

ABC Religion & Ethics

Gender and Identity: Freeing the Bible from Modern Western Anxieties

Scott Cowdell Thursday 14 September 2017 12:04pm

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra, and Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Anglican Diocese.

In Australia's same-sex marriage debate, anxiety over gender confusion looms large. An [early advertisement for the "No" campaign](#) features a young mother, concerned because her son was allegedly told that wearing a dress to school was permitted.

Conservative protests against "Safe Schools" programs, which supposedly attempt to normalise gender fluidity, reflect an unease with hybridity in its various forms. Anthropology reveals how clear-cut differentiations, enshrined in myth and ritual, are meant to keep such hybridity at bay and maintain an ordered society. The modern West is no exception, struggling with its own range of ineradicable hybrid realities. Hence we are not "modern" at all in that sense.

In this article I want to address gender anxiety as it is handled by the conservative Christian right, and offer an alternative view. A recent report by the Doctrine Commission of the (conservative-Evangelical) Anglican Diocese of Sydney will serve as a touchstone, entitled ["A Theology of Gender and Gender Identity."](#) I will suggest that its approach is way too modern, and not biblical enough.

But first, what exactly is the problem?

Parsing the LGBTIQ rainbow

The designation LGBTIQ points to a range of more-or-less distinct options. **L**, **G** and **B** are familiar enough and refer to one's primary sexual orientation. **T** stands for *transgender*, and this is where the gender wars are chiefly being fought. Some people find themselves more or less uneasy with the gender to which they have been assigned (though this has no necessary connection to their sexual orientation). Some experience what until recently was called Gender Identity Disorder (GID), feeling trapped in the wrong body.

The most recent *DSM-5* - the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#), fifth edition, of the American Psychiatric Association - now uses the term "Gender Dysphoria." Whereas GID pathologised belief about being in the wrong body, Gender Dysphoria sees the distress caused by this belief as the mental problem to be treated, but not the belief itself.

Some such people seek to "transition" by means of surgical reassignment and hormonal treatments, with even pre-pubescent children claiming Gender Dysphoria and seeking to do so. The contested rights of these children and their parents, which are typically adjudicated by the courts, can lead to the prescription of puberty-blocking drugs to buy time. Perhaps that "No"-voting mother's anxiety about her son wearing a dress to school (note: any liking for cross dressing would not necessarily make him either **G** or **T**) suggests that a whole tsunami of gender fluidity is barely being held in check.

The issue of gender has become one of ideology, politics and competing versions of reality. On the intellectual left it is not uncommon these days to view gender as a matter of patriarchally-repressive social construction

(thus [Simone de Beauvoir](#)), and performance rather than essence ([Judith Butler](#)). Whatever sex one might be biologically, the way in which one's sex is experienced, perceived and connected with conventional gender roles is no longer quite so straightforward.

We know that being male and female differs in various cultures ancient and modern, but the social constructivist argument does not stop there. Sexed bodies and the gender roles they correlate with are strongly cross-hatched - the way gender is constructed "performs" the sexed body, if not entirely overwriting it. And this newer perspective is becoming official, with the World Health Organization defining gender as socially constructed.

The two as-yet-unmentioned categories on the LGBTIQ rainbow - the **I** and the **Q** - are especially embroiled. The **I** stands for *intersex*, referring to people who are born with some indeterminacy in their bodily sexual makeup. Gender is variously ascribed to these people across the cultural spectrum. Their confinement to one of two genders was not always insisted upon in pre-modern cultures, however, nor indeed in the pre-Enlightenment West.

The **Q** designation is where gender fluidity is most fully expressed. Queer discourse in the academy, the arts and film, calls into question the gender binaries, gender roles, the implication of gender in social divisions of power (Foucault), and indeed the whole idea of a fixed self. It is potentially the most radical and transgressive posture in the gender debate, dismissive of all normalising, naturalising claims.

Of course, such in-your-face postmodernism may also be seen as the triumph of an individualistic ideology, and the consumerist dream of being able to make ourselves whatever we want to be, beyond any and all constraints - including the body we are given. Consequently, some Christian critique is to be expected.

However, "queer theory" also has its Christian defenders, such as [John Schad](#), who argue that the Gospel calls all overly-controlling and violent-tending versions of meaning into question. Hence, Christianity is surely at least somewhat "queer."

The answer of Sydney Anglicanism

The 2017 Sydney Anglican Doctrine Commission Report, "[A Theology of Gender and Gender Identity](#)," provides a useful reference point. It chiefly addresses Gender Dysphoria, concluding that those who experience it and wish to transition require guidance, correction and pastoral support to cease and desist. Steps deemed necessary include resuming the dress appropriate to their gender, refusing surgery and foregoing further hormone treatments. Those who have undergone irreversible surgery must learn to live by faith, within their assigned gender role, among the maimed who are designated by Jesus as "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others" (Matthew 19:12).

While the gender dysphoric are not "necessarily culpable" for their condition, the Sydney report regards it as sinful for them to act upon those feelings and seek to abandon their God-given gender. The moral outworking of this assessment invokes the virtues of endurance, patience, joy and thanksgiving, as enjoined on Christians in Colossians 1:1-12. These are regarded as incompatible with nursing a grievance about being wrongly gendered. To seek an alternative body is to express covetousness (Colossians 3:5), too, likewise to perpetrate falsehood (Ephesians 4:25) about who one most truly is.

A reward for patient, faithful endurance in the face of Gender Dysphoria will come in heaven, however, when the real and abiding transition will take place - to a body that is immortal and imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). It is argued that in this happy state, the gender dysphoric will come at last to live at peace within the confines of their assigned gender.

These pastoral recommendations assume that "in light of the teaching of Scripture, it is clear that all forms of cross-gender identification are contrary to God's will and the good of sufferers." Accordingly, the goal of "restoration" is "to work toward an acceptance of one's bodily sex as the true signifier of one's gender." Recommendations also include a call to public advocacy against the false claims of gender theory, and to insist on *genuinely* "Safe Schools" - presumably, "safe" from the influence of such a pernicious ideology.

The root premise here is based on Genesis 1-2, and God's creation of the gender binary. It is essentially the "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" argument. Male/female duality is perceived to be primal and deep-seated (see also Genesis 5:1-2), involving both a physical and a relational imperative. Jesus is cited accordingly, acknowledging that marriage does indeed join a man and a woman (Mark 10:6; Matthew 19:4). Paul is also invoked, endorsing Old Testament prohibitions on "gender bending" practices (such as cross dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5; and same-sex intercourse in Leviticus 18:22; 22:13), listing vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and insisting on separate gender roles for men and women in worship (1 Corinthians 11:4-5, 13-15).

Of course, there are alternative readings of all such biblical texts, including the small number that are regularly asserted against same-sex practice, and I cannot address them here. However, there are always deeper issues of whichever confessional world view and its accompanying biblical theology to look out for in the "No" case, which [underwrite the interpretation of any particular passage](#). For the Sydney report, a conservative Evangelical theology necessitates that God's sovereign will in creating humanity, as Genesis 1-2 is understood to portray it, must trump every other consideration, requiring that the gender binary be honoured, preserved, and never questioned.

The report's key assertion, and no doubt the abiding conviction of that "No"-voting mother in the same-sex marriage advertisement, is that:

"contrary to current gender theory ... biological sex is inseparable from both gender identity and gender roles. Human males grow into men (and potentially husbands and fathers) and human females grow into women (and potentially wives and mothers). Indeed, such heteronormativity is what makes human marriage, human family and human flourishing possible."

While feminists - not to mention queer theorists - would most likely read this as un-self-critically patriarchal ideology imposed on scripture, the Sydney report would regard such assessments as mistaken consequences of the Fall, which has clouded humanity's intellectual and moral judgement. Hence there is no place in the gender debate for science, philosophy, feminism, the hermeneutics of suspicion, or just simply listening to LGBTIQ people about their experiences, dreams and disappointments. The pastoral conversation, like the theological one, can only go one way.

However, so conventional and unproblematic an alignment of gender roles with sexed bodies, supported by a biblical theology that too-readily focusses and harmonizes all of scripture, and presented as the very heart of God's sovereign will, allowing no place for contemporary wisdom and pastoral experience, must surely raise concerns.

Modernity hates hybridity

Whereas the gender binary once reflected an order originating from above - effectively, a cosmology - Western medicine from the Enlightenment onwards asserted the gender binary afresh, but on the basis of a newer, more modern cosmological synthesis. In an increasingly materialistically-minded age, a transcendent order that was once marked out or made manifest in the gendering of human bodies was brought down to earth. Thereafter, the assignment of gender came to be based on the observed anatomy and physiology of those bodies. It did not elaborate new distinctions, but approached already-recognised ones in a new way: what had

been the *representation* of a divinely-mandated distinction became the *foundation* of a material one. As [Linda Nicholson](#) explains:

"When the Bible or Aristotle is the source of authority about how the relationship between women and men is to be understood, any asserted differences between women and men are to be justified primarily through reference to these texts. When, however, the texts of Aristotle and the Bible lose their authority, nature and the body become the means for grounding any perceived distinction between women and men. This means that to the extent there is a perceived need for the male/female distinction to be constituted as a deep and significant one, the body must 'speak' this distinction loudly, that is, in every aspect of its being. The consequence is a two-sex view of the body."

There had been a medieval view of woman as incomplete man, different in degree but not in kind (I will comment shortly on a likely source of such thinking in Genesis 2). But [Thomas Laquer](#) shows how the Enlightenment medical mind began to differentiate the external sex organs of men and women into two different types of thing, and to distinguish the ovaries from the testes - also to reinterpret menstruation, which had previously been seen as just one more instance of the sort of bleeding that all human bodies do (though women more than men, because they are "warmer"); and to start inventing new terms to distinguish body parts (such as "vagina").

Likewise, the hermaphrodite of former centuries became the "pseudo-hermaphrodite" whose true sexual identity would be revealed by sufficiently expert diagnosis - the ambiguous appearances could not fool the ordering modern mind.

My issue here is with modern Western unease towards the hybrid, the undifferentiated, the unclassifiable, the uncontrollable. Whereas the gender binary had represented a classical and biblical world view "from above," it came to represent a controlling modern materialistic discourse "from below." But in both cases, ancient *and* modern, I suggest that gender was ideologically freighted in the interests of maintaining a sufficiently differentiated view of reality, which was necessary for preserving social stability.

A cosmology coupled with a political order constitutes what Stephen Toulmin calls a [Cosmopolis](#). When the *Cosmopolis* underpinning the *ancien regime* and *Paradise Lost* was forced to give way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a modern, scientific, revolutionary world sustained by a new *Cosmopolis* of confident, rational, progressive modern order arose to take its place - lasting, arguably, until the First World War brought a new series of challenges.

French thinker [Bruno Latour](#) is highly sceptical of the excessive attempts at ordering and controlling the ill-fitting facts of life that this new modern synthesis entailed. He argues:

"Moderns ... differ from premoderns by this single trait: they refuse to conceptualize quasi-objects as such. In their eyes, hybrids represent the horror that must be avoided at all costs by a ceaseless, even maniacal purification ..."

With his anthropology of modern science, Latour declares that we have never succeeded in being "modern" - in actually achieving this purified state - because too many disowned hybrids remain. An example is the hybrid phenomenon of climate change, which is so confronting and aggravating for conservatives because it constitutes an uneasy amalgam of politics, science, nature and technology.

I argue that another conservative *bete noir*, gender fluidity, represents a similar, self-defining modern anxiety. It rocks a certain sort of brashly-confident, right-wing conservative to their core - someone like Tony Abbott. It undermines their confidence in the sacred promise of modernity and its institutions, into which a more ancient biblical faith has been enlisted to serve Western modernity's *Cosmopolis*.

However, what if the supposed sovereign order that emerges from the Genesis account of creation and gender, likewise the modern medical overwriting of any gender hybridity, can be questioned? What if the Sydney report, confident in its unproblematic alignment of sex and gender, has missed something? What if Genesis 1-2 actually problematizes rather than confirms the cosmology - the *Cosmopolis* - that has been erected upon it?

The Bible tells me so

I will argue that the gender binary is not absolute in Genesis 1-2 and that its God is not as remotely sovereign as the Sydney report would have it. My argument proceeds in three stages.

First, it is widely recognised that the so-called "Priestly" or *P* creation account (Genesis 1:1-2:3) represents an alternative to the sacred cosmology of ancient Babylon, where Israel had been exiled. I suggest that it is best read as a contribution to political theology. The primal violence of the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, is referenced but denied, and deconstructed. In *Enuma Elish*, the sky god, Marduk, slays the primal mother - the monster of uncontrollable watery chaos - Tiamat, and from her split (that is, *differentiated*) body a differentiated world emerges.

Israel's alternative in this first creation story removes the violence, and the world is differentiated in peace - this is not typical of pagan mythology, which the monotheistic Hebrew writers were intent on discrediting. Male and female emerge as part of God's creation, along with other differentiated pairings: sun and moon, night and day, land and sea, sea and sky, birds and sea creatures, cattle and wild animals, and so on. Unlike the *Enuma Elish*, gender in the *P* account does not reference an alarming primal reality that has to be tamed, but forms part of a peacefully differentiated and law-abiding world, unified under God's umbrella of meaning yet also distinguishable (Genesis 1:27).

So, yes, there is a cosmology here, and an alternative *Cosmopolis* also based on formative divisions - though it appears far more relaxed than the Babylonian one. In that sense, the Sydney report is right to acknowledge the divinely-instituted order, though with what perhaps represents an over-zealous handling of the material. But what about the other, older version of the creation that follows in Genesis 2:4-24?

My second point concerns this other creation account, ascribed to the so-called "Yahwist" writer *J* (from the German, *Jahweh*). Here it is a different story. We still have man and woman, but the man looms large as God's co-worker, tending the garden from early in the creative process. God speaks not in the cause of establishing sovereign order, but out of pastoral solicitude for the man who is lonely. The man has a major share in the creation of meaning, naming the animals, and eventually naming the woman who is derived from his own body by God.

Here the gender binary is introduced but with less emphasis on distinctiveness - the similarity is emphasised, the oneness of bone and flesh, and the felt imperative to bring the newly divided creature back together (here we might locate a root of the aforementioned medieval view of man and woman as not-fully-distinct types of being).

In this *J* version the man is far more active, conscious and intelligent, too, trusted by God with a key role in the ordering of reality, including sizing-up and naming his partner. We might even say that God entrusted to the creature of earth a role in the defining of gender: *the first human gets a say in who the newer, differently-sexed human is to be, and who they are to be in relation to each other* (Genesis 2:23-24).

My third point follows from the fact that these two creation accounts were combined by Priestly redactors or editors in the final edited version of Genesis. They put their own party's version first, but they also took pains to include the quite different, earlier voice of the *J* writer. In his discussion of such "Composite Artistry" in the

Old Testament, the Hebrew literary scholar [Robert Alter](#) concludes that "Even if they" - that is, the *P* editors - "felt more comfortable with the hierarchical and harmonious vision of things, they were obliged to put their own version in dialogue with *J*'s much more anthropomorphic, psychologically dynamic, and even unruly account of creation."

Alter stresses the Hebrew Bible's literary genius, in variously representing the struggle of perplexed and contradictory humans with God in the crucible of ordinary history. Regarding Genesis, Alter identifies its literary genre as closer to *Tom Jones* than to the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. By contrast, the Sydney report, with its tightly controlled, fully-harmonised biblical theology reflecting the overmastering sovereign will of God, misses a different point that the paired creation stories in Genesis seem to be making. From Alter's perspective, these joint accounts represent the grand but hair-raising adventure of humans trusted to share in the making of meaning with their God.

Regarding the whole business of gender, I argue that the paired Genesis creation narratives present gender as *our business to explore and to define and not just God's business to declare and to impose*. That responsibility goes along with the naming and tending of all creation that God entrusts to the creature of earth in the *J* account of Genesis 2.

A non-anxious alternative

The danger of enforcing differentiation, order and control is that the ill-fitting are perceived as disruptive, even dangerous, and are best gotten out of the way to ensure stability. Such scapegoating is well analysed by [Rene Girard](#) and lies at the heart of how human societies are established and maintained. "Gender bending" along the LGBTIQ spectrum is perceived accordingly as just such a potential control breach, calling forth responses that have proved both unerring and harsh.

We now realise that the gender binary has served powerful agendas of control, overseeing and regulating how the relationship between bodies, sexuality and social roles has been variously conceived. In the modern West, this gender binary has been reasserted in keeping with a widespread cultural loathing of hybridity. Accordingly, we now witness a strong reaction against such ideological harnessing of gender, with the whole issue coming to occupy the centre of today's culture wars.

My conclusion is that the Bible in general, and the Genesis accounts of humanity's creation in particular, have been annexed by modern Western anxieties and made to tell a more linear, less nuanced story about human identity than they actually provide.

Regarding widespread anxieties about "gender bending," which converge in Australia's same-sex marriage debate, I offer a non-anxious alternative. **The Bible is certainly a key conversation partner for reflection on these matters. However, the Bible mandates a place for humans to struggle with God in the making of meaning for their lives, as we can infer from the combined Genesis creation accounts themselves.**

Hence what we might call *sanctified reason* - which (unlike the Sydney report) respects both Church tradition and the best of contemporary critical insight, is leavened by compassion, and listens carefully as actual LGBTIQ people relate the riches and travails of their lived experience - completes the framework that God provides for us to work through these matters. It has ever been thus for human beings who seek to find their way faithfully under God.

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell is Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University, Canberra, and Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Anglican Diocese. He is the author of many books, but the most relevant to this topic is [Abiding Faith: Christianity Beyond Certainty, Anxiety, and Violence](#).