

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Created Male and Female

Two distinct but related pieces of news have recently crossed your editor's desk. The first of these is the information that the 2021 UK census will not require people to state whether they are male or female. Apparently the reason for this is that the census takers want to avoid distressing members of the transgender community who feel unwilling or unable to answer the question, though some feminist campaigners have accused the government of plotting to scale back women's rights by making it unclear just how many women there really are. The other notice is from Murray Edwards College in Cambridge, one of three that has remained exclusively female. The College is considering what to do about transgendered women, but although most of the undergraduates there seem to be in favour of admitting them, they have pointed to an unforeseen difficulty. This is that it is not legally possible for anyone under the age of eighteen to declare him or herself transgendered, but many people apply for admission to the College when they are still only seventeen. The fear is that this will mean that a considerable number of potential transgendered applicants will be turned away because they will be underage.

Nobody knows how many transgendered seventeen-year-olds there are, of course, and it is hard to imagine that more than a tiny fraction of them would be qualified for, or interested in applying to, an all-female Cambridge college, though a question about that in the census might help us to find out. That is not being proposed however, and it is probable that if it were, spokespersons for the transgendered community would object, perhaps arguing that it amounts to some form of discrimination against them. The real reason, one suspects, is that an objective survey of the facts would disclose either that there is nobody in the said category or that the number is embarrassingly small. What we are seeing here is yet another example of how a tiny minority of people can hold an entire country to ransom, regardless of the inconvenience that it might cause to everyone else. Perhaps the academic world will fend them off, rather in the way that the Bank of England rejected the claims of some vegans that they could not

handle the new five-pound notes because of the infinitely small amount of tallow that they contain, but right now the transgendered are “cool” in a way that vegans are not. Standing up to them might require more stamina than the authorities possess, and if so, we shall find ourselves bending over backwards in order to accommodate a handful of activists before they move on to target their next cause.

The Church of England is often accused of being behind the times, especially on matters of sexual ethics, but this is one instance in which the charge is anything but fair. Back in April 2015, the Blackburn diocesan synod passed a motion asking the House of Bishops to consider whether they might prepare some liturgical materials that could be used to mark an individual’s gender transition. The synod was not asking the bishops to discuss the rights and wrongs of transgenderism itself, but rather to assume that and move on to the next stage, which is to give it official recognition and support. Brought to the July 2017 meeting of the General Synod, the Blackburn motion was approved in all three houses by overwhelming majorities, with more than seventy percent of synod members voting in favour of it, and only about one in five opposed. It was an extraordinary success, particularly because there has never been any serious discussion of the question at any level of the Church. To his credit, Dr Christopher Newlands did propose just that, saying that it would be unwise for the Church to proceed without a proper investigation of the subject, but few were prepared to listen to his voice of common sense. What will happen next is anyone’s guess, but for the moment at least, it seems that transgenderism is in the Church to stay.

Compared with the long and often bitter arguments about same-sex marriage, the ease with which transgenderism has managed to penetrate the Church is truly astonishing. Homosexual practice, whatever we think of it, is legally confined to consenting adults and a same-sex couple can always divorce if one or both of them becomes a Christian. Damage can be done, but it can also be undone with relative ease. This is not the case with transgendered people. Undoing the surgery that transitioning from one sex to another may require is neither easy nor entirely possible, because in most cases the wholeness of the original body cannot be restored. Worse still, transgender advocates insist that it is best to start with children, who should be encouraged to discover their true selves long before reaching puberty. Most seriously of all, while homosexual inclinations cannot be measured objectively, the biological sex of a human body can. With very few exceptions, known as “intersex,” almost everyone is clearly male or female in the strictly physical sense—if people

think otherwise, that is usually because of their imagination, not a fact observable by medical science.

The trouble comes when surgery is proposed as a remedy for something that is not physical to begin with. “Gender dysphoria,” as the sense of being the wrong sex is called, may have many causes, but biology is almost certainly not one of them, and solutions that concentrate on altering the physical body are addressing the wrong question. There is a substantial and growing body of evidence that this is not working as intended, and that the problems which led to such operations have if anything been made worse. Some of those who have undergone treatment have regretted it and some have sought to reverse the process, with mixed results. There is nothing approaching a consensus on this in the medical community and it is clear that a great deal of further research is needed, though there are worrying signs that this necessary investigation may be thwarted for ideological reasons. The evidence for this has been gathered and helpfully analysed by Martin Davie in *Transgender Liturgies* (Latimer Trust, 2017), and those with a special interest in the subject would do well to get a copy and consider it for themselves.

For Christians, transgenderism presents unique challenges. On the one hand, there can be little doubt that it goes against everything the Bible teaches. When God made the human race, he created it male and female. The “intersex” problem arises when this distinction gets blurred for unknown reasons, but it is very rare and must be reckoned alongside other defects that affect particular individuals. Theologians differ as to the cause of these anomalies in the created order—were they put there by God, or are they the result of sin? It is hard to come to a definite conclusion about this, probably because the answer seems to be “a bit of both.” Human sinfulness has certainly not helped the created order to develop as it was originally intended to do, but at the same time, we cannot simply equate disabilities or other problems with actual sins committed either by those afflicted or by their parents. Jesus had to remind the Jews of his day that the man who was born blind did not suffer because of anyone’s sin but in order that God might be glorified (John 9), and there is a long tradition of remarkable individuals who have overcome their handicaps and done some quite extraordinary things.

Gender dysphoria however, whatever causes it, is not a physical disability. It is a psychological condition and must be treated as such. As Dr Davie points out, there are white people who have claimed to be black because they felt like it, and there is one case of a Norwegian girl who is convinced that she is a cat. People like that are clearly suffering from

delusions, and the authorities have refused to take their claims seriously because they are obviously untrue. Should gender dysphoria be any different? This is not to say that we should ridicule such people or refuse to offer them help, but only to point out that what they claim is often demonstrably false. It is not the business of the Church to decide how to handle that, but on no account should it become complicit in other people's self-deception. Love cannot be divorced from truth, and although there may be many ways of communicating it, reality cannot be shirked. Offering people a liturgical way of affirming a lie is hardly the right way forward, even if some people think that it is the most compassionate thing to do.

The transgender issue raises many questions for the Church that will need to be answered. First of all, how can we allow subjective emotions to displace objective facts in the decision-taking process of the Church's official bodies? Increasingly we are discovering that synod members and others are reacting according to ill-defined feelings and good intentions that have no foundation, and that those who know something about the subjects in question would be highly critical of. As Dr Davie shows in his study, the attempts of some transgender activists to justify their arguments by appealing to Jesus and the Bible are fatuous in the extreme. For example, some of them claim that Jesus must have been transgendered himself, since he was born of a virgin and therefore could not have been a biological male. Others insist that when Paul said that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28) he was justifying transgenderism! This is total nonsense of course, but the Church must be alert to its existence and do what it can to oppose such gross misunderstanding.

Then there is the problem of transgendered clergy, of whom there are a growing number. On what ground can the ordination of people who are confused about their own identity be justified? How can a person who is baptised as John suddenly re-identify as Joan (or vice-versa?) How can we claim to have a personal relationship with God in Christ if we then decide to become different persons, something that is in any case impossible? A liturgy that celebrates such a process is really blasphemous, and incidentally exposed to being cancelled if the individual in question subsequently seeks to return to his or her original sex. Ordained clergy who have transitioned in this way should automatically lose their posts, and nobody who has completed or who is considering such a step should be considered for holy orders. Those who minister to others should know who they are and be in control of their own lives, under the power of God at work in them. Those suffering from gender dysphoria do not need a

pseudo-physical transition—they need a genuine spiritual conversion, and it is our duty to say so.

Of course, it is easier to state a principle like this than it is to apply it in practice. As Christians we are called to show compassion to everyone, recognising that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But recognising this is not the same thing as accepting behaviour that is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The Bible states quite clearly that God made us male and female and that we are expected to live in the sex that we have been given, whether we like it or not. The same is true of our skin colour and of many other things about our physical bodies that we are unable to change. Those who suffer from gender dysphoria are no worse than people who have to deal with alcoholism, chronic depression and any number of other conditions that can be very challenging and stressful. The difference is that in these other cases, we temper our acceptance of the person with an awareness that something is wrong and needs to be dealt with, preferably by seeking professional help from those who are qualified to give it.

This is precisely the problem that the Church of England appears to be unwilling to face. Instead of accepting that the loving approach towards gender dysphoric people is to diagnose their condition and to deal with it in a way that respects the objective biological facts, too many people seem to have been persuaded that they should acquiesce in a narrative of victimhood that is completely inappropriate. The danger with this is that the current wave of transitioning from one sex to another will turn out to be a bubble, and that when it explodes, the fallout will not be pretty. It is all too likely that children who were encouraged to transition at a tender age will grow up and realise that they have been sterilised, and will turn on those who did that to them. A Church that has blessed such behaviour may well find itself eating humble pie, discrediting itself in matters of sexual ethics even more than is the case at present.

The revelation of Scripture and the theology that is derived from it are there to guide and protect us from falling into such traps. We live in an age when people prefer feeling to thinking, and when theology is regarded with the utmost suspicion, not least by Church leaders who often find it irrelevant and divisive. The consequences of this attitude are especially grave when the questions are as stark as they are with transgenderism. Back in 2003 the House of Bishops issued a statement on the subject—to date, the only one of its kind—in which it recognised that there are two positions that can be “properly held” in the Church. The first is the view, based on Scripture and Christian doctrine, that what they call

“gender reassignment” is a fiction. The second is the belief that some people are “trapped in the wrong body” and that medical intervention to address that might legitimately be called a change of sex or gender. The bishop’s statement is worthy of Sir Humphrey in *Yes, Prime Minister*, who informed the incredulous PM that the Church is made up of two different kinds of people—those who believe in God and those who do not.

Unfortunately, those who believe in God must accept the fact that for the moment, and on this issue at least, it is the other side that is calling the shots. This is not to say that they are the majority, and it may well be that when the evidence is properly considered by those who know what they are talking about, the ground will shift. We must hope and pray for that, partly for the sake of those who are suffering or are likely to suffer from gender dysphoria and its effects, but also for the sake of the truth. Without the truth there can be no love, something we must remember as we seek to deal with this particular question in a way that respects the facts and is fair to all involved. We shall be unpopular right now, but future generations may thank us for standing up for what is obvious at a time when doing so was costly and unwelcome.

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