geben. Bausteine einer geschlechtergerechten Gotteslehre*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener.
- Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies. Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Hero, J. (2012). Toward a queer theology of flourishing. Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency. In D. L. Boisvert & J. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Queer religion. LGBT movements and queering religion II* (pp. 143–165). Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Hill, D. B. (2008). Dear Doctor Benjamin. Letters from transsexual youth (1963–1976). *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 10, 149–170.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (1987). Dialektik der Aufklärung. In R. Tiedemann (Ed.), *Max Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 5, pp. 13–290). Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp.
- Isherwood, L. (2001). *Introduction feminist christologies*. New York: Sheffield Academic press.
- Jüngel, E. (1998). *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens. Eine theologische Studie in ökumenischer Absicht*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Jüngel, E. (2000). *Indikative der Gnade—Imperative der Freiheit. Theologische Erörterungen IV*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

- Jünger, E. (2002). *Entsprechung: Gott—Wahrheit—Mensch*. Mohr Siebeck: Theologische Erörterungen II. Tübingen.
- Karle, I. (2006). “Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau...”. *Theologie jenseits der Geschlechterdifferenz*. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser.
- Kenagy, G. P. (2005). Transgender health. Findings from two needs assessment studies in Philadelphia. *Health and Social Work*, 30, 19–26.
- Klöppel, U. (2010). *XXOXY ungelöst. Hermaphroditismus, Sex und Gender in der deutschen Medizin Eine historische Studie zur Intersexualität*. Bielefeld: Transkript.
- Knapp, M. (2006). *Verantwortetes Christentum heute. Theologie zwischen Metaphysik und Postmoderne*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Kress, H. (2000). Gleichgeschlechtliche Orientierung und gleichgeschlechtliche Partnerschaft in rechts- und sozioethischer Perspektive. *Ethica*, 8, 339–365.
- Kukla, E. 2006. *Terms for gender diversity in classical Jewish texts* (http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Classical_Jewish_Terms_for_Gender_Diversity.pdf), viewed on 25 June 2015.
- Küng, H. (1974). *Christ sein*. Munich: Piper.
- Lévinas, E. (1991). *Nine talmudic readings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lévinas, E. (2008). *Ethik und Unendliches. Gespräche mit Philippe Nemo*. Vienna: Passagen.
- List, E. (1997). Das lebendige Selbst. Leiblichkeit, Subjektivität und Geschlecht. In S. Stoller & H. Vetter (Eds.), *Phänomenologie und Geschlechterdifferenz* (pp. 292–318). Vienna: WUV-Univ-Verlag.
- Mastroeni, A. (1985). The morality of sex conversions. *Linacre Quarterly*, 52, 238–239.
- Michaelson, J. (2012). I’m just not that kind of god. Queering Kabbalistic gender play. In D. L. Boisvert & J. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Queer religion. Homosexuality in modern religious history I* (pp. 51–68). Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Moltmann, J. (1991). *The spirit of life. A universal affirmation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Ramet, S. P. (1996). Gender reversals and gender cultures. An introduction. In S. P. Ramet (Ed.), *Gender reversal and gender culture. Anthropological and historical perspectives* (pp. 1–21). London: Routledge.
- Ratzinger, J. (2007). *Jesus von Nazareth, Part I*. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder.
- Rauchfleisch, U. (2012). *Transsexualität—Transidentität Begutachtung, Begleitung Therapie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Rivera, S. (2002). Queens in exile, the forgotten ones. In J. Nestle, C. Howell, & R. Wilchins (Eds.), *Gender queer voices from beyond the sexual binary* (pp. 67–90). Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Rosen-Berry, J. (2008). Revealing hidden aspects of divinity in the ‘Queer’ face. Towards a Jewish ‘Queer’ (Liberation) theology. *European Judaism*, 41, 138–154.
- Ruttenberg, D. (2002). The image of god. *Lilith*, 20, 26–27.
- Schickendantz, C. (2007). Person, Körper und Liebe. Reflexionen über Gender und Alterität von der Schöpfungsgeschichte. In M. Eckholt & T. Fliethmann (Eds.), “Freunde habe ich euch genannt”. *Freundschaft als Leitbegriff systematischer Theologie* (pp. 49–90). Münster: Lit.
- Schippert, C. (2011). Implications of queer theory for the study of religion and gender: Entering the third decade. *Religion and Gender*, 1, 66–84.
- Sheffield, T. (2008). A queer counternarrative of embodied transgression. *Theology and Sexuality*, 14, 233–258.
- Sölle, D. (2006). *Gesammelte Werke* (Vol. IV). Stuttgart: Kreuz.
- Sonnenmoser, M. (2008). Transsexualität/Transidentität: Was ist weiblich, was ist männlich? *Deutsches Ärzteblatt*, 27, 174.
- Stanley, L. (2000). Interview with Steve Taylor. *Newsletter of the British Sociological Association*, 75, 1–4.
- Stone, S. (1991). The empire strikes back a post- transsexual Manifesto. In J. Epstein & K. Straub (Eds.), *Body guards. The cultural politics of gender ambiguity* (pp. 280–304). New York: Routledge.
- Stone, K. (2001). Queer commentary and biblical interpretation: An introduction. In K. Stone (Ed.), *Queer commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (pp. 11–34). Sheffield: Sheffield Acad. Press.
- Stuart, E. (1997). *Religion is a queer thing. A guide to the christian faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People*. London: Cassell.
- Tietz, C. (2005). *Freiheit zu sich selbst. Entfaltung eines christlichen Begriffs von Selbstannahme*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Torjesen, K. J. (1996). Martyrs, ascetics, and gnostics. Gender-crossing in early christianity. In S. P. Ramet (Ed.), *Gender reversals and gender cultures. Anthropological and historical perspectives* (pp. 79–91). London: Routledge.
- Vanderburgh, R. (2009). Appropriate therapeutic care for families with pre-pubescent transgender/Gender-dissonant children. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 26, 135–154.

- Von Rad, G. (1958). *Theologie des Alten testaments* (Vol. I). Kaiser: Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferung Israels. Munich.
- Weidmann-Schneider, S. (2001). Transgender Jews. *Lilith*, 20, 23–24.
- Wilcox, M. M. (2012). Queer theory and the study of religion. In D. L. Boisvert & J. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Queer religion. LGBT movements and queering religion* (Vol. II, pp. 227–251). Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Wilton, T. (2000). Out/performing our selves. Sex, gender and Cartesian dualism. *Sexualities*, 3, 237–254.
- Winand, S., et al. (2013). Transsexualität Ein Tabuthema? *Gynäkologische praxis*, 37, 509–518.
- Zimmerli, W. (1967). *1 Mose 1-11 Die Urgeschichte*. Zurich: Zwingli Verlag.