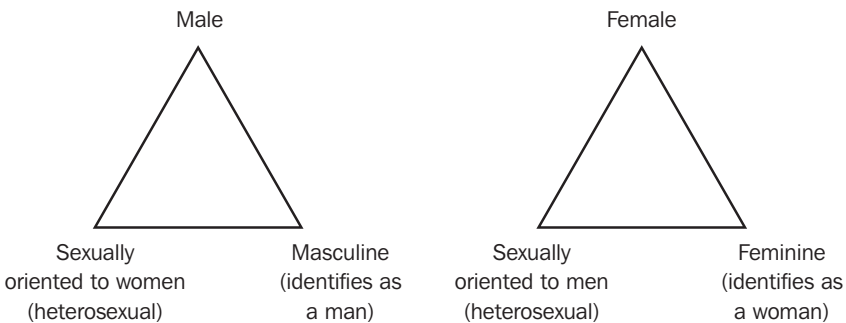

Sexuality, Sex and Gender

At the beginning of Chapter 1, I set out the ways in which I'd be using the terms *sex*, *sexuality* and *gender* within this book. I suggested then that sex, sexuality and gender aren't identical, but represent different aspects of our sexual selves: our biological sex as male, female or other; our cultural gender, that is whether we present and understand ourselves as men, women or another gender; and our sexual orientation, that is the activities or persons to whom we find ourselves sexually attracted.

Sex, gender and sexuality revisited

Christian theologians have often assumed that, in psychologically healthy people, these three aspects of sex, gender and sexuality must fit together in particular configurations. For example, many Christians object to homosexuality, because they believe that God's divine plan is for males to be attracted to females, not to other males. In this account, gender and sexuality must 'fit' with biological sex. Christian theologians have often asserted that sex, gender and sexuality must 'match' in healthy individuals. If we represented their ideal of healthy sex, gender and sexuality in a diagram, it might look like Figure 1.

Figure 1: Heterosexual male and heterosexual female

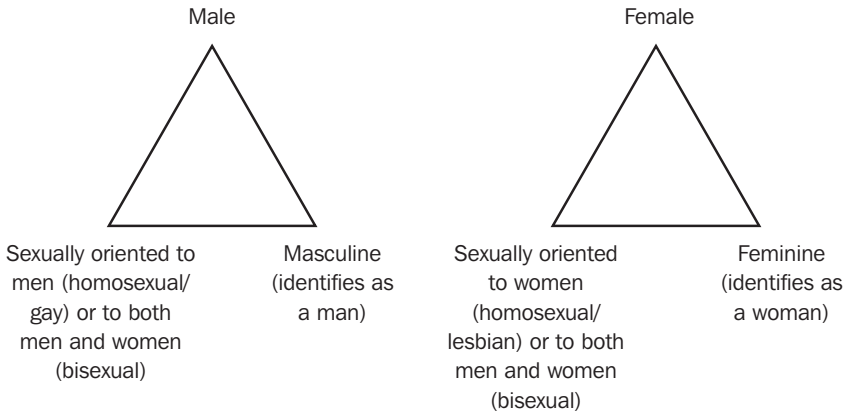


SEXUALITY, SEX AND GENDER

However, these triangles don't in fact represent everyone's experience. It's not the case that all biological males identify as men and are sexually attracted to women. Where any one of these – sex, gender or sexuality – differs from the 'norm', we need to construct an alternative set of triangles to represent the alternative configuration.

Where someone is male and identifies as a man, but is attracted to males rather than females, his sexual orientation varies, and he is termed homosexual or gay. Where someone is female and identifies as a woman, but is attracted to females rather than males, her sexual orientation varies, and she is termed homosexual, gay or lesbian (Figure 2).

Figure. 2: Non-heterosexual male and non-heterosexual female



Where someone is male but identifies as a woman rather than a man, she is termed transgender (and she might identify heterosexually, attracted to men, homosexually, attracted to women, or bisexually, attracted to both). Where someone is female but identifies as a man rather than a woman, he is termed transgender (and he might identify heterosexually, attracted to women, homosexually, attracted to men, or bisexually, attracted to both) (Figure 3).

Where someone has a physical difference which means their body can't be clearly categorized as solely male or female, they are termed intersex (Figure 4). Intersex people might identify as men, women or another gender. They might be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual.

THEOLOGY AND SEXUALITY

Figure 3: Transgender male and transgender female

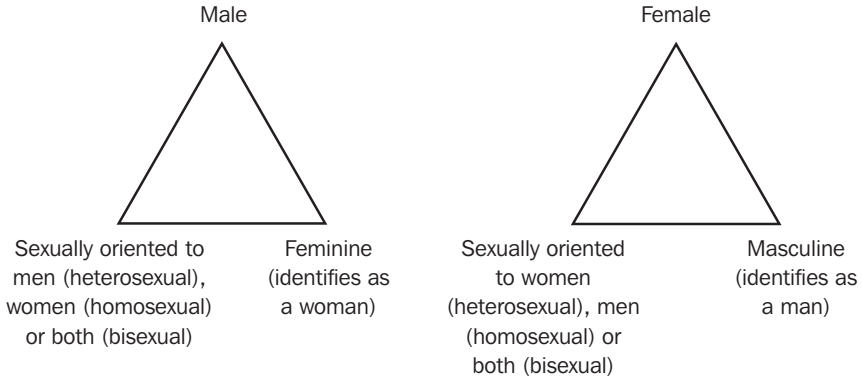
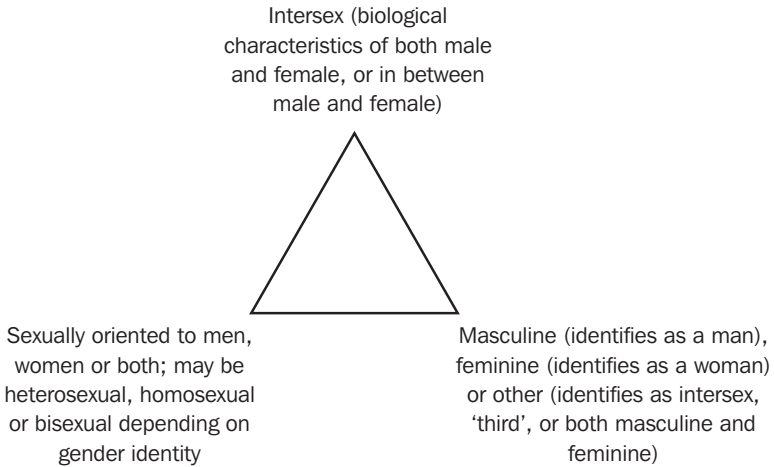


Figure 4: Intersex person



Christian theologians have sometimes argued that any variation from the first set of triangles in Fig. 1 represents something which has gone wrong and falls short of the ideal. For example, the Evangelical Alliance’s document *Transsexuality* (Evangelical Alliance 2000) insists that transgender is a form of psychological disturbance: since, as they understand it, God intends people’s gender to ‘match’ their sex, if someone believes they were born as the wrong sex, this can’t be part of how God intended things to be but is evidence of sin and disruption in the world and God’s good order.

Gender relations and the New Testament

Many Christian theologians believe that God created human males and females with distinct roles and responsibilities, which map onto their sexes and gender roles (see for example Piper and Grudem 2006; Köstenburger and Jones 2010). As a result, they believe, human sexual activity should take place only in specific gender combinations: men with women rather than women with women or men with men. This is held to be part of the broader divine plan for the way in which men and women should interact. As evidence, they point particularly to the Genesis creation accounts and to passages in the New Testament which set out the way that men and women should relate to one another in marriage and the family, in church leadership and in the broader community.

The majority of these New Testament teachings are found in the disputed Pauline letters – that is, letters which purport to be written by Paul, but which many scholars believe were probably written by a later member of Paul's community rather than by Paul himself (Horrell 2006, pp. 6–7, 125–32; Dunn 1996, pp. 269–70; MacDonald 2008, pp. 6–8).¹ There seems to be a shift from the extreme equality found in Paul's earlier letters to a more gender-hierarchical, socially conservative pattern in the disputed letters. For example, Galatians 3, which almost all scholars agree was written by Paul himself, says,

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3.26–8)

This has often been interpreted as a radical passage which seems to suggest that old social divisions have ceased to matter in the same way in light of the new community of equality in Christ. However, by the time of the later letter to the Colossians, the message appears softer and less counter-cultural:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters. (Col. 3.18–23)

¹ Horrell, MacDonald and many other scholars have pointed out that, at the time the texts were produced, to write under someone else's name would not have been considered plagiarism or forgery, but rather a way of honouring a respected teacher (Horrell 2006, pp. 130–1; MacDonald 2008, p. 8).

While this is in some respects still a deeply revolutionary teaching – since the idea that women and children deserve as much respect as men would have been a radical one – it no longer carries the sense that gender and social divisions have somehow stopped existing. Colossians implies that there still are slaves and masters, and that it is possible to be a good Christian slave or a good Christian master; Galatians had seemed to imply that Christians should no longer recognize these distinctions at all.

In Ephesians 5—6, these social differences are not only acknowledged as existing, but are given cosmic, theological resonance. Slaves are now told that they should obey their masters ‘as you obey Christ’, and their masters are reminded that they, too, have a Master in heaven. Wives are told,

Be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. (Eph. 5.22–4)

Again, the message is more radical than it might sound to modern readers: husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, a move away from a social-cultural norm in which men have absolute control over the women, children and slaves in their households and can treat them however they please. Nonetheless, the Ephesians teaching still seems less counter-cultural than Galatians’ message that, in Christ, distinctions of race, gender and class no longer exist at all.

Other New Testament books give even more detailed teachings about gender roles. The Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) purport to have been written by Paul, but many scholars believe they were probably written later, partly because their socially conservative message seems at odds with Paul’s early letters, and partly because their vocabulary, style of writing and choice of subject-matter seem very different from Paul’s earlier writings. (For detailed discussions about the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, see for example Marshall 1999, pp. 57–80; Towner 2006, pp. 9–26; Montague 2008, pp. 15–26). The Pastoral Letters say,

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim. 2.11–15)

Tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being sub-

missive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited ... Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to answer back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour. (Titus 2.3–5, 9–10)

Some Christians believe that the texts were probably not written by Paul but that, since they are in the Bible in any case, they still represent God's word and should be taken seriously. Apparent differences between the earlier and later teaching might be explained by, for example, the suggestion that Paul expected Jesus to return very soon and so did not feel the need to endorse existing social norms, whereas by the time of the later letters, there was less expectation that Jesus would return imminently and so the Christian communities were having to navigate how they should continue to live in the world. Biblical interpreters continue to debate the significance of the women mentioned in Romans 16 who do seem to take active roles in church leadership (such as Phoebe and Prisca) and whom Paul describes as fellow-apostles (such as Junia). Other apparent New Testament mentions of female leaders in the early Church appear in Acts 16.40, Acts 18.26, 1 Corinthians 1.11, and Colossians 4.15.

As with debates surrounding homosexuality, the disagreements surrounding passages about gender relations in the New Testament raise broader questions about the nature of biblical interpretation. Whether or not they were written by Paul, are the teachings in the New Testament representative of God's plan for how men and women should relate to each other across all time, or are they specific to the time and culture in which they were written? Must Christians today still base their lives on these texts, or are they free to look for broader principles about human relationships in the Bible and elsewhere in the Christian tradition?

Feminist theological responses

Some feminist theologians in particular believe that the hierarchical, strongly gendered message of Ephesians, Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles represents a distortion of what they consider the truer teaching of texts like Galatians. For example, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite notes that Colossians 3.11 seems to present a more limited vision of equality in Christ than Galatians 3.28 does, since women are not mentioned at all in the groups who are now 'in Christ'. She argues that the more hierarchical, conservative vision of Colossians and Ephesians 'developed in response to social criticism of the newfound freedom of Christians' (1985, p. 105).

Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that Jesus' giving-up of male and other privilege, which is endorsed in the early Pauline texts, is a powerful example for Christians, but that its radical quality is lost because of Christianity's

subsequent alliance with sexist and hierarchical social norms in the Roman Empire and beyond. Ruether considers that this distortion affects Christian interpretations of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts, noting that the hierarchical teaching on gender by theologians like Thomas Aquinas (a thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian) is exacerbated by their integration of beliefs about human biology prevalent at the time. For example, she notes, Aquinas' biology meshed with the dominant worldview of his time, based on the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, namely that there was only one sex and that females were 'lesser' or 'imperfect' versions of males (1983, pp. 96). Aquinas therefore concluded that God had *intended* women to be lesser and inferior, and that this was their divinely ordained place. What Ruether points out is that, although we no longer accept Aristotle's biology, Aquinas' theological anthropology has hung on more stubbornly, and continues to influence Roman Catholic and other teaching on gender to this day.

Evangelical responses

Indeed, many theological beliefs about human sex and gender are grounded in the belief that there is an ontological difference between males and females – a difference in their very being and existence, and one which is cosmically significant. For example, argues the evangelical theologian John Piper, 'The Bible reveals the nature of masculinity and femininity by describing diverse responsibilities for man and women while rooting these differing responsibilities in creation, not convention ... Differentiated roles were corrupted, not created, by the fall. They were created by God' (2006, p. 35). In similar vein, Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones say,

The man and the woman are jointly charged with ruling the earth representatively for God, yet they are not to do so androgynously or as 'unisexual' creatures, but each as fulfilling their God-ordained, gender-specific roles. Indeed ... it is only when men and women embrace their God-ordained roles that they will be truly fulfilled and that God's creational wisdom will be fully displayed and exalted. (2010, p. 26)

Even more explicitly, Dennis P. Hollinger asserts, 'Being male and female is less a designation of functions, and more a designation of humanity's two-fold ontological way of being' (2009, p. 74). As a second step, such anthropologies assume that it's always possible to know who's male and who's female (which, as we'll discuss below, may not always be the case), and that gender should always 'match' sex. This can be seen in documents like the Evangelical Alliance's report on transsexuality, which says, 'The doctrine of creation with the story of Adam and Eve, and the insistence that "male and female he created them", shows that our sexual identity is part of the

“givenness” of how we have been made’ (Evangelical Alliance 2000, p. 48). In other words, someone who identifies as a man must always be physically male, and someone who identifies as a woman must always be physically female. In this account, everyone is really, in truth, either male or female, and if there is any ambiguity about this, it’s simply because something is obscuring this genuine, basic fact about a given individual.

Gender complementarity

Related to the ‘God-givenness’ argument is the argument from complementarity. The word ‘complementarity’ often comes up in theological discussions of human sex and gender. It implies that human maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity, complement each other and that human experience would be less rich and less full without both.

In contrast to the egalitarian view, in which people are believed to have been created equal regardless of their sex or gender and to have no particular necessary roles based on sex or gender, the complementarian view states that although males and females are both created in God’s image, they have different roles or functions, designated by God. According to complementarians, the different roles for males and females are ordained by God from the beginning of human history.

Some female theologians have embraced the idea of complementarity, since it gives space for femaleness and femininity to be understood as positive and valuable in their own right, not just failed or inferior versions of maleness. Some theologians argue that masculinity and femininity *both* reflect aspects of God, and that to deny the real differences between men and women (as they believe egalitarians do) would be to deny the beauty of the diversity of humanity. In this account, men are not ‘better’ than women: it’s simply that men and women have been created to fulfil different functions. Leadership and governance in families and churches are understood as characteristically masculine qualities; servanthood and submission are characteristically feminine ones.

Complementarian views are particularly common among Roman Catholic and conservative evangelical Christians. However, they also occur elsewhere. Karl Barth (1886–1968), the Swiss Reformed theologian, gave particular theological significance to gender complementarity, since he believed that it reflected God’s relationship to humanity. Barth argued that the structure of procession of humans as male and female mirrors the structure of authority from God to Christ to the Church (1961, pp. 116–18, 148–72). More recently, liberal evangelicals have asked whether there might be gender complementarity without hierarchy built in (Pierce and Groothuis 2004).

However, many theologians criticize complementarity on the grounds that it portrays difference and variation in a rather stereotypical way. Is

it really true, they ask, that there are things all women have in common which make them different from all men, or does variety happen in a more complex way than that (Farley 2006, pp. 156–7)? Others note that complementarity *appears* to give equal status to men and women but actually reinforces the non-mutual status of the genders: women help, complement and serve men, and respond only to male initiative. Another criticism is that complementarity tends to idealize qualities in each gender which might be considered to perpetuate imperfect human social norms rather than divine ones. For example, gentleness might be considered a particularly ‘feminine’ quality and courage a particularly ‘masculine’ one, whereas human individuals and communities might be richer if both gentleness and courage were nurtured in everyone, no matter what their gender. Complementarity risks overwriting permanent theological goods on shifting social norms: Zoë Bennett Moore describes the complementarity idea as ‘a pernicious way of thinking’ which ‘gives religious legitimation’ to the social inequalities of men and women (2002, p. 37).

Complementarity also seems to have built into it a sense of lack, an idea that each gender provides for the other something that is missing. Again, this can be interpreted positively: neither gender is self-sufficient, but each brings something valuable and distinct to the picture of what it is to be human. However, the idea of lack can also be understood negatively, particularly if one gender is perceived to be more lacking – or at least more lacking in particular, valued attributes – than the other (Farley 2006, p. 157).

Above Rubies is an evangelical Christian magazine designed to encourage women ‘in their high calling as wives, mothers and homemakers’. Its title is taken from Proverbs 31.10, which states that the price of a virtuous woman is above that of rubies. The magazine features articles written by women about their experiences as wives and mothers. The majority of these demonstrate strongly complementarian convictions, to the extent that they border on caricaturing both men and women. For example, addressing other women, one *Above Rubies* author writes,

Women see the world through the rainbow spectrum of a thousand shades and hues ... a man sees black-and-white. Either a thing is or it isn’t. He doesn’t analyze how he feels about it. He just knows the facts. For example, when a female friend tells you that she is sick, you do not simply process the fact ‘my friend is sick’, you feel for her emotionally. You might say something like, ‘Poor thing! How are you getting all your house work [*sic*] done?’ We instantly relate to another woman’s emotional needs, because they are probably very similar to our own. Now just imagine that a male friend told your husband that he was sick (which would be very unlikely, but let’s imagine!) Your husband’s response would probably be something like, ‘Oh. So, who won the foot-ball [*sic*] game last week?’ ... When a man attempts to relate to his wife, a highly emotional and

very intimate creature, it is like learning to speak in a foreign language. Things can quickly escalate on a down-ward spiral if the couple has not learned to realize and appreciate their God-given differences. (Howard 2008, pp. 14–15)

Here, women are characterized as inherently empathetic and caring, and men as inherently unemotional. These traits are characterized as ‘God-given differences’. All of this is based on an essentialist caricature of what men are and what women are. This does a gross disservice to men and women, let alone all those who don’t feel they fit into either binary category. In this account, a man barely has any choice but to be emotionally shallow and unanalytical, for to be otherwise would not be ‘manly’. Character traits are pinned on sex. Emotional needs are divided only along gendered lines: the needs of two women will be inherently similar, but a man could not understand them.

This is an extreme form of complementarity, but milder versions underlie much Christian objection to homosexuality, bisexuality and gender transition. But what if the whole idea that humans come in only two kinds, male and female, masculine and feminine, is less certain than we often assume?

Transgender

What is transgender?

Transgender people feel that their gender identity, or sense of being a gendered self, doesn’t ‘fit’ their biological sex according to the usual pattern. While most people who are biologically female identify as women, transgender men are biologically female but identify as men. Some transgender people describe this feeling as having been ‘born in the wrong body’. Transgender refers to a whole category of people who have some kind of disjunction between their sex and their gender identity; transsexualism refers more specifically to people who have had surgery or hormone therapy in order to make their bodies ‘fit’ their gender identities. This might include surgery to remove their breasts, and testosterone treatments to deepen their voices and stimulate the growth of facial and body hair, or surgery to remove their penises, breast enhancement, and hormone therapy to suppress hair growth and raise their voices. Not all people who transition gender also have surgery to alter their bodies, and some people have ‘top’ surgery (to remove or enlarge their breasts) but never have ‘bottom’ surgery (to alter their genitals), partly because chest appearance affects many social encounters, whereas genital appearance and function is easier to keep hidden in everyday life.

It’s not clear what causes transgender. Some scientists believe that there is an innate biological difference between the brains of transgender and non-

transgender (sometimes called **cisgender**) people. Some believe transgender people have a variant gene. Others believe transgender may be caused by foetal exposure to unusual levels of hormones during pregnancy. Still others believe that there's no biological basis for transgender and that it arises for other reasons, such as psychological trauma or particular dynamics within families.

ACTIVITY

Which of the Christian understandings of human sex you have read about so far could be of relevance in constructing a theological account of transgender? Why might some Christians endorse gender transition on theological grounds? Why might some Christians oppose it?

Theological responses to transgender

Some theologians, including the authors of the Evangelical Alliance's documents on transgender, assert that there is no biological basis for transgender and, as a result, that it's not a 'real' phenomenon. These authors believe that transgender represents a psychological disturbance. The Evangelical Alliance therefore calls transgender 'a state of mind ... rather than any concrete set of facts' (Evangelical Alliance 2000, p. 38). The psychological phenomenon of feeling a disjunction between sex and gender is considered less significant or primary than the biological phenomenon of sex itself, which is considered irreducible and inescapable. People who find their gender identity at odds with their bodies are 'fundamentally mistaken given the biblical assertion of the priority of the physical' (Evangelical Alliance 2000, pp. 48–9). Not admitting that gender rests in biological sex is, therefore, alienation from the truth about yourself (Evangelical Alliance 2000, p. 63).

A similar argument arises in the Church of England's teaching on transgender. Transgender people should, it's said, be helped to accept the 'truth' of their biological sex, since this is God-given and should therefore not be changed. The Church of England's *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (House of Bishops 2003), which dedicates a whole chapter to transgender, draws on work by Oliver O'Donovan, who argues that 'To know oneself as body is to know that there are only certain things that one can do and be, because one's freedom must be responsible to a given form, which is the form of one's own experience in the material world' (1982, p. 15). In other words, our choices about our gender expressions are limited by the sexed bodies in which we find ourselves. Sex and gender must match, but if there's an apparent mismatch, sex must be considered more primary and gender must fit around it. There is a strong emphasis on male and female

as being the human types created by God, so that individuals shouldn't seek to change or escape from their sex-gender configuration as given by God: which, it's assumed, will be a cisgender configuration. There are some things about being a human which are too fundamental to change, argues O'Donovan: our sexed bodies are one of them.

However, Fraser Watts counters,

It is clear that not all aspects of our nature are a given that must simply be accepted. Most Christians would raise no objection to operations that corrected minor physical deformities ... It is also clear that Christians do not accept their personalities as a given that they should simply accept. (2002, p. 75)

In other words, implies Watts, as humans we can and do alter elements of our physical and emotional being. Sex and gender might similarly be aspects of ourselves which we can alter if they present obstacles to our well-being (as many transgender people claim).

Sexual orientation also comes into play here. Some Christian theologians object to gender transition because it leads to 'homosexual' relations. These theologians hold that a transgender woman is still 'really' male, so if she has a sexual relationship with another biological male, this relationship will be homosexual and therefore illegitimate. In fact, argue the Evangelical Alliance writers, not only would a marriage involving a transgender person be 'a deceptive representation of an apparent heterosexual relationship', it would also be 'more subtle and devious than an overt homosexual relationship' (Evangelical Alliance 2000, p. 50), because it may not be evident that it is indeed homosexual.

Other theologians have rejected this kind of analysis, and have argued that transgender represents a non-pathological form of gender variation. A few even argue that the **eunuchs** mentioned in the Bible might be understood as forerunners of today's transgender people. Eunuchs at the time of the Bible often held senior positions as servants or stewards within households, and it's believed that many people in this position had either been born with unusual genitalia or had had surgery to remove parts of their genitalia. Castrated men were considered to make particularly trustworthy servants, since they couldn't impregnate their masters' wives. Victoria Kolakowski, a transgender theologian, argues that, since the Bible doesn't condemn eunuchs, Christians today should also show compassion to transgender people. The Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, for instance, is baptized into the Christian community with no special mention made of, or significance attached to, his genitals (1997, p. 24). In Matthew 19, Jesus describes several different categories of people: those who've been born eunuchs, those who've been made eunuchs by others, and those who've made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Some commentators suggest that present-day transgender and intersex people might fall into these categories, and

that since Jesus accepts them, Christians should do likewise (Kolakowski 1997; Tanis 2003, p. 79; Hester 2005; DeFranza 2011, pp. 126–7).

Furthermore, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott argues that transgender people have special lessons to teach religious congregations. These include reminding them of the diversity in human beings and in God; helping them make connections between gender, spirituality and justice; and, by occupying an ambiguous space, helping ‘to heal religious addictions to certainty’ (2009, p. 47). Lewis Reay suggests that much so-called ‘inclusive’ theology ‘fails in [its] task, for just replacing “he” with “she” and “mother” for “father” does not create the radical project that Jesus had in mind with his sayings about eunuchs’ (2009, p. 165). Reay believes it is transgender people who can call into question the binary construction of gender, and that the contested middle ground they inhabit is ‘God’s territory’ (p. 165). Justin Tanis believes gender should be understood as a calling, God’s call to transgender people to be who they really are, and notes that spiritual callings are ongoing revelations which might last for a period of time or a whole lifetime (2003, p. 168).

Some theological responses to transgender, notably that of the Church of England bishops in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, have been criticized. Christina Beardsley argues that the report drew too much on Scripture and tradition to the exclusion of human experience (2005, p. 339), especially the experience of transgender people (p. 342). Beardsley identifies an over-emphasis on passages such as Genesis 1.26–7, and a lack of acknowledgement that what the biblical writers understood by ‘male’ and ‘female’ may not be identical with what we mean today (p. 343). Beardsley also suggests the report took too little account of the fact that there is disagreement among scientists about whether transgender has a biological basis (2005, p. 339). The assumption by some theologians that transgender always results from a psychological disturbance is also criticized (Cornwall 2010, pp. 112–4, 125).

Intersex

As we’ve seen, some theologians and others argue that transgender is fundamentally a psychological phenomenon, some kind of disturbance which means that people can’t recognize their sexed bodies as being really themselves. Transgender people are therefore best helped, in this account, by being encouraged to make peace with their bodies and live in the gender which ‘matches’ their sex as ordained by God.

However, it’s much more difficult to explain away the ambiguities of intersex bodies. People with intersex conditions have a difference in their actual biological sex which means they can’t easily be categorized as male or female.

What is intersex?

Most foetuses develop along clear male or female lines. We would usually expect XY foetuses to develop testes, a penis and scrotum, and XX foetuses to develop ovaries, a clitoris and vulva. However, people with intersex conditions often have unusual combinations of these features. For example, people with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome have the XY chromosomes and testes usually associated with males, but the clitorises and vulvas usually associated with females. At puberty, people with AIS grow breasts and hips and look unremarkably feminine, although they don't start to have periods, because they have no ovaries or uteruses. Almost all people with AIS identify as women despite their XY chromosomes and testes.

Some other people with intersex conditions don't simply have a 'mismatch' between their internal and external sexual features, but actually have unusual, liminal features. For instance, many intersex people have 'ambiguous' genitalia which look somewhere in between what we would expect male and female genitalia to look like. It's also possible to have one testis and one ovary or a combined organ called an ovotestis.

Although intersex conditions are much less common than typical maleness and femaleness, they still affect about one in every 2,500 people (Preves 2003, pp. 2–3) – a similar frequency to a condition like cystic fibrosis. You might be surprised by how relatively common intersex conditions are. Until recently, families whose children were born with intersex conditions were encouraged to keep their conditions secret, and many children with unusual genitalia had surgery to alter them and make them look more like typical male or female genitalia. Many people argued that this was the best thing for intersex children, so that they would be able to grow up as 'normal' boys or girls. However, others, including some intersex people themselves, argued that the secrecy and corrective surgery had caused them even more problems, including, for many people, an inability to enjoy sex when they grew up, because their genitals were so scarred, and some had had their penises or clitorises removed altogether. (For more detailed information about how intersex has been treated, see Dreger 1999, Preves 2003, and Karkazis 2008.)

ACTIVITY

Think about the characteristics which define what makes someone male or female. Could you rank them in order of significance? Is there one single characteristic which is more important than all the others? Why or why not? Which do you think is held to be most important by doctors, by theologians and by society at large?

People who are learning about intersex for the first time sometimes ask, ‘But what sex is a person with an intersex condition *really*?’ This question implies that sex is a real thing, which can always, eventually, be discovered, even if it initially seems unclear. However, the history of the treatment of intersex conditions shows that the definition of what makes someone male or female is less evident than most of us imagine. This is discussed in detail in Dreger 1998 and Reis 2009. At different times, the accepted marker of ‘real’ sex has been:

- external genital appearance: whether someone’s genitals look more male or more female (though some genitals don’t look clearly either male or female);
- gonads: whether someone has testes or ovaries (though it’s also possible to have one of each, or a combined ovotestis);
- chromosomes: whether someone has XX or XY chromosomes (though it’s also possible to have other configurations, such as XXY chromosomes, or some cells with XX and some with XY chromosomes in the same body);
- gametes: whether someone produces eggs or sperm (though some people produce neither);
- gender identity: whether someone feels more like a man or more like a woman (though some people feel ‘in between’, or feel unlike either gender, or feel more masculine and more feminine at different times);
- hormones: whether someone produces more androgens (‘male’ hormones) or oestrogens (‘female’ hormones) (though everyone produces both ‘male’ and ‘female’ hormones in differing levels).

Since it’s possible to have different combinations of these characteristics, and since it’s not clear that any one characteristic ‘trumps’ the others, doctors who are making decisions about whether it’s best for an intersex child to be brought up as a boy or a girl usually try to look at the big picture. Crucially, however, as P.-L. Chau and Jonathan Herring note,

It is not possible to classify everyone as clearly male or female. It is not that it is hard to find out whether an intersexual person is male or female, but rather that even knowing everything there is to know about them, they do not fall into the accepted description of male or female. (2002, p. 332)

For theologians, questions about what constitutes ‘real’ sex are even more significant, since if gender assignment for some people is a matter of guesswork and making a best attempt to discern which gender will suit someone best, this raises questions about how clear and unquestionable sex and gender are in the first place, and therefore how legitimate it is to build theological teachings on them.

Theological implications of intersex

Many Christian theologies of sexuality assume and assert that God created and intended all humans to be clearly either male or female, and to have genders and sexualities which ‘match’ their sexes. However, it might be much more difficult to assert what the ‘correct’ gender and sexual orientation for an intersex person is. For example, think again about Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. People with AIS have a combination of features normally associated with males and females. Marriage is understood by many Christians as something which can only take place between a male and a female, but should people with AIS be considered male or female for this purpose? A marriage between a woman with AIS and a man (which is fairly common, given that people with AIS overwhelmingly identify as women) might be considered by some theologians to be illegitimate, since it’s a marriage between two people who both have XY chromosomes and are in some sense both male. However, a marriage between a woman with AIS and another woman might also be considered illegitimate, since this would be a marriage between two people who both behave and identify as women. Theologians who object to relationships between couples of the same sex might therefore need to think carefully about what they actually mean by ‘the same sex’.

Some Christian theologians (such as Oliver O’Donovan and Rodney Holder) argue that it’s appropriate to assign someone a masculine or feminine gender even when their biological sex is unclear, as in the case of intersex people. These theologians believe that God intended everyone to live clearly as a man or a woman, and that this is the case even for people with ambiguous sex. But this in turn raises questions about where the belief that God intended binary gender comes from. If binary gender is grounded in binary sex, what’s the rationale for arguing that even people who do *not* have a clear binary sex must also have a clear binary gender? O’Donovan (1982), Holder (1998a, 1998b) and others might argue that this is simply part of the ‘order of creation’. However, this suggests that intersex people have failed to live up to the goodness of the rest of creation – that they have, in some way, ‘gone wrong’.

Some theologians do, indeed, make exactly this type of argument. Dennis P. Hollinger, the evangelical theologian, says,

From a theological standpoint we can understand these conditions as results of the fallen condition of our world, including the natural world ... We should also understand that such natural sexual conditions and anomalies in no way undermine the creational norms. All distortions in the world are to be judged against the divine creational givens. In a fallen world there will be chaos and confusion that extends even to human sexuality. But the normative structure toward which God calls humanity

is not the fallenness of nature; it is, rather, God's created designs. (2009, p. 84)

However, it might be countered that this stigmatizes intersex bodies, rendering them 'fallen' in a way that other, male and female bodies are not.

Some Christians with intersex conditions have felt excluded from communities of faith because of their conditions. Sally Gross, who used to be a Roman Catholic priest (only taking the name 'Sally' after leaving the priesthood), found that when she tried to be open about her intersex condition, she was denied communion in the Roman Catholic Church. She was also told by other Christians that, because she wasn't clearly male or female, she wasn't fully human, and therefore 'not the kind of thing which could have been baptized validly' (Gross 1999, p. 70). However, Gross counters, 'I am a creature of God, and ... I'm created, and intersexed people are created, no less than anyone else, in the image and likeness of God' (speaking in Van Huyssteen 2003).

Indeed, other theologians have contended that intersex is positive and valuable in its own right, and reflects part of the difference and diversity in God. To insist on corrective surgery for all intersex people, or to insist that all intersex people must live as men or women even if they feel that they have another or 'third' gender, is, in this account, to fail to recognize the goodness of intersex. Heather Looy suggests, 'We should at least ask whether intersexuality could be part of God's good creation' (2002, p. 16), and Mollenkott adds, 'God made no mistake by creating intersexuals. Therefore, their condition represents God's perfect will for them' (2007, p. 7). In fact, Mollenkott suggests that if, as some scholars argue, the first Genesis creation story points to human beings who weren't initially distinguished by sex or gender, 'intersexuals are not only part of God's original plan, they are *primarily* so!' (p. 98) and might be 'viewed as reminders of Original Perfection' (p. 99). Patricia Beattie Jung (2006) argues that the fact that Genesis says male and female are made in the image of God doesn't mean that *only* males and females are made in the image of God, or that this is the only legitimate way to be. She says,

When the church finally recognizes that intersexed, like male and female, persons have been made in the image and likeness of God, then perhaps Christians will come closer to recognizing that God is not male, female, or intersexed but rather truly beyond human sexual differentiation. (p. 307)

Jung's point is important, because theologians have often insisted that sex and gender tell us not only what it means to be human in relation to other humans, but also what it means to be a human in relation to God. For example, famously, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth argued that the way human females were to 'follow' and 'respond to' human males echoed the way that all humans were to follow and respond to God. To deny the order

and procession built into human sex and gender, Barth believed, would be to deny the broader divine order. The problem with this, as critics have noted, is that it assumes that a hierarchy of genders simply is natural and indisputable, rather than being a social construction which presents its own problems and might (as Ruether and others have noted) actually prevent women, and people with unusual sex–gender configurations, from developing relationships with God in their own right. (For further discussion of some problems with Barth’s theology of gender, see for example Muers 1999; Sonderegger 2000; Blevins 2005.)

QUESTION BOX

- 1 What difference might it make to theologies of sex, gender and sexuality if more theologians engaged with the existence of intersex conditions?
- 2 Should theologians take the experiences of intersex and transgender people into account when constructing broader arguments about the theological significance of sex, gender and sexuality? Why or why not?

Summary

In this book, I’ve been working with the assumption that sex and gender aren’t the same thing (see Chapter 1), but that sex refers to biology while gender refers to identity. This definition of sex and gender works to an extent and is helpful for making clear that, for example, not everyone who’s biologically male identifies as a man.

Even so, there are ways in which making such a strong distinction between sex and gender causes problems. It might tend to reinforce the idea that biological sex is always clear, obvious, and irreducible – whereas in fact, as we’ve seen in this chapter, biological sex isn’t always clear or obvious at all. Thomas Laqueur, a scholar who’s studied the way bodies and sexes have been understood through history, makes the surprising assertion that thinking of human beings as falling into two sexes, male and female, is quite a recent idea. To those of us living here and now in the West, it seems obvious and self-evident that there are two and only two sexes. However, he argues, for a lot of human history, it seemed self-evident and obvious to people that there was only *one* human sex. Males represented a more perfect version of this single sex, and females a less perfect version. Laqueur believes that when we look at human beings now, we see two sexes because that’s what we expect to see, what we’ve been trained to see, and what

largely fits into our current scientific and cultural model. Perhaps one of the reasons why it's been so 'obvious' to us for the last 250 years or so that there are two sexes is that we'd *already* developed an idea that there were two distinct genders (Laqueur 1990).

The assumption that sex and gender are clear, binary, fixed and unchanging underlies much theological teaching on human sexuality. However, transgender and intersex show that sex and gender aren't always as straightforward as they seem. Sex and gender don't always 'match' in the typical ways; even at a biological level, maleness and femaleness aren't the only possibilities for human bodies. Theologians interested in human sexuality must therefore think carefully about what transgender and intersex imply. Should transgender and intersex be understood as anomalies, which don't fundamentally disrupt the model of two distinct and separate human genders which map onto two distinct and separate human sexes as intended by God as part of the orders of creation? Or, alternatively, should the existence of transgender and intersex prompt theologians to re-examine their theological anthropologies, and ask whether theologies which assume a fixed, binary model of maleness and femaleness or masculinity and femininity continue to make sense in light of what we now know about human sex and gender? Theologies which assume everyone's clearly male or female can't easily accommodate hard cases. Some theologians argue that intersex and transgender aren't just exceptions to the rule, but actually mean that Christians should rethink their whole understanding of sex and gender (Cornwall 2010).

Transgender and intersex both pose particularly important questions when it comes to theological teachings about marriage. Transgender and intersex people might be homosexual or heterosexual, just like anyone else. However, it's not always obvious whether they should be considered male or female for the purposes of marriage. According to many Christians, and legally in many jurisdictions, marriage can happen only between a male and a female.

We began this chapter by noting that people can be understood as having three interrelated facets: sex, gender, and sexuality. We observed that Christian theologians have often endorsed only some combinations of these three facets as legitimate or good – and that variations from the norm, such as intersex, transgender and homosexuality, have sometimes been figured as imperfect or fallen.

We then examined New Testament passages on gender relations, noting disagreement between scholars about whether these passages were written by Paul, whether they should be considered normative for today, and whether they represent a central truth for Christianity or distract from Christianity's message of equality. We considered the notion of gender complementarity and saw that some critics have considered it a formalization of inequality.

Next, we asked whether unusual states such as intersex and transgender mean that ideas of gender complementarity in Christianity should be questioned and whether Christian theologies of sexuality which do not take account of the embodied experiences of intersex and transgender people are likely to be inadequate.

In recent years, doctors, social scientists and others have begun to suggest that the two-sex model of human sex isn't perfect, any more than the one-sex model was, because there are people whose bodies don't fit into it: most obviously, intersex people. The question for theologians and other Christians, then, is whether Christianity is also operating according to a 'two-sex' model of human sex, and, if so, to what extent this is justifiable. What does theological belief in a two-sex model – and, more importantly, the belief that God intended everyone to fit into the two-sex system – mean for intersex people, and for theologies of sex in general?

In Chapter 4, we'll move on to considering how sexuality plays out in the lives of people who are not physically sexually active, and how Christian theologians have understood celibacy and virginity within the tradition.

Questions for study and reflection

- 1 Theologically, does it matter whether someone identifies as masculine, feminine or neither? Does it matter whether their gender identity 'matches' their biological sex? Why?
- 2 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott argues, 'God made no mistake by creating intersexuals.' How might a Christian theologian agree or disagree with this statement?

Further reading

Althaus-Reid, Marcella and Lisa Isherwood (eds), 2009, *Trans/Formations, Controversies in Contextual Theology*, London: SCM Press.

Cornwall, Susannah, 2010, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology*, London: Equinox.

Sytsma, Sharon E. (ed.), 2006, *Ethics and Intersex*, Dordrecht: Springer.

Tanis, Justin Edward, 2003, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

"Sexuality, Sex and Gender" is taken from the book, *Theology and Sexuality* written by Susannah Cornwall and published by SCM Press. More information can be found at www.scmprpress.co.uk