

NEWS & OPINIONS

Trouble at Every Turn: Christian Anthropologists Ponder Sex/Gender

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Jesus declared to his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33, New International Version). Trouble is a theme throughout Scripture; God’s people suffer trouble, cause trouble, and seek God (or don’t) during times of trouble. In most regards, Christianity may not connect easily with Judith Butler’s philosophy, but she also sees the world as a place of trouble. In *Gender Trouble* she explicates ways that gender causes trouble, and not only because it is the site of problems including interpersonal and structural sexism, violence, misogyny and more. Taking a radical approach, going to the root, Butler “seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the [feminist] movement of thought to which it belongs” (Butler 1999, vii). In her view, conceptual critique is a form of feminist self-criticism that supports the movement. It is often difficult to embrace self-criticism, or “immanent critique” (vii), because it may seem disloyal and likely feels unpleasant, but such foundational critique of the symbols we employ is precious and helpful.

Indeed, in reading the articles by Gil, Priest, and Rynkiewicz (this issue), I come away wondering whether these authors will have any friends left, once these essays are published! Their gift is a hard one to receive: immanent critique of both modern society and Christianity, an insider’s self-critique intended for growth, reform, and ultimately, movement toward the “life that truly is life” (1 Tim. 6:19, NIV). As anthropologists, they look at Christian life through a cultural lens, analyzing the social context of religious belief and practice, probing the generation of words, concepts, and frameworks. To political, national, or religious ideologues, this seems disloyal because the work does not bolster any side in a simplistic or total way, including even the Christian traditions of which the authors are committed members. In betraying

ideology, propaganda, and unquestioned assumptions, these essays express a higher loyalty and carve out a space for critical reflection that can ultimately be part of deepened discernment on the part of the willing reader, a capacity to notice what is good, pleasing, and perfect, in light of and while positioned in the midst of the patterns of this world (Rom. 12:1-2, NIV).

All three essays are about signs. Humans have instinct and physical strength, but neither match the power of symbol-making as a survival skill. Connecting with Max Weber who came before him, Clifford Geertz believed that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun, and I take culture to be those webs” (Geertz 1973, 5). Theologically, symbol-making is an outstanding expression of the *imago Dei*; a distinctive way in which humans reflect their Creator. This is seen in the capacity and responsibility given to Adam, when God “brought [all the beasts and the birds] to the man to see what he would name them” (Gen. 2:19a, NIV). Humans are not told to overpower, outrun, or outsmart the animals, rather, to name them. God allows us to live with the consequences of our naming: “. . . whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19b, NIV).

This set of essays examines the work of Adam; that is, the ways in which humans name certain elements of creation in modern society: sex, sexuality, gender, marriage, and kinship. Gil explicates the conceptual conflation of sex and gender that instructs an inner, felt sense of gender to suppress the identity implications offered by the body’s biological sex. Priest uses a primary data set to explore competing sexual paradigms in American higher education, showing that traditional sexual ethics are increasingly cast as a mean-spirited outlier in a world that has shifted to a consent-based ethic of freedom and choice. He turns to

ethnology to justify the notion that the concept of marriage as between a man and a woman and with strong concern for biological and social reproduction is actually the ethnological prototype and is still recognized as such in anthropological definitions of marriage. Rynkiewicz looks at that part of life that Americans label “homosexual” or, more expansively and less precisely, “LGBTQ+.” He warns of poorly contextualized Christianity, when American Christians reify extant cultural concepts by taking their own concepts to be obvious and universal and then use them in biblical, moral, and ecclesial applications without examination or awareness of their social construction. Christians are then ill-prepared to engage sex/gender matters in their own society or any other.

Readers may wonder when the authors will get down to it and stand with one of two sides in Christian discourse: does the Bible say homosexuality is a sin, or not? (This question no longer even points to the correct subject, which includes sexual identity, gender identity, fluidity, queerness, and a variety of nonconformities in the domain of life we call sex, gender, and sexuality, yet it is the word and the phrase still commonly used among Christians, so I use it for comprehension’s sake.) It is the nature of discourse to hold ideas and symbols in place, breaking new ground only with great effort and slow accommodation on the part of those immersed in a given symbolic universe. These articles do not eventually sort into expected binaries, rather, they take current biblical, theological, pastoral, and sociopolitical discourse as a trailhead and forge new paths. They elevate our sights above struggles for power between two existing sides: in fact, in their concern over the human as symbol-maker, they alert us to a survival threat. Symbol-making, or the capacity for social construction, is one of God’s great gifts to our species, a vital potential for expressing our nature as bearers of God’s image. Are we exercising it amiss over crucial matters related to selfhood, identity, reproduction, embodiment, marriage, and family? Do our symbols point to that which we intend them to, or do they direct our gaze and our minds awry? And to what consequence?

These essays point out incompleteness and error in both secular and sacred realms. As Christian anthropologists, the authors use a participant-observation stance to move in and out of both realms, leaning on lived experience, scholarly literature, and religious and spiritual insight to speak from the insider-outsider vantage point endemic to anthropologists and to missionaries. Insider to modern society, but outsider

insofar as religious identity sets them apart. Insider to the church, but outsider insofar as scholarly commitments and disciplines shape a distinctive mode of thought and communication. Insider to lived experiences of sex, gender, and family, but outsider insofar as multiplicity of sex/gender labels and identities make it impossible for any one person to experience the world from within all vantage points.

I will identify and explore the four sex/gender troubles raised by these essays: epistemological, conceptual, ethical, and ecclesial. My response concludes by questioning how this fine body of work can inspire us all, as Christian scholars, to contribute to the church’s understanding of and striving toward holiness.

Epistemological Trouble

Sex/gender is a site of contestation including even the means by which one may enter conversations on the topic. One could dismiss this set of articles because all the authors are men, because it includes no self-identified LGBTQ+ author, because all authors are Christians, because authorial voice is not grounded in lived experience of non-dominant identity, or because the articles do not put forward an expansive range of religious and non-religious perspectives. The authors certainly speak from a Christian perspective grounded in theology and Christian service, and the influence of historical subjectivity (the modern West) in particular is implicit, but personal subjectivity is not often called upon for epistemological authority. In the main, the epistemology of these articles rests on anthropology’s traditionally scientific approach: empiricism and a shared body of methods, modes of analysis, and theory, with analysis and discussion shaped by Christian commitment. Scientific epistemology is often disregarded in public discourse, despite its promise to broaden the field of inclusion by allowing all voices to speak from common rationality and empirical evidence. In a sense, the epistemology of anthropology is at odds with our society’s elevation of identity-based knowledge, because the premise of fieldwork is to elevate the lived experiences of others. Ideally practicing reflexivity, the anthropologist holds their own perspective lightly in order to deeply understand and carefully represent the perspective of others. In a way that does not appease current identity-based epistemological demands but that resonates with the basic approach of anthropology, these articles do take lived experience seriously, the lived experience of the

peoples and cultures which the anthropologists have lived, served, and studied.

Demonstrated by centuries of wrestling over how to connect religion and science, it is clear that the human quest to know is not organized into strict compartments. As Gil notes, humans develop knowledge with rationality, intuition, bias, empirical data, religious tradition, cultural norms, and other influences, all operating at the same time. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to fully see the paradigms surrounding a quest for knowledge; easier to see them in historical perspective (Kuhn 1970). In these articles, faith and science are at play simultaneously, and in the subject they treat, two other epistemologies intertwine. In analyzing extant knowledge of gender identity and gender variance, the American Psychological Association describes a divide between academic knowledge and activist knowledge (American Psychological Association 2009). In looking at nonbinary gender specifically, the APA describes an almost total lack of research, because this and other identity labels are proliferating more rapidly than scientists are able to locate and study each group of people. Academic epistemologies value data and theory, generating empirical knowledge linked to ongoing scholarly conversation, which by definition is relatively slow and not immediately linked to sociopolitical applications. In contrast, activist epistemologies value lived experience, and without scientific methodologies and peer review processes, rapidly generate knowledge that is closely linked to sociopolitical goals and quick action. Increasingly, activist and scientific knowledge are merged in anthropology; the subfield of public anthropology embraces this epistemological fusion for the sake of applying anthropology to social issues. Understanding the processes and values of these two epistemologies, and the problems and promise of their hybrid forms, is vital for understanding sex/gender issues and conflicts, just as understanding the same about science and religion is vital for appreciating the modern faith integration endeavor.

Methodological and epistemological trouble underlies all other troubles. What do we know about sex/gender, how do we know, and when ideas conflict, which knowledge prevails (and which knowers) and why? Gil encourages fidelity to biology, a seeking of the real by looking at the created order in the biological realm. There is an epistemological humility—submission, even—in this approach, expecting cultural constructs to bend in light of what is really there in nature. By extension, this requires trust in scientific

biologists to describe what is and to correct their errors over time. In taking an ethnological approach, Rynkiewicz encourages fidelity to empirical reality, looking across cultures for generalizations or even universals in how humans reckon sexuality and identity. This requires a kind of trust or humility as well, trusting fellow humans across all time and space to offer insights (not templates) in how to name and interpret shared elements of human reality. Priest shares with Rynkiewicz an ethnological approach and with Gil a priority on biology, and Priest also generates a data set and interprets it.

Accepting knowledge because of the knower's lived experience is one kind of epistemology. It carries potential for inclusion and for cultivating empathy and an expanded sense of the human experience. It carries dangers too, which arise in far fewer than all or even most instances, such as unaware acquiescence to the discursive norms of a single social context due simply to the use of language, and also problems related to charisma, truthfulness, and self-deception. These authors do not ask us to extend trust or to exercise critical awareness in this direction, but they do ask the reader to trust and exercise critical awareness toward empirical knowledge generated by credentialed scientific experts. This carries potential for harmony with reason and science, but also carries dangers of error, unacknowledged bias, or obliviousness toward the paradigms that elevate or denigrate certain questions and areas of exploration. Similarly, these are not endemic problems of every or even most scientific explorations, but they do prevent an idolizing of a single methodology as an unimpeded highway to reality and truth.

A second frustration may arise for church audiences who expect Christian engagement with sex/gender to focus on biblical interpretation, moral assessment, or pastoral advice. Christian engagement with sex/gender has certain established pathways, most of which are lined on either side with affirmation (progressive or revisionist) and negation (conservative or traditionalist). These articles serve neither side entirely, nor do they fit exactly with predictable outcomes such as pastoral advice or biblical or moral verdicts. With ethnological and biological insights framed with anthropological theory and interpreted in Christian perspective, they offer insights and frameworks that can benefit biblical interpretation, moral assessment, and pastoral advice, but not by simply joining a side or offering a quick list of how-tos.

Better than dismissing or elevating this set of articles because of limits in the diversity of author identities or because the arguments presented do not provide weapons to any side of extant ecclesial divides is to notice and explore the epistemological trouble that extends far beyond this discussion to the entire sex/gender complex as a site of cultural negotiation and conflict. This set of articles has a certain purpose, for Christian anthropologists to dialogue within the confluence of their discipline and religion. In meeting that *telos*, it does not achieve other ends. Noticing the epistemological and methodological frameworks that are privileged or dismissed in a social setting is vital for understanding others, assessing knowledge, and speaking such that one may be heard.

Conceptual Trouble

Our authors join many scholars in probing the subject itself: just what, exactly, are we talking about when we speak of gender, sex, sexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality, LGBTQ+, marriage, and other words related to these topics? Gil's concern is the conflation of gender and sex, with inner sense of gender identity obliterating (or promising to obliterate) the meaning and influence of sexual biology on human selfhood and identity. Rynkiewich appeals to ethnology in questioning whether western societies, and western Christians, have encoded a category error in concepts such as "gay", "homosexual", and by extension, "heterosexual." Priest looks at the concept of marriage, though his argument will be addressed more in the next section.

The human work of naming creation has real consequences: "whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 2:19b, NIV). Anthropologists have documented many examples of misnaming, for example, taxonomies that name Black persons as closer to apes than to their fellow humans (Jones 2012; Smedley 2017[1993]). Gil might point to biological reality as evidence that human error can have great social consequence but it cannot become truth; biology is still real, whether we recognize it or not. Rynkiewich makes a similar point with ethnological evidence, offering examples of how error can become cultural norm, with profound influence on human life courses and relationships. The same could be pointed out for things that go unsaid, human experiences for which societies do not develop words.

Over two decades ago, sociologist Edward Laumann asked a similar question: When we speak of

homosexuality, what are we talking about? (Homosexuality was the word used at the time.) In the mid-1990s, some argued that homosexuality was exceedingly rare, an outlier, while others said at least 10% of the population was gay. Laumann and his colleagues looked for population-level data and pointed out the obvious: prevalence depends greatly on definition (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels 1994). Anthropologists and sociologists of religion engage this issue in long-standing methodological challenges in studying Christians and in comparing studies of Christians, as sample inclusion by self-identification, measures of extrinsic or intrinsic religiosity, measures of theological agreement, and others yield very different numbers. Laumann identified three key components of a measure of homosexuality: same-sex behavior, same-sex feelings, and same-sex identity. Should sociologists count individuals who fit with one of those dimension, two, or all three? Prevalence rates will vary accordingly, and sample selection becomes nearly impossible if one is measuring, for example, those with same-sex feelings but no behaviors and no identity affiliation. Others have probed even these definitions, considering, for example, what exactly constitutes attraction, arousal, orientation, or erotic feeling (Baumeister 2000; Herdt 1982). This connects closely with Rynkiewich's example of the "Sambia." Sociologist Stephen O. Murray looked at all available ethnographic evidence of same-sex acts, including the Sambia and dozens of other cultures, and concluded that while same-sex behavior is quite common across cultures, homosexuality is exceedingly rare (Murray 2002). He categorized same-sex acts as being part of age-graded relations (rituals that masculinize boys are an example), profession-based, gender-based, and relations between relative social equals (what people in today's western societies and others call homosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and more). Murray was a gay scholar hoping to argue that because homosexuality was found around the world, it should be normalized in American society. Instead, he made the case that homosexuality is rare, meaning that in light of ethnology, same-sex acts are not typically socially organized and recognized as emotionally meaningful connections between people of relatively similar age in an arrangement that replaces opposite-sex, procreative marriage.

Such are the webs of significance we ourselves have spun. Progressives may see this issue as objectifying LGBTQ+ persons with a gaze of suspicion, examining the terms and the question of their existence, and

traditionalists may perceive needless deconstruction that obscures moral clarity and offers confusion to people in need of guidance. Gil and Rynkiewicz (also Butler, Laumann, and Murray) provide vital critical thought, pointing out what can go wrong when we get it wrong, when our webs of significance—the social constructions of a given context—offer names, labels, meanings, and values that set people in pathways of self-understanding, identity formation, and life course development that lead toward problematic personal states or social conditions. We may name amiss, fail to name, misperceive prevalence, or, as Gil points out, wrongly narrow the scope of incoming information. Doing theology within “argumentative territory” is dangerous, and Gil encourages us to listen to God’s creation in every way it may speak to us: culture, learning, experiences, Scripture, and biology.

Rynkiewicz’s warning turns the missiological gaze back on western Christians, warning them of poorly contextualized Christianity. Doing theology within frameworks already shaped by “American culture wars” predetermines the pathways and conclusions that theology may explore. Both Gil and Rynkiewicz encourage expansive listening to biology, tradition, and cultures of the world, in a pursuit of truth. This message is threatening for those working within a “culture wars” framework, in which further pursuit of truth is a distraction from entrenching and advancing existing viewpoints and agendas.

I wish Rynkiewicz had explored that which we refer to as heterosexuality as much as that which we refer to homosexuality. In moralizing categories that haven’t received critical scrutiny, Christians often embed their own identities with morally privileged categories in ways that may seem to provide some measure of moral absolution, but this relief may be illusory as the category itself invites other kinds of trouble. I cannot write here in merely scientific ways, with appeals to reason and empirical data because my insights stem also from experience. My experience isn’t shared with all others who affiliate with the category “heterosexual,” of course, which is part of the problem with the category. So I shift voice in this section, demonstrating the multithreaded epistemology that is always at play in these matters.

When required to signal identity with words, for example in introductions in a group conversation, I say “straight” or “heterosexual,” but I see this as a sociopolitical identifier that acknowledges a kind of privilege at play in the conversation. When time and interest allows, I explain that I would rather choose

“unlabeled,” because while assessing inner feelings with respect to their object of desire is important (my culture has socialized me to understand myself in this way), it is not my leading guide for self-understanding or everyday life; my sexuality is also structured by a religious vow that I made over twenty years ago to be married to one man. Defining myself in terms of categorical erotic attraction seems both immodest and bizarre. Immodest, because in thought, deed, and feeling, my sexual life doesn’t extend to include categories of persons because it is vowed to just one person. Speculating or ruminating about these categorical possibilities as a means of identity exploration is contrary to the religious vow with which I promised to both express and constrain my sexuality in commitment to one man and to the children who may (or may not) issue from our union. Bizarre, because I’m not able to even imagine attraction to men, categorically; my imagination extends only so far, and I cannot meaningfully consider a personal bond to a 10th century medieval knight, a 19th century Kwakiutl chief, or a modern Hadza man. Also strange, to frame desire as existing almost entirely prior to and separate from the object or subject of its longing. Butler and other feminists since the 1960s have pointed out the immature phallocentrism in modern sexual identity constructs that have subsumed a more contextual and relational notion of personhood and desire. Desire-based identity constructs share this dimension of category error, and when they are conflated with morality, the potential for self-aggrandizement and self-deception expands along with the excessive categorical breadth.

The religious marriage vow also shapes my identity in ways contrary to modern identity constructs, also part of the reason I write in the first person. Simplistic notions of finding “identity in Christ” can ask for the impossible, a denial or repression of one’s culture in favor of living only from a seemingly a-cultural religion. Some people cannot remain in marriage, despite the sincerity of the vow they made, due to gender and sexual imperatives, others craft very particular kinds of marriage, and others, like me, are able to accept the identity and behavioral implications of a marital vow even though they sometimes cause suffering and constraint. Christians in all these categories live from the language and patterns of socialization in which they were raised or in which they live, including the ways in which sexuality and gender identity are reckoned. In sum, in my mind, my sense of sexual identity in Christian terms is “married,” and in American terms is

“unlabeled.” I realize this is unsatisfying and easily perceived as disrespectful in contexts focused on social privilege, so in those settings I call myself heterosexual in order to signal my willingness to participate on the only available grounds.

There is a profound spiritual invitation in this trouble: to trust that what God made is really there, and that we can seek and draw near to the Real, trusting that it will not undo us or those we love, and in that place of trust and nearness we may do Adam’s work—naming creation—with care and humility. Cultivating willingness to lean into this work is the most serious challenge raised and left unresolved by all three articles. A rational argument about category error will not gain traction if people (and their loved ones) whose lives are given words and meaning with those categories see their society as a place of danger rather than of safety. Taking biology seriously involves exploring what we know about ourselves before and without words, a tender vulnerability of knowing and being known before and without asserting power with symbols. We tend to protect ourselves instead with both secular and theological words that assert fixed knowledge rather than receiving knowledge that comes from places we cannot control or know fully. Self-protection is rational in its own way, in the face of survival threats perceived and/or actual, though it blocks other venues for rational exploration and expression. The work called for by our authors, then, is not simply intellectual, rational, or scholarly. Both the work and the capacity to approach it is deeply spiritual, as trust in the “I AM” is more necessary even than theological or moral propriety in sheltering unflinching exploration of the individual “I am.”

Ethical Trouble

Priest inspects the social construction of ethical systems, showing that accepted designations of prototypes and outliers do not necessarily reflect empirical reality. This argument resonates with foundational ideas about social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1991[1867]; Kuhn 1970). In a given context, a paradigm structures and holds in place assumptions that make certain questions, views, and areas of interest particularly compelling. Accordingly, some ethical views are more palatable and even obvious, while others are repugnant and even “outrageous.” This may or may not associate with the actual truth of the ethics, whether they point to Truth, Goodness, or Reality, or whether they have empirical

validity; rather, it simply reflects how a given ethical stance or code comports with the reigning paradigm. Foucault would argue that this is the nature of knowledge—there is no truth, only regimes of truth (Foucault 1980). If this premise were accepted, Priest’s argument could be like a string dangled before a cat: we could endlessly explore ways that humans working within power regimes have granted prestige and privilege to some constructs of right and wrong over others by granting social rewards and inflicting punishments. In contrast, taking a Christian critical realist view on ethics, we may posit that humans do not capture truth totally or perfectly, but we can explore empirical reality (including both ethnology and biology), reason, personal experience, religious tradition, Scripture, and revelation in a never-ending quest with saints of all time and all people from all cultures, times, and places, trusting that we can determine not perfectly but sufficiently whether a given moral code is in step or out of step with the moral order of the universe (King 2018).

Priest shows that in our current paradigm, consent-based ethics are more appealing than traditional sexual ethics. Consent-based ethics harmonize with the U.S. Constitution and with the western legal tradition grounded in individualism, individual legal rights, and values of freedom, liberty and happiness, values that find their limits when harm is done to others. It is logical that an ethical view comporting with society’s power structure (government, law, and dominant cultural values) would receive privilege. In contrast, traditional Christian ethics do respect the principle of non-harm, but this is neither their entirety nor their grounding. In foundation, they are grounded in the character of God, which yields ethical codes in various societies described in Scripture (tribal, kingdom, minority group under empire) that are impossible to reduce to or explain solely in terms of modern legal principles. Thus, Christian ethics often overlap with western legal traditions, but in other cases, they appear outrageous.

Priest calls for proper identification of prototypes and outliers, but in our society such identifications are anything but empirical; they are power-laden in many ways. It is hard, then, to respond to Priest’s call for scholars across disciplines to “courageously prioritize a sustained commitment to faith-informed research and writing on sex and marriage” (p. 13). For most Christian scholars, this matter is simply too hot to handle, as Priest describes very well. Whether with data or pastoral encouragement, I’m doubtful that

scholars will take up this charge, with any scale, with the risk configuration of the current environment.

Surveying definitions of marriage in anthropology textbooks over many decades, Priest notes that anthropologists have always seen marriage as prototypically between a man and a woman, and that anthropologists have also always noticed marriage outliers. He makes the case that traditional Christian sexual ethics are not actually the outlier they are often portrayed to be. With respect to kinship, Priest concludes that “male-female marriage is a social and cultural formation grafted onto a biological reproductive template” (p. 22). He describes several important ethnographic cases such as “walking marriages” among the Moso in their traditional lives, and the custom of female husbands found in numerous African societies, arguing that while unfrequent marriage forms serve adaptive purposes in certain contexts, they are exceptions that do not alter the prototypical definition of marriage as between a man and a woman. While this makes good sense, I do wonder about scrutinizing two other aspects of a traditional sexual ethic in ethnological perspective. First, sex only within marriage seems less than predominant in both ideal and practice, with a sexual double standard often giving more opportunities, both legitimated and not, for sex before and outside of marriage for men more than for women. Second, the number of partners in a marriage seems highly variable across cultures, with many cultures allowing for polygamy (whether or not it is commonly practiced).

Looking at the same evidence, another point of focus might be on marriage as a social construct that is powerfully adaptive, serving as a vital part of kinship networks everywhere. Same-sex marriage is a relatively new adaptation in modern societies, but it joins all other modern marriages in many shared features of cultural adaptation. In America, the law of coverture adapted the western custom of *pater familias*, allowing the husband to serve the family as its only legal person, thus preventing women from voting and from legal guardianship of their children. With removal of coverture laws, women gained rights of guardianship, enfranchisement, and land ownership. Removal of coverture laws seriously altered the nature of the bond within a nuclear family, making marriage a bond between two legal equals, not a protective structure headed by the man. In this example, new cultural norms flowing from the Democratic Revolution and the Enlightenment brought values such as liberty, individual rights, freedom, and perhaps happiness to

bear on kinship structures in profoundly influential ways. Similarly, as medical technology developed, contraception became available as a support for succeeding in modern educational and financial structures, delaying or avoiding childbirth in order to live well within a given educational, financial, and technological context.

All American marriages adapt to this context, and it is little wonder that a culture emphasizing individualism, choice, and happiness, and one in which people exercise significant discretion in reproduction, that same-sex marriage would become legally valid. Same-sex marriage in the modern world may be an outlier in the long view of history, but like ghost marriage, polyandry, “walking marriage,” *fa’afafine* in Samoa, *hijras* in India, *mahu* and others in Tahitian and other Polynesian society, and many other unfrequent sex, gender, and marriage constructs, it is an adaptation to certain contexts that demonstrates humans’ brilliant capacity to make symbols and lifeways that support survival. The advantages and disadvantages of adaptations can be complex, and of course, some practices are eventually deemed maladaptive, or become vestigial when contexts change. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex concern, I wonder whether it may be more fruitful for Christians to amplify the strengths of extant marriage forms, and other modern kinship structures such as blended families, childfree-by-choice families, and families comprised of fictive kin, rather than dwelling on the reasons why they are outliers, reasons that may not be very adjustable given the contexts that gave rise to them.

Norms and exceptions, or prototypes and outliers, are power-laden and it is difficult to engage these issues in a society marked by distrust (perhaps anomie is a better descriptor). If a person had a rare disease, for example, they may appreciate being labeled “outlier” because they trust their doctor and the social institution of medicine. In this case, being an outlier attracts helpful attention and healing resources. In the case of sexuality, gender nonconformity, or same-sex marriage, being an outlier may attract stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence. Thus, pursuing equality through the abolition of norms, or strategic (non-empirical) identification of outliers, is a means of gaining power that can provide social safety (and possibly even social power, and at an extreme, political domination) that does not require social trust. The Bible portrays idealized politics in which strangers, foreigners, and other vulnerable persons and

groups can find safe haven. They may remain marginal, but included, or they may integrate and join the majority. Modern nation-states are not such safe havens, and not simply because they aren't securing human well-being through socialized welfare structures. By definition, modern nation-states require military power for self-protection; structurally, their trust is in warfare. Little wonder, then, that citizens use techniques and metaphors of war to interact with one another and with social institutions. Gil points this out clearly, in that seemingly simple introductions of basic vocabulary in conversations about sex/gender actually carry immense implications for understanding humans, connections between biology and culture, human relations, and sociopolitical norms and ideals. Conceptual struggles over gender, sexuality, sex, and marriage may be seen as an ideological dimension of the struggle for justice in the absence of social trust.

Ecclesial Trouble

Critiques of both Christians and the church are not hard to come by. Notably, the same critiques issue from within and without the church: too conservative, too liberal, wrong-headed, fear-based, irrational, politically irresponsible, homophobic, transphobic, misogynist, sexist, and/or willfully dumb. Critique often concludes with admonishment to commit more strongly to an existing set of social constructs, the symbolic universe created and upheld by conservatives, liberals, a certain denomination, or a certain political party. An anthropological perspective exposes the pattern of this tedium and diminishes the allure of warfare—joining an alliance and weaponizing one's symbols for the sake of gaining dominance—and lays plain the self-deception in seeing one's warfare as reform, or as pure-hearted.

Gil critiques Christians and churches, both those who wish to obliterate the sexual binary in an attempt to create social justice and those who wish to retain a rigid sexual dualism in an attempt to reign in a slippery slope. He recommends that Christians find new resources for understanding gender identity, and for developing practices of community and inclusion, in Jewish community life as described in rabbinical literature.

With many years of childhood and adult experience as missionaries between them, Rynkiewicz and Priest bring a vital insider-outsider vantage point in showing that American Christianity is as culturally situated as any other society's Christianity. All

Christians, not just those converted by western missionaries, must always discern appropriate contextualization, watching out for syncretism and concept error. Humans seek and know God and the good news of the Gospel from within a social context, thus eternal truths signified with language can only be approximations, not perfect "captures", of that which is prior to and beyond the human experience.

Adam's work of naming is never complete; as we name human anatomy, identities, and roles, cultivating an awareness of our cultural situatedness and its probable strengths and weaknesses is vital. Rynkiewicz points out that western Christians are likely to globalize their concepts, projecting local symbols onto the world. Priest warns of the irrationality of power dynamics that privilege some symbol sets by associating them with justice and goodness, and denigrate others as backward, revanchist, or mean-spirited. Gil warns of the tendency to strategically elevate either culture or biology in a quest for justice and human well-being, a quest misplaced from a desire to know the real, with trust that the real and the true will not undo us.

Discussion

I am tempted to ask the authors for advice or a "to do" list, because this dialogue leaves me restless for action. A list of quick tips might ease my restlessness, but only with a false promise of decisively dispatching with these important matters. Living at the juncture of the world's most poignant and pressing conundrums is our very place. Taking up these issues as opportunities for cultivating virtue and as contexts in which we can meet God and witness to His presence in the world is worthy work that won't be completed in our lifetimes.

In *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Ellul develops an argument that harmonizes with this set of articles, showing that Christian identity does not necessarily give a boost to social interpretation or right action. It's difficult to frame problems rightly, to name things appropriately, and we tend to default to existing frameworks, language, and ideologies. He joins our authors in seeing humans as symbol-makers but does not advise that we set about the work of repair, making the ideal symbolic universe in which humans may dwell. Instead, he says that humans are themselves a sign. It is good for people to do good works (such as scholarship) and pour out their energy in effort for others, but this "will have no meaning unless [they are] fulfilling the only mission with which [they have] been

charged by Jesus Christ, which is first of all *to be a sign*" (1989, 5). As living symbols, Christians symbolize that God is real and that He dwells among us. By living in the midst of the world's troubles, unable to resolve or sometimes to even interpret them rightly, Christians may wait "to see how God's will of preservation can act in this given situation" (1989, 19). Grounded in doctrines of creation and sin, Ellul sees Christians living fully in the world, fully experiencing the agonies and limitations of the human condition and the social contexts in which we find ourselves. It's an agony to realize that it is impossible for us to reform or perfect the world, yet we also cannot accept it as it is (1989, 9).

His solution is radical, going to the root: to be in touch with who we truly are and with who God is, and thereby live "the life that is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:19, NIV). Better than a morality of this, that, and the other, Ellul points to an ethic in which Christians live open-handed in the world and before God, seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance as to right and wrong in a given society, historical context, or situation (Ellul 1987). This requires cultivating a spirituality that empowers Christians to tolerate ambiguity, disappointment, self-critique and even colossal error not only within society but on the part of the church; to seek and bend to the Real, even when reality challenges our sense of identity, our well-intentioned efforts, or when it exposes the fact that our efforts were multi-intentioned; to witness not only with reason, data, and words, but with the demonstration of our mere (sheer!) being and living, not that we've got it right, for everyone else's sake, but that God is real, active, and good. Christians then take their place in the web of significance that is culture as signs pointing to the presence of God among humans, not as superior web-makers.

I conclude with a question for each author. For Gil, a question about power and possibility. In both LGBTQ+ safe spaces and in Christian churches, acceptance of definitions is sometimes an entry issue; that is, a person won't remain in conversations or relationships unless they accept certain definitions. In LGBTQ+ safe spaces, gender is a social construct grounded in inner feelings, not in biology. Here, sex and gender may be one and the same (both totally malleable) or totally separate (gender as entirely independent from biology). In conservative Christian churches, gender must be man or woman, grounded in God's creation of male and female. Here too, sex and gender may be one and the same (some even refuse the invention of the category of gender), or

separate but linked in one way that does not have exceptions (male is man, female is woman). Gil persuasively shows biology to assert influence in human development of a gendered sense of self. Progressives may neglect this influence, and conservatives may harden it, but in both cases, this is not simply a misunderstanding that can be corrected with education; rather, it is an act of power asserted against socializing agents, as a reclamation or preservation of social space and personal identity in a world experienced as oppositional. How can people trust biology, and by extension, trust the Real, in a world that isn't always on their side? How can we love what is real, seek what is true, with open hearts and hands, willing to receive what we learn and to change in light of it? There is a childlike quality to Gil's very sophisticated essay, a wonder and love of "what is" that many on both liberal and conservative ends of sex/gender struggles would find naïve, warning that to seek the real and the true, in the world such as it is, will not lead to our good. Using power to define reality in a manner best suited to our group, and to extend our understandings to other social groups and institutions as possible, seems a safer strategy. I wonder how people can move toward a love for the real and a quest for the truth, in a social context that treasures neither?

For Priest, a question about which questions matter most. I find it inconsistent to notice same-sex marriage as contrary to biology and ethnological norms without scrutinizing the same about the use of contraception to avoid or delay reproductive possibility, the nuclear family structure (which leave children dependent on only two adults, and each adult primarily on only one other), and other basic features of kinship in the modern world that most families rely on, including one-woman-one-man Christian couples who contain sex only to marriage. Some of these features are ethnological outliers that contain or redirect biological urgencies in order to promote survival and happiness in the only available social context. Marriage in western societies has already adapted to context: free choice marriage, dating, relative equality of social status and age between partners, dual earners, childcare via employment of strangers, access to contraception and divorce, involvement of scientific technology in reproduction and infant/maternal health, and an expectation of individual legal and constitutional rights. The result is Christian marriages that, while expressing fidelity to Christianity in certain ways, inevitably bear the imprint of their only available social/historical/cultural context, both to the advantage and detriment

of the partners and the children. Churches already focus more on supporting marriages and shoring up weaknesses borne of context (ease of divorce, difficulty of childcare, work-home strains) rather than critiquing cultural conformity or encouraging radical non-conformity. Same-sex marriage seems inevitable in a democratic context in which individuals have legal rights, in cultures that prize choice, freedom, and happiness (including the exercise of these values in identity formation), and in which biological reproduction and child-raising is not a universal expectation. In this light, might it be more prudent to accept legal marriage forms, including same-sex marriage, and bring resources and support in strengthening adaptive features and shoring up the maladaptive? As I consider how to engage the complexity of Priest's argument, this is the question that rises to the surface for me, and I wonder whether he sees this question, or another, as particularly urgent.

For Rynkiewich, a question about what missiological anthropologists have learned about polygamy that would apply to current issues of LGBTQ+, including same-sex marriage and gender identity. Rynkiewich writes an intriguing sentence: "The construction of male and female identities, and how that affects marriage and family life, is a long-standing missiological interest—perhaps last discussed under the guise of 'polygamy'" (p. 69). Why is polygamy in quotation marks, and why is it referred to as a guise? Unpacking that question may open up my broader area of curiosity, which is to explore what Christians in the United States could learn from societies in which polygamy, and third genders as well, are long-established and accepted elements of the society. The biblical text also offers many examples of God's people engaging differences in gender, sex, sexuality, and kinship in neighboring societies and within their own midst. It seems to me that American Christians could benefit from learning about how followers of Christ have understood and lived with these complexities in other contexts.

Conclusion

The sex/gender troubles of the present moment are novel and complex, but they are at the same time very old and familiar. The Genesis account portrays human nature, human limitation and sin, gender relations, and marriage, as endemic to the human condition. Adam and Eve sought right connection with God and with others in marriage, family, and society. They got some

of it right, some of it wrong, and ultimately found themselves dependent on God's grace for their very lives and those of their descendants. We are no different, taking up responsibility for naming creation, procreating, marrying and relating with kin, and constructing and reforming societies in which to do all of this and more. We get some of it right, some of it wrong, and ultimately find ourselves dependent on something greater than ourselves in the face of both our human brilliance and incapacity.

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