

From Edge to Centre: Being Trans in the Church Today...

‘We do not know what the body can do...’ – Gilles Deleuze

‘You’re like a Jewish person who wants to join the Nazi Party.’ A close friend said that to me over twenty years ago when I told him I’d become a Christian and was going to start going to church. Undoubtedly, his rhetoric was inflated, questionable and, arguably, tasteless. Yet, he thought it apposite. For, I am a trans woman and he reckoned my desire to join a church was indicative of either a form of self-loathing (which one might now call ‘internalised transphobia’) or a symptom of a degree of recklessness bordering on masochism or a breakdown. He thought that Christians – especially the Evangelical Christians I planned to worship with – would love my sincere faith, but hate (even persecute) my gender expression and sexual identity. And, if his comparison with Nazi persecution of Jewish people is over-the-top, he was convinced I was placing myself in a situation that could only lead to psychological and emotional trauma. I would be entering a culture that meant death: for my queerness and otherness, and – in the face of potentially relentless bullying and gas-lighting – perhaps the death of my own body.

In recent years, for trans people in countries like the United Kingdom, things have arguably got better. We’ve had, as the media sometimes puts it, ‘a bit of a moment.’ Whereas for my generation the nearest we got to icons and role models were drawn from the pages of tabloid exposé, in the twenty-first century one readily finds high-profile trans actors, writers, artists, politicians and legislators. The internet and social media supply links and networks which enable trans and gender non-conforming people to create unprecedented support networks and organise and stand in solidarity together. Large

campaigning organisations like Stonewall which, for decades, treated trans people as the embarrassing other of queer rights have brought trans identities centre-stage.

And yet ... in so many respects transgender people remain icons of otherness. The English language is littered with words which, for trans people, signal 'other'. These words sometimes turn into nettles and barbed wire in our mouths; sometimes, in the voices of our opponents, they become weapons against us. I am not talking so much about the obvious slurs, though one might include those too. I think I've been called all of them over the years. Slur terms exist to fetishize, punish, control and mock persons whose bodies don't conform to normative ideas. They are powerful means of othering. And if language is our most powerful form of magic and, therefore, also our most powerful means for generating violence, let us not ignore the realities of injuring – including murder and maiming – inflicted on trans people by those who would deprive us of our very breath. Let us not forget the internalised violence trans people introject into ourselves by structures – religious and otherwise – that deprive us of terms to speak of ourselves except in damaged, damaging and pathological terms.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of LGBTQIA students at Manchester University about transgender and God. I spent a fair amount of time talking about my theological and theoretical commitments, my experience of growing up trans and how God lived in and through all that. I thought it went pretty well. Then we came to the questions. And here's the curious thing. While the students were – more-or-less – a kind, sympathetic audience and I wasn't expecting a monsterring, I was in for a surprise. For, as the questions and comments came in I had a disconcerting experience. I discovered that – from the POV of many of these students – I was basically a

‘back issue’. I’d stood up in front of them and done my rather well-rehearsed thing, spoken with confidence and, dare I say it, with some knowledge and ... I felt the ground shift under me. These students were as happy talking about genderqueer and asexual and agender or post-gender as transgender. Their touchstone was queer. A trans woman like me, whose reference point was the 90s, who conceived of herself rather simply as a woman was old, old news. Perhaps a bishop friend puts it most simply. He was talking recently to a group of 6th formers about sexuality and gender, and a student said, with many murmurs of approval, ‘Why are you old people so obsessed with binaries?’

I offer that story as a kind of warning. I suspect that some of the things I want to talk about today will be new or fresh for some of you. Others may be experts. For some, what I say may run deep in your own personal experience and may take you to a site of trauma. For some what I say may be old news. I speak as someone who has thought about this stuff deeply. But one of the extraordinary things about talking about trans bodies or queer bodies or subjectivities is how quickly the sands move. And more than that – this ground is dangerous and holy in a rich, rich sense. We walk in the midst of the wonder and terror of identity and its limits and its remaking. And yet more: as some theorists suggest, the body is a disputed site of power-relations. The ongoing, often entrenched arguments about the status of trans people, intersex people, people of colour, women and so on, not only among religious people, but across political and cultural divides, indicate the disputed status of many bodies. And looming over this are normative bodies or the normative Body, typically ordered around concepts of masculinity, power-over and whiteness.

Once upon a time, I was inclined to refer to myself as ‘transsexual’, that is, as someone who, through hormones, surgery and social identity, has sought

to make their body as congruent as possible with their gender identity. I've not entirely abandoned the term. However, I'm conscious of the extent to which it is a loaded, medicalised expression. Transsexuals' represent a relatively niche part of the trans spectrum, and yet we've sometimes been taken as a kind of norm for trans identities. In a time when the trans community has become more confident about its wild and delicious diversity, trans people themselves have become strong critics of the idea that 'proper' trans people are people like me, the ones who gives themselves over to the ministrations of the medical and psychiatric profession. Trans people so often get caught in a lens that makes us 'other'. Simply to survive we can feel we must or ought to live through that lens. I and other trans people have often performed stereotyped femininity/masculinity for the sake of psychiatry.

One of the things one learns in any context in which being trans is inescapably 'other' and 'othered' is that there no escape from cost and loss. There is no safe space. Those who perform or foreground their trans identities face abuse and violence, but those who go stealth live in the terror of discovery and outing. One of the indicators that we live in a cis-normative culture is the prevalence of the narrative that trans people are duplicitous and tricksterish. This has inner and outer dimensions. The inner dimensions can be acute when it comes to forming intimate relationships. I – along with other trans people I've known – have felt pressure to disclose my most intimate personal truths to enjoy the kind of everyday relationships many people unconsciously take for granted. The internalized belief that being trans is somehow shameful has led me to the 'there's something you need to know about me' conversation on too many occasions. I've felt like I've been making a dirty confession. Yet the 'outer' dimension – in which men have attacked and

killed trans people and offered 's/he tricked me' as a defence – is also well-attested.

Perhaps the only fair thing to acknowledge is that such are the pressures on being trans that one must simply do what one must to survive. In that respect, there is solidarity between trans women and womanist theological positions developed by the likes of Dolores Williams in her analysis of Hagar. While I'm profoundly alert to the risks of appropriating the work of black, Asian and African-American theologians, there are intersections which resonate. For trans people, especially trans people of colour, I sense there is a profound power in the figure of Hagar who, as Williams suggests, reveals that sometimes resurrection means survival; that we can find in Hagar's negotiation of exploitation, her claiming of the power of naming – not least of God – but also a bitter negotiation of terms which we have not set, an icon of promise and hope.

Bodies signal our fragility and precariousness; as matter they expose us to non-negotiable truths – birth, death, the way we are always at risk of trauma. We are so readily torn apart. We find our common-ground in bodies. Even as we talk of psychic trauma we are fools if do not pay attention to how that is represented in and through the body. The theorist Roberta McGrath suggests,

Death is what we most fear in ourselves. This is what lies beneath the skin, what threatens to break through and destroy life. It is our bodies which in the end give up on us [...] It is little wonder that we both love and hate the body, and that we project our desire and fear on to others. In the meantime, there are diversionary tactics: we try to contain or at

least limit the progress of death by making more humans; we try to thwart death by making objects.¹

Equally, as the womanist theologian and psychotherapist Phyllis Sheppard claims,

‘We need to consider “the body” in the context of a society where certain bodies are exploited to create a desire for commodities, regardless of the need or ability to afford them; where the color of our skin continues to greatly influence our quality of life, our experiences of society, and our economic locations ... where sex and sexuality, used to sell “entertainment”, is infused with violence. We need to hear what the body has to tell us about being created in the image of God.’²

Perhaps othered bodies, the ones which many Christians have rejected and abjected, have sought to push away, have begun to take centre-stage and be celebrated. People like Robert Mills have traced how this non-normative, apparently non-Christ-like body – represented by women’s bodies, trans bodies, disabled bodies, black bodies and so on – has often been seen as a problem for narratives of Christian holiness. As the non-normative body has claimed space and respect and attention, it can seem as if the insights of Christian holiness have been abandoned.

Rightly, tho’, one wants to say that there is a meeting ground between queered bodies and the Body of Christ; between what can seem novel negotiations of identity and ancient Christian practice and wisdom. People of faith have resources to find riches in the broken middle of embodiment. Partly, these lie in reminding ourselves and contexts in which we work that

¹ McGrath, p. 10.

² Phyllis Sheppard in Pamela Lightsey, ‘Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology’ (Eugene Or: Pickwick, 2015), pp. 49-50

negotiating marginal and othered bodies has always been a rich seam in faith and spiritual discourse. It is 'of us'. I suppose that one of the matters that fascinates us as people interested in human flourishing, wholeness, healing, integration perhaps, is how we want to locate that flourishing within the story of God. Yet, what fascinating resources we have. When we talk, for example, of the Body of Christ surely we talk about a queered body. For, if Christ's body is normative for all other bodies seeking holiness, it is already problematized. It is not safe, but queer. Christ's body is no mere heteronormative, white male body of patriarchal fantasies.

The very queerness of Christ's body, as both icon of salvation and as the locus of the Church's central liturgical work, is indicated in several ways. Christ's body – as fully human, fully divine – is, if definitive of God's work of salvation, always liminal. Even in old-school, patriarchal pictures of Christ's body, this is signalled not only through its representative power to bear the Sin of the World through death on the Cross, but in its resurrection. It can pay the 'Sin of Adam' through the shedding of that icon of human mortality, blood, but also redeem the world via Christ's status as divine. His spilled blood is sinless. Equally, the resurrected body is no mere ghost. If the resurrected Christ can walk through walls, this body is also touchable.³ His risen body bears all the marks of his torture and death on the Cross. He is no spectre, but embodied, carrying in his body the representations of violation as well as signalling new transformed power.

This queer, liminal transgression is further signalled in the status of the Body and Blood, the Bread and Wine, of Christ in the Christian Eucharist. Its status has been subject to debate across Christian history and space disallows more than glancing remarks. However, Catholic dogma insists that the

³ See: John 20. 17 and 24-29.

Eucharistic Body of Christ is, through transubstantiation, both bread and the actual body of Jesus.⁴ In short, the Eucharistic Body of Christ – on which the devotee feasts – occupies a queer space and time, irreducible to either mere matter or transcendent body. Indeed, significant theological themes emerged out of this Catholic doctrine in the High Middle Ages. Not least among them, was the representation of Christ’s holy, salvific body as ‘feminine’ rather than ‘masculine’. Its status as violated and pierced, wounded (bleeding throughout all time) and as the source of true life has led theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux and Mother Julian to code it as female, not male. In visual representations, Christ’s bleeding wounds – showing forth the means of sacrificial redemption as well as the mark of human sin – were represented as vulva and vagina, or even a nipple from which his followers might suckle new life.⁵

Yet I want to make the case that the kind of complex negotiations that queer bodies and subjects like me undertake, are simply technicolour versions of the negotiations we’re all make much of the time. And this picture of the call to reconciliation and re-creation is not about stasis, or comfort or some totalised picture of unitary oneness with an untroubled God. Not in this life. We carry the marks of our patriarchal formations and discourses within us. We are marked with the precariousness of a limited world. I am, as much as

⁴ For a summary of Roman Catholic Catechesis on transubstantiation and Eucharist see: Catechism of the Catholic Church, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm [accessed: 02 August 2017]. Section 1376 indicates the formal assertion of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation at the post-Reformation Council of Trent.

⁵ For a clear example of Christ’s vaginal side-wound see: Folio 331r, Psalter and Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg. See also, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 199. I’m grateful to Kathryn Loveridge’s work for deepening my understanding of medieval debates around Christ, theology and gender. See: Kathryn Loveridge, ‘The Curse of Christ’s Wound: Christ’s Blood as ‘anti-relic’’, <https://hortulus-journal.com/journal/volume-9-number-1-2013/loveridge/#f52> [accessed: 14 July 2017].

anyone, a divided self, a body with hands capable of creating and destroying. I am conscious of this journey of reconciliation I am on. It would be easy for me as a middle-aged woman with a very messy childhood and youth to write everything pre-transition off. It has taken me many years of honest and authentic self-reflection and living with God to become at peace with the simple unavoidable fact that some aspects of my past life are dissonant with where and who I am now. For me, the immense and joyous good news is that such dissonance, paradox and inconsistency is creative, thrilling and risky in the best sense of the word.

In short, queer and queered bodies matter, not least, because of what they can uncover, expose and foreground. At its simplest, bodies like mine can problematize those almost overwhelming claims that everyone negotiates: that our lives are determined by a natural order that – for religious people – is underpinned by a divine order. It is one that says that there are men and women and each has natural functions and roles that are pre-ordered by biology and/or divine warrant. And it is one that has privileged – you know what I’m going to say – white, middle-class, heterosexual men/male bodies and created an order which has a diminishing scale of value which can reward those other bodies prepared to comply with this hierarchy of privilege: those who can perform heterosexuality, produce children and so on and so forth. At the heart of this schema is a picture of the world in which ‘the male’ is normative and heterosexuality is compulsory and enforced to produce and underline gender identities. For Judith Butler, ‘[the] “unity” of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.’⁶ She further claims that ‘gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid

⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance.’⁷

To unpack that and move a little closer to some of the questions queered bodies might raise for any of us: We are saturated by pictures of identity which construct us and we reproduce. Judith Butler most famously suggests, ‘gender is a copy without an original’. In a time of scans and imaging, even before we are born our bodies are being represented and constructed according to pre-established discourses. Yet as Butler indicates there is a profound sense in which so-called natural gendered, sexed and desiring identities – as inner ‘realities’ – are constructed through discourses of repetition and anticipation. The performance of gender identities is regulated by discourses which disguise their own contingency. That want to appear timeless and innate. We sometimes talk in Christian circles of how we are called to be ‘conformed to Christ’, but often in our totalizing, hetero world we are being conformed to a set of deep, cultural conventions.

Sometimes the only option for trans people is to live in an endless negotiation, deciding when to use stealth and when to be out and proud. It’s costly and tiresome, but also human and real. At one level, I think it signals the extent to which trans people are simply variants on the ordinary spectrum of identity. For each of us, whether cis or trans, gay or straight, must make negotiations about when we disclose and when to hold back. Cis-het people⁸ have certain privileges, for sure, as do those trans people who can pass as cis. However, I sense that all of us hold a deep abiding otherness and strangeness within ourselves. One doesn’t have to be trans to know how toxic cultural,

⁷ Ibid, p. 45.

⁸ ‘Cis-het’ is a contraction of the terms ‘cisgender’ and ‘heterosexual’. In short, a ‘cis-het’ person is a straight person who is comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth.

social and religious norms play out in our inner lives. Each of us negotiates for ourselves what social concepts of 'man' or 'woman' or 'being good', or whatever, mean for us. Much of the time these norms do not match our lived experiences. If we are to live well, surely a negotiation of oddness will be unavoidable. None of us, in the end, are terribly normal.

Perhaps I go too far in my protests. Perhaps I am to be read as a posturing faux-edge dweller. Look at me. I am part of the established church, I am an honorary canon of a Cathedral, a member of General Synod, an incumbent of a parish. I am one of the Church's agents. I am privileged, though that is a complex matter. I remember how, after I'd transitioned but was still going to the Charing Cross Gender Identity Clinic, I overheard one of my psychiatrists say to a visiting doctor about me, 'Come and meet one of our successes...' There are layers and layers held within that statement...

I'd be lying if I said my otherness has not presented challenges from within the Church. At times, I've been the object of serial mocking and spite. The Church is not an easy place in which to be a woman, let alone an out LGBT* person. Yet I have also been cherished by very many. The Church is an odd institution. I know some would be delighted if I were 'defrocked'. Defrocked! Only in an organisation as wondrously strange and other could someone imagine that 'frock-wearing' was the proper business of straight, cis men!

Ironically, the Church has offered an extraordinary space for me to delight in and come to terms with my otherness as a trans person. For, if the Church often gets it horribly wrong, at its heart is a desire and call towards reconciliation. And this has implications across every aspect of life – international, national, local and personal. As an internal concept 'Other' so often refers to those aspects and dimensions of our selves we readily write off,

are afraid of or wish to bury or destroy. In my teen years, there was simply no doubt that my desire to be female was precisely the kind of dimension of myself that I wanted to wipe away, tried to bury and destroy; yet, no matter what strategy I adopted it came back stronger and more insistently. It was a part of me that sickened me because it seemed abnormal, other and made me different. I saw it as 'wrong' and in need of excision. Perhaps this experience, especially when we're teenagers, is pretty much universal. It is a time when we undergo rapid change, a series of transitions, from childhood to adulthood. It can make us anxious about how others see us and, most especially, how we see ourselves. We can be so insecure that we try to hide those parts of us – our insecurities, sexual inadequacies and so on – from ourselves and others. In one sense, my experience of being trans was just one variant on that; it was simply one way of being human.

Transitioning was a journey into reconciliation and, for me, reconciliation goes deeper than me merely accepting myself as a woman. It's meant re-embracing and loving that within me that I want to disavow: my childhood, my bewildering experience of being socialised 'as a boy'. To open myself up to those things about me that I consider 'male' or 'mannish' has been akin to walking among the dead. It has been a journey into so many things I'd rather forget. It has entailed travelling into darkness. It has been like the work of a cold case pathologist who, when presented with a long dead body, attempts to unlock its secrets.

Yet, there is resurrection too. It has taken me many years of honest and authentic self-reflection to become at peace with the simple unavoidable fact that some aspects of my past life are dissonant with where and who I am now. For me, the immense and joyous good news has taken the form of a discovery: that such dissonance, paradox and inconsistency is creative, thrilling and risky

in the best sense of the word. The 'shalom' in my Self is not of a comforting and easily resolved kind. Yet, there is such a thing as grace. It is what had made it possible for me to embrace the dissonance within and go beyond my places of safety and prejudice. By reconciling that which seems impossible, grace brings new hope. I do not care if you choose to see this grace as the work of God or not. It is real. And within it I have begun to find a way to a place where I both rejoice in who I am and what I have become, and also am glad of and delight in who I was.