



Transgender Welcome

A Bishop Makes the Case for Affirmation

By Bishop Gene Robinson January 2016

Center for American Progress



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Preface

This document is a love letter to the transgender community, both a “thank you” and a “welcome” to transgender people. It comes out of my experience of learning so much—about sexuality, gender, and myself—from transgender people. It springs from my belief that God is enriching the lives of us all by bringing transgender people and their insights into our experience and understandings. This resource is an attempt to recognize transgender people as the gift they are to our understanding of God and God’s love.

God is up to something, as God often is! And this time, it’s personal.

Introduction

One of the most striking things about the Gospel of John in the Christian Scriptures is that the author begins with his conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Son of God, the long-awaited messiah, and the perfect revelation of God. Reading John's Gospel is a little like picking up a whodunnit mystery and then reading the last page first—beginning with the answer to the whodunnit question and then returning to the first and succeeding pages to see how the inspector builds a case and gets to the answer. John wants the reader to know exactly where he is going to wind up.

Similar to John, I want the reader to understand from the beginning where I am headed. I am setting out to affirm that transgender people are children of God, worthy of respect, valued for their perspectives, and regarded as God's gift to our religious communities and secular cultures. Their experiences will challenge society's normative ways of thinking about gender, call us to a broader-than-binary understanding of gender, and expand our appreciation of the beauty in diversity of God's creation. I argue that the emergence of transgender people into the consciousness of the wider religious and secular communities is a gift of God, given for the benefit of all, and that our response should be affirmation, welcome, and celebration.

You may be wondering why a white, gay, male, Episcopal bishop would find himself standing with and standing up for transgender people. Partly, it is because Jesus—who, as a Christian, I believe to be the revelation of God—says that when Christians treat a marginalized and discounted human being with disdain or compassion, it is as if we are treating Christ and God that way. Partly it is because transgender people are helping me to better understand the unearned privilege I am afforded simply because I am cisgender, or not transgender. But I am mostly making this case for the full and joyful acceptance, affirmation, and inclusion of transgender people because I know them and because they have changed my life for the better. Just as it is for gay and lesbian people, living authentically is the most powerful witness a transgender person can make. That authenticity may be lived openly, if they so choose, for all the world to see. But that world is not always safe for transgender people, and for that as well as other reasons, a transgender person may choose to live their authenticity quietly. Whether public or private, authenticity is the goal and its own reward.

Two transgender women figure prominently in my education. The first—for privacy reasons, let’s call her Joan—was someone who transitioned within the community of one of the New Hampshire Episcopal parishes. Joan did something that was generally not recommended, at least at the time: remaining in the community in which you were formerly known as one gender, while transitioning to the other. Joan was an accomplished lawyer and avid, avocational videographer. She was deeply committed to her friends and to her parish, and she was not going to leave either behind as she transitioned. In being so courageous and open about her journey, she brought an entire parish of adults and children along with her for her journey. All of us benefitted from the experience that she was graceful enough to share with us.

The second transgender person I came to know well—let’s call her Jane—I met while working for LGBT rights and marriage equality in the New Hampshire Legislature. What I remember most about her is her generous spirit and the articulate and powerful way she told the story of her life. Living as the male gender she was assigned at birth, Jane had made her living as a carpenter and building contractor. Unlike Joan, however, she experienced much resistance, anger, and hostility in her work environment. Ultimately, she left her work as a carpenter, took an intensive truck-driving course, and became a professional truck driver—as the woman she knew herself to be. Her endurance and her commitment to living her life authentically knew no end. I was humbled, challenged, and inspired by her courage and integrity, and it was my privilege to call her a friend.

In one of the most important—and least remembered—parts of Jesus’ conversation with his disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” [John 16:12–13a] I take this to mean that God’s revelation of God’s self was not complete at that moment in time, even at the end of Jesus’s life. Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples, “Look! In these last three years, you have learned so much and you have changed in so many ways. But there is so much for you—and for those who will follow in your footsteps—to learn about God and God’s will for humankind. But it is simply too much for you to bear, now, all at once. And so, I will send the Holy Spirit, who will teach you and guide you into a fuller, deeper understanding of God’s truth.”

Surely, God’s Spirit has guided humankind into more and more truth, as we could bear it. For countless generations, many used Holy Scripture to justify slavery. Can any person of faith imagine that it was not God’s Spirit leading us to love, value, and honor our fellow human beings, regardless of their race, that ultimately taught us to end the enslavement of all people? How long has a patriarchal church and synagogue used Scripture to justify the denigration and subjugation of women?

Surely, it is God's Holy Spirit that is leading people of faith ever increasingly to understand the equality and worthiness of every human being as a child of God. For many Christians and Jews, the Spirit leading us into all truth has recently involved a new understanding, acceptance, and welcome of those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, recognizing them as the children of God that they are. And now, for many people of faith, that journey toward a deeper understanding of God and God's love for humankind leads us to the affirmation, acceptance, and welcome of God's transgender children.

This resource is meant to assist people of faith in that journey.

Recent history

Efforts toward the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people into the life of American society go back more than half a century. The past decade has brought astounding progress regarding rights and equality for gay and lesbian Americans, culminating in the Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision.¹ It affirmed that all Americans have the right to marry the person they love, including someone of the same gender. While there is much work still to be done to ensure nondiscrimination in public accommodation, employment, and housing across the country, gay and lesbian people are enjoying an unprecedented level of equality with other Americans.

The same cannot be said, unfortunately, about the place of LGBT people in most religious institutions. The traditional Judeo-Christian condemnation of homosexuality continues to be one of the chief obstacles in the fight for equality, even in the public sphere. While there is a legal separation of church and state in this country, policymakers, both local and national, often carry their religious beliefs against homosexuality into places of government. Those religiously based, negative attitudes have slowed the progress toward achieving equality. And the official teaching of most religious groups is still negative toward homosexuality, even though a few of those groups have tried to sound more welcoming by claiming that they do not condemn gay people, just gay physical intimacy—a distinction often seen as both cruel and meaningless by the gay and lesbian people at whom it is aimed. Liberal, mainline Christians and Jews have gone the furthest in changing their traditional teachings regarding gay and lesbian people, even welcoming them into leadership positions in their churches and synagogues. The Lutheran and Episcopal Churches not only have gay clergy, but also gay bishops; Denise Eger, a lesbian, serves as the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.² But Roman Catholicism—the largest denomination of American Christians—still officially teaches the notion that love and intimacy between two people of the same gender is repugnant to God. It should be noted, however, that as of April 2015, a majority of Roman Catholic laity—some 60 percent³—now disagree with their church's official teaching.

Key to changing the minds of thoughtful, faithful Christians and Jews has been the deeper understanding of biblical texts, traditionally thought to condemn homosexuality. The most convincing of these strategies have been the efforts to understand the relevant texts within the contexts in which they were written, not to summarily toss those texts into the religious, historical dustbin. Generally speaking, the conclusion of such studies is that whatever the Bible is condemning in those texts is not what people of faith are seeking to address today. For instance, the apostle Paul is likely addressing relationships between an older adult male and a young adolescent boy, somewhat common in Greek and Roman culture, which we would also condemn today as child abuse. This is very different from the adult, consenting, committed relationships society is considering today. Although same-sex physical intimacy was known in the ancient world, it is appropriate to assert that the Bible is silent on the issue of homosexuality since homosexuality as a sexual orientation was simply unknown in biblical times. The notion of sexual orientation as a scientific construct would not be posited until late in the 19th century.⁴

For the most part, both secular society and religious institutions have focused their attention on gay and lesbian people. As more and more gay and lesbian people came out to family, friends, and communities, a majority of Americans finally knew someone who is openly gay or lesbian. And as the Pew Research Center reports, knowing someone who is gay or lesbian is a crucial indicator of someone's likelihood to have a positive opinion of homosexual people.⁵

Increasingly, people began to speak of a larger LGBT community, which added bisexual and transgender people to those identifying as gay or lesbian. However, it must be admitted that much less attention has been given to the bisexual, or “B,” and transgender, or “T,” members of that community.

Very little attention has been focused on bisexual people largely because if they are in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, they appear heterosexual, and if they are in relationship with someone of the same sex, they appear to be gay or lesbian. Bisexual people are largely unseen and rarely discussed in either secular or religious settings, their particular needs are generally not understood, and little public conversation has occurred regarding what it means to be bisexual—a realm of inquiry still waiting for the attention it deserves.⁶

In contrast, transgender people have found themselves much more in the public eye with the emergence of some high-profile, celebrity transgender women. Janet Mock authored *The New York Times* bestseller *Redefining Realness*, worked as staff editor at the *People* magazine website, and speaks out as a transgender rights activist.⁷ Laverne

Cox's success as an actress in the Netflix series "Orange Is the New Black" brought the subject of being transgender to the public's attention and to the cover of *Time* magazine in June 2014.⁸ The new Amazon Studios series "Transparent" won critical acclaim and numerous awards for its thoughtful and sensitive focus on an older parent's journey toward understanding herself and living as a woman.⁹ The much-hyped transition of Olympic decathlon champion Caitlyn Jenner was captured in a TV interview, *Vanity Fair* cover story, and succeeding docuseries.¹⁰

However, the nation's attention has not always had positive consequences for transgender individuals, and many are experiencing a backlash. There seems to be a connection between the wider visibility of trans people and violence against them. The year 2015 saw alarming rates of violence, and even murder, against trans people—especially trans women and more specifically trans women of color.¹¹ Higher visibility means higher vulnerability. For trans people themselves, the positive effects of greater visibility are tempered by the violence it apparently engenders. Advocates on behalf of trans people must always balance celebration of increased visibility with a commitment to making the world a safer place for the trans community.

As part of that effort to make the world safer, advocates must argue that words uttered publicly do matter, and religious words especially so. Condemnation by religious leaders has the dangerous effect of assuring people that their transphobia is rightly felt and religiously condoned.

Attacks from the religious right

In Lafayette, Colorado, a transgender woman had been attending Flatirons Community Church for three years; by all accounts, she was an accepted member of this megachurch and had participated in many different volunteer activities, including specifically gendered groups. Then in August 2015, the pastor sent a letter to the transgender member, saying that she was no longer welcome to attend any functions that were segregated by gender, such as women's prayer groups and retreats, because, the pastor asserted, she really is a man. The pastor offered his services to help the transgender woman return to her God-ordained status as a male. In part, his letter¹² to her, which appeared widely on social media, read:

When God has assigned a place, a station, to someone, it is disobedience to desert that station. I have searched Scripture and I can find no reference that would say that gender or gender-identity would be different or exempt from that directive of obedience, even in the case of brokenness, emotions or feelings.

I also can find no reference or example in Scripture where Jesus recognizes, alters or gives permission for a person to treat gender as anything to be treated or “healed” or corrected, either by miracle or medical procedure.

I do find Scriptural reference and example directing men and women to remain in the situation that they find themselves in, even if the situation that they have found themselves in contradicts their current understandings or who or how they identify or by their current feelings, orientations or attractions. ...

Melissa, “best case scenario”, your body has betrayed you due to sin but God’s grace is and will be sufficient. But, the solution is not to embrace the consequences of sin’s betrayal of your flesh and to treat it as if it is something to be considered or embraced as your “true identity.” No. It is to hold onto what God has said is true and live in the gender that God has given to you, in spite of the condition of your flesh and emotions.

After a discussion of eunuchs, based on Scripture, the pastor concludes with:

Return, rethink how you have been thinking or considering your gender-identification and how you are pursuing life as a woman ... and then ... Return to the actual, reality-based, true, gender-appropriate life that images the masculine nature of God which will be made possible, only by the grace-sufficient, Christ supplied, promised strength of Jesus.

You are a man living in a broken body but Jesus and this part of the body of Christ known as Flatirons Community Church are ready and willing to walk along-side you as the man that you are and always have been.

I find this supposedly pastoral letter to be filled with cruel, shaming language and anything but pastoral. Its arrogance—to claim to know the inner workings of someone’s being better than they know it themselves—takes my breath away. The minister makes claims for God that God never makes for God’s self anywhere in Scripture and draws conclusions for which I know no scriptural or theological basis. But it does illustrate the lack of safety, not to mention respect, a transgender person may feel around religious people and institutions.

Just weeks after Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of *Time*, a resolution on transgender identity was passed with very little dissent at the 2014 Southern Baptist Convention in Baltimore.¹³ That resolution “affirm[ed] God’s good design that gender identity is determined by biological sex and not by one’s self-perception—

a perception which is often influenced by fallen human nature in ways contrary to God’s design,” “proclaiming what Scripture teaches about God’s design for us as male and female persons created in His image and for His glory.” While the resolution “condemn[s] acts of abuse or bullying committed against [transgender people],” it also declares “that we continue to oppose steadfastly all efforts by any governing official or body to validate transgender identity as morally praiseworthy”—apparently without seeing any connection between the two.

In contrast, some mainline Christian denominations have passed dramatically positive legislation to welcome transgender people into the life of their congregations and wider church. For instance, the Episcopal Church passed a General Convention resolution in 2012 opening the ordained offices of deacon, priest, and bishop to otherwise qualified transgender people.¹⁴

It should be noted, however, that one cannot always make assumptions about affirmation or rejection of transgender people based on a particular brand of religion or approach to faith. It will surprise many people that Pat Robertson—the conservative televangelist known for his harsh judgment and condemnation of lots of people and behaviors based on his reading of Scripture—has stated on his own television show, Christian Broadcasting Network’s “The 700 Club,” that he neither regards being transgender nor taking steps to change one’s appearance, either through surgery or hormone therapy, to be sinful or immoral.¹⁵ In response to a caller’s question about co-workers who are transgender, Robertson advises the caller, “It’s not for you to decide or to judge.”

General lack of knowledge and understanding

While the word transgender may be on the lips and minds of many more Americans these days, many people have a mostly superficial understanding of what it means to be born into a body and designated a gender at birth that is at odds with how that person internally identifies their gender. That experience, which was once labeled as “gender identity disorder” and considered a mental illness, is now called the less-stigmatizing “gender dysphoria”¹⁶ by the psychological and psychiatric community. This term focuses not on gender identity being at odds with the gender someone was assigned at birth but rather on the distress¹⁷—caused by society’s harsh attitudes, and sometimes, rejection—that may come with such a recognition.

The letters LGBT seem to roll easily off the tongues of gay and lesbian people and even of much of the public. But it must be said that, generally speaking, gay and lesbian people, as well as their straight neighbors, are fairly uninformed in their attitudes about transgender people and the issues they face—although this is becoming less and less true. For the most part, the gay and lesbian community understands that it must care about what happens to transgender people, but that attitude is seldom accompanied by real life interactions and relationships with transgender people, nor does it include much in the way of knowledge about the diverse and complex circumstances—both psychological and biological—that come under the umbrella of transgender experiences.

Religious organizations have been so focused on sorting out what they think and believe about homosexuality that little of their time has been focused on what God—and, consequently, they—might think of transgender people and the reality that in order to be true to themselves and God, transgender people must live as a gender that is not the one they were assigned at birth. This is perhaps attributable to a general weariness in some religious communities over seemingly endless discussions about sexual orientation, as well as a lack of easy references to transgender people in Scripture or in the histories of faith traditions. While theological work on the religious understanding of gender identity has been ongoing since at least the 1990s, that work—for the most part—has not yet reached the mainstream of even the most liberal faith communities.

Questions to be addressed

This resource aspires to inform one small part of the discussion related to transgender people by considering the following questions.

Do the Bible or religious traditions and practices provide any guidance in understanding transgender people? How do the stories found in the sacred texts of Jewish/Christian tradition shed light on what the church's/synagogue's stance should be toward transgender people? How might people of faith approach these ancient texts to best discern God's will for us?

What might people of faith learn from the creation stories of Genesis? What does the creation story have to teach us about the goodness of creation and the place of transgender people in that creation?

As people of faith, how are we to regard those who take deliberate steps toward a gender transition, which may include hormonal and/or surgical interventions of various types? Theologically, how do we understand God's gift of agency to humans, and how does it empower transgender people to become co-creators with God of their own lives and identities?

Is the creation good, as Genesis claims God declares? What difference does it make to hold such a positive regard for creation in general, and humankind more specifically?

Does the appearance of eunuchs in both the Jewish and Christian holy texts provide an example of transgender people being named in Scripture? What might we learn from their mention and treatment?

Does the life of Jesus offer any guidance for Christians about how to regard transgender people? Where else in Scripture might transgender people, as well as the larger religious community, find resonance with transgender experience?

How is God calling people of faith to welcome and incorporate transgender people into our religious communities? What is the best way of making the case for support and inclusion? What role are religious communities and institutions called to play in helping their members understand and welcome transgender people?

And finally, what is to be affirmed and celebrated in transgender lives, and what gifts do transgender members bring to religious communities?

This resource will attempt to answer these and other related questions.

Methodology

In my work as a Senior Fellow and member of the LGBT team at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., I noticed that while much biblical and theological work has been accomplished—and popularized—regarding homosexuality, biblical and theological work regarding transgender people and communities has enjoyed much less in the way of wide distribution and priority in religious communities. I wanted to create a usable resource that is reasonably brief and thoroughly accessible to people who are not theologically trained.

I then invited eight people of faith—mostly transgender and some nontransgender, some lay and some ordained, some older and some younger, from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds—to come to CAP for a consultation on the biblical and theological case for the acceptance and inclusion of transgender people in contemporary Jewish/Christian communities and institutions. This diverse group of people of faith acted as a council of wisdom and advice for me as I prepared to do this work. Together, we brainstormed what threads of Scripture and theology might support an inclusive stance toward transgender people and serve as a defense against their condemnation by some in the religious world. The extent to which they—and this process—also furthered my own education and learning about transgender people cannot be overstated.

I then took the notes, themes, and ideas brainstormed and discussed at the consultation and set about creating a resource that makes the case for the affirmation, acceptance, and welcome of transgender people into the life of churches and synagogues. Drafts of the resource were circulated among the consultation participants for their feedback, corrections, additions, and suggestions.

I rejoice that in the writing and editing of this resource, my own education about transgender people and their experience continued apace. I would often write something, only to receive careful, thoughtful, and patient feedback from someone in the consultation pointing out how I had poorly described or completely misunderstood the real, lived experience of transgender people. I want to express my deep

appreciation for members of the consultation for their candor and their patience with me. This is the kind of loving, respectful interchange I hope can occur more frequently between transgender and nontransgender people, and especially people of faith. No one of us ever gets it all right. Together, we can do something beautiful.

This resource is the final result of that arduous and exciting conversation. I am deeply grateful to the many ways in which this advisory consultation worked to keep me on the right track so that something could be produced that is useful, true to lived experience, and respectful of transgender people. Flaws and insufficiencies found herein are all mine and my responsibility. Our conversation and education will and must continue.

With grateful appreciation to the consultation participants:

- Carolyn Davis, Washington, D.C. (Faith Team, Center for American Progress; United Methodist Minister)
- Nicole Garcia, Denver, Colorado (Psychotherapist; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Candidate for Ordained Ministry; Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota)
- Steve Greenberg, Boston, Massachusetts (Orthodox Jewish Rabbi)
- Asher Kolieboi, Baltimore, Maryland (Chaplain, Johns Hopkins University; Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee)
- Sarah McBride, Washington, D.C. (LGBT Team, Center for American Progress)
- Alex Patchin McNeill, Washington, D.C. (Director, More Light Presbyterians; Harvard Divinity School)
- Cameron Partridge, Boston, Massachusetts (Episcopal Priest; Boston University; Harvard Divinity School; Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts)
- Justin Tanis, Berkeley, California (Adjunct Professor, Pacific School of Religion; Managing Director, Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry; Harvard Divinity School; San Francisco Theological Seminary)

Approaching the Scriptures

There are a number of ways to approach the texts held sacred by Jews and Christians. The approach taken here is a nonliteralist one, which seeks to read Scripture and to situate it in its context, both literary and historical, including the historical understandings of the time. While people of faith do not expect ancient writings to know about modern questions and realities, we are called upon to engage them and wisely apply their teachings to our context.

People of faith would also do well to remember that the original Scriptures were not written in English. When we fixate on what a particular word might or might not mean, we should remember that the English words we are parsing are already an interpretation. Some translator—or group of translators—has already made an interpretation in deciding that this word instead of that word will be used to translate the original word’s meaning. In short, there is much in Scripture that cannot be read simply or understood easily. One cannot assume that words and phrases in Scripture meant in ancient times precisely what they mean now. Nor can we always determine how a word found in the original Hebrew or Greek was used at the time of writing. However, it should be noted that Jews are generally not obsessed with determining the author’s original intent, since it is the many and varied readings of a text that will illuminate that text. Still, it is the nature of the biblical and theological enterprise to use all the tools and approaches available in order to discern the meaning of the Scriptures and their appropriate application to our own time.

This resource assumes that the words of Scripture need to be understood in the context of:

1. Understandings and beliefs at the time the words were written
2. How the religious community has interpreted those words over time
3. Current, modern day understandings of science, psychology, and the context of modern times

I believe that using all of these perspectives together will bring people of faith close to what these ancient words might mean today.

It is important to remember that “transgender” and “gender identity” were not categories used and understood at the time of biblical writing. However, it is fair to assume that there have always been people who have, to one degree or another, transgressed the prevailing norms of gender in their contexts. Scripture does show specific roles that are fulfilled by individuals based on gender or perceived gender, but there is no reference to the concept of gender identity itself. Transgender people likely existed in biblical times but were not acknowledged or recognized as transgender and were not understood in the ways they are today—even by those transgender people themselves. Transgender people in biblical times might have lived their realities without a name for what they were experiencing or an intellectual framework within which to understand it themselves. The transgender community is continuing to build that framework even today.

If there was not a name or category for transgender people in ancient times, then how can people of faith expect Scripture to offer any help in understanding what a Judeo-Christian understanding of transgender people might be? There are many things in modern life that are important and confusing and require some sort of moral consideration. Many of these concepts are simply not referenced in the Bible because they did not exist, had not yet been discovered, or were simply beyond comprehension at that time. People of faith would not expect Moses to have known that the earth revolved around the sun, nor would they expect Jesus to have made pronouncements on the depletion of the ozone layer or in vitro fertilization. It should not be surprising, then, that the word “transgender” does not appear in the Bible, nor is there obvious and direct reference to gender identity or to transgender people in Scripture.¹⁸ People of faith are left, therefore, to lift up from what is in Scripture—those texts that might help us create a reasoned theological reflection on the relationship between God and transgender identity. For many religious people, seeking and understanding God’s attitude and will for God’s people is central to being godly in their actions and attitudes, as individuals and as a community of believers.

Again, a good measure of humility is recommended in such an endeavor, admitting to our own biases and experiences that may lead us to understand and interpret the meaning of Scripture in particular ways. When seeking guidance from Scripture regarding issues or understandings that were unknown in the ancient world, Christians and Jews are left with this kind of extrapolation—and in so doing, we must always put forward our conclusions with the caveat that we are discerning those conclusions as best as we can understand and interpret.

I also want to acknowledge that other, more conservative readings of Scripture may arise from a thoughtful, faithful, and reasonable place. As evidenced in much of the Torah, Jews have always had a reverence for order and at least a nervousness about disorder. Guidelines, rules, and proscriptions are meant to keep order, and much of Hebrew culture and religious practice was about applying the divine of God to the social order of human beings. Jews have always been as concerned with the common social order of the human community as with the individual—an emphasis from which Christians might well learn. And so, for Jews, it is a legitimate question, arising from a deep faith, to ask whether or not gender is a part of the Divine’s ordering of humankind. As people of faith seek to answer this question, we would do well to honor the legitimate concern for order from which it comes.

As we seek to explore our sacred texts as a way of understanding current, modern realities, people of faith would do well to be creative in our approaches. Jews have the rich and ancient tradition of dealing vigorously and even contentiously with their sacred texts. The rabbinic tradition of midrash is a many-centuries-old, chronicled history of grappling with the meaning of sacred texts—pushing the boundaries, making associations, asking hard questions (even of God!), and not being afraid to challenge traditional meanings assigned to certain texts. Anyone who has ever participated in a Seder knows that much of the evening involves arguing about what God did, why God did it, and what it all means today. Jews are not afraid to play with a text in order to tease out its many meanings. Even assuming that a single text can have multiple meanings is a wonderfully Jewish way of going about interpreting Scripture.

Christians, on the other hand, often treat Scripture as a single, fixed object to be revered and obeyed but never questioned. While biblical fundamentalism is historically a recent phenomenon,¹⁹ it has been tremendously influential, especially in contemporary American society. There is a difference between believing, on the one hand, that the Bible was dictated, word for word, by God and, on the other hand, believing that the writers of the Scriptures were inspired to record their encounters with the Living God as best they could for humankind’s benefit. The approach of this resource is closer to the latter, with a healthy dose of the Jewish tradition of playing with Scripture to tease out its multiple possible meanings. The Torah claims that every word is from God, and the word’s meaning is open to 70 possibilities: The words are actual, but what they mean is not given.

What are the moral implications of transitioning one's gender, whether socially or medically? With what authority or agency do people make the decision and take steps to transition?

I was born the oldest son in a Roman Catholic, Hispanic family. I felt I had a specific role to fulfill in my family: to marry, have kids, and carry on the family name. I tried as hard as I could to be the person everyone wanted me to be. By the time I was 40, I had been married in the Roman Catholic Church, lived in a beautiful home, and was a respected law enforcement officer, but I never felt comfortable in my own skin. I knew I was lying to my wife, family, and friends. I became angry at God for not taking away the feelings I had deep inside even though I prayed and prayed for solace. I stopped going to church. Eventually, I turned to alcohol to cope with the façade I had created in order to make all those around me happy. After eight years of marriage, my wife and I divorced. I blamed her for all the pain I felt, but in reality, she was the one who had to suffer through a marriage with an angry and frustrated spouse.

Soon after my divorce, I was depressed and entertained thoughts of suicide. I entered therapy, and after a few months, I admitted to my counselor that the source of my pain was the guilt associated with the fact that I liked wearing women's clothing. My counselor referred me to a support group where I met other people who had the same feelings. Over several months of therapy, support group meetings, and attending a conference with some 200 transgen-

der participants, I realized I wasn't a freak or an outcast, but I was really a woman. When I accepted the fact that I had to live the rest of my life as a woman, the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders. I found peace. I felt in my heart and soul that I had discerned God's will for my life. My anger toward God disappeared, and I knew I had to return to church. I was transgender and divorced, so I did not anticipate being welcomed back into the Roman Catholic Church. I had met a transgender woman who was welcomed into a Lutheran church so I decided to attend this church in downtown Denver, where I expected the people to laugh and point at "the man in a dress." Instead, I was welcomed with open arms. I heard words of love and acceptance from the pulpit, and I was told I was a beautiful child of God. I had found a home where my faith in Jesus Christ was restored. Today, I thank God for the journey of self-discovery. The path I took during the first 42 years of my life showed me what suffering means, but now I am empowered to be a beacon of hope for those who follow after me. The welcome I felt in that church in Denver is one I will replicate in a church I will someday lead as a pastor, when I complete my seminary studies and am ordained as a minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Thanks be to God!

— Nicole Garcia

Usually, human gender is thought of in a binary way. Male and female are simply understood as the way things are. However, it is interesting to note that one of the two creation stories from the Book of Genesis posits the notion that gender was actually created in a secondary step by God.

The first creation story—beginning with Genesis 1:1–2:3—tells the more familiar story of each day's creative tasks accomplished by God and declares that God "saw that it was good." And on the seventh, Sabbath, day of the week, God rests. In that telling, humankind is created male and female from the very beginning, in God's image. This is the rather straightforward story most people think of when they think of the Genesis creation story.

However, in a second telling of the creation of the world by God, which immediately follows the first, beginning with Genesis 2:4, there is a different order and emphasis in the creation of the world:²⁰

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ...

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.’*

Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.
[Genesis 2:4–9; 15–25]

A literalistic reading of these two creation stories in English hides the rich and complex meanings to be found in the Hebrew language. Both creation stories in Genesis use a combination of meanings for the Hebrew word “a-DAM.” Sometimes it means a man; sometimes it means man and woman; sometimes it means human-kind; sometimes it means a particular male human being named Adam. It is not always possible to tell. And that means that readers are meant to think about it, to contemplate all the possible ways of understanding this story. However, it is rather clear from the Hebrew text of the second telling that, initially, “a-DAM” is not a man named Adam but “human being,”²¹ “earth creature,” or “earthling.”²²

Here is one possible way of reading this story:

God first creates the earth, but it is still barren. And then God creates the adam, the earthling, the human being with no gender. God then plants a fabulous garden, full of every good thing, and puts the earthling in the garden to take care of it. Very soon after, God realizes that there is a problem in this perfect garden: The earthling is lonely. God thinks, “I’ll make some entertaining animals to cheer the human up—and perhaps the human being will find one of the animals to be a suitable and fulfilling companion, a cure for the loneliness that the human being feels.” (It is interesting—and important—to note that God does not at first seem to know what will be the answer to the earthling’s loneliness but rather is dependent on the earthling to name the earthling’s own happiness and cure for loneliness.) The earthling seems to like the animals and gives names to them all, but at the end of the day, the loneliness is still there, and no helpmate is found for the adam. Then, God gets an idea! God causes the earthling to fall asleep, takes one of the human’s ribs/sides, mixes it with the dirt (the adamah from which he formed the earthling in the first place), and produces a second earthling to be the adam’s helpmate. And the adam, the human being, seems to become a man, viewing for the first time a woman (who is not named Eve until Genesis 3:20). And Adam says to God, “This is the answer to my loneliness. This is my helpmate.” And although this is not reported in the text, God must have been quite relieved to have solved this imperfection in the garden!

This only slightly tongue-in-cheek retelling of the story is at least one of the ways this text can be read. Because of the complexity of the language and the art and poetry of the telling, it is impossible to posit only one meaning in this story. What might Christians and Jews learn from this understanding of the creation?

In this second creation story, Adam is a co-creator with God. Adam's naming of the creatures is no small contribution. Especially in ancient times, the naming of something was highly significant. Names had meaning. Places were named for events that happened there. The Name of God was so sacred that it was never spoken aloud by Jews. In addition, people's names were often changed when some great transformation occurred or some big event affected their lives forever.

However, the power to name is not the only authority given to Adam by God. God grants to Adam the ability and authority to determine much of Adam's own life—an authority somewhere between the extremely limited authority and consciousness of the creatures of land and sea and the complete authority of God.

Sociologists would call this authority given to humankind “agency”—the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Agency is a deeper way to understand the free will given to human beings by God. Free will often sounds limited to choosing a particular way forward for ourselves when presented with one or more options. Agency, however, represents the freedom, independence, and authority of human beings to take action and to be proactive in the world on behalf of themselves or others.

It seems that one of the things it means to be made in the image of God is to have agency, the authority to determine much of one's own human life in the world. Unlike the other created creatures, Adam is given unmatched independence and the ability to make decisions that will affect Adam's life and happiness. It is Adam, not God, who gets to decide what and who cures Adam's loneliness and brings happiness.

Such agency, according to Scripture, is one of the things that sets human beings apart from the rest of creation. And this has dramatic relevance for the issue of gender identity. When people of faith ask, “What are the moral implications of the decision not only to live outwardly as a different gender, but also to change one's body medically?” we are asking a question about the extent, quality, and character of human agency. The authority to take such an action on one's own behalf is to assert that humans are indeed co-creators of our lives with God.

While there are those who would argue that one's gender is determined solely by one's physical characteristics, the gift of agency would suggest that each of us gets to decide what our true identity is, regardless of the gender assigned at birth based upon a physical determination. Rather than a rejection of what God has done, the embracing of one's true gender identity is an exercise of God's gift of agency.

As Genesis makes clear, unlike the rest of the creatures of creation, humankind is indeed vested with the creative powers of the Creator and made in the Creator's image. For transgender people, this means that it is not only appropriate, but also of their very human nature to claim who they are, to take responsibility for their lives, to bring into being outwardly the personal identity they know themselves inwardly to be, and to proclaim, like the adam, the earthling, "this is what is right for me."

What are some of the theological or religious perspectives with which to make sense of the occurrence of transgender people in creation?

I am not a mistake. My transgender identity and experience is not a mistake, but rather a blessing. It has made me a stronger and better person, a more empathetic being, and a more enlightened neighbor. This experience has led to a life of revelation. Being transgender was not a mistake, but the path I was meant to walk down. Our diversity enriches us, and that includes the experience of being transgender.

— Sarah McBride

This discussion must start at the beginning: "In the beginning, God" The stories in the early chapters of Genesis tell of a beginning and a Creator who intentionally creates the world out of both chaos and void. The first telling of that creation marches through the first seven "days" of creation, with God creating succeeding parts of the created order and declaring it good! The God of creation seems to take delight in what has been created, standing back and admiring the handiwork of that "day." [Genesis 1:1–2:3]

The declaration of the world and all that is in it as "good" is no small or insignificant thing. Christianity inherited much from the Greek philosophy of the ancient world, which tends to denigrate and judge the physical world as less than the world of mind and soul, even calling it corrupt and evil. It should be noted, however, that some scholars would argue that this Greek understanding is much more complex and nuanced than such a characterization might suggest. Greek philosophy, which often focused on a dualism and separation of mind and body, influenced Paul's letters to the early churches, and I would argue, still plagues Christianity today—a dualism that would have been foreign to Jesus and ancient Jews alike.

I have detected a divide among various denominations and religions, based on what that particular faith regards as the quintessential and defining moment for humankind. There are those who believe that the Fall defines us. [Genesis 3 account of Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit in defiance of God's will] Human beings are weak at best, corrupt at worst, and without the help of a strict, unwavering oversight by religion, we would deteriorate into the beasts that we are, unleashing the demons in a Pandora's box kind of world. Religion, in such a world, is our only hope of keeping a lid on that box. Our goal becomes reaching the end of our lives without having done anything really, really bad.

A different view poses the notion that the quintessential and defining moment for humankind is our creation by a loving God and being declared good by the Creator. Whatever else may happen, no matter how bad some of our choices turn out to be, no matter how far short of our best selves we fall, we have been declared good by the Creator, and that ultimately defines us. In that kind of world, religion's role is liberation, setting us free from whatever holds us back from being the very best, most compassionate, and fully alive human beings we can be. Our goal is reaching the end of our lives having done much that is good.

In truth, no religion or denomination is entirely on one side or the other of this divide. But which of these narratives about the nature of humankind dominates our consciousness affects our outlook.

God, it seems to me, delights in God's creation—all of it. One of the prayers in the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* that is used on Ash Wednesday begins by addressing Almighty and Everlasting God as the one “who hatest nothing that thou hast made.”²³ Indeed, there is nothing in all creation that God does not will into being and declare good.

The question about whether or not God has made a mistake in creating transgender people is an ill-placed and nonsensical question if God has declared the entire creation good. The question is not “What went wrong?” but rather “What gift is God giving to us in the creation of transgender people?” and “What is the rest of creation meant to learn from these particular children of God?”

Does the appearance of eunuchs in both the Jewish and Christian holy texts provide an example of transgender people being named in Scripture? What might be learned from their mention and treatment?

First, there is nothing in either the Hebrew Scriptures—traditionally called the Old Testament by Christians—or the Christian Scriptures—the New Testament—that identifies someone as feeling that their gender is at odds with the gender to which they have been assigned. While prohibitions in the ancient world about cross-dressing point to the occurrence of people who indeed traversed gender lines, gender identity and sexual orientation are categories unknown in the ancient, biblical world.

It should be noted that the current phenomenon of exclusion of and discrimination toward transgender people has not always been the case. There are times, places, and cultures of the past in which transgender people were not excluded and even valued highly, perceived to bring special gifts to their communities and given a place of honor in their cultures. For instance, many indigenous tribes of Native Americans have honored “two-spirit” people as being “doubly blessed” with both genders and especially “spiritually gifted.”²⁴ The moral questioning, suspicion, and violence aimed at transgender people today is a somewhat new phenomenon.

Both the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament and the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament point toward a movement from rigid exclusion to greater inclusion of those outside normative life in some way. Older proscriptions are giving way to ever more-inclusive understandings. This movement from exclusion toward greater inclusion should be helpful in guiding people of faith toward a contemporary response to transgender people.

The Bible rarely talks about sexual organs and sexual acts, except perhaps euphemistically. There is, however, a category of people mentioned in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures who are named despite this reticence: eunuchs. Generally understood to be castrated men, the term was sometimes used to describe other sexual or physical configurations. While it would be wrong to declare that all eunuchs were transgender people or all transgender people change their bodies, eunuchs represent examples in Scripture of people whose bodies have been altered or were ambiguous at birth. [Matthew 19:12]

On several levels, eunuchs provide an analogy for trying to understand transgender people and contemporary religious communities. However, the eunuch label generally applies only to people assigned male at birth, and of course, transgender people are not limited to a single gender. Additionally, it is important to note that many transgender people live as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth without altering their bodies.

Generally speaking, people tend to think of eunuchs as castrated men who were given oversight of harems for kings who were considered pagan to the Jews. “Eunuch” also came to be a common administrative term used for someone charged with authority over others. Castration solved the potential problem of the harem overseer impregnating women in the harem, which was not only a violation of the king’s so-called property, but also caused questions about legitimate heirs to the throne. Eunuchs could be trusted with the king’s wives or concubines.

Before examining this group of people who were categorized by their physical attributes—eunuchs—it should be noted that transgender people often resist the reduction of their bodies and transitions to surgery in general and to genital surgery in particular. While looking at scriptural references to eunuchs, the term “eunuch” could have several meanings. In addition, it is important to remember that the current understanding of transitioning may or may not include a number of different sorts of bodily changes—surgeries for those who choose them and/or hormone replacement therapy. It also should be noted that the biblically mentioned “eunuchs who have been so from birth” [Matthew 19:12] probably includes those born with physical ambiguities who today would be described as intersex.²⁵ In some places—notably in Australia—intersex people are organized and vocal and have a huge impact on the discussions about and understandings of human sexuality.²⁶ In short, no comparison or analogy is perfect—something important to keep in mind when looking at the presence of eunuchs in ancient times.

But these Scripture passages about eunuchs point to how some ancient religious communities dealt with someone physically outside society’s gender norms, including making a place for them specifically because of their gender identity.²⁷ And more importantly for transgender people and people of faith who love them, these Scriptures tell of a dramatic, historical arc from exclusion to inclusion. The message of Isaiah is that God has provided a way for even eunuchs to be woven into the covenant between God and humankind. The Hebrew Scriptures offer mixed reviews on the treatment of males whose genitals have been altered, presumably by accident or voluntarily. Deuteronomy 23:1 reads, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” Similarly, Leviticus 21:17–21 cautions:

Speak to Aaron and say: No one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind and lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has broken a foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.

It is not unusual that only male genitals would be addressed here, owing to the culture's patriarchy and focus on men. Relatively speaking, women are quite ignored in the texts, excepting the general disdain for women's bodily functioning, cleanliness, and subservient status to men.

It is important to note that while a man's crushed testicles or the removal of his penis disqualifies him from being "admitted to the assembly of the Lord," even this set of circumstances does not completely exclude him from the community. Instead, it just forbids him from taking a Jewish wife and disallows his serving in the Temple if he is a priest. The list of other disqualifications from being a part of the assembly includes circumstances that today would not result in exclusion or penalties from Jewish communities: blindness, "lameness," uneven legs, being hunchbacked or dwarf, having a blemish in the eyes (perhaps referring to cataracts), and skin rashes (perhaps eczema). In applying these prohibitions and disqualifications to modern situations, there is no reason to believe that the condemnation of those with altered genitals would remain true and operative today, any more than having a disability or cataracts would disqualify someone from being a part of a religious community.

The Holiness Code found in Leviticus comes down hard on anyone or anything outside the norm, it seems. Only those who are whole and unblemished in these particular ways may be admitted into the assembly of the Lord or serve God and the assembly as a priest.

However, the Hebrew Scriptures also offer another historically later view, one that is much more positive and inclusive. The portion of Isaiah that addresses the Jews held in captivity in Babylon and promises God's deliverance in the near future reads:

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree."

For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. [Isaiah 56:1–5]

The prophet Isaiah, preaching to an enslaved community and promising hope and deliverance by God, includes eunuchs in his description of the broadness of God's redemption. These heretofore outcasts are not merely to be included in the new Jerusalem that will follow the end of exile, but will also be honored, elevated, and given a "name better than sons and daughters."

Perhaps it was this passage from Isaiah that Jesus' follower Philip remembers as he obeys God's call for him to travel toward Gaza to preach the Good News of Jesus' resurrection:

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.'*

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. [Acts 8:26–40]

One can fill in the feelings between the lines of this story. Philip is on a wilderness road, not knowing what to expect, least of all an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot. Philip has all kinds of reasons to see this person as outside the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached: He is a foreigner; he may be a gentile who is a convert to Judaism and a believer short of being circumcised, which was not uncommon; he serves a pagan queen, the Candace; and he is a eunuch. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, he was “wealthy enough to ride in a chariot, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he cannot understand what he is reading without help.”²⁸ And besides, before Philip reaches out to him, this eunuch shows admirable hospitality in inviting Philip to sit with him in his chariot.

Because Philip is steeped in the Scriptures—remember, it is the Hebrew Scriptures of Christians’ Old Testament that are Philip’s Bible—he is able to imagine even a eunuch being welcomed into the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus.

Perhaps Philip remembers Isaiah's prophecy of the Lord's inclusion of the eunuch in his redemption of the Jews. This kind of inclusion, this broadening of the vision of God's love, is what leads the early disciples to incorporate into their community all kinds of people hitherto excluded from God's grace and favor—among them eunuchs, the uncircumcised, and those who do not follow Levitical dietary laws.

After conversing with Philip about the meaning of this passage from Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch surprisingly, and rather boldly, asks: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" One can only imagine that Philip is taken up short for a moment, wondering what craziness he has wandered into and if he himself believes the message of God's grace that he had just given the eunuch. To answer the eunuch's question—"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"—Philip can think of only one answer: nothing! And so Philip baptizes the eunuch.

Jesus himself is recorded as mentioning eunuchs once. In an exchange with the Pharisees over the religious laws regarding marriage and divorce, Jesus says:

There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can. [Matthew 19:12]

Given that the context for these comments is an argument over marriage, divorce, and remarriage, some have argued that Jesus is likely using the word "eunuch" in a more metaphorical way—indicating those who are not physically able to procreate or choose not to do so for a greater good through celibacy. However, Jesus' mention of "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others" argues against such a reduction of the term "eunuch" to a metaphor about heterosexual sex and reproduction.²⁹ In any case, Jesus' tone is far from condemning or judgmental.

While these passages from Scripture about eunuchs point to how ancient religious communities dealt with someone physically outside the norm of society, they also tell the story of a religious community's growing acceptance of those who are outside the norm in some way and have historically been marginalized from the larger community because of that difference. These passages from Scripture describe a historical arc from exclusion to inclusion. It must be acknowledged, however, that this historical arc is neither inevitable—it takes human work and advocacy—nor linear because there will be both setbacks and advances over time.

These passages do show that historically, both Judaism and Christianity were moving steadily toward greater inclusion of the non-normative in the vision of God's beloved community. This is a huge, overarching theme of both the Hebrew and Christian stories. Indeed, many people today measure the progress of both religious institutions and society in general by the movement away from exclusion toward greater inclusion and participation.

This movement from exclusion toward inclusion evidenced in Scripture should be good news for transgender people. It calls on contemporary religious communities to fully accept and embrace transgender people as children of God and heirs to the Reign of God.

For Christians, the life and ministry of Jesus are touchstones for how we are to be in the world.

What might Jesus' life teach us about how we should treat transgender people?

While it is difficult to say what it means, it is important to note in passing that the central figure in the Christian narrative, Jesus, does not exactly toe the prevailing line on traditional gender boundaries and expression.

According to Scripture:

1. Jesus never marries in a culture that virtually requires it.
2. Jesus seems to cross many of the societal boundaries regarding the separation and hierarchy of the sexes, treating women with a deep respect and high regard virtually unheard of in his culture. [the hemorrhagic woman, Matt 9:20–22 and Mark 5:25–34; Samaritan woman at the well, John 4:7–30; Mary and Martha, Luke 10:38–42]
3. Jesus is said to have a particular disciple who holds a special importance in his life, “the one whom Jesus loved.” [John 13:23–26, 20:2, 21:17, 21:20]

Jesus is particularly known for breaking long-standing boundaries regarding hallowing the Sabbath [Matt 12: 1-14 and Mark 2:23-3:6] and ritual cleanliness [touching/healing the leper, Matt 8:1–3]. Jesus does not advocate for the breaking of long-established rules just for the sake of causing trouble, but rather gives a rationale for defying traditional boundaries or prohibitions:

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'
[Mark 2:23–28]

Jesus is trying to teach those who will listen that a certain standard must be applied when assessing whether to follow or to disobey a traditional boundary: Does the observance of this boundary serve or harm human beings? If this answer is harm, then it is the godly and good thing to disobey the rule because the well-being of humankind always trumps rules.

Christians should be neither surprised nor alarmed at the notion that Jesus breaks rules and violates boundaries when it results in a more compassionate and respectful treatment of human beings. The Christian community has every reason to embrace a similar standard when testing a long-standing practice. When assessing whether or not to embrace and include transgender people in the community, the standard is still the same: Does it help or harm human beings? Clearly, inclusion helps and exclusion hurts. Such an action by Christians today follows in the footsteps of the one they call Lord.

Where in Scripture might transgender people, as well as the larger religious community, find resonance with transgender experience?

Names and naming

I was in my second year serving a church when I got the courage to send a church-wide letter about my name change, which was the first step I took towards transitioning. After sending the letter I was so nervous to face the congregation on Sunday morning. I was worried the members of the congregation wouldn't have read the letter, or would pretend they hadn't read it, and would continue calling me by my old name. While I was in the front of the sanctuary, setting up the candles and making the final preparations for worship, almost everyone came up to me before they sat in the pews to say hello and call me by my new name. I squinted into the sun streaming through the stained glass and realized I had never felt so seen.

— Alex Patchin McNeill

One of the strongest, most recurring notions in Scripture is the power of names and naming. This resource has already noted the authority given to Adam to name all the creatures. Names are carefully attended to in the history of the Jews.

In a dramatic scene in the story of the Exodus that serves as a preamble to his demands that Pharaoh release the Jewish slaves, Moses asks God what God's Name is. [Exodus 3:1–15] He wants to know how to answer if Pharaoh asks, who is “the God of your ancestors?” This is no small request Moses is making. In the ancient world, knowing someone's name was a deeper kind of knowledge and intimacy than in the modern world. Knowing someone's name gave a certain amount of power over that person, to bless or to curse. That God would share God's name with Moses—and by extension, the Israelites—is an indication of how intimately God is linking God's self with this chosen people and the lasting depth of commitment God is making to them in the Covenant.

The changing of names is also a custom seen in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, particularly to mark a dramatic and profound internal change that occurred in the life of the one whose name is being changed. After journeying in faith with God for many years, Abram begins to despair of ever having progeny, despite God's promises to the contrary. Finally, when Abram is 99 years old, God says to him:

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous ... this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. [Genesis 17:1b–4]

Similarly, God gives Abram/Abraham's wife, Sarai, a new name along with a promise:

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.' [Genesis 17:15–16]

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, has a harrowing encounter with the Divine in the form of a man. [Genesis 32:22–32] They wrestle through the night until dawn, when Jacob demands a blessing. The man asks Jacob his name and then says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." [vs. 28] Jacob, now Israel, says "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." [vs.30]³⁰

When one encounters the Divine, the inner transformation is so profound, a name change seems necessary to honor the sacred power of the transformation. The same holds true in the Christian Scriptures of the New Testament, most famously with the persecutor of the new Christian community, Saul of Tarsus. [Acts 9:1–22] After Saul's encounter with God on the road to Damascus and his conversion to believing that Jesus is the Son of God, Saul becomes Paul, a change in name signifying his new life in Christ. Even Jesus participates in this renaming tradition by renaming Simon son of Jonah. Upon Simon's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." [Matthew 16:17–18a]

Names are important in most cultures. Once a name has been given to a child, the culture places many barriers to changing that legal name. Legally renaming oneself is a long, complicated, and tedious process. Names and naming often have a special resonance with transgender people since most names have an association

with the gender of the person being named. Most transgender people choose a new name for themselves. The process of choosing a new name can be a sacred act for transgender people.³¹ The name change is a spoken embodiment of the transformation that has occurred in the person being renamed. It is why the changing of the name on one's driver's license, passport, or birth certificate can be so important for transgender people's well-being and safety. For example, millions of viewers watched and heard Caitlyn Jenner say in her interview with Diane Sawyer, "This is the last time you will see Bruce."³² The experience of embracing one's own gender identity is so profound an experience that for some, nothing short of a name change will do for marking the occasion.³³

From death to rebirth to joy

Another recurring theme in Scripture is the movement from death to rebirth and the joy that comes from that journey. The experience of conversion to either Judaism or Christianity is often spoken of by these religious communities as dying to one life and being reborn into another. Liturgical rituals often act out the dying and the rising to new life with ceremonial washings and preparations for burial; a liturgical action symbolizing being buried, such as full immersion in the water of baptism; rising from the grave and the old life into a new life; and receiving a new name symbolic of that new life.

Transgender people might find resonance with the story of Lazarus and Jesus' raising him from the dead. [John 11:1–44] Lazarus has already died when Jesus appears on the scene, but Jesus calls to him inside the tomb, commanding him to come out. To the astonishment of everyone who is present, Lazarus appears at the door of the tomb alive but still wrapped in burial bands of cloth. Jesus commands the people around him to "unbind him."

Part of what can resonate with transgender and other marginalized people in this story is the implied communal nature of rebirth. There is only so much an individual can do, and then it is the community's responsibility to contribute to and complete the rebirthing. Lazarus will not be fully integrated back into the community of the living until that community unbinds him from the cloths that still imprison his body. Many transgender people have done the hard work necessary to bring about reconciliation with their own bodies, but the full integration of that new, rebirthed person needs to be completed by the larger community. A community does that by using the name chosen by that transgender person, by using pronouns of reference indicative of the gender embraced by that person, and by welcoming this new person into the wider community.

In his farewell discourse to the disciples, which would come to be known as the Last Supper, Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” [John 15:11] The reward of living a life with God is an abundance of joy. It is alarming to note how unhappy and joyless many professed believers appear. If there is no joy, how complete or effective is their conversion?

One of the most striking characteristics I have often observed in transgender people is joy. It is the joy that comes from finding the peace that only wholeness and reconciliation brings after feeling a disconnect between the gender one has been assigned at birth and the gender one knows at their core. That joy is often expressed as relief, much like finally reaching a destination after a long and difficult journey.

However, 2015 was not only filled with joy, visibility, and progress for the trans community. There seems to be a correlation between greater visibility for the trans community and greater violence against its members. For some trans people, this vulnerability to greater violence overshadows any joy that they might be feeling. The threat of violence does not take away the gains that have been made, but it should remind us all that part of the advocacy work on behalf of trans people is making society a place of safety within which trans people can live lives of integrity and authenticity without fear of harm or even being murdered. That advocacy for safety reminds me of a petition addressed to God in the prayers of the Episcopal Church’s service of Evensong to “shield the joyous”: Part of religious people’s responsibility to the trans community is to “shield the joyous”³⁴ from violence.

One transgender person explained to me the disconnect between her assigned gender and the gender she understands herself to be as being like feeling homesick. She described that seemingly untouchable and painful ache in the pit of one’s stomach for which coming home is the only cure. Finally acknowledging and embracing one’s gender is like coming home to one’s self. And with that return home comes a peace that some might describe as a peace “which surpasses all understanding.” [Philippians 4:7]

Religious people would do well to listen to transgender people telling their stories. Religious themes are often echoed in them: life, suffering, death and rebirth; resurrection; coming to one’s senses, as did the Prodigal Son, and going or coming home; leaving an old life behind and embracing a new life, full of joy; knowing a “peace that surpasses all understanding.” Their stories, and the calm confidence with which they are told, will be the greatest motivators for change among those who feel uncomfortable or judgmental about transgender people.

Not just compassion, but justice

Loving God and loving one's neighbor is at the center of what it means to be Jewish or Christian. Indeed, it is a core value held, in one form or another, by most of the world's religions. It is the shorthand summary for how God wants us to be in relationship to God and to one another. Aside from God's love for humankind, there is perhaps no stronger theme in the Scriptures of the Hebrew and Christian texts than God's focus on how people treat one another—with Jesus going so far as to claim that in treating our fellow human beings a certain way—positively or negatively—Christians are, in fact, treating Jesus that way as well.

Since transgender people are children of God, inherently worthy not only of God's love, but also our own, people of faith are called to fight for just institutions, laws, and attitudes that build up, support, and equip transgender people for productive and joyous life. It is not enough to merely feel kindly toward transgender people; we are called to work for their full acceptance, safety, and affirmation in society and within our religious institutions. That means advocating for protections against discrimination; access to health care, including services related to hormone replacement therapy and sex-reassignment surgery for those who desire it; and protection from violence. We must pay special attention to transgender people of color—especially transgender women of color—who are disproportionately targeted for violence.

In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, God is depicted as caring deeply about justice. God is portrayed as wanting humans, individually and as a community, to treat one another with respect, compassion, and fairness, even, and perhaps especially, when it requires sacrifice on our parts. Reconciliation and justice are the goals of loving God—the vertical or human-God dimension of religious life—and loving one's neighbor—the horizontal or human-to-human dimension—as one's self. If we love God, then we ought to love one another as God loves us. Loving one's neighbor is what justice looks like in action.

Justice works from the premise that God's creation is good and should be treated with respect and reverence. Justice declares that every human being is a child of God and is entitled to fair, compassionate, and life-affirming treatment.

Justice has a powerful social dimension, declaring that just treatment is not only a requirement of the individual, but also of the society in which individuals live, move, and interact with one another. If the systems of society do not reflect the respect for every person as a child of God, then justice demands that those systems be changed.

Note that there are two kinds of justice in the Jewish tradition:

1. "Blind justice" that is the application of the right law to a situation, a fairness based on no contextual details that offers just a simple reading of the facts in which everyone gets what they deserve
2. Justice that affirms the unique circumstances and placement of individuals and offers a fair judgment in light of the realities of poverty, power, vulnerability, and need

The latter kind of justice is stressed in the teachings of Jesus.

Justice demands, as does God, a special emphasis on care, compassion, and advocacy for the poor, the marginalized, and the most vulnerable. People of faith are called upon to work for justice—as human beings and as members of society—for those who are forgotten, scorned, and mistreated by the systems of society. In addition to direct, compassionate service to those who are treated as less than the children of God they are, justice demands that people of faith bring the institutions of society into line with that understanding of the inherent worth of every human being. Systemic justice is the calling to account of religious institutions, which sadly are often the most guilty of the judgmentalism that causes their members to treat the marginalized as other and brands them as unworthy of the support of religious people and institutions.

Similar to other marginalized communities, transgender people are often perceived as being other. And all too often the other is demonized as being less than human and therefore deserving of scorn, mistreatment, and violence. Advocating for transgender people in such an environment is an inherently risky proposition.

When one advocates for marginalized people judged to be other, one becomes associated with that group and runs the risk of being subject to the same treatment as the targeted group itself.

Judaism and Christianity teach that this is precisely where their adherents are called to be: right in the middle of standing with and for the oppressed. As transgender people become more visible in American communities and congregations and make their way into our hearts, they need advocates within religious communities. As they begin to share publicly more of their lives and stories, transgender people deserve the support of allies, gay and straight, in order for their voices to be more readily heard. And in places where their voices are not yet heard or welcome, allies need to speak on their behalf. Justice demands no less.

The case for acceptance and inclusion

Jews and Christians believe that God created the heavens and the earth and all within it, and God proclaimed it good. God gave humankind the gift of agency, which bestows a remarkable authority to shape one's own life and to become co-creators with God. Humans are not only given the agency to decide between right and wrong when tough decisions need to be made, but also given the agency to be proactive in our own lives, moving forcefully on our own behalf to make the most of the lives given to us. That God-given agency comes with the freedom and opportunity to choose what makes us whole.

While transgender people were not named as such in biblical times, there are clues in Scripture that point in the direction of acceptance and affirmation. The arc of both Judaism and Christianity bends from exclusion toward inclusion, even for those who do not conform to the explicit male-female gender roles and who were once considered outside of the community. Whatever the Reign of God means, it certainly includes transgender people and others who have historically been scorned by religious institutions and people. And Christians should take note that the one they call savior was himself a man who, by not marrying, lived outside the acceptable social gender norms of heteronormativity for men of his day.

Transgender people can find places in Scripture that reflect their own journeys and experiences. Transgender people know the power of naming, so important in the religious cultures of the ancient world. Transgender people know the feeling of rebirth that comes from daring to lay claim to the identities they know themselves to be. The joy exhibited by transgender people at such a transformation should be clear evidence to the church, the synagogue, and the world that this transformation is holy and of God.

Rather than being resistant to or judgmental of transgender people, communities of faith should be asking, "What can we learn from transgender people? What is God seeking to help us understand about ourselves in and through the lives and witness of transgender people?" Many communities of faith are beginning to see

the emergence of the transgender community as an adventure to be embraced rather than a challenge to be endured. The wisdom about humankind freshly enlightened by the experience of transgender people is something to celebrate. It is, in short, yet another way that God may be glorified.

Those who are not transgender themselves are called upon to work for justice for transgender people and to advocate for them within religious institutions and within religious culture. That justice demands physical safety and protections from discrimination for this often-vulnerable community. Justice calls the wider community to lay down its life—as Jesus did—for these, our siblings.

Justice calls people of faith to build a community and a world in which it is safe for transgender people to grow ever more deeply and powerfully in authenticity. Justice calls us to honor those who embark on that journey toward authenticity by standing with and learning from them. Justice invites us to delight in transgender people as God does and, in so doing, find ourselves blessed by their presence in our faith communities.

About the author

Gene Robinson is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress. He was elected bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire on June 7, 2003, having served as Canon to the Ordinary—assistant to the bishop—for nearly 18 years. He was consecrated a bishop in the Episcopal Church on All Saints Sunday, November 2, 2003, and was invested as the Ninth Bishop of New Hampshire on March 7, 2004.

Robinson graduated from the University of the South in 1969 with a B.A. in American studies and history. In 1973, he completed an M.Div. degree at the General Theological Seminary in New York and was ordained deacon and then priest in 1973. He is the author of *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* (Seabury Press, 2008) and *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage* (Knopf, 2012).

Glossary

A glossary of terms related to sexuality in general and transgender people in particular can be found on the National Center for Transgender Equality website. See National Center for Transgender Equality, “Teaching Transgender: A Guide to Leading Effective Trainings—Terminology,” available at <http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/teaching-transgender-guide-leading-effective-trainings> (last accessed January 2016). A group of transgender people contributed to creating this. Check back occasionally, as preferred usage changes over time.

Endnotes

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