

TRANS-FORMATIONS:

A GROUNDED THEOLOGY, ROOTED IN THE IDENTITIES,  
EXPERIENCES, AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRANS AND NON-  
BINARY CHRISTIANS.

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis arises out of standpoint epistemology, arguing that the insights of trans and non-binary Christians stretch beyond trans-apologetics to formative anthropological and theological notions without which the body of anthropological and theological knowledge is incomplete. Whilst there is an abundance of material about trans ethics, there is little trans-written theology or theological anthropology that is formative, rather than trans critical or trans-apologetic. Situated within a queer paradigm, rooted in lived experience, and drawing on grounded and feminist standpoint theory, this thesis presents the identities, insights, and ideas of ten diverse trans and non-binary Christians. Key findings concern narratology, anthropology, and theology.

The narrative themes of 'suffering', 'resilience', and 'joy' are foundational to the emerging anthropology and theology. In anthropological understandings, I argue participants describe a continuity of identity, self, mind, and body. I argue that mirroring – of self, other, and God – is key to that continuity. Participants' theological understandings were methodological as well as descriptive. Participants argued that God cannot be known with any certainty, and that God is either gender-full or gender-less. God was described as participative, not judgemental. I argue that this thesis is an essential step in the inclusion of trans and non-binary voices in Christian theology, which fills the knowledge gap created by the current marginalisation and underrepresentation of trans and non-binary theologians.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of the trans, non-binary, gender-queer, gender-creative and a-gender people of faith who are striving to articulate their most precious and authentic understandings to those who would silence them. You are my kin. I love you, and I would not and could not speak and write as I do without you.

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## **Section A. Introductory Material**

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Grounding Theology

My name is Alex, my personal pronouns are they/them, I am a transmasculine<sup>1</sup> non-binary<sup>2</sup> person, and when I was a child I thought that I was an alien. I felt so alienated that I thought that one day I would be taken to the place where I belonged. This sense of being alien is how I often introduce myself in conferences, workshops, and church services. I start with my name and pronouns to explain how a person should refer to me in the dialogues that will follow. I then go on to introduce my gender identity<sup>3</sup>, because my identity, and correlated experiences, hermeneutics, and insights, are core sources that I bring into conversation with scripture and with the identities, experiences, hermeneutics, and insights of those I meet so that all parties might learn and discern together. Finally, I explain that when I was a child I thought that I was an alien so that those I meet can begin to understand the alienation that I have experienced as someone whose identity, experiences, hermeneutics, and insights are often considered subaltern.<sup>4</sup>

I am also a Christian and an ordained minister in the United Reformed Church. Before beginning to explore my vocation to ministry, the lack of transmasculine and/or non-binary Christian role models contributed to the alienation that I experienced. This has

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<sup>1</sup> Transmasculine refers to the gender identity of people who have transitioned/are transitioning towards masculine or male.

<sup>2</sup> Non-binary refers to the gender identity of people who identify as something other than the binary gender identities of male and female.

<sup>3</sup> Gender identity refers to a person's sense of self in relation to being female, non-binary, or male. For example, my gender identity is transmasculine non-binary.

<sup>4</sup> Subaltern refers to those who are marginalised and/or oppressed in relation to characteristics including, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, financial status, and beliefs. The term is used in postcolonial studies and critical theory to refer to populations who are excluded from a social power hierarchy. It was coined by Antonio Gramsci in relation to those excluded from hegemonic institutions and systems. See Marcus E. Green, 'Rethinking the Subaltern and the Question of Censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks', *Postcolonial Studies*, 14, 4 (2011) pp. 385-402.

improved slightly over time; there are now other transmasculine and/or non-binary Christian ministers and writers. However, there are very few trans<sup>5</sup> and/or non-binary authored theological and theological-anthropological texts. This meant that I continued to feel alienated in theological education, confronted with reading list after reading list compiled entirely by cis<sup>6</sup> theologians. I only encountered trans and/or non-binary theologians in the reading list for one lecture; an ethics lecture where trans identities were a matter of ethical debate and the contributions of the trans and/or non-binary writers referenced, as well as my own verbal contributions, were largely dismissed. I believe that being unable to read texts by anyone in your discipline who shares your identity characteristics is highly problematic. I found myself further alienated and lacking in personal and academic confidence. I wonder whether much 'imposter syndrome', wherein one feels lacking in the academic skill that one perceives others to have, is related to the inability to recognise oneself in the experiences and insights of others.

As well as my own experiences, I also became aware of a knowledge gap, or a dissonance in the knowledge assumed in trans-related literature, created by the lack of trans and/or non-binary voices in Christian theology. I realised that my understandings of what it means to be human, and of what and/or who God is, are inextricably intertwined with my experiences of being a transmasculine non-binary person. I found that trans-apologetic<sup>7</sup> literature assumed a distanced, if non-judgemental, God and a rupture between past and present self in transition. Further, I did not find any compelling theological challenge to the accusations of individualistic

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<sup>5</sup> Trans refers to people whose gender identity and/or presentation differs from their sex assigned at birth. Trans is an umbrella term which I also use to include non-binary.

<sup>6</sup> Cis refers to people whose gender identity and/or presentation does not differ from their sex assigned at birth.

<sup>7</sup> Trans-apologetic refers to theological literature which explains and/or defends trans identities.

self-interest often levelled at me as a trans, non-binary Christian. I began to wonder how other trans and non-binary Christians understood their own humanity, and the God who they related to. I was desperate to know whether the dissonances I was noticing were mine alone, or whether any other trans and/or non-binary people felt, and thought, similarly. There was no cohort of trans theologians whose work I could draw upon to consider this question. I also wondered if theological understandings of humanity and God might be partial, or even mistaken, due to their cisnormative bias.

There was a clear need for an increase in trans and/or non-binary authored theological literature, particularly literature which is not trans-apologetic in nature, but rather grounded and/or constructive.<sup>8</sup> It was also clear to me, though, that the feeling of alienation I experienced affected my ability to contribute to theological discourse in any way other than by offering trans-apologetic material. I was only ever invited to speak about being trans and non-binary, and about how I might defend myself against critics of trans identities. I was never invited to speak more generally about anthropology and theology. This dilemma led me to feel called to complete research with other trans and/or non-binary Christians, to enable a group of us to contribute something authentic, confident, and unapologetic to grounded theology.<sup>9</sup> This thesis is one which begins to address the trans-cis gender imbalance in both academic theology and church ministry. By addressing this imbalance, trans and non-binary voices will be increasingly able to contribute to understandings of God, understandings of humanity, and ecclesial understandings and praxis.

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<sup>8</sup> Grounded theology refers to theological material grounded in the lived experiences of particular individuals. Constructive theology, a departure from and/or re-evaluation of systematic theology, refers to theological material which allows for incoherence and does not allow any pre-determined system to constrain it.

<sup>9</sup> For an introduction to grounded theology, see 3.1.1.

The foregoing introduction is likely to appear unconventional in the context of academic theology. I explore the unconventionality of this thesis in more depth later when exploring theological incoherence.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note now, however, that this unconventional introduction reflects the grounded nature of this thesis, to which autoethnography – analysis of my own experiences and understandings – is essential.<sup>11</sup> This thesis is grounded in my identity, experiences, and insights as much as in the identity, experiences, and insights of research participants. Our identities, experiences and insights are not manipulated to fit into a given theological framework but, rather, are stated as plainly as possible.

To ignore my own identity, experiences, insights, and my interest in this research would be to assume false objectivity. I cannot claim academic distance from this research. Rather, I have operated as a researcher-participant, a dual role which enables me to analyse and relate participants' identities, experiences and insights faithfully whilst also recognising my own personal interest and perspectives in the topics discussed. In doing so, I have not overdetermined the findings but, rather, have been able to note where I – my own identity, experiences, praxis, and theoretical understandings – have been changed by them.<sup>12</sup> This reflects my belief that there is no generalisable, singular objective lens and that instead, each theologian's writing is affected by their own identity, experiences, and insights. When complete objectivity is claimed by an individual, the researcher pretends absolute personal disinterest in the subject of their research. This cannot be so. As such, I do not see my method as intentionally unusual or subversive but radically honest. I refuse to lie or omit or alter

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<sup>10</sup> See section 4.7 for material on indecent theology and theological incoherence.

<sup>11</sup> Autoethnography refers to the practice of research based on the researcher's own experiences and insights. See section 3.2.3.

<sup>12</sup> See section 3.2. for a fuller consideration of autoethnography and its challenges.

in order to attend to academic convention. This would be to contribute to the marginalisation of unconventional voices, including the voices of the participants of my research.

### **1.1.1. Introducing Feminist Standpoint Theory**

There is no 'view from nowhere'. This is a central claim of standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology, arising out of feminist theory and praxis, is positioned in opposition to the idea that the production of scientific knowledge can be objective and apolitical. Instead, standpoint epistemology suggests that all knowledge from a single or homogenous source is affected by the standpoint of the producer of that knowledge and is, therefore, both subjective and political. Further, standpoint epistemologists suggest that marginalised and/or previously accessed standpoints have particular knowledge that can provide novel and, therefore, essential insights to any discipline. As such, it expands the relevance of voices from a particular standpoint. Whereas the contributions of marginalised people are often limited to discussions assumed to be about them, standpoint epistemology suggests they may have contributions beyond those discussions. In the topic of theology, for example, a standpoint epistemology exposes the limiting of trans and non-binary voices to the topics of sex, gender, and sexuality, and highlights the ways in which voices from a trans and or non-binary standpoint can contribute to theology and theological anthropology more widely. This research project arose out of my understandings that:

1. All theological sources are subjective or provisional, meaning that without the subjective contributions of trans and non-binary people to Christian theology  
a) there is a clear knowledge gap and b) trans and non-binary people are treated as objects of theological discourse, rather than participants of it.

2. The enfleshed nature of theology means that abstract theologising that is not rooted in the lived experiences of human beings risks the God-trick.<sup>13</sup> Further, any claim that such abstract theologising by cis people is not rooted in their lived experiences is inherently errant.
3. As enfleshed, subjective beings, our viewpoints are always partial. As such, no trans and/or non-binary person can be held as representative of all trans and/or non-binary people.
4. Theologies arising out of the enfleshed, subjective, partial viewpoints of particular trans and/or non-binary individuals have the capacity to be revelatory; to expose the cisnormativity inherent in theological and ecclesial assumptions and to call out unjust theory and praxis.
5. There is a need for a movement in both the discipline of theology and Christian denominations away from some people being restricted to binary debate about ethics towards all people being free to engage in fully participative dialogue about theology and anthropology.
6. These views are inherent in standpoint epistemology. Here, I explore each of them in turn, in preparation for returning to them throughout this thesis.

#### 1.1.1.1. Standpoint Theory Resists Neutrality

Standpoint theorists argue that those who claim generalisable objectivity in their research and writing hide normativity behind a mask of false neutrality. In theology, for example, it is often assumed that the normative usage of the pronoun 'He' for God

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<sup>13</sup> The 'God-trick' is the idea that a single source can observe the objective truth as if from above, as if the person claiming to tell the truth was God, and therefore removed from any particular location or perspective. It challenges the ideas of universal facts and objectivity. This term was coined by the feminist standpoint theorist Donna Haraway. See Donna Haraway. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14, 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066> accessed 12 March 2023.



assumes that those using it do so from a neutral, objective standpoint, rather than noting the potential impact of patriarchy. The risk of a claim to generalisable objectivity is that some voices are privileged, and others are marginalised. In other words, some people generally function as 'objects' of research, rather than 'subjects' of research, meaning that their unique viewpoints are uncontributed. Feminist standpoint theory was a response to the understanding that the supposedly objective speaker of normative and assumed facts was usually male. This thesis responds to the understanding that the supposedly objective speaker of normative and assumed theological facts is usually cis. Therefore, if trans and/or non-binary individuals are unheard or marginalised in theology, there is a risk that we are seen as 'objects' to be studied rather than subjects or participants in the processes of researching and writing theology.

Consistent with standpoint theory is the belief that knowledge is always rooted in social context and that, as such, the social context of any given researcher and/or writer affects the process of research and the resulting theory. The social context of the U.K. presents increasing challenges for trans and non-binary people. As such, the subaltern location of trans and non-binary people in this context affects our contributions to research and theory. This research is affected by my identity and location and the identities and locations of my interview participants. By acknowledging this, we can contribute subjective understandings from our social context which differ from the equally subjective understandings contributed by cis people.

The way in which subjectively false neutrality is recognised by standpoint theorists is often criticised as being a form of 'epistemological relativism'. In other words, recognising subjectivity risks destabilising theory by noting that it is never absolute

and always contextually limited. This critique, however, is unravelled by Sandra Harding who argues that, given that all knowledge is contextually situated, it is illogical to use this reality to critique knowledge from any one theoretical perspective, standpoint, or identity group.<sup>14</sup> I believe that all theology prior to the eschaton is relative and provisional and that recognising that relativity and provisionality in this discipline is particularly essential given the power issues at play. If an ecclesial leader with substantial power and influence can claim that their theological understandings are the objective truth, the potential for abuse is disturbing.

Donna Haraway writes that

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of "objective" knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

As a trans, non-binary Christian, I have often felt like a 'resource', used as an object of pity, education, prayer, or abuse. Even when I am granted some agency, it is often only extended to training others about my identity, answering debate, or offering pastoral care to other trans people. By researching and writing this thesis, I resist this objectification, claim my own agency and provide space for research participants to do likewise.

#### **1.1.1.2. Standpoint Theory Honours Incarnation**

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<sup>14</sup> Sandra Harding, (2004), 'Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate' in Sandra Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-16.

<sup>15</sup> Donna Haraway, (2004), 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' in Sandra Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 81-102, p. 95.

In claiming agency, we are literally fleshing out trans-related theology. We are present in the flesh, not discussed or theorised about in absentia. Harding points out that some feminist standpoint theorists describe the importance of theory rooted in a 'women's standpoint',<sup>16</sup> whereas others describe a 'feminist standpoint'. Trans-related theologies often discuss trans and non-binary people as an 'ism' – as a homogenised class of people to be studied rather than as individual people who are trans and/or non-binary and have agency and perspectives which flow out of our own lived experiences. It is important to highlight, then, that this thesis is grounded in 'trans and non-binary people's standpoints' rather than in theories about the phenomenon of being trans and/or non-binary.

Harding observes that:

(1) participants in standpoint theory research must be seen as human beings with bodies and social contexts; [...] (2) knowledge should be formed in conversation with those embodied and situated human beings, rather than being formed in supposedly objective observation of them; [...] (3) knowledge is formed in community and/or relatedness, not individually; [...] (4) diverse and individual participants must not be homogenised.<sup>17</sup>

The defensive corner that trans and non-binary Christians have been backed into by cisnormativity means that we are (1) often neither seen nor heard, (2) spoken about instead of with, (3) unable to find and theorise together with trans and/or non-binary Christian peers and (4) often subjected to accidental homogenisation by allies who lift

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<sup>16</sup> Harding, 'Introduction' in Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 1-16, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity"' in Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 127-140, pp. 132-134.

up the voices and experiences of one or two trans and/or non-binary Christians as normative, rather than seeking to hear the multiple, even conflicting, perspectives of trans and/or non-binary Christians.

Haraway argues that 'We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future'.<sup>18</sup> I have often felt, in ecclesial contexts, that trans and non-binary identities and bodies are simply denied. The normativity of dimorphic,<sup>19</sup> binary language and theological understandings erases me and every other person who is neither male or female or who is both male and female. In order that trans and/or non-binary people may have 'a chance for a future' in the ecclesial context, the development of theological and anthropological theory which is 'rooted in our meanings and bodies' is both essential and overdue.

To achieve this groundedness, trans and non-binary theologians must (1) be seen and heard, (2) speak into discussions about theology and anthropology, (3) find and theorise together with trans and/or non-binary peers and (4) resist homogenisation by refusing to be representative and, instead, seek to hear and to lift up the multiple perspectives of trans and/or non-binary Christians, even those with whom we disagree. After a decade of being held up, unwittingly, as representative of trans and non-binary Christians, this thesis is a part of that reparative effort.

### 1.1.1.3. Standpoint Theory Calls for Fragmentation

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<sup>18</sup> Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges' in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 81-102, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Dimorphic sex model refers to the belief that there are two distinct and separate sexes, indicated by chromosomes, reproductive organs, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics.

Contrary to the intentions above, critics of standpoint theory cite the same 'essentialism' that feminist theorists critique.<sup>20</sup> In other words, projects rooted in a feminist standpoint risk suggesting that all women are the same. Similarly, there is a risk that a thesis written from a trans and/or non-binary standpoint suggests that all trans and non-binary people have similar identities, lived experiences, and insights. As such, it is vital to note that this thesis contains aspects of the unique identities, experiences, and insights of ten individual trans and/or non-binary people. Our views are our own and are not representative of all trans and/or non-binary people. Any theology which claims that 'all trans people identify/experience/think in x way' is essentialising. Rather, I contend that these particular ten trans and/or non-binary individuals have insights to offer which are a) distinctive because of their identity and location in their social context and b) unheard in the theological discipline and/or in the church more widely because of the lack of theological material written from a trans and/or non-binary standpoint.

Haraway observes that any claim to 'infinite vision' is 'an illusion, a god-trick' and that, as such, 'only partial perspective promises objective vision'.<sup>21</sup> Recognising that individuals' identities, experiences, and insights are not the absolute truth does not, therefore, limit their potential. Rather, standpoint epistemology recognises that human beings are not omniscient and that each of our perspectives is limited. As such, it is epistemologically essential that any academic discipline contains multiple perspectives from multiple standpoints. I do not, therefore, propose to stop cis people from writing trans and/or non-binary related theological and anthropological literature.

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<sup>20</sup> Gender essentialism refers to the idea that set characteristics, including bodily and psychosocial norms can be attributed to the respective binary genders of male and female, correlated with sex accordingly.

<sup>21</sup> Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges' in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 81-102, p. 87.

Rather, I argue that the addition of trans and/or non-binary voices to theological and anthropological discourse strengthens theory. Voices must continue to be multiplied until the eschaton and, until such time, we must recognise that any truth is fragmented, and any truth claim is partial. Monovocal truth is partial, with polyvocal truth reaching closer to 'strong objectivity', the truth which builds on the identities, experiences and insights of all.

As such, research rooted in standpoint epistemology must be expansive enough to create room for a variety of views, for fragmentation. Truth must always be 'stuttering', or layered, not certain. Throughout this thesis I, and the other participants, assert our own identities, lived experiences, and theological and anthropological insights. We cannot state that 'God is x', but only that 'we experience God as x'. This distinction is important. We also challenge individuals and institutions who speak with certainty about who and what God and humanity are, and how they function. We question overly confident assertions and queer normative generalisations. We do so not to offend or to silence, but to create space and to free potential. We seek to speak honestly about God, which we can only do by speaking provisionally.

#### **1.1.1.4. Projects of Standpoint Theory are Revelatory**

Given that each standpoint is unique, researching any topic from new standpoints brings new insights, angles, and questions to the topic. Part of my motivation for researching with other trans and/or non-binary Christians was curiosity regarding the new insights, angles, and questions that we might be able to bring to theology and theological anthropology. I was able to read about the theological views of countless cis people, but very few trans and/or non-binary people. I wondered what revelations may arise.

Research projects rooted in standpoint theory are revelatory; by virtue of their yet marginalised voices, their participants have the experience and knowledge necessary to unmask the logic of normative and/or oppressive systems. As a regular visitor of many churches, and as someone who offers pastoral care to trans and/or non-binary people, I am all too aware of the cisnormativity which dominates ecclesial discourse. This dominant system can only be fully exposed by trans and/or non-binary Christians who speak a language that is counter to the normative ecclesial language.

Revelation requires a common counter-language. Dorothy E. Smith argues that an insider researcher is a 'native speaker' of the counter-language in which they are researching.<sup>22</sup> As a trans, non-binary researcher, I am a native speaker of the languages of trans and non-binary experience. As such, I can hear the revelations offered by trans and non-binary voices with clarity and empathy. This characteristic of being a 'native speaker' speaks to the importance of insider-research in curating theologies from trans and non-binary standpoints. Despite this, there are very few trans and/or non-binary theologians.

Concerning the theoretical world of feminist standpoint epistemology, Smith writes that 'Men appear in this world as necessary and vital presences. It is not a women's world in the sense of excluding men. But it is a women's world in the sense that it is the relevancies of the women's place that govern'.<sup>23</sup> In both academic and ecclesial contexts, the 'relevancies' of the trans and/or non-binary person's 'place' do not 'govern'. This thesis does not ignore or discount the identities, experiences and/or insights of cis people, who 'appear in this world as necessary and vital presences'.

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<sup>22</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology', in Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 21-35, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 'Women's Perspectives', in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, p. 21.

Rather, I ask what is particularly relevant to the trans and/or non-binary participants of this research. This thesis is a world in which 'it is the relevancies of the' trans and/or non-binary people's 'place that govern'.

The idea of governing spaces is necessarily political. Standpoint epistemology's political nature is sometimes a source of controversy.<sup>24</sup> However, I am reminded of the words of Palestinian poet Marwan Makhoul who suggests that 'In order for me to write poetry that isn't political, | I must listen to the birds, | and in order to hear the birds, | the warplanes must be silent'.<sup>25</sup> In the midst of 'culture wars' surrounding trans and non-binary identities this quote resonates with me. From the location at which I stand, it is not possible to write theology that is apolitical – there is simply too much noise. Further, any claim that majority theories and insights are apolitical is disingenuous. Speech, particularly speech which contains theoretic truth claims, is always political, given that it has material effects on the conditions in which people live.

Harding explains that understandings gleaned from marginalised political standpoints can be 'toolboxes' which facilitate transformative theories and praxis. The political is practical.<sup>26</sup> Marginalised peoples must be able to make truth claims in order to develop tools which we can use to challenge that very marginalisation. If this process of toolmaking is seen as political, perhaps it needs to be.

#### 1.1.1.5. Projects of Standpoint Theory are Motional

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<sup>24</sup> Harding, 'Introduction' in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 1-16, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Marwan Makhoul (2019), *أين أمي ain ami*, ISBN: 9786144254721, tr. @dialectichiphop, Twitter, <<https://twitter.com/dialectichiphop/status/1557049741610999808>>, Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Harding, 'Introduction' in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp. 1-16, p. 5.



The curation of transformative tools is a motional praxis – it is a process that moves us from one position to another. Standpoint epistemology is inherently motional. Standpoint projects emerge naturally when the voices of the oppressed are heard. This thesis, then, is part of a motion out of silence towards multivocal utterances. This emergence, though, requires transgression movement on the part of the speaker. It is not possible to speak out of a trans and/or non-binary standpoint without transgressing normative theological and anthropological ideas. This transgressive movement is a movement heavy with risk.

To move transgressively is to struggle, not least when speaking from standpoints where even language is problematic, novel and/or contested. bell hooks observes that:

We are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. Dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same voice? Dare I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination--a language that will not bind you, fence you in, or hold you? Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.<sup>27</sup>

This thesis moves transgressively by struggling with language. By daring to address both oppressed and oppressor this thesis risks offending everyone. By daring to transgress dominant norms this thesis risks freeing voices of dissent. In daring to speak with trans and non-binary peers in the process of shaping and speaking our

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<sup>27</sup> bell hooks (2004), 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp.153-160, p. 154.

theological and anthropological views together, we struggle, united in our diversity, to describe ourselves for ourselves, to reconcile ourselves to God, to reconnect our voices and to transform the spaces in which we move.

Standpoint projects are acts of 'resistance' from the 'margins' of society which function by curating new, transformative locations from which to speak.<sup>28</sup> Trans and/or non-binary Christians are at the margins of both church and theological discourse. As I have researched and written this thesis, I have moved to a new, transformative location. As you read it, I hope that you might too.

#### **1.1.1.6. Standpoint Theory Summary**

In this section, I have introduced feminist standpoint epistemology and have argued that this thesis is a standpoint project. I have noted that both standpoint epistemology as a whole, and this thesis in particular, are subjective, enfolded, fragmented, revelatory and motional. As you read, then, I ask you to avoid objectifying participants and to centre our enfolded lived experiences. I urge you to leave enough space for fragmentation, resisting the temptation to consolidate or essentialise. I appeal to you to mourn the injustices that are revealed. Finally, I invite you to move, to see things from another standpoint, and to be transformed as a result.

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<sup>28</sup> hooks, 'Choosing the Margin in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, pp.153-160, p. 159.

### 1.1.2. Grounding this Thesis

This thesis is an outworking of standpoint theory, asserting that missing voices in academic research lead to missing, incomplete, or inaccurate information.<sup>29</sup> Whilst standpoint theory is controversial, Sandra Harding argues that its controversies point to its needfulness.<sup>30</sup> Harding highlights the fact that individuals marginalised in any particular field of research may have insights which do not support prior assumptions made in that field. As such, theologies written from the standpoint of those who are marginalised in the discipline of theology, in this case trans and non-binary people, are essential if we are to fill the potential knowledge gap created by the scarcity of published trans and non-binary theologians.

Exploring this gap, I realise that steps are gradually being taken to begin to address similar gaps in other fields, such as disability theology. In particular, Deborah Beth Creamer's early contribution to disability studies is strikingly relatable to me, and to this thesis. Creamer argues that:

1. The field of body theology is limited by the assumption of a bodily norm.
2. Body theology leaves a vital aspect of being embodied, namely disability, underexamined and, therefore, misses the experiences of disabled people out of other aspects of discourse around embodiment.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Standpoint theory refers to post-modern approaches to knowledge whereby power and experience are acknowledged by noting the standpoint from which human beings view the world and recognising that all theories are partial, given the particular standpoint of the theorist. See section 4.4. for material on embodied theology. See section 3.1.2. for material on feminist standpoint theory.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Harding, 'A Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science? Resources from Standpoint Theory's Controversiality', *Hypatia*, 19, 1, (2004), pp. 25-47, p. 39, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810930>> [accessed 17 March 2022].

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

3. Body diversity exists, and that diversity is not abnormal and does not need to be changed or corrected.

4. The prevalent models of exploring disability do not encapsulate the complete diversity of disabled people's lived experiences.<sup>32</sup>

5. Disability theology 'deliberately embraces experiences of disability' and has 'great potential to benefit us all'.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, I contend that:

1. The field of trans-related theology is limited by the assumption of gendered norms. These norms must be deconstructed if trans-related theology is to contribute to theology more widely. Further, there is an urgent need to find ways to talk about human identity in general, and gender identity more specifically, that do not limit or marginalise people's authentic lived experiences.

2. Trans-related theology leaves vital aspects of being trans, namely the lived experiences and insights of a diverse range of trans people, underexamined and, therefore, misses the experiences of trans and non-binary people out of other aspects of discourse around gender. For example, we lack trans and non-binary theological perspectives on topics such as, but not limited to, God's gender, feminism and patriarchy, trauma, trans people in ministry, gendered violence, and trauma.

3. Gender diversity exists, and that diversity is not abnormal and does not need to be changed or corrected. Trans-related theology needs to be founded on the first-person

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<sup>32</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> Creamer, *Disability*, p. 120.

authority<sup>34</sup> of trans and non-binary people. It is essential that we cease feeding a debate regarding the ethical validity of trans and non-binary identities and, instead, accept that trans and non-binary people exist and ask what they can teach us about being human and about God.

4. The prevalent models of exploring gender do not encapsulate the complete diversity of trans and non-binary people's lived experiences. Academic understandings of trans and non-binary identities overwhelmingly rely on difficult experiences such as dysphoria. Trans and non-binary identities are medicalised and pathologised rather than being heard and affirmed. It is vital that trans-related theology includes and takes seriously the self-understandings of trans and non-binary people and not only what is written and/or said about us.

5. Trans-related theology, and gender-related theology more generally, should deliberately embrace diverse experiences of trans and non-binary identities. These lived experiences, and the arising insights, have the potential to benefit all people, not only trans and non-binary people. Most trans and non-binary theologians only write about being trans and non-binary. Our contributions should extend beyond our identities into theology more widely.

Writing in 1995, in a similarly early contribution to gender-related theology, Elaine Graham highlights the knowledge gap in theology that is related to gender, given

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<sup>34</sup> First-person authority is the philosophical idea that a person uniquely knows their own mind. For example, the way I know what I think and feel is distinct from the way that my sister knows what I think and feel. Similarly to Talia May Bettcher, I use this term to suggest that the individual has expert self-knowledge, and their avowals – self-declarations – should not be denied rather than to suggest that the individual's self-knowledge is entirely inerrant. See Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Trans Identities and First-Person Authority', Laurie Shrage (ed.) *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 98-120, p. 98.

changing understandings of the latter. Further, Graham explores the complexities of speaking into this gap, arguing that:

Gender is a complex, dynamic and self-reflexive phenomenon; and a 'theology of gender' will not be a straightforward application of selected categorical statements about empirical differences. Instead, theology itself must engage with the pluralism and complexity of interdisciplinary theories of gender at a profound level.<sup>35</sup>

Graham suggests the need to hear multiple voices, so that gender is not further essentialised, limited to two binary categories that are rooted in stereotypes and assumptions. Almost three decades later, gender-related theology is still rife with simplistic understandings, both of binary sex and gender and, more recently, of what it means to be trans. The 'pluralism and complexity' that Graham notes have not yet been adequately attended to. This is a clear gap in the field of trans-related theology.

The knowledge gap that Graham points towards is the gap of not knowing how real people, across a diversity of experiences and understandings of gender, understand anthropology and theology. The part of that gap that I am particularly interested in relates specifically to trans and non-binary people. How do other trans and non-binary people understand being human? Who and/or what do other trans and non-binary people think that God is? How do God and humanity relate, in the conceptions of other trans and non-binary people?

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<sup>35</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1995), p. 222.

Addressing this knowledge gap is not, however, about generalising broad-brush ideas from the identities, experiences and insights of a sample of trans and non-binary Christians. Rather, it is necessary to attend honestly and authentically to diversity and individuality. Graham reminds the reader that this work will 'do nothing to dispel the fundamental limitations of using human experience to apprehend the divine, but rather remind us of the provisional and metaphorical nature of all 'God-talk''.<sup>36</sup>

Attempts to talk definitively about humanity, or about God, are limiting and assume norms, such as those critiqued by both Creamer and Graham. The task is not, in other words, to fill the knowledge gap with clear answers but, rather, to question the assumptive answers that have been used to obscure the gap, by creating space for additional trans and non-binary narratives to speak into the gap. For example, where an assumptive understanding of trans identities might say that trans people are 'born in the wrong body', those hoping to create spaces for trans voices might ask the individual, 'How do you understand the connections between your identity and your body?'. The answer given will be the answer of that individual, which might differ from the answer of any other individual, highlighting the diversity of knowledge that is obscured at best, erased at worst, by assuming and/or generalising.

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<sup>36</sup> Graham, *Making the Difference*, p. 225.

## **1.2. Outline**

Diverse trans and non-binary voices are woefully under-represented in Christian theology, and almost absent in Christian theology which goes beyond trans-apologetics. This thesis begins to fill the void left by the lack of diverse trans and non-binary voices in Christian theology in four steps. In this section, I will lay out the contents of this thesis.

### **1.2.1. Literature**

Section A of this thesis contains introductory material. Firstly, I review trans-related theological literature to assess the ways in which it addresses the gap shown above, and to indicate remaining gaps. In the literature review, I explore the aforementioned lack of trans voices in theology by exploring the trajectory from apologetic contributions, through contributions which explore trans experiences towards grounded and/or constructive theologies written by trans people. In doing so, I not only consider the relevant literature, but critique it and suggest a direction of future travel, indicating where this thesis fits into the continuing task of trans-related theological research.

### **1.2.2. Method**

Secondly, I consider both the research method and the theological method through which I obtained and analysed data regarding the identities, experiences, and insights of diverse trans and non-binary Christians. I consider research method including my grounded, feminist, queer,<sup>37</sup> research paradigm, the use of autoethnography, the identities and contributions of my participants, and the fieldwork I conducted. I go on

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<sup>37</sup> Queer is a reclaimed word which refers to a) some subaltern sexual and gender identities when the person concerned uses this word themselves; b) queer theory. See section 3.2.2.4.



to discuss theological method by first explaining my experiences of, and evaluating the use of, the Wesleyan quadrilateral before considering the ways in which my own theological method is grounded, resists kyriarchy,<sup>38</sup> is embodied, is practical, includes critical ecclesiology, and accepts incoherence.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.2.3. Data

Thirdly, I narrate the identities, lived experiences, and insights of ten, diverse trans and non-binary Christians and curate narratological, anthropological, and theological material from this data. Section B of this thesis contains research data, including direct quotations from interviews with participants and theological reflections on that data which include autoethnographical material. Each chapter in Section B is preceded by an interlude, which re-grounds the data, analysis, and arising theory in the identities, experiences and insights of one of the interview participants.

In chapter four, 'Narrating our Experiences', I consider the narrative themes within which participants' identities, experiences, and insights were framed in their interviews. Participants' interviews were framed by narratives of suffering, resilience, and joy. Understandings of trans identities are often framed by the theme of suffering. The alternative theme of resilience still assumes suffering. Several participants use intentional framings of joy, exploration, and play. There is a need for theological attention to narratives of trans joy. Theological reflections on trans identities are overwhelmingly framed by the theme of suffering and, in some cases, resilience. Joy is not a prevalent theme in trans-related theology. This has been the case in

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<sup>38</sup> Kyriarchy refers to the social system apparent when hierarchies are multiple and/or interconnecting, leading to widespread power imbalances. It stems from feminist biblical studies and was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But she said: feminist practices of biblical interpretation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Here, incoherence refers to disruption of systematic theological norms. See section 3.3.4.

sociological and clinical understandings of trans identities too, until recently. There is, however, an increasing move towards euphoria<sup>40</sup> as a framing theme, in a reaction against dysphoria<sup>41</sup> based models. Will J. Beischel et. al. explain that ‘gender euphoria describes a joyful feeling of rightness in one’s gender/sex’ and go on to argue that it is essential that clinicians and gender theorists understand and use this relatively new, grassroots term.<sup>42</sup> It is notable that dysphoria models focus on the past and/or incoherent self, whereas euphoria models focus on the present and/or coherent self. It fundamentally shifts the discourse of trans-related theology to move the focus from dysphoria and suffering, along with necessitated resilience, to euphoria and joy.

In chapter five, ‘Breadcrumbs of Delight’, I share participants’ anthropological understandings, in which mirroring, continuity, complexity and joy are foregrounded.<sup>43</sup> Understandings of trans identities often assume past/present, mind/body disconnections. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the trope of ‘sex change’ or ‘sex swap’ which is currently used in print media. Rhianna Humphrey’s article regarding the harm caused by inaccurate representations of trans identities in the media highlights the prevalence of these terms, and the correlated harm.<sup>44</sup> Trans-apologetic literature fails to provide a strong challenge to this trope based on assumptions of disarticulation. Conversely, continuity of identity, self, mind and body

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<sup>40</sup> Gender euphoria refers to the joy a person may feel in relation to their body and/or the way in which society perceives their gender.

<sup>41</sup> Gender dysphoria refers to the discomfort a person may feel in relation to their body and/or the way in which society perceives their gender.

<sup>42</sup> Will J. Beischel, Stéphanie E. M. Gauvin and Sari M. van Anders, ‘A little shiny gender breakthrough: Community understandings of gender euphoria’, *International Journal of Transgender Health*, (2021), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1915223>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>43</sup> Mirroring is used, herein, to refer to the ways in which people reflexively reflect each other and God. See chapter 6.

<sup>44</sup> Rhianna Humphrey, “‘I think journalists sometimes forget that we’re just people’: Analysing the effects of UK trans media representation on trans audiences’, *Gender Forum*, 56, 1, (2016), < <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/scholarly-journals/i-think-journalists-sometimes-forget-that-were/docview/1759000383/se-2>> [accessed 2 April 2022].

are experienced by participants. This continuity was supported by participants' anthropological and theological understandings. This shows the role that theology can play in critiquing harmful tropes.

Another trans trope is that of individualism. Perhaps the clearest example of this trope is found in the tragic suicide of teacher Lucy Meadows who was described as 'selfish' for transitioning by a columnist in a major U.K. newspaper, shortly before her death.<sup>45</sup> There is also evidence that many trans people internalise this trope, believing their own actions in transitioning to be selfish.<sup>46</sup> Further, selfishness is linked, by some, to sinfulness.<sup>47</sup> It is vital, therefore, to critique this trope from a Christian perspective. Selfishness and/or individualism was not apparent in the data provided by interview participants. Rather than individualistic desires, the reflexive mirroring of self, of the other, and of God are key to identity formation and development. This shows that not only are my participants not overly individualistic, but they are also the exact opposite. Participants actively rely on relatedness as a formative element of transition and take personal risks and/or make personal sacrifices in order to prioritise relationships, both personal and professional. This is a clear rebuttal of a pervasive trope that has caused considerable damage. Further, the theme of mirroring speaks to the church more widely about how we might better construct theological anthropologies that enable dialogue, rather than reinforcing debate.

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Brown, 'Transgender teacher sought protection from intrusive press coverage', *The Independent*, (23 March 2013), <<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/transgender-teacher-sought-protection-intrusive/docview/1318868442/>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

<sup>46</sup> Brian A. Rood, Sari L. Reisner, Jae A. Puckett, Francisco I. Surace, Ariel K. Berman, David W. Pantalone, 'Internalized transphobia: Exploring perceptions of social messages in transgender and gender-nonconforming adults', *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 18, 4, (2017), pp. 411-426, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2017.1329048>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

<sup>47</sup> Kristen Norwood, 'Meaning Matters: Framing Trans Identity in the Context of Family Relationships', *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 9, 2, (2013), pp. 152-178, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2013.765262>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

In chapter six, 'Dancing with God', I share participants' theological understandings which are dialogical and participative in nature. I have found that trans-apologetic literature avoids any extensive reference to God, focussing instead on trans narratives, and on biblical support for trans identities.<sup>48</sup> I am not dismissive of this approach – it has been necessary to work in this way in order to respond to trans-critical literature. This binary process does, however, raise particular difficulties. It is inherently androcentric whereas many feel that theology, as several of my participants point out, should be theocentric. The risk is that God is marginalised from, or constrained within, the very human parameters of these texts. Rather, explicitly exploring theological concepts enables participants to explore God as both intertwined with, and yet entirely distinct from, their own identities, experiences, and understandings. This is a carefully navigated balance which seeks to reaffirm God's centrality in trans theology and also to recognise the inseparability of God and our lives and, therefore, of theology and anthropology.

Despite some participants highlighting the centrality of God, all participants felt strongly that God cannot be known with any certainty. This is in contrast to trans-apologetic literature which, by its very nature, attempts to assert God's definitive opinion in relation to trans identities. In doing so, trans-apologetic literature risks the same critique as trans-critical literature – claiming to definitively know the mind of God. Rather, this thesis attempts to multiply understandings of God, rather than to concretize any one particular understanding.

Participants explored multiple ways in which God and humanity participate in action together – described by one participant as God 'dancing' with us. God, experienced

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<sup>48</sup> See chapter 2, literature review, for an exploration of trans-apologetic literature.

as Creator, Spirit, and Christ, is continually in positive action, communication, and transition, working over and against forces of normativity, judgement and injustice. Again, this is distinct from trans-apologetic literature, which asserts a non-judgemental God in response to the trans-critical judgemental God. This approach risks implying a clear gap between God and humanity. Rather, participants' understandings of God and of humanity were as inextricably intertwined as the God and human beings who they described. This understanding highlights the agency of both God and humanity, freeing both God and humans from the binds of a distancing hierarchical stance. God is considered by participants to be gender-full and/or gender-less, rather than merely male.<sup>49</sup> This is distinctive from the instinct to claim that God is simply beyond gender. This instinct is evidenced in the United Reformed Church Mission Council's paper on inclusive and expansive language, which asserts that 'God comes to us gender-neutral'.<sup>50</sup> Such claims push God away as an abstract mystery. Instead, participants experience God in the particular, both in gender, and in the lack thereof.

#### **1.2.4. Conclusion**

I conclude by arguing that these identities, experiences, and insights must be encountered. Until every person's understanding of God is elucidated, any theological theory will be partial. Whether or not you agree with trans and/or non-binary identities, or any of the insights elucidated in this thesis, they exist and must be attended to. As

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<sup>49</sup> Gender-full refers to the state of being full of/containing every possible gender identity.

Gender-less refers to the state of being completely empty/outside of any possible gender identity.

Whilst there has been significant discussion regarding God's gender, gender-full-ness outside of the male/female binary is novel. Janet Martin Soskice speaks to the problem of a complete de-gendering of God in search for inclusive and expansive language. See Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God : Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.86.

<sup>50</sup> United Reformed Church Equal Opportunities Committee, 'E3: Discussion on Inclusive Language and Expansive Language', (November 2013), p. 3, <[https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/November\\_2013/Paper\\_E3\\_MC\\_November\\_2013.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/November_2013/Paper_E3_MC_November_2013.pdf)> [accessed 3 April 2021].

such, the curation and amplification of these ten voices is a vital step in furthering knowledge about trans and non-binary people's understandings of anthropology and theology and in developing fuller understandings of theological method, ecclesial praxis, humanity, and God. If you think, speak, or write about any topic related to gender and theology you need to hear the voices introduced herein and to ensure that you take the diversity of trans and non-binary identities, experiences, and anthropological and theological insights seriously.

### 1.3. Standpoint Theory: A Coda

As you read this thesis you will notice that (1) it does not fit neatly into any one theological discipline, (2) the ten participants sampled have experienced significant marginalisation, and (3) norms and assumptions are que(e)ried<sup>51</sup> throughout. The challenges that these three characteristics – resisting categorisation, experiencing marginalisation, and que(e)rying assumptions – present are intentional and are worth examining and re-examining as you progress through the thesis. I could have avoided them, but that would be to avoid the authentic realities of trans and non-binary identities, experiences and insights. Rather, then, I suggest that these challenges are integral to the comprehension of the thesis offered.

This thesis does not fit into any one theological discipline. It contains elements of ethics, biblical studies, practical theology, public theology, liberation theology, body theology, and queer theologies, to name but a few. As such, this thesis asks essential questions of the academic pursuit of theology, particularly que(e)ring the divisions within our discipline.

This thesis is curated from the identities, experiences and understandings of ten trans and non-binary Christians, each of whom has experienced systematic and personal marginalisation in theological discourse, in churches, and in society. This means that parts of it are painful to read, and that it raises questions around the ways in which we can amplify trans and non-binary voices and more helpfully frame discussions around trans and non-binary lives. As a result of the marginalisation participants already experience, I do not reference trans-critical literature in this thesis. Rather, I choose to

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<sup>51</sup> Que(e)rying refers to a play on words, combining 'queer' and 'query' to denote the questions raised of norms by queer theories. See Gary David Comstock, Susan E. Henking, *Que(e)rying Religion*, (New York: Continuum, 1997).

allow trans and non-binary voices, and the voices of our allies, to speak authentically, rather than in reaction to critique. As such, this thesis asks essential questions of the systems and structures of the academy, the church, and society, particularly que(e)rying hierarchies, debate of lived experiences, and binaries.

It is vital to me that the identities, experiences, and insights of interview participants are foregrounded in this research. Analysis is important, but I decided I must also give substantial space for the voices of those whose real lives are at the heart of this research. Throughout this thesis there are references to the fact that theorising about people's lives without giving space to their actual lived experiences is problematic at best and abject objectification of the individual at worst. As such, I use extensive quotes from interview transcripts throughout this thesis. In addition, I include an extensive transcript extract, edited minimally for readability, at the opening of each of the three core chapters. It would, perhaps, be more conventional to include these as appendices. However, I feel that it is essential to foreground these extracts, rather than appending them.

This thesis que(e)ries norms and assumptions in trans-related anthropologies and theologies as well as in ecclesial praxis. Many of the identities, experiences and insights herein differ from or complexify those presented in trans-apologetic literature and strongly critique harmful or limiting ecclesial practices. As such, this thesis asks essential questions of trans-apologetic literature and of ecclesial understandings and praxis, particularly que(e)rying those conversations that occur without us, but about us. This thesis demands change, and asserts autonomy and respect for each participant interviewed, and for each trans and non-binary Christian who has



experienced being marginalised from debates about our own lives. We are asking to be heard.

## 2. Literature Review

Some literature reviews are descriptive, outlining the existing material that is in the same field of, and concerns similar topics to, the thesis. Here, however, I have used the literature review to critique material so that I can show where this thesis sits in relation to what I see as the necessary ongoing progression and diversification of trans-related theology. As such, in this literature review, I consider the trajectory of trans-related theology,<sup>52</sup> suggesting that theological conversations about and with trans people have moved from trans-apologetic literature to careful and pastoral consideration of trans experiences towards trans-related grounded and/or constructive theologies. I argue, however, that this trajectory must split into two trajectories in order to enable and centre trans voices in grounded and/or constructive theologies. Cis theologians' contributions to the discipline are essential and show that trans identities and experiences are starting to be attended to in theological research and writing. However, trans theologies must not rely on these contributions alone. Rather, trans people should write our own grounded and/or constructive theologies, in equitable<sup>53</sup> discussion and debate with cis colleagues, creating two streams of work which are woven together in collegiality and respective gratitude but also retain a degree of independence.

My call for trans-written trans-related theologies and the way in which it interrelates with my method throughout this thesis, and particularly in this literature review, is rooted in the politics of citation. Sara Ahmed utilises a 'strict citation policy' in *Living a*

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<sup>52</sup> Trans-related theology refers to theology that relates to the identities, experiences, or insights of trans and/or non-binary people.

<sup>53</sup> Equitable refers to the quality of equity whereby people are treated fairly according to their support needs, as contrasted with equality, whereby people are treated equally regardless of their support needs.

*Feminist Life*.<sup>54</sup> This policy raises several considerations that have been key to my own thinking regarding who – and how – to cite.

My policy, however, is less strict. Whilst I prioritise citation of trans and non-binary sources, and do not use cis-written sources to directly critique the insights suggested by trans and non-binary research participants, I do cite some cis voices throughout. In research on the politics of citation in doctoral research, Cecile Badenhorst, Abu Arif and Kelvin Quintyne note the ‘contradictions and paradoxes’ in their own policies of citation during their studies.<sup>55</sup> They note the role of academic writing in socialisation as a postgraduate student and suggest that socialisation throughout earlier studies includes learning normative methods of citation, which are then difficult to unlearn at a later stage.<sup>56</sup> I do not know to what extent my own somewhat loose politics of citation are related to academic socialisation, but can see that there may be an element of prior learning in my practice. More, I feel that given the early stage that we find ourselves at in relation to trans studies, particularly in theology, necessitated paying attention to a wider field of literature. Had I ignored all cis-written contributions to the field, this thesis would have been rather shorter! Nonetheless, attention to the politics of citation is essential throughout.

Three of Ahmed’s arguments for a clear citation policy are particularly relevant here. Firstly, Ahmed notes that her citation policy has ‘given me more room to attend’ to the voices that she prioritises in her work.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, I have attempted to create room to prioritise the voices of research participants throughout, both in including substantial

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<sup>54</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Cecile Badenhorst, Abu Arif, Kelvin Quintyne, ‘Doctoral writing and the politics of citation Use’, *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, 32, (2022), p. 262.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 275.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 15.

quotes and in allowing their voices to speak without undue response. Further, I have allowed space for trans and non-binary voices to critique cis-written theories without response within this paper. There will be time for response subsequently.

Secondly, Ahmed notes that her 'citation policy has effected the kind of house I have built'.<sup>58</sup> I have been aware throughout the process of research and writing of attempting to build a house in which trans people felt safe to speak authentically. That required safety from both material harm and invited critique within the text.

Thirdly, Ahmed points to the ways in which relationality shape citation. She gives the example of a testimony which is only heard through the voice of a narrator to illustrate the ways in which some accounts are only accessed through the accounts of others.<sup>59</sup> For example, in cis related theology, trans accounts are often filtered through the accounts of cis narrators. Annabel L. Kim argues that citation is relational.<sup>60</sup> I hope that attending to the politics of citation by prioritising trans and non-binary voices in this thesis provides a step in the ongoing journey of relationality between cis theologians and trans and non-binary theologians, as our voices are increasingly heard in dialogue. Further, I hope to point towards ways in which that relationality might be authentic, rather than imbalanced or partial.

My research is broadly theological. As such, the primary discipline for this literature review is theology. This includes practical theology.<sup>61</sup> Grounded theologies sit between and challenge the disciplines of both constructive theology and practical

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<sup>58</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>60</sup> Annabel L. Kim, 'The Politics of Citation', *Diacritics*, 48, 3 (2020), pp. 4-97

<sup>61</sup> Practical theology refers to theology that is related to the practices of a faith group e.g., the Christian church.

theology. I also consider literature in the discipline of therapeutic/clinical studies. Trans-related theology is a relatively new area of scholarship. As such, it is necessary to consider relevant literature outside of the discipline of theology, and to include this literature where it specifically considers the identities, experiences, and theological understandings of trans and/or non-binary people. I exclude literature that critiques or argues against trans identities, and ecclesial responses to trans identities, as my research is not a response to or a debate of trans identities. I also exclude literature from the field of biblical studies, except where a clear contribution to trans-related grounded theology has been made.

My research was conducted by a transmasculine, non-binary researcher, and every research participant self-identified as trans and/or non-binary. As such, I am particularly interested in literature written or co-written by trans and/or non-binary authors/researchers or research which involves trans and/or non-binary participants. I also consider literature written by cis authors/researchers. This literature forms an important part of trans-related theology. However, I believe that there is a need for more theological literature written by trans people and that this research arises out of that need. As such, I make a distinction in this literature review between trans-authored and cis-authored literature. My intention is not to discount cis-authored literature, but to clearly differentiate and to attempt to compare like with like. Research participants self-identified as Christian. As such, I am primarily interested in literature written from a Christian perspective. However, several of my participants experience, or have experienced, multiple religious belonging.<sup>62</sup> Several scriptural texts referenced are

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<sup>62</sup> Multiple religious belonging (MRB) refers to the membership of multiple faith groups or religions by one person. It can be inherited and/or chosen. E.g., a child whose parents are respectively Muslim and Christian or a person who follows Buddhism and Islam.

also scriptures of several other religions. As such, I consider the contributions to trans-related theology from other faiths. Of particular relevance is literature from Jewish theology.

Trans/non-binary visibility has increased rapidly in the last decade. Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi, and Jasper J. Verlinden show the way in which trans and non-binary visibility in the media has led to increased visibility in the public square.<sup>63</sup> I had originally written that ‘visibility, acceptance and affirmation’ have increased. I now, however, question the latter two due to the transphobia<sup>64</sup> that is currently sweeping the U.K. Due to the increase in visibility of trans and non-binary identities in the last decade, however, I focus on literature published between 2010 and 2021. Literature that has been peer-reviewed and has been published in the United Kingdom is given priority in this literature review. However, given the scarcity of trans-related theology and my participants’ reliance on non-academic sources, I have also reviewed literature that has not been peer-reviewed. Due to this scarcity, I have also reviewed literature that was written outside of the United Kingdom, particularly in the United States of America. I have, however, attended to the effect of different contexts on literature.

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<sup>63</sup> Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi, and Jasper J. Verlinden, ‘Representing trans: visibility and its discontents’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 24, 1, (2020), pp. 1–12, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>64</sup> Transphobia refers to the holding of anti-trans views and resulting marginalisation, exclusion, and/or abuse.

## **2.1. Apologetic Literature**

My exploration of the trajectory towards grounded and/or constructive theological writing by trans people begins with ‘trans-apologetic literature’ – literature which explains or defends trans identities. This is a phrase which I have coined to highlight the similarities between Christian apologetics and trans-apologetics – both of which seek to defend something rather than to explore it more freely. Whilst trans-apologetic writing sometimes contains theological aspects its scope is usually limited to the defence of trans identities; usually including attempts to teach about what it means to be trans and to then argue against anti-trans interpretations of scripture. Trans-apologetic literature is an essential component of the foundations of grounded and/or constructive theologies written by trans people. I do not argue that it should not exist, though I do suggest that we now need to move beyond it. Nevertheless, its contributions, and limits, deserve careful consideration. I consider ‘trans ethics’, literature which largely responds to critiques of trans identities, followed by ‘trans discernment’, literature which considers trans identities from an inherently positive perspective. Finally, I explore the way in which some trans-apologetic literature combines trans-apologetic material with attention to experience.

### 2.1.1. Trans Ethics

Some trans-apologetic texts focus on ethics. They ask and attempt to answer the questions, 'is it OK to be trans?' and, 'if so, why?' In her doctoral thesis, 'Changing sex? Transsexuality<sup>65</sup> and Christian Theology', Helen Savage laid a courageous foundation for explorations of the ethics of trans identities.<sup>66</sup> Savage, who describes herself as a 'transsexual woman', rightly observed that trans identities had 'received no extended academic attention from a Christian perspective'.<sup>67</sup> Her use of the word 'transsexual', which is now outdated, suggests the speed at which this discipline, and the language it uses, moves. Savage writes reflexively and openly about her own identity in what is clearly a deeply personal project. Her argument for trans identities hinges on the theological understandings that our eschatological identity is *unity* in Christ, rather than differentiation, and her experience and observation that transition can be equated with healing and salvation.

Savage's thesis is persuasive and draws together a wide range of research from diverse fields including history, medical science, theology, scripture, philosophy, and ethics, as well as interviews with trans people. At the time of its writing, this text would have been invaluable to those who wished to understand trans identities better from a Christian perspective. However, Savage's participant sample was limited to six trans women and one trans man, all of whom held binary<sup>68</sup> identities. This, again, is unsurprising given the year in which this thesis was written. There is, however, a

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<sup>65</sup> Transsexuality refers to the practice of gender transition. It is no longer widely used, due to its focus on sex characteristics rather than identity.

<sup>66</sup> Helen Savage, 'Changing sex? : transsexuality and Christian theology', (Doctoral thesis. Durham: Durham University, 2006), <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3364>> [accessed 11 January 2021].

<sup>67</sup> Savage, 'Changing sex?', pp. 8, 1, <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3364>> [accessed 11 January 2021].

<sup>68</sup> Binary refers to pairs of characteristics which are assumed to be completely opposite and separate. Male and female are binary genders.



resulting sense in which Savage overly homogenises understandings of trans identities due largely to this limited sample. She extrapolates universal theory from particular identities. It is also important to note that this research is largely focussed on the ethics of trans identities and, although it draws on a range of Christian theologians, is not a comprehensive grounded and/or constructive theology. It does not explore the characteristics of humanity or of God beyond consideration of trans identities. Nevertheless, Savage's work should not be overlooked as a helpful early contribution to this discipline.

A decade later, between 2016 and 2020, Christina Beardsley, Chris Dowd and Michelle O'Brien wrote a series of books which have been a very helpful contribution to discussions about the ethics of trans identities, particularly in ecclesial contexts.<sup>69</sup> The first part of Beardsley and O'Brien's *This is my Body* focuses on trans-apologetic material.<sup>70</sup> Section 1, 'The Workshop Chapters' describes the workshop style focus group sessions through which data was collected, before going on to include two chapters in which participants describe psychosocial<sup>71</sup> understandings of gender identity.<sup>72</sup> Beardsley's reflection on the performative nature of gender draws on evidence from the fields of history, philosophy and performing arts, as well as from the Bible to argue that there is a diverse history of gender and sexuality that is not adequately represented in ecclesial statements.<sup>73</sup> This closely follows Butler's thesis

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<sup>69</sup> Christina Beardsley, and Michelle O'Brien, *This is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2016).

Chris Dowd, Christina Beardsley, and Justin Tanis, *Transfaith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2018).

Chris Dowd, and Christina Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches: How to Celebrate Gender-Variant People and Their Loved Ones*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020).

<sup>70</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*.

<sup>71</sup> Psychosocial refers to the connections between wellbeing and, psychology and social context.

<sup>72</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 11-33.

<sup>73</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 23-32.

of gender as performance.<sup>74</sup> Butler posits gender as performance, drawing upon the example of drag art. This theory is foundational to current understandings of gender identity, but is also critiqued by some, including trans and non-binary theorists.<sup>75</sup>

Beardsley's argument is clear and compelling and draws on a wide range of primary sources. Whilst attention to further scholarship, particularly in relation to scripture, might have been helpful, Beardsley's contribution here is undoubtedly valuable. In the following chapter, Jasmine Woolley's explanation of gender as social construct differs from Beardsley's in aim and in style.<sup>76</sup> Woolley draws largely on trans experience and relatively contemporary gender theory to argue that gender is socially constructed, and that transphobia is a reaction against the bending or breaking of societal norms. Woolley's argument is logical and well-supported by the provided evidence. I feel, however, that more attention could have been given to essentialist understandings of gender, so that these might have been challenged effectively.

In Section two of *This is my Body*, participants go on to discuss theological trans-apologetic material.<sup>77</sup> Chapter seven describes a group discussion and resulting report in response to an anti-trans statement. The group's report argues that the initial anti-trans statement interprets scripture too narrowly, and with a lack of attention to lived experiences.<sup>78</sup> As such, it is clearly trans-apologetic. The chapter relays data gathered from the discussion on topics as diverse as scripture, transphobia, the medical treatment of trans people, gender theory, trans children, law, and pastoral praxis. Whilst much of the data are anecdotal, helpful sources of evidence are

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<sup>74</sup> Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble*, (London: Routledge, 1990/2007).

<sup>75</sup> See 3.1.4. for an introduction to Butler and key critiques.

<sup>76</sup> Jasmine Woolley 'The Social Construct of Gender' in Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 33-44.

<sup>77</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 57-92.

<sup>78</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 81-92.

provided. The chapter concludes with a series of recommendations for churches, including the importance of considering clinical understandings, transparency, reference to experts, pastoral support, and information and training regarding name changes, baptisms, funerals, and pastoral care.<sup>79</sup> I have not encountered any evidence in the years following that these recommendations have been noticed and acted on at a central level by any Christian denomination in the UK.

In Chapters nine and ten, Dowd and Gilchrist, respectively, offer their own apologetics.<sup>80</sup> Dowd challenges assumptions about trans identities and provides trans-affirming interpretations of scripture, arguing that trans people, like Job, face an 'onslaught' of accusations against which we assert our innocence.<sup>81</sup> Dowd concludes that 'I do not believe that trans folks are a threat to the church'.<sup>82</sup> Dowd's argument would, however, have been helped by the use of clear evidence to support his claims. Conversely, Gilchrist's scientific expertise allows her to combine understandings of neurophysiology and psychology with theological and biblical understandings, resulting in a compelling argument in support of trans identities.<sup>83</sup> Drawing on her expertise, she successfully argues that ecclesial understandings of trans and non-binary identities fall far short of society's clinical progress. Part two of *This is My Body* contains trans contributors' own stories and is considered later in this chapter.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>80</sup> Chris Dowd, 'Five things cis folk don't know about trans folk because it isn't on trashy TV – my right of reply', in Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 101-107.

Susan Gilchrist, 'Taking a Different Path', in Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 108-118.

<sup>81</sup> Dowd, 'Five Things', p. 106.

<sup>82</sup> Dowd, 'Five Things', p. 107.

<sup>83</sup> Gilchrist, 'Different Path', pp. 108-118.

<sup>84</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 100-133.

The next contribution in this set, *Transfaith*, contains two apologetic chapters.<sup>85</sup> Chapters four and five aim to respond to biblical arguments against trans identities.<sup>86</sup> In chapter four, the authors respond to trans critical accounts of the Genesis creation narratives and of natural law. They counter the binary interpretation of Genesis chapter one – that God created ‘man and woman’ – by arguing that, in this account, humanity is plural. They suggest that, in Genesis chapter two, an androgynous creature is split into its two constituent parts, masculine and feminine.<sup>87</sup> In chapter five, the authors turn to the examples of eunuchs as a site of affirmation for trans people and then to Job as a parallel with which trans experiences of suffering can be compared. The authors acknowledge that the former risks the medicalisation of trans identities, given that eunuchs are often defined by altered genitalia.<sup>88</sup> They do not attend, however, to the difficulties of rooting accounts of transness in narratives of suffering.

In these chapters, the authors make good, if brief, use of biblical and theological sources, as well as referring to the experiences of focus group participants and to understandings and practices of gender transition. There is still, however, a lack of reference to biblical exegesis or contemporary theological understandings. In their final collaboration, *Trans Affirming Churches*, Beardsley and Dowd open with three chapters which respectively explain trans identities, explore biblical material in relation to trans ethics, and posit potential cultural reasons for, and effects of, Christian transphobia.<sup>89</sup> These chapters are clearly apologetic, and the first two revisit previous

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<sup>85</sup> Chris Dowd, Christina Beardsley, and Justin Tanis, *Transfaith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, and Tanis, *Transfaith*, pp.100-133, 161-177.

<sup>87</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, and Tanis, *Transfaith*, pp.100-112.

<sup>88</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, and Tanis, *Transfaith*, pp.113-133.

<sup>89</sup> Chris Dowd and Christina Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches: How to Celebrate Gender-Variant People and Their Loved Ones*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020), pp. 29-69.

arguments, with greater attention to non-binary identities than in previous texts.<sup>90</sup> The focus is still, however, on binary identities. The third chapter, 'The Culture Wars and the Christian Community', introduces helpful new material which explores the potential role of divisive and binary political and religious belonging in religious transphobia.<sup>91</sup> There is clear potential for further research in this area.

In 2018, two additional texts were published.<sup>92</sup> Steve Chalke's short booklet explores the ethics of trans identities from an affirming Evangelical perspective. It is a basic explanation of trans identities, with some reference to Christian theology, largely focussing on the inclusive nature of Jesus's life, death and resurrection and the importance of grace. This brief resource was clearly intended for a popular, rather than academic, audience, and does not evidence clearly defined research practices. Nor does it engage with a range of trans perspectives. The text's title, *The Gender Agenda*, feels offensive, given potential negative implications of the word 'agenda'.<sup>93</sup>

Agenda language has long been used by anti-LGBTQ+ critics in order to imply that LGBTQ+ identities are part of a post-truth homogenising agenda which goes beyond LGBTQ+ identities.<sup>94</sup> As Didi Herman has argued, the language of 'gay agenda' was popularised by the religious right in the U.S.A. in the early 1990s.<sup>95</sup> This language is

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<sup>90</sup> Dowd and Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*, pp. 29-68.

<sup>91</sup> Dowd and Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*, pp. 69-88.

<sup>92</sup> 1. Steve Chalke, *The Gender Agenda: Towards a Biblical Theology on Gender Identity, Reassignment and Confirmation*, (London: Oasis Books, 2018). 2. Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Chalke, *The Gender Agenda*.

<sup>94</sup> LGBTQ+ refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning or who are otherwise subaltern in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>95</sup> Didi Herman, *The Anti-Gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

now being adopted by anti-trans critics.<sup>96</sup> Consultation with trans and non-binary people would likely have steered Chalke away from this problematic title.

It is also notable that Chalke talks about what trans people supposedly think and/or feel throughout, without referencing trans sources. This shows a paternalistic attitude towards trans people, rather than genuine allyship. Further, this text's theological content is brief and is not supported by academic sources. As such, the potential suggested in its subtitle, *Towards a Biblical Theology on Gender Identity, Reassignment<sup>97</sup> and Confirmation,<sup>98</sup>* is not fully realised.<sup>99</sup> Whilst Chalke's work as an ally<sup>100</sup> is helpful in the thought and praxis of churches and individuals who identify as Evangelical, it does not contribute any new material towards trans theologies. This, in combination with the claims made in Chalke's title and abstract, unfortunately implies a lack of genuine engagement with, and respect for, the developing field.

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<sup>96</sup>Examples of the use of 'agenda' language by those who critique trans identities: Truth in Science, 'The Transgender Agenda', <<https://truthinscience.uk/product/the-transgender-agenda/>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Ken Ham (2022), 'Answers in Genesis: The Horrific Consequences of the Transgender Agenda', <<https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/the-horrific-consequences-of-the-transgender-agenda/>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Stuart Waiton (2018), 'Why is the state pushing harmful transgender agenda?', *The Herald*, <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/16911183.stuart-waiton-state-pushing-harmful-transgender-agenda/>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Beverly Hallberg and Kara Danksy, 'One Feminist's Perspective On How The Transgender Agenda Harms Women & Girls', *She Thinks*, <<https://www.iwf.org/2021/12/10/one-feminists-perspective-on-how-the-transgender-agenda-harms-women-girls/>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Ian Paul, 'Navigating the Transgender Agenda', *Be Thinking*, <<https://www.bethinking.org/human-life/navigating-the-transgender-agenda>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

Rod Liddle (2019), 'The Transgender agenda is collapsing', *The Spectator*, <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-transgender-agenda-is-collapsing>> [accessed 12 September 2022]

<sup>97</sup> Gender reassignment refers to social and clinical transition to a person's authentic gender. Some critique this term as it suggests a change in gender, preferring the term 'gender confirmation'.

<sup>98</sup> Gender confirmation refers to social and clinical steps taken to transition to a person's authentic gender. It implies a continuity, rather than a change in gender identity.

<sup>99</sup> Chalke, *The Gender Agenda*.

<sup>100</sup> Ally refers to a cis person who supports/affirms/works for justice alongside trans people.

The second text published in 2018 is more constructive. As a trans author and pastor in conversation with other trans people, Austen Hartke's contribution to this field is rare and essential. *Transforming* is located in the field of biblical studies and attends to trans experiences and understandings of scripture.<sup>101</sup> Hartke, a Christian, transgender YouTuber and lay pastor, analyses autobiographical material and connects it to biblical theology and the testimony and theology of other trans Christians. Some chapters focus on Hartke's own story and understanding of biblical texts, whereas others interweave the stories of other trans individuals including: M. Barclay, a deacon in the United Methodist Church; Aiden, a lay person; River, an ordinand in the Metropolitan Community Church; Lawrence Richardson, an ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ; Nicole, a lay person who works with Reconciling Works (formerly Lutherans Concerned); Asher O'Callaghan, a lay member of the Lutheran Church; and Taj Smith, a lay member of the United Church of Christ. The first section of this compelling text is trans-apologetic, focussing on ethics. Hartke roots theory in his own lived experience, describing processes of identity formation, coming out, transition and vocation. He refers honestly, and with grace, to relatives, friends and colleagues who had difficulty understanding his identity and uses a variety of sources from theology and beyond to explain and defend trans identities. Hartke's authenticity and humility are striking. Whilst accessible and engaging as a popular-style text, Hartke supports his claims with rigorous academic research. His humble and personal approach mean that this text is incredibly persuasive, and easy to recommend to churches and individuals who seek a better understanding of trans identities.

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<sup>101</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*.

The most recent contribution to the trans ethics conversation is *Gender and Christian Ethics* by Adrian Thatcher.<sup>102</sup> This work is perhaps an unusual contribution to this literature review, as trans identities, experiences, and theological understandings are not explored. It is Thatcher's aim, however, to consider the negative effects and unsafe foundations of a binary understanding of gender and to suggest a theoretical understanding of gender as continuum, which might lead to greater global harmony.<sup>103</sup> As such, Thatcher's argument is trans-apologetic; it sets out a rationale for, and defence of, trans identities, even though it does not explore them in any depth.

Thatcher's work is impressive and persuasive, with clear theological reason, obvious cultural relevance, and appealing linguistic flair. His treatment of theological sources is logical and revelatory. This text is academic in genre and has strong foundations in theological, ethical, and psycho-social theory. Its practical implications and potential impact should not, however, be underestimated. This is a book that should be read by ministers, politicians, and therapists as well as academic theologians and ethicists.

Despite the praise above, however, in relation to this project, *Gender and Christian Ethics* is troubling in its lack of attention to trans identities. In his introduction, and throughout the text, Thatcher suggests that an understanding of gender as a continuum allows for the full affirmation of LGBTQ+<sup>104</sup> people.<sup>105</sup> Despite this, there is no in-depth exploration of what that affirmation might look like. Nor is there any consideration of non-binary experiences, which might be expected given that many non-binary people identify somewhere other than at either end of a gender continuum.

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<sup>102</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*. 1st edn., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>104</sup> LGBTQ+ refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning or who are otherwise subaltern in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality.

<sup>105</sup> Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, pp. 3-16.



Attention to trans identities, experiences and understandings would certainly have added both authenticity and, perhaps, additional perspectives and understandings to Thatcher's research. Without these contributions, this work does not effectively challenge transphobic violence. Rather, there is a strong focus on misogynistic violence, and a heavy use of binary-gendered language and examples. There is no consideration of the differences between trans and cis experiences of masculinity, femininity, and the gender binary. These oversights suggest a cis-normative<sup>106</sup> bias. There is a clear need for Thatcher's thesis, which I welcome, to be tested in conversation with trans and non-binary research participants and/or theologians.

Material which considers the ethics of trans people in light of Christian theological and scriptural understandings is essential in the move towards more theologies authored by trans people. It is based, however, on the assumption that trans identities are problematic and require defence. Whilst I have not reviewed material that argues against trans identities, these arguments are implicit in trans-apologetic responses. Further, these responses seem to be limited in scope, responding closely to opposing viewpoints. Whilst much trans-apologetic ethical material is compelling and helpful, some of the material reviewed lacks evidence, scholarship and/or diversity. In the next section, I explore material which builds upon these trans-apologetic accounts towards fully affirming discernment related to trans identities.

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<sup>106</sup> Cisnormative refers to theories, texts and practices that rely on social norms asserted by a system which prefers cis people, those who identify with the same gender as their sex assigned at birth.

### 2.1.2. Trans Gifts Discernment

There are some trans-apologetic texts that reach beyond ethics to discernment of trans gifts. They consider and explain positive spiritual rationales for, and attributes of, trans identities and people. These texts have been written by cis allies and are founded on the assumption that trans identities are not only acceptable but, further, positive. Some are purely theoretical, whereas others rely on fieldwork with trans participants. Each text explored in this section is a journal article. This means that they are peer reviewed texts. It does, however, place limits on their scope. There is, therefore, a need for further research into the gifts of trans people.

The next group of researchers considered each write with compelling reference to trans people, be they colleagues, students, congregation members or research participants. As such, their accounts benefit from the lived experience that Thatcher lacks.<sup>107</sup> This attention to lived experience is vital and is explored in relation to additional texts later in this chapter. For this section, I focus on the ways in which the authors named above explain the gifts of trans identities, with reference to both experience and theory.

In each of these journal articles, the author(s) have a distinctive focus. All of these foci broadly fall within the category of trans-apologetic material and, more narrowly, trans gift discernment. Sister Luisa Derouen writes about the lived experiences of trans people, particularly their experiences of suffering, with a clear passion for sharing the testimony of the trans people that she has worked with as a pastoral carer.<sup>108</sup> It is clear that her primary aim is to positively affect public understandings of trans identities. As

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<sup>107</sup> Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*.

<sup>108</sup> Sister Luisa Derouen, 'Proclaiming the Truth of God's Transgender People', *CrossCurrents*, 68, 4, (2018), pp. 561–568, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cros.12343>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

such, her work is clearly apologetic. However, Derouen also touches on the particular gifts of the trans people whom she has encountered. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead redefine the feeling of ‘bewilderment’ – which they use to describe gender dysphoria – that those exploring trans identities for the first time feel, by positing bewilderment as a virtue which ‘can lead to a new appreciation of God’s extravagance’ – which might now be described as gender euphoria.<sup>109</sup> Kelly Reinsmith-Jones moves the trans-apologetic field on from discussion of embodiment to discussion of the soul, exploring the pneumatology of transition, arguing that transition is spiritual, as well as social, clinical and psychological.<sup>110</sup> Ellen Clark-King specifically considers the practice of prayer in the lives of Anglican, transgender women, with a view to conveying the breadth and depth of these women’s practices of prayer.<sup>111</sup>

In each of these papers, the methodologies used and the interactions with trans people considered, vary considerably. Reinsmith-Jones and Clark-King both use data from interviews with trans people. Both researchers attend to specific demographics, with Clark-King interviewing six transgender women and Reinsmith-Jones interviewing four people who self-identified as transexual [sic.]; two of whom identified as male, and two of whom identified as female.<sup>112</sup> Neither researcher attends to non-binary identities.

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<sup>109</sup> James D. Whitehead, and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, ‘Transgender Lives: From Bewilderment to God’s Extravagance’, *Pastoral Psychology*, 63, 2, (2014), pp. 171–184, p.171, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0543-7>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>110</sup> Kelly Reinsmith-Jones, ‘Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation: Implications’, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 9, 1, (2013), pp. 65–99, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2013.748509>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>111</sup> Ellen Clark-King, ‘The Divine Call to Be Myself: Anglican Transgender Women and Prayer’, *Anglican Theological Review*, 98, 2, (2016), pp. 331–339, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861609800208>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>112</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, ‘Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation’.  
Clark-King, ‘The Divine Call to Be Myself’.

Clark-King's narrow demographic field is clearly defined and intentional.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, there is potential for future research on the same topic with a wider demographic. Reinsmith-Jones, however, attempts to generalise trans experience from four interviews with trans people who clearly identify with the gender binary.<sup>114</sup> Whilst her findings are of interest, they would be more significant if her participants were from a wider demographic.

Mary Elise Lowe, Whitehead et. al., and Derouen each refer to case studies, as well as the written testimonies of trans people.<sup>115</sup> Whilst the experiences described are compelling, it would have been preferable if the arising theories could have been tested with trans and non-binary people. The case study which Whitehead et. al. use is generalised and suggests pastoral experience working with several trans/non-binary congregation members.<sup>116</sup> The situation described is realistic, but could have been supplemented with more nuanced, detailed narratives. In introducing her article, Lowe tells the story of a non-binary student whose parents have disallowed transition.<sup>117</sup> This story is emotive and helps to contextualise Lowe's theory. However, it might have been helpful if later sections referred back to it. Derouen refers to two case studies in moving detail. It is clear that her pastoral relationships with the individuals described are central to the article.<sup>118</sup> In each article, transition is the central experience referred to. Whitehead et. al. additionally consider experiences of Christian community,

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<sup>113</sup> Clark-King, 'The Divine Call to Be Myself'.

<sup>114</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, 'Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation'.

<sup>115</sup> Whitehead et. al., 'Transgender Lives'.

Mary Elise Lowe, 'From the Same Spirit: Receiving the Theological Gifts of Transgender Christians', *Dialog*, 56, 1, (2017), pp. 28–37, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12293>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

Derouen, 'Proclaiming the Truth of God's Transgender People'.

<sup>116</sup> Whitehead et. al., 'Transgender Lives'.

<sup>117</sup> Lowe, 'From the Same Spirit'.

<sup>118</sup> Derouen, 'Proclaiming the Truth of God's Transgender People'.

including practices of baptism and re-naming.<sup>119</sup> In all five articles, I felt that greater attention to experiences of community and relatedness may have been a helpful addition, given that, in each case, the reader is left with a fairly ego-centric narrative of trans experience.

Each of the articles considered in this section contributes something distinctive and valuable to trans-related theology. Reinsmith-Jones notes arising themes of 'authenticity', 'mirroring', and 'self-love'.<sup>120</sup> She argues that authenticity is the primary motivator for transitioning.<sup>121</sup> She goes on to highlight the significance of 'mirrors' and 'reflections' – of being able to recognise the self you see in the mirror.<sup>122</sup> She relates this mirroring theme to the theme of self-love, which she argues is reliant on congruent mirroring.<sup>123</sup> Whilst Reinsmith-Jones attends to these themes as they apply to the trans individual, my research suggests that authenticity and mirroring, in particular, are also key to trans understandings of the other, of relatedness, and of community, including church. Whitehead et. al. explore the way in which trans experiences mirror Christology in 'the harrowing movement from bewilderment to a celebration of God's extravagance', from the cross to resurrection.<sup>124</sup> Clark-King also suggests the theme of authenticity, in this case in relating to God.<sup>125</sup> Lowe suggests that trans people contribute the theological goods of celebrating co-creation, loving oneself, mind-body coherence, and the acceptance of spiritual gifts.<sup>126</sup> I also found that trans people have particular theological gifts. This might be an unsurprising discovery, given that a

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<sup>119</sup> Whitehead et. al., 'Transgender Lives', pp. 181-182.

<sup>120</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, 'Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation', pp. 80-82.

<sup>121</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, 'Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation', p. 80.

<sup>122</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, 'Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation', p. 81.

<sup>123</sup> Reinsmith-Jones, 'Transsexualism As a Model of Spiritual Transformation', pp. 81-82.

<sup>124</sup> Whitehead et. al., 'Transgender Lives', pp. 172.

<sup>125</sup> Clark-King, 'The Divine Call to Be Myself', p.332.

<sup>126</sup> Lowe, 'From the Same Spirit', p.28.

theologian might be assumed to suggest that everyone has gifts. Some of the participants of this research, though, have noticed their gifts being ignored or dismissed. Some struggle to notice their own gifts as a result. This unacknowledged giftedness has become a major theme in my thesis.<sup>127</sup> Derouen suggests that trans people gain and express the gifts of the Holy Spirit through transition and relying on a foundational journey of self-knowledge.<sup>128</sup> I concur that self-knowledge is a key gift that trans and non-binary people display, which often influences our theological understandings.

The move to trans discernment clearly contributes understandings to trans-related theology. It is notable, however, that these texts are still predominantly written from a cis perspective. There is a clear need for further research to show whether the trans people referred to in these articles would describe, and theorise from, their experiences in the same way as these authors. I also think that there is a need for care, so that we do not move from a defensive apologetic model to a practice of only using trans and non-binary people as sources of inspiration, as seen in disability studies.

Jan Grue explains that, in disability studies, 'inspiration porn' refers to:

the representation of disability as a desirable but undesired characteristic, usually by showing impairment as a visually or symbolically distinct

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<sup>127</sup> See 5.3 in this thesis.

<sup>128</sup> Derouen, 'Proclaiming the Truth of God's Transgender People', p.568.

biophysical deficit in one person, a deficit that can and must be overcome through the display of physical prowess.<sup>129</sup>

I am concerned that if trans-related theology continues to be dominated by apologetics we will see a similar type of representation of transness, whereby trans and non-binary identities are seen as popular or trendy, whilst also seeing that is problematic to be trans – the most difficult and painful parts of trans and non-binary people's stories are highlighted, suggesting that they are overcome by cisnormative 'passing'<sup>130</sup> whereby the trans person is 'healed' by being able to present as cis following gruelling surgical processes.

This cisnormativity must not be allowed to develop uncritiqued in trans-related theology. Rather, we must seek to enable trans and non-binary people to consider and share our own understandings, with reference to our identities and lived experiences, as sources of knowledge and teaching, not merely as subjects whose stories are simplified into moving or inspiring stories of binary-gendered triumph over undesirable dysphoria and/or gender nonconformity.

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<sup>129</sup> Jan Grue, 'The problem with inspiration porn: a tentative definition and a provisional critique', *Disability & Society*, 31, 6, (2016), pp. 838–849, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1205473>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>130</sup> Passing refers to a trans person appearing to others as a cis person of the same gender. It is problematic when seen as a marker of success.

### 2.1.3. From Apologetic Material to Lived Experiences

The following trans-apologetic texts written by trans people move this body of work from apologetic material towards description of, and theorisation about, the experiences of trans people. Here, I attend to texts in which trans and non-binary people share their stories with an apparent aim of explaining what it is like to be trans, including material that is apologetic and material that moves towards the discernment of gifts.

One such text is 'Part 2: Sibyls' Stories' in *This is my Body*.<sup>131</sup> I have already considered some of the apologetic contents of this volume. Part 2, however, allows trans people to tell their own stories. Participants include seven trans women and one trans man. There is a clear need for more attention to transmasculine and non-binary identities and experiences. Whilst the stories told are largely autobiographical, there is some attention to Christian theology. Jemma describes her transition as a pilgrimage,<sup>132</sup> Michelle describes it as a resurrection,<sup>133</sup> Carol notes the limits of language in describing God,<sup>134</sup> and Abigail explores the possibility of being Christian and antinomian<sup>135</sup> and considers the importance of creation.<sup>136</sup> These passing theological references, peppered through participants' testimonies, warrant further exploration. It is clear that, for the participants, describing their identities and experiences naturally included touching on some of their theological understandings. This observation hints at the potential for trans-written trans theologies.

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<sup>131</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 119-173.

<sup>132</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>133</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, p. 141.

<sup>134</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, p. 149.

<sup>135</sup> Antinomian refers, here, to the rejection of legalism.

<sup>136</sup> Beardsley and O'Brien, *This is My Body*, p. 153.



Similarly, *The Book of Queer Prophets* gives space to LGBTQ+ people to tell their own stories.<sup>137</sup> This volume includes testimonies from three trans and non-binary Christians: Jay, Karl, and Rachel. Jay, who is transmasculine, describes his experience of conversion – meeting God in a cathedral, after challenging God to show up.<sup>138</sup> Karl, who is a trans man, writes about the interweaving of his vocation and transition.<sup>139</sup> <sup>140</sup> Rachel, a trans woman whose book is considered in 2.3.2. below, writes about trauma and embodiment, Christology, and vocation, as she tells her story.<sup>141</sup>

Whilst the texts explored in this section are not explicitly grounded and/or constructive theologies, they highlight the fact that theological ideas are an inherent part of the identities, experiences, and self-understandings of trans Christians. They also, however, highlight the difficulties that researchers have had in recruiting a diverse field of participants who identify as trans and Christian. In particular, there is a clear need for further attention to non-binary identities, experiences, and understandings.

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<sup>137</sup> Ruth Hunt, *The Book of Queer Prophets: 24 Writers on Sexuality and Religion*, (London: William Collins, 2020).

<sup>138</sup> Hunt, *The Book of Queer Prophets*. pp. 121-128.

<sup>139</sup> Transition refers to the social and/or clinical process of changing one's presentation/embodiment in line with one's authentic gender identity.

<sup>140</sup> Hunt, *The Book of Queer Prophets*. pp. 171-182.

<sup>141</sup> Hunt, *The Book of Queer Prophets*. pp. 195-206.

## **2.2. Experiences**

The experiences of trans people have been explored in the fields of clinical and pastoral care, and practical theology. These texts, which focus on the provision of clinical and pastoral care for trans people, are not explicitly theological. They do, however, highlight the connections or, more often, disconnections, between religious belonging and trans wellbeing and, as such, show the need for more work to be done in the area of trans-related theology.

### **2.2.1. Clinical and Pastoral Care**

In the fields of clinical and pastoral care, practitioners and scholars have explored the experiences of trans people with a view to improving care. In this section, I consider five clinical texts which explore the mental health implications of trans experiences of religion, four pastoral texts which attend to the pastoral care of trans people, and one text which sits between these two genres and considers the potential for trans chaplaincy in healthcare settings, such as Gender Identity Clinics.<sup>142</sup>

Clinical articles which explore the treatment, and mental health, of trans people highlight the effect that religion, in particular Christianity, can have on trans people and on the reactions of others to trans identities. I do not critique these articles in depth, as they are outside of my field of study. They do deserve attention here, however, given their theological and ecclesiological implications.

Melissa Conroy in 'Treating Transgendered Children', and Juleen K. Buser, Kristopher M. Goodrich, Melissa Luke and Trevor J. Buser in 'A Narratology', explore the ways in

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<sup>142</sup> Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) refers to an N.H.S. service which manages the clinical treatment of people in relation to their gender identity.

which religious belief systems affect the treatment of LGBTQ+ people.<sup>143</sup> Conroy draws on psychological, sociological, and theological texts to show how the Genesis dimorphic sex model, which relies on a diagnosis of disorder, rather than recognising and affirming diversity, affects the treatment of transgender children today.<sup>144</sup> Buser et al. use interviews to consider the way in which counsellors have dealt with themes of religion and spirituality with LGBTQ+ clients.<sup>145</sup> Their study showed that counsellors' beliefs created biases and assumptions which led to microaggressions and/or the avoidance of topics of religion and spirituality. They also found that spirituality and religion is a key topic for LGBTQ+ counselling clients.

These articles have clear implications for both ecclesiology and theology. Both articles show the potential harm of narrow church teaching. Conroy shows that ecclesial proliferation of the dimorphic, binary model harms trans and gender non-conforming children.<sup>146</sup> Buser et al. show that church teaching affects LGBTQ+ people and, further, affects how people in the caring professions treat them.<sup>147</sup> Both articles clearly show the need for the expansion of theological understandings in relation to sex and gender. Conroy, in particular, highlights the need for a better theological anthropology which explores what it means to be a creation from a trans perspective.<sup>148</sup> Chapter five of this thesis considers anthropology, including createdness.

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<sup>143</sup> Melissa Conroy, (2010) 'Treating Transgendered Children: Clinical Methods and Religious Mythology', *Zygon*, 45, 2, (2010), pp. 301–316. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2010.01082.x>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

Juleen K. Buser, Kristopher M. Goodrich, Melissa Luke, and Trevor J. Buser, 'A Narratology of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Clients' Experiences Addressing Religious and Spiritual Issues in Counseling', *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 5, (2011), pp. 282–303, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2011.632395>> [accessed 9 March 2022].

<sup>144</sup> Conroy, 'Treating Transgendered Children'.

<sup>145</sup> Buser et. al., 'A Narratology'.

<sup>146</sup> Conroy, 'Treating Transgendered Children'.

<sup>147</sup> Buser et. al., 'A Narratology'.

<sup>148</sup> Conroy, 'Treating Transgendered Children'.

In their respective articles, Denise L. Levy and Jessica R. Lo, Brenda L. Beagan and Brenda Hattie, and G. Tyler Lefevor, Brianna M. Sprague, Caroline C. Boyd-Rogers, Abigail C.P. Smack each explore the ways in which religious beliefs affect LGBTQ+ people themselves.<sup>149</sup> Levy and Lo use interviews to explore the integration of faith and gender identity.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Beagan and Hattie use interviews to examine the intersections between LGBTQ+ identities and spiritual/religious identities.<sup>151</sup> Lefevor et al. use demographic data to explore psychological distress in relation to sources of support, including religious belonging.<sup>152</sup> Theirs is the only quantitative study considered in this review.

All three studies clearly show the intersections of religious/spiritual and gender-related journeys, raising important questions for churches. Levy et al. and Beagan et. al. both found that transition may lead to people being dechurched. This raises the question of how churches might better support trans people through transition.<sup>153</sup> Further, Beagan et. al. found that a disconnection from embodiment is common amongst LGBTQ+ Christians. This suggests that limited church teaching on embodiment is harmful. Lefevor et. al. found that, in the general population, religious belonging was correlated with better mental health, whereas in the trans population there was a high rate of

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<sup>149</sup> Denise L. Levy, and Jessica R. Lo, 'Transgender, Transsexual, and Gender Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing: The Process of Resolving Conflict Between Gender Identity and Faith', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 32, 1, (2013), pp. 60–83, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2013.749079>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

Brenda L. Beagan, and Brenda Hattie, 'Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration', *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counselling*, 9, 2, (2015) pp. 92–117. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2015.1029204>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

G. Tyler Lefevor, Brianna M. Sprague, Caroline C. Boyd-Rogers, Abigail C.P. Smack, 'How well do various types of support buffer psychological distress among transgender and gender nonconforming students?', *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20, 1, (2019), pp. 39–48, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1452172>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>150</sup> Levy and Lo., 'Transgender, Transsexual, and Gender Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing'.

<sup>151</sup> Beagan and Hattie., 'Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration'.

<sup>152</sup> Lefevor et al., 'How well do various types of support buffer psychological distress'.

<sup>153</sup> Levy and Lo, 'Transgender, Transsexual, and Gender Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing'. Beagan and Hattie, 'Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration'.

leaving one's religion. In other words, Lefevor et. al. argue that a person who is cisgender and religious is likely to experience better mental health than a person who is cisgender and not religious. They argue that the opposite is true for trans people who are more likely to leave their religion due to the ill effect it has on their mental health. This, then, is a negative spiral which denies trans people the beneficial effects on mental health that cis people experience when participating in religious belonging. I feel that this argument is, perhaps, stretching the evidence somewhat. Nevertheless, the high rates of trans people becoming dechurched does raise the question of how churches might retain trans members and support them.

Each of these studies showed that trans people, even those who are not studying religion in a formal setting, engage in theological study with a striking degree of depth and interest, which suggests that this demographic may have much to contribute to the theological discipline. This is in stark contrast to the harm that each study showed that narrow theological teaching causes. However, each study also showed that a high percentage of trans people leave their churches, and that many separate their spirituality from understandings of religion. How, then, might be possible to hear, and learn from, trans theological understandings?

Several works in the field of practical theology aim to highlight, and consider response to, the pastoral questions raised by the clinical material: Are churches neglecting or causing harm to trans members and, if so, how can they do better? There are three substantial texts which consider this topic, and which I explore in some depth. First,

though, I would like to mention Craig Rubano's article, 'Where do the Mermaids Stand?'<sup>154</sup>

Rubano focusses on the pastoral care of 'gender creative' children.<sup>155</sup> He uses a reader-response analysis of Matthew 15: 21-29, the story of a Canaanite woman challenging Jesus, as a lens through which to consider this topic. Rubano's argument draws on therapeutic, theological, and pedagogical texts to suggest that the Canaanite woman challenging Jesus on behalf of her child is analogous with the parent of a gender creative child, challenging religious authorities on behalf of their child. He highlights the need to 'do ever better' in creating safer space for such children.<sup>156</sup> This paper is important because of its compelling and creative use of a passage of scripture which is not usually attended to in discussions on trans identities. Further, it enters the discussion about trans children, which tends to be polemic and has been largely avoided in theological texts. There is a clear need for further research into the needs and, perhaps, the theological understandings of trans and gender creative children and their parents.

In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, Mark A. Yarhouse considers the pastoral care of trans people.<sup>157</sup> Yarhouse draws on a wide range of sources, and much of its content focuses on explaining trans identities, their potential causation, and the medical treatment trans people may receive. There is a sense in which the text overly medicalises trans identities, assuming the pathology of gender dysphoria and the need

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<sup>154</sup> Craig Rubano, 'Where do the Mermaids Stand? Toward a "Gender-Creative" Pastoral Sensitivity', *Pastoral Psychology*, 65, (2016), pp. 821–834, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-015-0680-2>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>155</sup> Rubano, 'Where do the Mermaids Stand?', p.821.

<sup>156</sup> Rubano, 'Where do the Mermaids Stand?', p.833.

<sup>157</sup> Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: navigating transgender issues in a changing culture*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015).

for treatment.<sup>158</sup> This is not surprising, given that Yarhouse's text draws on his own work as a counsellor. The final two chapters of this text do, however, focus on 'Christian Response'.<sup>159</sup> I recognise that this text may be helpful in a traditional or conservative church environment, helping those who reject trans identities to come to a more balanced and compassionate understanding. I feel, however, that the tightrope that Yarhouse tries to walk between the traditional church on one side and trans theory on the other compromises both. Yarhouse uses case studies in an analytical way, examining the trans person rather than allowing them to examine themselves.<sup>160</sup> He suggests that there are three frameworks within which gender identity can be explored: diversity, integrity, and disability. He largely attributes the diversity framework to the trans community and the integrity framework to the church.<sup>161</sup> This seems to imply a polemic division between two communities and worldviews within which, in fact, there is overlap. Further, Yarhouse suggests that the trans community overly advocates for what he describes as 'invasive steps'.<sup>162</sup>

Yarhouse does also critique a shame-inducing response<sup>163</sup> and, instead, suggests a more balanced approach with a focus on grace and pastoral care.<sup>164</sup> In concluding, Yarhouse suggests seven areas of work for Christians to do in response to gender identity:

- Analysis of trans theory.
- Consideration of, and response to, clinical best practice.

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<sup>158</sup> See Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, pp.101-124.

<sup>159</sup> See Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, pp.125-162.

<sup>160</sup> See Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, pp.125-126.

<sup>161</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, p. 132.

<sup>162</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, p. 135.

<sup>163</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, p. 135.

<sup>164</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, pp. 134-144.

- Hearing the stories of trans Christians.
- Witnessing to gender and sex norms.
- Engaging politely with those who deconstruct gender and sex norms.
- Considering ecclesial best practice.
- Providing pastoral care.<sup>165</sup>

These seem like reasonable suggestions and show a clear need for further work in this area. There is a risk, however, that Yarhouse is providing a roadmap for those who wish to undermine trans identities, as well as those who wish to affirm them.

Whilst Yarhouse provides clear and compelling information and advice for churches regarding gender identity, there is an underlying conservative bias. The argument made relies on the assumption that dimorphic sex and binary gender is not only a norm but also a virtue. Yarhouse does not use theological sources to construct this argument. Rather, he simply assumes them – arguing as if theological truths are a given, rather than evidencing them or explaining his theological assumptions and theories. In other words, he doesn't really discuss theology. Further, Yarhouse establishes the conversation as a diametric debate between church and culture, which contributes to the environment of fear for trans people and undermines trans voices. Finally, Yarhouse implies that Christians and churches should compromise their theological understandings in order to care for trans people and that, conversely, trans people should compromise their transitions in order to accept norms of sex and gender. This implication is worrying, as it suggests that it is impossible to come to a thoroughly trans-inclusive theological understanding of personhood. As such, I feel that Yarhouse's contribution to trans-related theology is a destabilising one,

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<sup>165</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, p. 160.



suggesting that it is possible to be pastorally inclusive and theologically exclusive. I hope that, conversely, my research might demonstrate the potential for thoroughly affirming trans-authored grounded and/or constructive theologies.

Two of Christina Beardsley and Chris Dowd's texts, also considered in section 2.2. of this thesis, contribute more helpfully towards an affirming understanding of pastorally caring for trans people. In *Transfaith* Beardsley and Dowd enable trans people to explicate their own identities, explore biblical understandings of trans identities, provide liturgies for use in the affirmation of trans people, and reflect pastorally on trans identities.<sup>166</sup> In their chapter on pastoral care, Beardsley and Dowd draw on data from focus groups with trans people in order to suggest useful insights for Christians and churches.<sup>167</sup>

Beardsley and Dowd set out three foundational assumptions. Firstly, the implicit acceptance of trans identities, secondly the importance of supporting family members and friends, and thirdly, the fact that anti-trans practices are damaging.<sup>168</sup> These foundational assumptions are in stark contrast to Yarhouse's assumption of a preference for dimorphic sex and binary gender as norms and virtues.<sup>169</sup> Beardsley and Dowd's affirming foundations and inclusive methodology enable them to suggest thirteen insights which all pastoral carers should be aware of.

Five of these insights are, I suggest, particularly important for a) the ecclesial context and b) the creation of trans-related theology. They are as follows:

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<sup>166</sup> Chris Dowd, Christina Beardsley, and Justin Tanis, *Transfaith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2018).

<sup>167</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, pp. 134-148.

<sup>168</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 134.

<sup>169</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*.

- ‘There is a marked difference between celebration and toleration of trans identities’.<sup>170</sup>
- ‘Clergy have tremendous power to hurt or heal’.<sup>171</sup>
- ‘Our language and understandings [...] are often inadequate’.<sup>172</sup>
- ‘Testimony is a powerful and healing tool’.<sup>173</sup>
- ‘An active forgiveness must be sought’.<sup>174</sup>

These insights imply the following moves: reflecting on past errors, preventing future harm, creating affirming theology, and enabling reconciliation. They suggest theological themes of createdness, personhood, sin, and redemption. They do so in a way that provides a foundation for practical responses to trans identities in the ecclesial context and highlights the potential for further theological research in this area.

In *Trans Affirming Churches*, Beardsley and Dowd update and build on their earlier material.<sup>175</sup> In chapters four and six, respectively, they reflect on the pastoral needs of those who are related to a trans person and the ways in which a congregation might respond pastorally and affirmingly to trans identities.<sup>176</sup>

In chapter four, Beardsley and Dowd draw on interviews with trans people and their parents to explore the realities of families which include a trans member.<sup>177</sup> They

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<sup>170</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 142.

<sup>171</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 143.

<sup>172</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 144.

<sup>173</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 146.

<sup>174</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 147.

<sup>175</sup> Chris Dowd, Christina Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches: How to Celebrate Gender-Variant People and Their Loved Ones*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020).

<sup>176</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*, pp. 89-106, 125-154.

<sup>177</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*, pp. 89-106.

suggest that the ecclesial environment within which each family was situated affected their feelings around, and understandings of, trans identities. They go on to suggest that churches should offer theological, emotional, and practical support to the families of trans people. This chapter helpfully connects familial and ecclesial experiences, highlighting the need for ecclesial change and making practical suggestions.

In chapter six, Beardsley and Dowd again draw on interview data to show the differences between exclusive, conditionally inclusive, and affirming churches, and to explore what helpful pastoral care for trans congregation members might comprise.<sup>178</sup> The accommodations suggested are practical, as well as pastoral, and provide a helpful roadmap towards becoming a trans-affirming church. The data drawn on in *Trans Affirming Churches* is extensive, showing careful attention to the experiences and understandings of those being discussed.<sup>179</sup>

In exploring the potential for 'Healthcare Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care for Trans People', Susannah Cornwall helpfully considers the intersections of clinical and pastoral care.<sup>180</sup> Cornwall argues that it is possible for chaplaincy to help to fill the void left by long waiting lists for Gender Identity Clinics but that this would require proper training for chaplains regarding trans identities. Cornwall's argument is compelling and well supported, although it is important to note that spiritual care can never fully replace clinical care, or fill the therapeutic gap left by extremely long waiting lists. There is the potential for further theological research regarding the practices of Gender Identity Clinics, the beliefs that underlie them and the ways in which clinicians and spiritual

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<sup>178</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*, pp. 125-154.

<sup>179</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*.

<sup>180</sup> Susannah Cornwall, 'Healthcare Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care for Trans People: Envisaging the Future', *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, 7.1. (2019), pp. 8–27.

carers might best collaborate. The training that Cornwall suggests also highlights the importance of continuing to develop robust grounded and/or constructive theological understandings that can form a foundation for praxis.

### 2.2.2. From Experiences to Theology

Cornwall's work has also been key in the move from understandings of trans experiences towards trans written grounded and/or constructive theologies. In 'Recognizing the Full Spectrum of Gender', Cornwall argues effectively that there is a need for theology which recognises trans identities, experiences, and understandings.<sup>181</sup> Writing in *Feminist Theology*, Cornwall suggests that the furthering of the feminist theology discipline 'must involve a re-examination and re-negotiation' of its understandings of sex and gender.<sup>182</sup> In doing so, Cornwall makes a balanced and persuasive argument for an increase in intersectional feminist theology which celebrates, rather than denigrates, trans and intersex voices.<sup>183</sup> I suggest that the discussion of feminism in my methodology section highlights the ways in which feminism and trans theory have further diverged. Whilst there have been some moves towards trans inclusion in feminist theology, there is still much work to be done. Given my feminist paradigm, this thesis contributes towards that body of work.

Six years later, the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* issued a volume of papers initiated by a round table conversation on Max Strassfeld's 'Transing Religious Studies'.<sup>184</sup> Strassfeld argues that, rather than assuming that theology is

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<sup>181</sup> Susannah Cornwall, (2012) 'Recognizing the Full Spectrum of Gender? Transgender, Intersex and the Futures of Feminist Theology', *Feminist Theology*, 20, 3, (2012), pp. 236–241, <<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0966735012436895>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>182</sup> Cornwall, 'Recognizing the Full Spectrum', p. 236.

<sup>183</sup> Intersex refers to a person whose sex characteristics do not correlate with their binary sex as assigned at birth. The term 'intersex traits' may also be used and is preferred by some.

<sup>184</sup> Max Strassfeld, 'Transing Religious Studies', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 37–53, <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.1.05>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

'cisgendered', religious studies scholars must 'trans religious studies to engage the depths of trans religiosity'.<sup>185</sup> In this thesis, I make the same argument for the study of theology. Whilst many of the papers that respond to Strassfeld focus on religious studies, rather than theology, five responses move the discussion towards trans written theologies. Ellen T. Armour makes a persuasive argument for an increase in attention to trans identities and experiences.<sup>186</sup> Building on ontological theory, Armour suggests that trans lived experiences have the potential to 'trouble' the lines between religion and non-religion, and theory and praxis.<sup>187</sup> By doing so, she shows the potential of trans-written theologies. Her paper is, however, an examination of trans identity rather than a conversation with trans people. As such, any arising theology would be a theology of trans phenomenology, rather than a trans-written theology. What I mean is that Armour studies the phenomenon of being trans, rather than listening explicitly to trans voices. I believe that the phenomenon of being trans has much to contribute to Christian theology. I also think, however, that trans voices must be prioritised, and that an overuse of trans phenomenology risks objectifying trans people. I argue, therefore, that reference to the phenomenon of trans identities without attention to, or discussion with, trans people is problematic. As such, Armour's article suggests the potential for further work shared between feminist and trans theologians who may, in conversation, be able to make connections between lived experience and academic theory.

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<sup>185</sup> Max Strassfeld, 'Transing Religious Studies', p. 53.

<sup>186</sup> Ellen T. Armour, 'Transing the Study of Religion: A (Christian) Theological Response', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 58–63.

<sup>187</sup> Ellen T. Armour, 'Transing the Study of Religion: A (Christian) Theological Response', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 62–63.

Three other contributors each move towards trans-written theologies from the perspective of their own identities and lived experiences. Roberto Che Espinoza argues for an 'ontology of becoming' grounded in motion, rather than static binaries.<sup>188</sup> This suggests a compelling hermeneutic from which trans-written theologies may be constructed. Joy Ladin and Zohar Weiman-Kelman write Jewish theologies from a trans perspective. Whilst this thesis focusses on Christian theologies, their contributions are noteworthy, particularly given the lack of Christian contributions. Ladin powerfully explains the ways in which intersections between her trans identity and experiences, and her relationship with God contribute to her theological understandings. This leads her to suggest that the identities and experiences of trans people can contribute to theology by 'exceed[ing], confound[ing], or defy[ing]' categorisation.<sup>189</sup> Weiman-Kelman, a trans theologian, highlights the ways in which theological understandings can arise out of the spiritual practices of trans people.<sup>190</sup> There is a clear potential for trans-authored grounded and/or constructive theologies to be constructed on the foundations that these three articles lay. Such theologies could be grounded in motion, rather than stasis, could challenge binaries and systems, and could attend to the identities, experiences, and practices of trans people.

### 2.3. Towards Theologies Authored by Trans People

There are some texts that can be described as trans-related constructive theologies. Those which prioritise trans voices and/or are authored by trans people are, however,

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<sup>188</sup> Roberto Che Espinoza, 'Transing Religion: Moving Beyond the Logic of the (Hetero)Norm of Binaries', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 88–92, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.1.13>> [accessed 10 March 2022, p. 91].

<sup>189</sup> Ladin, Joy, 'In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 53–58, <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.1.06>> [accessed 10 March 2022], p. 57].

<sup>190</sup> Zohar Weiman-Kelman, 'Transing Back the Texts, Queering Jewish Prayer', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 34, 1, (2018), pp. 80–84, <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.1.11>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

partial. In section four of this literature review, I explore the theological components of trans autobiography, and the moves made towards constructive theologies which draw on trans identities by cis theologians.

### **2.3.1. Trans Voices**

Some trans theologians have written autobiographical texts which include theological content. These are a vital step towards trans-written grounded and/or constructive theologies. I suggest, though, that they are partial and interdisciplinary. This is not, in itself, problematic. It does, however, show that fulsome trans-authored, trans-grounded and/or constructive theologies do not yet exist. Rather, trans theologians have used autobiography to share theological insights in a more popular, experience led, genre. The two autobiographies which I explore in this section are recent and contain clear theological elements. They are autoethnographical as well as autobiographical, with each author providing theological analysis of their own personal experiences.

In *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, Alex Clare-Young shares their experiences of vocation and transition as a non-binary person.<sup>191</sup> <sup>192</sup> Clare-Young's writing is clearly autobiographical, with the sections 'Beginnings', 'Transforming', and 'Transformative' structured respectively around their childhood, early transition, and continued development.<sup>193</sup> There is also content that could be described as practical theology,

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<sup>191</sup> Alex Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2019).

<sup>192</sup> I have reviewed this text in the third person for consistency but acknowledge the challenges in critically reviewing my own work and do not claim objectivity.

<sup>193</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see pp.15-17.

including reflective questions, group activities, and prayer at the end of each section,<sup>194</sup> and extensive liturgical resources at the end of the book.<sup>195</sup>

As well as being autobiographical and practical, however, *Transgender. Christian. Human.* is also autoethnographical and theological. In each chapter Clare-Young examines and critiques their own identity, experiences, and actions, as well as the identities, experiences and actions of others, and highlights arising theological insights. Their experiences of childhood lead to theological anthropology which carefully considers the links between embodiment and identity.<sup>196</sup> Their experiences of difficulty and pain lead to Christology, in which Clare-Young suggests that 'transformation can only come out of stasis'.<sup>197</sup> In exploring their transition, Clare-Young returns to understandings of embodiment, attending to the image of God and the idea that the body is a temple.<sup>198</sup>

Whilst *Transgender. Christian. Human.* does contain theological insights, its attention to theological sources is light. If this is theology, it is theology largely borne out of experience, with some attention to scripture. There is no substantive attention to reason or tradition. There is clear potential for further research regarding some of the theological claims that Clare-Young makes, both in relation to additional sources, and in research with other trans and non-binary people.

In *Dazzling Darkness*, Rachel Mann shares her experiences of the intersections between being trans and being disabled.<sup>199</sup> Originally published in 2012, the second

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<sup>194</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see p. 29.

<sup>195</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see pp. 114-134.

<sup>196</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see p. 28.

<sup>197</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see p. 49.

<sup>198</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see p. 71.

<sup>199</sup> Rachel Mann, *Dazzling Darkness, 2nd edn*, (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2020).



edition of *Dazzling Darkness* was published in 2020. In this edition, Mann explores her priesthood in more depth. Mann's writing is unflinchingly personal, and unapologetically poetic. Indeed, these attributes are essential to Mann's appeal and persuasiveness. Simultaneously, though, Mann attends in great depth, and with appropriate care, to both theology and practice. Mann suggests that her experiences of being trans and of being disabled impact upon her theological understandings and her practice of priesthood. In the introduction alone, Mann attends to theologians including Eckhart, Merton, and Ignatius; to understandings including the identity and characteristics of God, anthropology, language, and hermeneutics; and to practices including interpretation, confession, prayer, and pilgrimage.<sup>200</sup>

Mann's autoethnographical theological method involves analysing her own experiences – experiences described in scripture and experiences reflected on in Christian theology. She uses gender theory and literary techniques to critique and draw analysis between theory and experience. She describes her own experiences of both dysphoria and euphoria in depth and critiques assumed norms. She also reflects on the gendered and genderqueer nature of ministry and rails against theologies and practices that marginalise and/or abuse the queer, disabled body. Her writing is largely poetic, rather than analytical. As well as some trans-apologetic content, Mann attends to most of the main themes of Christian theology. She is continually reflexive, examining and repenting of her privilege and considering unheard voices. Mann's concluding chapter outlines a theology of 'the God of "The Other" or the "Stranger"'.<sup>201</sup> In doing so, she powerfully illustrates the way in which experiences of being othered can inform expansive theological understandings. She shows that it is not the 'known'

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<sup>200</sup> Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, pp. 17-21.

<sup>201</sup> Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, p. 138.

– in Mann’s case, gendered and embodied norms – that can point us to God but, rather, the ‘unknown’ – gendered and embodied diversity. God comes as the stranger, not as one who is straightforward to understand.

Similar to Clare-Young, the genre of Mann’s work is not academic but popular. As such, her use of traditional sources of theological reason could be seen as somewhat light. I think, however, that such a critique is outweighed by Mann’s casual reference to countless theologians throughout and her heuristic style which enables the reader to *do* theology, rather than merely to read it. In her style of writing, therefore, Mann challenges the boundaries between disciplines, and envisions an inclusive and useable form of academic theology. Mann’s critique of her own privilege together with her pointing to the need to consider other voices throughout, highlights the need for further work in the area of trans-related theology which attends to diversity.<sup>202</sup>

Both Clare-Young and Mann write theologically and apologetically in ways which trouble the boundaries between practical and systematic/constructive/grounded theological disciplines, between popular and academic style, and between autobiography and autoethnography. In critiquing their work, I have suggested that it does not fully or comfortably sit within the disciplines of constructive theology. However, these texts are moves towards grounded theology, theology which is built on lived experience, which challenges understandings of disciplines as being binary or static. It is the case, however, that fulsome unapologetic grounded trans-authored trans theologies do not yet exist.

### **2.3.2. Towards Grounded and/or Constructive Theologies**

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<sup>202</sup> Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, pp. 25-26.

With the notable exceptions of Virginia R. Mollenkott's *Omnigender*,<sup>203</sup> and parts of Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood's *Trans/formations*,<sup>204</sup> theologians did not attempt to write constructive or grounded theologies that attend to trans experience until 2013. One in-depth, cis-authored trans-related theology has been written within the past decade. This is an important contribution to the theological discipline, which moves us closer to the creation of trans-authored grounded and/or constructive theologies.

In *Grounding Theology in quotidian experiences of complex gender*, Jennie Barnsley creates grounded theology, with attention to trans experience, and with a focus on God's characteristics.<sup>205</sup> Barnsley draws on gender theory, theological method and theory, particularly feminist theology, and the experiences of trans people. Further, she argues that theologies that rely on binary understandings of gender are not sufficient. Barnsley's method is notable for its attention to trans experience, as well as gender theory, and its careful use of theological sources. I wonder, however, if theology written by a cis researcher can be understood as fully grounded in trans experience. Barnsley does examine her own gender identity in detail.<sup>206</sup> Her self-exploration does, however, centre around femaleness and feminism, and does not fully attend to the differences between the ways in which cis people and trans and non-binary people experience gender. There is a risk of flattening experiences of gender to an extreme that belies diversity and distinction.

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<sup>203</sup> Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*, (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

<sup>204</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations*, (London: SCM Press, 2009).

<sup>205</sup> Jennie Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology in quotidian experiences of complex gender: a feminist approach: PhD', (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2013) <<https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/4188/>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

<sup>206</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', see pp. 21-26.

In chapters three to five, Barnsley draws on research with three participants: Leigh, Robin and Sol. Each chapter includes a considered pen portrait of the participant, followed by analysis. Whilst the arising insights are compelling and novel, the stories and insights of Barnsley's participants are overshadowed by the strength of her reference to gender theory and theological reasoning. As a result, Barnsley's theology is grounded in trans phenomenology, rather than trans experience. Whilst Barnsley's use of theological method is compelling to a fellow theologian, I am left wondering whether her participants would recognise themselves in the arising theory, or whether they may find it abstracted and technical.

None of the above is to the detriment of Barnsley's work. The arising description of God's thinness, proteanism and opacity is impactful. There is a clear potential for further research regarding these characteristics as lived out by trans people. Our approaches to grounded theology, though, are different. Coining the term 'grounded theology', Barnsley addresses the question of 'how can theology be grounded?' by use of distinctly theological method.<sup>207</sup> Conversely, I address the same question by use of method that relies heavily on experience. There is a need for further research in grounded theology that explores these methodological differences and highlights the ways in which contemporary theologians are transgressing and transforming traditional disciplines and methods.

One additional soon-to-be-published text, which I welcome and look forward to reading, deserves mention here. In *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance*, Cornwall constructs theology, with attention to trans experience.<sup>208</sup> Pre-publication

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<sup>207</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', see pp. 102-103.

<sup>208</sup> Cornwall, Susannah, *Constructive Theology and Gender Variance*, publication details to be confirmed.

drafts which Cornwall kindly invited me to read show that this valuable text will further demonstrate the potential of novel and transformational trans-related constructive theologies and will be grounded in the lived-experiences and insights of trans people.

## 2.4. Summing Up

Trans identities and experiences have been studied for over a decade by scholars in the fields of practical theology, psychology, religious studies, and theology, with a trajectory from explaining and defending trans identities, through exploring trans experiences and improving the pastoral and clinical care of trans people, towards the creation of trans-related grounded and/or constructive theologies. The latter, however, is a relatively new area of research which, to date, has largely been completed by cis people.

Whilst the texts in this field written by cis theologians are essential for both the inclusion of trans people and the expansion of theological thought, I am concerned by the lack of trans voices in trans-related theology. The voices of trans theologians, with our particular lived experiences and the arising understandings, are not generally being heard. When trans voices are heard, they are predominantly binary and additionally focussed on the apologetic. This lack of plentiful and diverse grounded and/or constructive theology written by trans people risks forcing a false uniformity on trans identities, experiences, and understandings and contributing to cisnormativity. Further, the field of theology is missing the contributions that trans theologians can make. Finally, the lack of trans contributions to theology negatively impacts the extent to which churches and Christian individuals can understand and relate to trans people.

I contend that two parallel trajectories are needed, one of which offers grounded and/or constructive theologies based on the phenomena of trans identities and experiences, and the other which offers trans-authored grounded and/or constructive theologies based on our own identities, lived experiences, and insights. Both of these research and writing trajectories are valid and necessary. In much needed cis-authored trans-

related grounded and/or constructive theologies, writers further the trajectory of theologies that not only recognise, but centralise, the phenomena of trans identities and experiences. The parallel step, which might further the composition of grounded and/or constructive theologies by trans people, has not yet been taken. It is that step to which I attend in this thesis.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1. Research Method**

Trans and non-binary voices are just beginning to be heard in Christian theology. Our voices are, however, still marginalised and often confined to ethical debates. By conducting this research, I have produced a polyphonic, grounded, trans and non-binary theology. I have enabled ten trans and non-binary voices to speak theology into being, and to share some of my own theological understandings, too.

This chapter explores my fieldwork method. The aim of this fieldwork was to learn something about the identities, experiences, and understandings of a variety of trans and non-binary Christians. The chapter begins with an explanation of my research paradigm, which draws on insights gleaned from grounded theory, feminist theory, particularly feminist standpoint theory, and queer theory. I then explore autoethnography, the use of my own identity, experiences, and understandings as research data. I attend to critiques of autoethnography, before moving to discuss queer autoethnography. I study three autoethnographical texts in an exploration of the differences between evocative and analytical autoethnography, before discussing the ways in which I have practiced autoethnography as part of my fieldwork.

The attention then turns to my participants. I explain the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the research sample, and explore the importance of attention to diversity and, in particular, to unheard voices. I then discuss the practice of fieldwork, including recruitment and screening, conducting and transcribing interviews, and analysing data. This includes some discussion of changes necessitated by the Covid19 situation. Finally, I share short biographical profiles to introduce my ten participants.



### 3.1.1. Research Paradigm

The paradigm of my research is queer; rooted in interpretivism and utilising grounded theory and feminist theory. Any theory is complexified by the lived realities of trans and gender-nonconforming individuals and, indeed, by the fieldwork process. In what follows I explain each of the choices made in structuring a research paradigm, explore my reasons for using the above theories, consider the ways in which lived realities complexify and challenge theory, and outline the imperatives that this research paradigm creates for methodology.

#### 3.1.1.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory describes research practices that draw on data that is 'grounded' in the lived realities and testimonies of research participants, and then developed through coding and analysis. Grounded theory is, therefore, grounded in the actual lived experiences of those who are most affected by the topic being researched.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> For more on grounded theory see Kathleen M. Charmaz, *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2006).

cf. Melanie Birks, & Jane Mills, *Grounded theory: A practical guide*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2011).

Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*, Englewood Cliffs, (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969).

Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, diversity and the rise of sociological research*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Kathleen M. Charmaz, 'Grounded theory methods in social justice research', in Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2011), pp. 359–380.

John W. Creswell & Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.), (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2007).

Barney G. Glaser, *Basics of grounded theory analysis: Emergence vs. forcing*, Mill Valley, (CA: Sociology Press, 1992).

Barney G. Glaser, & Anselm L. Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory*, (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

Wendy A. Hall, & Peter Callery, 'Enhancing the rigor of grounded theory: Incorporating reflexivity and relationality' in *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(2), 257–272.10.1177/104973201129119082, 2001.

Ann Hartman, 'Many ways of knowing', *Social Work*, 35(1), 3, 1990.

Jane C. Hood, 'Orthodoxy vs. power: The defining traits of grounded theory', in Antony Bryant & Kathleen M. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2007), pp. 151–164.

Grounded theory fits within the interpretivist paradigm, allowing the researcher to pay attention to data which is a) fluid and b) self-contradictory. Grounded theory is developed inductively from data and arises out of a question, rather than a hypothesis. The question that I sought to answer was 'What distinctive theological views are held by people who identify as Christian and trans or non-binary?' This was not a closed question, nor a question with a single answer. As such, any hypothesis would undoubtedly have been the product of my own identity, biases, and social reality.

Grounded theory allowed me to recognise these limiting factors and to seek the wisdom of research participants regarding my research question. It also encouraged me to follow the direction in which research participants led me, rather than rigidly controlling the research and steering it in the direction of my choice. Transcription, close reading and coding after each interview, as well as updating my personal theological journal, allowed me to consider the ways in which each participant transformed my own thinking and contributed to trans theology. In subsequent interviews, whilst continuing to be led by the participant, I was able to encourage them to consider questions and suggestions raised earlier in the research.

There were two potential difficulties in conducting research based on grounded theory. Firstly, it was possible that some of the topics of interest to me would not be covered. This would not have necessarily suggested that those questions are irrelevant to my participants. Rather, it might have been the consequence of a helpful probe not being applied. In order to mitigate this difficulty, a list of topics was used in each interview, which outlined some of the broad themes of theology that I hoped to cover. This list was visible to both researcher and participant and was broad, rather than leading. The overarching themes were identity and theology. The sub themes of identity were

gender identity, intersectionality, and religious identity. The subthemes of theology were God, humanity, sin, redemption, and mission. Aide memoirs for these themes enabled me to guide the topics covered in each interview, without overdetermining the direction of conversation. Additional, more nuanced, themes arose as the fieldwork progressed.

The second potential difficulty was that contrasting opinions may emerge. Systematic theology has generally attempted to assert coherence, leaving no room for multiple truths. Grounded theology, however, is based on the experiences of those who participate in its creation. It acknowledges the limits of human knowledge, allowing for incomplete or contradictory understandings.<sup>210</sup> This genre of theology is congruent with an interpretivist approach. As such, there was no attempt in my fieldwork process to rule out or flatten conflicting understandings. Rather, these contribute towards the richness of the arising theology. Where there were commonalities, however, a grounded theory approach allowed me to draw these out and to test them.

### **3.1.1.2. Feminist Theory**

The paradigm explicated thus far highlighted the need for attention to individual identities and ideologies, social construction, power dynamics, and intersectionality. In this research, gender identities were a clear focus. As such, these factors necessitated exploration through the lenses of gender theory. The roots of the gender theory which I drew on in my research practice are feminist, with particular attention to feminist standpoint theory. This theory reminded me to pay attention to issues of

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<sup>210</sup> Jennie Barnsley, 'Grounded Theology: Adopting and Adapting Qualitative Research Methods for Feminist Theological Enquiry', *Feminist Theology*, 24, 2, (2016), p. 109-124, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735015612175>> [accessed 30 May 2022].

epistemic privilege, intersectionality in research and analysis, and reflexivity versus subjectivity.

Feminist standpoint theory locates research and analysis in women's lived oppression, locating knowledge in their life experiences.<sup>211</sup> Whilst this research is not specifically located in female experience, it is located in the experiences of trans and non-conforming people who are systematically, socially, and epistemically oppressed. An example of systematic oppression is the complicated system which trans people must navigate to obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate<sup>212</sup> and the fact that there is no such legal recognition for non-binary or non-conforming people.<sup>213</sup> An example of social oppression is the difficulty that trans people experience accessing public toilet facilities.<sup>214</sup> An example of the epistemic oppression of trans people is the relatively small proportion of published academics who identify as trans or gender non-conforming. The life experiences of research participants were central to my fieldwork. Whilst I anticipated that research participants would have experienced oppression due to their gender identity – or lack thereof – it was also vital to pay attention to privilege.<sup>215</sup>

In the field of gender studies, privilege is often related to maleness. This relation is complicated by trans experience. Questions arise as to whether someone who was

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<sup>211</sup> See Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014).

<sup>212</sup> Gender Recognition Certificate refers to a legal document which enables a trans person to live in their gender.

<sup>213</sup> U.K. Government, 'Gender Recognition Act', (2004), <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents>> [accessed 15 November 2019].

<sup>214</sup> See Rachel Thorn, 'Why Toilets are a Battle Ground for Transgender Rights', *BBC*, (2016), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-36395646>> [accessed 15 November 2019].

<sup>215</sup> See Nancy A. Naples & Barbara Gurr, 'Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Approaches to Understanding the Social World', Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber, (ed.), *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), pp. 14-41.

assigned male at birth retains male privilege as a trans person. Similarly, one might ask whether a transmasculine person, who has experienced life presenting as female prior to transition, gains privilege in transitioning. Although this might seem straightforward, transmasculine privilege is heavily reliant on 'passing' and non-discovery and is, therefore, a fragile privilege. There is not a singular straightforward answer to this question. As such, I frequently had to ask questions of both myself and research participants concerning gender and power.

Asking questions about power in an interview scenario was difficult, but important. A primary concern was to ensure that I was genuinely hearing what the participant was saying, rather than merely hearing information that was limited by my own views or assumptions. To do this, I used echoing techniques, to check if I understood the participant's statement. This is a technique used in interviews, counselling and pastoral care, whereby the interviewer repeats back the interviewee's statement in the form of a question. For example, if a participant seemed to be stating that they felt angry about a situation I might have responded, 'I'm hearing that that made you really angry, is that fair?'

When questioning gendered privilege and oppression, the participant's experiences were key. If they seemed to be expressing that they felt, or had felt, a sense of privilege or oppression because of their gender in a particular scenario, I asked if that is/was, indeed, the case. Rather than asserting my own opinion, I attempted to attend to the participant's impressions whilst striving to understand the reasons for them. I did not assume that masculinity equates to privilege; nor did I assume that femininity equates to oppression. Rather, I attempted to engage in these questions in a nuanced manner. In addition, I tried to ensure that I understood the ways in which a participant's identity

differed from my own including factors such as ethnicity, disability, gender and socio-economic status. When identity factors that I did not understand fully were raised by participants, I asked for more detail, rather than making assumptions.

It is also important to note the intersectionality of privilege and oppression. Feminist standpoint theory does this by offering intersectional analysis.<sup>216</sup> This helps the researcher to avoid flattening all female experiences into one narrative. Similarly, I gave attention to the intersections and considered whether privilege and oppression that are not directly related to trans identity contributed to participants' theological understandings. Important characteristics to consider included, but were not limited to, those noted as protected in the Equalities Act (2010), namely age, disability, gender reassignment [sic],<sup>217</sup> marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.<sup>218</sup>

I asked each participant to fill out a demographic form,<sup>219</sup> which helped me to notice the intersectional identities that they held. This is used in three ways: in sampling, in interview, and in analysis. I attempted to find a sample that is reflective of the diversity of the trans community. My sample contained ten participants. The arising theology is based on an in-depth analysis of, and personal theological reflection on, the data provided by those ten participants. In interviews, I used the demographics I obtained to make sure that I encouraged the participants to talk about all facets of their identities and to reflect upon how particular parts of their identities intersected with their

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<sup>216</sup> Naples, Gurr, 'Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory', p. 24.

<sup>217</sup> Some trans/non-conforming people interviewed feel that this characteristic is too narrow and ought to include all who identify as trans and/or non-binary.

<sup>218</sup> U.K. Government, Human Rights Act, (2010), <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/>> [accessed 22 July 2019].

<sup>219</sup> See Appendix 1

transness and their Christianity. In analysis, I highlighted statements that demonstrate intersectional thinking.

Feminist standpoint research is self-reflexive.<sup>220</sup> In my research, I resisted the claim to academic objectivity, preferring to recognise that all knowledge is inseparable from the identity, experiences, and biases of the knower. As I conducted this research, I examined not only my own theological understandings but also my identity, privilege, and oppression. I have attempted to be transparent about my own identity, both to the reader and, primarily, to the research participants. The primary way in which I have examined my own identity and understandings is through a journal, which I then analysed as research data. This material was analysed separately from data obtained through interviews, so that I did not confuse participants' voices with my own. I also started each interview by telling the participant a little bit about myself to create transparency and trust.

### 3.1.1.3. Feminist Critiques

An obvious difficulty in aligning my research methods with feminist paradigms is the feminist critique of trans identities. Sheila Jeffreys believes that trans identities are a form of 'gender preservation' – that, in seeking and gaining legal recognition, trans people are reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies.<sup>221</sup> This view was previously explored by Janice Raymond, who argued in *The Transsexual Empire* that gender is never not political, never fully transcended, and always hierarchical.<sup>222</sup> Other feminist critiques

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<sup>220</sup> Naples, Gurr, 'Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory', p. 25.

<sup>221</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, 'They Know It When They See It: The UK Gender Recognition Act 2004', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 10, 2, (2008), pp. 328-345, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856x.2007.00293.x>> [accessed 10 March 2022], p. 342.

<sup>222</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, (London: The Women's Press, 1980).

cite surgery on physically healthy bodies, the transition of children, and the sexualisation of gender as concerns.<sup>223</sup> A critique that raises the definition of gender is raised by Julie Bindel, who suggests that trans women rely on surgical procedures, rather than experience, to define femaleness.<sup>224</sup> This critique is more complex than it first appears, raising two questions. Firstly, is gender primarily biological, social, or psychological? Secondly, to what extent do trans people experience living within various genders?

Some nuanced feminist critiques of trans identities specifically challenge binary transition. For example, Myra J. Hird critiques any 'artificial emphasis on sexual difference'.<sup>225</sup> Hird argues that the propagation of multiple genders does not offer a strong enough challenge to the binary system either. However, this argument implies that, if non-binary identities were able to offer a rigorous critique of the gender-binary and the expectations based on it, they could be a feminist tool.

Many feminist theorists have, however, spoken out clearly against feminist critiques of trans identities, as reported by Stephen Paton.<sup>226</sup> Cressida Heyes focusses on the importance of congruence between external and internal identity and writes positively of the technical advances that have allowed for the physical creation of such a congruence.<sup>227</sup> In doing so, Heyes shifts the focus from embodied normativity to

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<sup>223</sup> See Robert Jensen, 'Is the ideology of the transgender movement open to debate?', *Feminist Current*, (2016), <<https://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/06/27/ideology-transgender-movement-open-debate/>> accessed 15 August 2019.

<sup>224</sup> Julie Bindel 'Gender Benders Beware', *The Guardian* (1 January 2004) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/31/gender.weekend7>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

<sup>225</sup> Myra J. Hird, 'Gender's nature: Intersexuality, transsexualism and the 'sex'/gender' binary', *Feminist Theory*, 1, 3, (2000), pp. 347-364, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/146470010000100305>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>226</sup> Stephen Paton, 'They Do Not Speak for Us: Feminists hit back at trans-exclusionary activists in open letter', *The National*, (2019), <<https://www.thenational.scot/news/17472564.they-do-not-speak-for-us-feminists-hit-back-at-trans-exclusionary-activists-in-open-letter/>> [accessed 22 July 2019].

<sup>227</sup> Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).



embodied freedom. Additionally, she counters arguments against gender confirmation surgeries. In *TransForming Gender*, Sally Hines argues that trans identities and feminism are intricately connected.<sup>228</sup> Hines notes that transmasculine people often continue to identify as feminist and, therefore, are a key voice within feminism.<sup>229</sup> She also notes the differences between trans and non-trans masculinities.<sup>230</sup> Hines goes on to suggest that, far from speaking out of masculine privilege, some transfeminine people use feminist techniques in their responses to those who reject them.<sup>231</sup>

As a transmasculine person, I have experienced the differences that Hines notes personally. Through transitioning, I have been able to witness the complex differences in the treatment of men, women and trans/gender non-conforming people. The masculinity that I have developed is built on female socialisation and eighteen years of experiences living as female. As such, it is undoubtedly different than any masculinity built on male socialisation and experiences. Further, I continue to embrace feminism as a framework for gender freedom and equality. For me, transitioning enabled me to challenge patriarchy from a different, perhaps wider, perspective.

Paddy McQueen argues that, rather than reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies, trans people challenge them.<sup>232</sup> This challenge can be observed in the critique of medicalisation, the assertion of self-determination, the lived-experience of those who live outside the gender binary, and arguments for safe gender-neutral facilities. If feminist theory focuses on those who are oppressed and marginalised due to their

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<sup>228</sup> Sally Hines, *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), p. 85.

<sup>229</sup> Hines, *TransForming Gender*, p. 92.

<sup>230</sup> Hines, *TransForming Gender*, p. 94.

<sup>231</sup> Hines, *TransForming Gender*, p. 97.

<sup>232</sup> Paddy McQueen, 'Feminist and Trans Perspectives on Identity and the UK Gender Recognition Act', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18, 3, (2016), pp. 671-687, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116637998>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

gender, trans identities are a valid location for feminist research. Further, the epistemic oppression of trans people is apparent in the lack of trans voices in academic disciplines. There are many reasons for this lack, not least that trans voices are small in number and our experiences are only beginning to be explored in theory. Indeed, it may be argued that the sparsity of trans voices is not active discrimination. This, however, is also a matter of privilege and oppression, given that trans people have existed throughout time and yet, our voices are only now beginning to be heard. This research attempts to counter that very oppression by enabling and encouraging trans and non-binary people to speak into the discipline of constructive theology. Several participants identified as feminist, but they also challenged feminism where it has, in itself, become a hierarchical system.

#### 3.1.1.4. Queer Theory

Judith Butler's understanding of gender as performative is central to my understanding of feminist epistemology and to the application of feminist theory to trans and gender-nonconforming identities and provides a bridge into queer theory.<sup>233</sup> Butler critiques gender essentialism and foundationalist understandings of gender arguing, instead, that gender is performative. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes that:

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (London: Routledge, 1990/2007).

<sup>234</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

This critique of normativity not only supports the experiences of trans and non-conforming people, but it also moves towards explicating how trans experiences can be pedagogically valuable to cis people. One reading of the above quote is that transness is a liberatory performance of gender, which can show others how to escape the bonds of normativity and binary thinking. Butler suggests that by exploring trans and non-binary understandings of gender, it is possible to disrupt potentially trapping gendered norms.

Some trans academics have highlighted the 'lack of material analysis' in Butler's theory as problematic.<sup>235</sup> Jay Prosser explains that:

As Butler exemplifies, queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodiliness of gendered crossings. The concomitant of this elision of embodiment is that the transgendered subject has typically had center stage over the transsexual: whether s/he is transvestite, drag queen, or butch woman, queer theory's approbation has been directed toward the subject who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex.<sup>236</sup>

Butler responds to critiques regarding a lack of materiality in *Bodies that Matter*, noting the normativity of sex categories, and suggesting that sex is a 'regulatory ideal' which is 'compelled'.<sup>237</sup> They account for changes to embodiment as part of the production of sex. It still seems, however, that sex is defined herein as largely binary, with the trans subject moving from one normative category to another as a product of social

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<sup>235</sup> Hines, *TransForming Gender*, p. 5.

<sup>236</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 6.

<sup>237</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), p.3.

regulation. The complexity of mind-body inter-relationality, and embodied sex-fluidity is somewhat flattened, and the concept of brain-sex is not yet part of the discussion.

In 'Realness as Resistance', Marie Draz returns to Prosser's critiques of Butler, suggesting that more recent understandings of embodiment support his position. Draz suggests a tension between the theorised flexibility of identity and materiality of embodiment. She argues that 'early trans critiques of Butler context dominant narratives that align flexibility with nonnormativity and realness [...] with normativity'.<sup>238</sup> In doing so, Draz argues that where transness is overly related to flexibility, it is contingently related with unrealness.

Butler has increasingly attended to the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people.<sup>239</sup> Despite this, whilst Butler's notions of performativity and observation of the impossibility of living in a falsely constructed gender role are helpful, Butler, and queer philosophical theorising more generally, risks focussing on an understanding of trans and non-binary lives that prioritises the flexibility of identity politics, thereby unhelpfully fixing embodiment and implies that trans and non-binary identities are reliant upon, and in opposition to, binary sex and cocurrent gender roles. Rather, I think that gender and sex are both flexible and material – intangible and real – and are intertwined in complex to date, poorly understood ways. This does not limit the usefulness of queer theory, which I rely on in this thesis. It does, however, highlight the importance of a repeated turn to re-engage with the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people through listening to our voices, as well as theorizing about our identities.

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<sup>238</sup> Marie Draz, 'Realness as Resistance: Queer Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Early Trans Critiques of Butler', in *Hypatia*, 37, (2022), p. 366.

<sup>239</sup> E.g. Jules Gleeson, 'Judith Butler: "We need to rethink the category of woman"', *The Guardian*, (7 September 2021), available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender>> accessed 24 March 2023.

In my fieldwork, I felt that it was vitally important to hold queer theory/ies and the lived realities of trans and non-binary lives in tension. When conducting research with people who held varied trans identities, an understanding of queer subjectivity was essential, both between differing accounts and, indeed, within each individual's account. However, it was also vitally important to give attention to the material realities of trans and/or non-binary bodies and the particular lived experiences of trans and/or non-binary individuals.

David M. Halperin, describing the history of queer theory, notes that when the term was first used in a lecture by Teresa de Lauretis the intention was provocation.<sup>240</sup> Queer theory can be described as an attempt to provoke a strong reaction to norms enabling and enticing the listener or reader to disrupt those norms. Queer theory is, in its very definition, non-conforming. Halperin also notes the danger, therefore, of formalising or institutionalising queer theory.<sup>241</sup> To prescribe a set of rules for queer theory would be to undermine its destabilising intention and effects. Rather, queer theory suggests the questioning of any rule, norm, or construct.

To move from feminist theory to queer theory, then, was to question, deconstruct and challenge the very paradigms that my research was framed by. My interpretations had to be questioned, deconstructed, and challenged when they became narrowed or single-focussed. Grounded theory had to be questioned, deconstructed, and challenged when developing theories began to suggest new normativities. Feminist standpoint theory had to be questioned, deconstructed, and challenged whenever

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<sup>240</sup> David Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45, (2003), pp. 339-344, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23555352\\_The\\_Normalization\\_of\\_Queer\\_Theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23555352_The_Normalization_of_Queer_Theory)> [accessed 10 March 2022], p. 670.

<sup>241</sup> Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory', p. 671.

individual voices began to be flattened and/or amalgamated, and when constructs of power and privilege threatened to silence certain voices. Even queer theory had to be questioned, deconstructed, and challenged when that very queering risked becoming a norm, rather than a challenge to norms. For example, in chapter six I explore understandings of God. Several participants questioned, deconstructed, and challenged both feminist and queer naming of God, where they felt that these had reinforced unhelpful norms, or created new norms. I was repeatedly reminded of the importance of never assuming what 'queering' might look like, as ten different participants gave ten different sets of answers.

This was the inherent challenge, risk, and potential of my research. By using a queer paradigm, I was allowing for, even encouraging, its destabilising effects. The challenge was to allow deconstruction, whilst curating a coherent, constructive theology. The risk is that this theology will be immediately rejected by readers whose own identity, biases, and experiences prioritise normativity, objectivity, and universal truth. The potential is that this theology might queer norms; questioning, deconstructing, and challenging theological understandings that flatten, limit and are used to harm.

### 3.1.2. Autoethnography

Autoethnography can be defined using the constituent parts of the term – *auto*, or self; *ethno*, or cultural; and *graphy*, or systematic analysis.<sup>242</sup> Autoethnography, therefore, is the systematic analysis of one's own personal experience that analyses oneself in context. In my research, then, autoethnography is the systematic theological analysis of my own experiences of belonging to the identity groups 'trans' and 'Christian'.

#### 3.1.2.1. Critiques

It is necessary, first, to attend to critiques of autoethnography. Andrea Ploder and Johanna Stadlbauer have encountered the following common arguments used against autoethnography: navel-gazing; a lack of theoretical application; difficulties of critiquing emotive and personal writing; the turn inwards; and the question of strategy.<sup>243</sup>

Solipsism, narcissism, and the resulting 'navel-gazing' are clearly potential pitfalls that autoethnographers must avoid. When researching one's own experiences, it is possible to spiral inwards, focussing on oneself to the exclusion of context, theory, and other people. It is also possible, however, to avoid these pitfalls. Ploder and Stadlbauer note that rootedness in one's social or cultural context is important to autoethnographers.<sup>244</sup> Two autoethnographic researchers whose work has inspired me, Austen Hartke and Maggie Nelson, each mix autoethnography with ethnography

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<sup>242</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12, 1, (2011), pp.1-19, <<https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>243</sup> Andrea Ploder, Johanna Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity and Its Critics: Responses to Autoethnography in the German-Speaking Cultural and Social Sciences', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22, 9, (2016), pp. 753-765, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416658067>> [accessed 11 March 2022], pp. 756-760.

<sup>244</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity', p. 756.

attendant to the experiences of others.<sup>245</sup> This is a careful balance that I, too, have tried to curate.

For Ploder and Stadlbauer the development of a critical argument, informed by relevant theory, is central to ethnographic research.<sup>246</sup> The argument that autoethnography ignores theory applies largely to evocative autoethnography, rather than analytic autoethnography.<sup>247</sup> Nelson includes a strong use of critical analysis and attention to theory in her autoethnographic novel.<sup>248</sup> The variations in autoethnographical technique show that the critique of autoethnography as atheoretical is not a valid argument against the whole practice. It does highlight, however, the importance of applying and developing theory when creating autoethnographical research.

It is understandably uncomfortable to critique writing that is evocative, emotional, and personal. Ploder and Stadlbauer observe that this discomfort makes autoethnography an ill fit in academic conferences and journals.<sup>249</sup> I believe, however, that it is essential for the academy to be discomforted. Further, autoethnography is not defined simply by subject or genre; style is also important. 'Autoethnography is also painted as an evocatively rendered, aesthetically compelling and revelatory encounter'.<sup>250</sup> As such,

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<sup>245</sup> Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (London: Melville House UK, 2015).

<sup>246</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity'.

<sup>247</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity'.

Evocative autoethnography is used in *Freshwater* (Emezi, 2018) in the author's use of rich emotive and descriptive language to describe and analyse their own experiences. It could be argued that Emezi ignores theory. However, Nelson (2015) also writes evocatively and yet retains a strong use of critical analysis and attention to theory.

<sup>248</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*.

<sup>249</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity', p. 758.

<sup>250</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, 'Autoethnography is a Queer Method', in Kath Browne, and Catherin J. Nash, (eds.), *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010). pp. 195-214, p. 199.



emotive reactions, including discomfort, are important. The evocative, emotional, or artistic style of autoethnography can create either connection or dissonance between researcher and reader. It is potentially effective, inviting the reader into the researcher's very self where both might be changed as a result of the mutual encounter.

Autoethnography does necessitate a turn inwards to examine one's own knowledge, experiences, and emotions. At its best, however, it does also turn outwards towards others, towards social contexts, and towards political realities.<sup>251</sup> Autoethnography should not only concern the self. Rather, it should also examine one's relationships, social context, and theoretical understandings. Its goal should be theoretical or social change that reaches beyond an individual to a wider community or question.<sup>252</sup>

A hidden argument against autoethnography that Ploder and Stadlbauer noticed concerns the question of strategy:

The 'strategic mistake' argument is mostly formulated behind closed doors. It does not point toward a specific theoretical or methodological problem but toward the strategic dangers of engaging with autoethnography.<sup>253</sup>

This argument suggests that autoethnography will damage the reputation of both researcher and discipline. Tanice G. Foltz and Wendy Griffin, discussing their fieldwork with Dianic witches, note their concern 'that the unconventional subject

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<sup>251</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity', p. 759.

<sup>252</sup> For further discussion on the importance of theoretical change as a goal of research and critiques of autoethnographical approaches that do not enable change, see Sarah Stahlke Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15, 1, (2016), pp. 1-9, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406916674966>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>253</sup> Ploder, Stadlbauer, 'Strong Reflexivity', p. 759.

matter and the methods we used might negatively affect our tenure cases'.<sup>254</sup> Those methods were distinctly autoethnographic, suggesting that autoethnography was felt to be unacceptable in their academic contexts.

However, I do not think that reputation should be a barrier to knowledge. If autoethnography can advance understandings and theories, then the risk to reputation is a necessary one. Autoethnographical research calls into question what is 'academic', bringing artistic, personal, and subjective accounts into the academic arena. This benefits academia, widening its horizons and inviting varied sources and forms of knowledge into academic conversation. Foltz and Griffin explained that their research 'would be incomplete without commenting on the changes we experienced in our 'inner landscapes'.<sup>255</sup> It is clear that the benefit of their research was related, at least in part, to its autoethnographical content and, indeed, the ways in which the research changed the researchers.

### 3.1.2.2. Queer Autoethnography

In my own life, I have faced arguments against being trans that are very similar to the above arguments against autoethnography. I have been told that being trans is 'self-obsessed' and that I 'just think too much about myself', as in the navel-gazing argument. I have been told that 'there is no scientific proof that people like you [sic.] exist', as in the lack of theory argument. I have been told that my identity is 'too much information', as in the difficulty of critiquing emotive writing argument. Time and time again I have experienced a loss of reputation due to coming out as trans. Many of my

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<sup>254</sup> Tanice G. Foltz, Wendy Griffin, 'She Changes Everything She Touches: Ethnographic Journeys of Self-Discovery', in Carolyn Ellis, Arthur P. Bochner, (eds.), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. (London: AltaMira Press, 1996), pp.263-285, p.278.

<sup>255</sup> Foltz, Griffin, 'She Changes Everything', p. 278.

trans friends and colleagues have reported similar experiences. These similarities led me to wonder whether there is a link between queerness and autoethnography.

Holman, Jones, and Adams argue that autoethnography is intrinsically queer and, when explicitly used as such, can be part of the process of queering or queer(y)ing research.<sup>256</sup> The queer nature of autoethnography rests on the refusal of more traditional methodologies. Rather, autoethnography questions and subverts academic norms. Objectivity is shown to be an oppressive norm while subjectivity is revealed as an aspect of academic writing that values experiential knowledge while being an ever-continuing process which subverts conventions and assumptions. Personal honesty opens doors, rather than closing them; allows rivers to flow, rather than building dams.

Holman, Jones, and Adams explicitly defend the use of 'I' as a way to link the experiences of researcher and reader, enabling the sharing or reframing of experience.<sup>257</sup> The use of 'I' in my research also links me, as researcher, to my participants. Rather than a debate between 'them' and 'us', the research becomes a process shared between 'you' and 'I' through which any of us may find experiences that we share or find our own experiences reframed in a way that has the potential to be transformative both for those participating in research, including the researcher, and for those who encounter that research.<sup>258</sup>

Queer autoethnography is not, however, a simple study of the self. Rather, as Holman Jones, and Adams argue, in queer autoethnography the researcher holds their experience together with the experiences of others, and wider sociological, ethical,

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<sup>256</sup> Holman Jones, Adams, 'Autoethnography is a Queer Method'.

<sup>257</sup> Holman Jones, Adams, 'Autoethnography is a Queer Method', p. 198.

<sup>258</sup> The transformative potential of research on both researcher and researched is evidenced by Foltz and Griffin in 'She Changes Everything'.

and political understandings, in order to create something that can add to, inform, challenge, or change, theory or knowledge.<sup>259</sup> This is consistent with how Butler understands identity as performative, something that is continually co-created in the wider context of social and relational interactions and affected by engagement with the wider context.<sup>260</sup>

### 3.1.2.3. Considering Evocative and Analytical Autoethnographies

Queer autoethnography, when done well, can blur the lines between labels like ‘queer’ and ‘straight’, boundaries like ‘public’ and ‘private’, spheres of influence like ‘personal’ and ‘political’, exposing the humanness of each of us. This potential, however, brings us back to the debate as to whether ‘evocative’ or ‘analytic’ autoethnography is more helpful.<sup>261</sup> This debate is more about how autoethnography should be conducted, rather than its validity. I have explored evocative and analytical texts whilst developing my own method and voice.

#### 3.1.2.3.1. Evocative

The beautiful novel *Freshwater* takes the form of evocative autoethnography, with the writer acting as ‘story-teller’ rather than ‘story-analyser’.<sup>262</sup> The novel’s author, Akwaeke Emezi, describes themselves as ‘a writer and video artist based in liminal

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<sup>259</sup> Holman Jones, Adams, ‘Autoethnography is a Queer Method’.

<sup>260</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>261</sup> This debate is considered in the following texts:

DeLysa Burnier, ‘Encounters With the Self in Social Science Research: A Political Scientist Looks at Autoethnography’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35, 4, (2006), pp. 410-418, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286982>> [accessed 9 March 2022].

Carolyn Ellis, *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

Herbert J. Gans, ‘Participant observation in the era of “ethnography”’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28, (1999), pp. 540-48, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/089124199129023532>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>262</sup> Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*, (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 2018).

Brett Smith, ‘Narrative inquiry and Autoethnography’, in Michael Silk, David Andrews, Holly Thorpe, (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 505-514.

spaces'.<sup>263</sup> Emezi was born and raised in Nigeria and writes in Igbo. *Freshwater* is a coming-of-age story, drawing heavily from Igbo cosmology.

Although Emezi describes *Freshwater* as autobiographical, and hints at autoethnography in their description of the text, it, like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*,<sup>264</sup> crosses genre and has been praised for its 'unapologetic narrative style'.<sup>265</sup> For some, it would be difficult to understand *Freshwater* as being autoethnographical. However, Emezi carefully studies their experiences of transness in order to help to pull the reader deeper into an experience of transness.

Emezi does not hide the complexity of identity. Rather, they expose it through the use of multiple voices, each with their own style and tone. This also allows for much questioning of oneself through dialogue between the gods.

Sade Omeje writes:

Do we read the novel differently once we find out that it isn't all simply a work of fiction but that it's somewhat autobiographical, a memoir of Emezi's? Do we find it more poignant? Even more disturbing? The choice to write in the form of fiction was yet another way Emezi refuses to stay within binaries. As they write, 'a story can be true without necessarily sticking to straight facts'.<sup>266</sup>

This unconventional treatment of truth is, indeed, powerful, allowing Emezi's voice and story to be understood as if laid bare in a multi-mirrored room. The intensity and depth

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<sup>263</sup> Akwaeke Emezi, 'Biography', Akwaeke, (2019), <<https://www.akwaeke.com/biography>>, [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>264</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*. Discussed further in 3.1.2.3.1.

<sup>265</sup> Sade Omeje, 'Review: 'Freshwater' by Akwaeke Emezi', *The Mancunian*, (2018), <<https://mancunian.com/2018/11/22/review-freshwater-by-akwaeke-emezi/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

<sup>266</sup> Omeje, 'Review: 'Freshwater''.

of emotional self-analysis and evocative presentation does, in my opinion, shine, highlighting the flaws in any approach based solely on systematic analysis.

Leon Anderson, however, observes the growth of evocative, emotional autoethnography and critiques it, arguing, instead, for a new analytic autoethnography.<sup>267</sup> Analytic autoethnography is used to:

refer to research in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.<sup>268</sup>

Anderson's model retains the academic integrity and rigor of sociological research whilst recognising the researcher's reflexivity and highlighting the values of research where the researcher meets the criteria for participation within their own research. The main point of distinction from evocative autoethnography is the priority placed on analysis. However, DeLysa Burnier fears that Anderson's recommendation of separating analytical from evocative autoethnography risks losing the distinctive power of the two combined.<sup>269</sup>

It is possible to analyse in ways that are evocative. For example, to state that '*I am trans*' is neither analytic nor evocative; it is simply a fact. To explain that: '*I am trans. This means that I was identified as biologically female at birth based on the appearance of my genitals as assessed by a midwife. I felt a strong sense of dysphoria*

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<sup>267</sup> Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35, 4, (2006), pp. 373-395, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

<sup>268</sup> Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', p. 373.

<sup>269</sup> Burnier, 'Encounters With the Self'.

*throughout my childhood and later transitioned towards male. As a feminist, I disagree with the assignation of gender based on genitalia', is an analysis, albeit overly simplistic, of that fact. To observe that 'gendered as a child, I was haunted by pain, anger and fear leading me through transition to love and light' is an evocative rendering of that fact. To write that 'I find it incomprehensible that just because as a tiny, little baby my genitals were a certain shape and size, I was condemned to a prison of gender that was neither accurate nor chosen. Kate Bornstein writes of the life they 'always wanted but never could have.'<sup>270</sup> That is my life, my pain. Surely that, in and of itself, is a feminist issue.'* combines both analysis and evocation. This combination is, I believe, both compelling and educational.

### 3.1.2.3.1. Analytical

If Emezi's autoethnographical writing is particularly evocative, Austen Hartke's contribution to biblical studies, *Transforming*, introduced in the literature review, can be described as analytical autoethnography.<sup>271</sup>

In *Transforming*, Hartke notes that 'The answers to those questions [questions around meaning in scripture] depend on whom you ask' and goes on to provide answers from various readers, including himself.<sup>272</sup> Each analysis of scripture, however, is preceded by a description of a personal experience followed by an analysis of that experience, as separate from scripture. For example, Hartke describes his experience of being asked to leave a women's bathroom, aged 12, and the reaction of women in the bathroom, and connects these facts to cultural analysis of clothing and gendered spaces. This then leads into a section on laws around cross-dressing in

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<sup>270</sup> Kate Bornstein, S. Bear Bergman, *Gender Outlaws*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010).

<sup>271</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*.

<sup>272</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*, p. 61.

Deuteronomy.<sup>273</sup> Hartke's descriptions of his own personal experiences, whilst open and warm, are very factual and are always followed by analysis. There is no attempt to use evocation to create an emotional reaction in the reader. I wonder, though, whether more emotional/evocative content may, in fact, have been helpful in facilitating empathy and understanding, particularly given that multiple voices are introduced relatively briefly.

### 3.1.2.3.1. Moderate

There is a third option; a moderate autoethnography. As an experienced peer reviewer, Sarah Stahlke Wall has noted the problems of mislabelling autobiography as autoethnography, of 'blurred boundaries', of emotional manipulation, and of a lack of analysis.<sup>274</sup> Wall also highlights the extent to which autoethnographers sometimes ignore ethical concerns.<sup>275</sup> In response to these problems, Wall advocates 'an ethical and self-focused but analytical approach to autoethnography' which is located between evocative and analytic methods.<sup>276</sup> Such an approach maintains authenticity and evocation whilst attending to the need for methodical content, ethical care and research that progresses knowledge.

This balance is achieved successfully by Maggie Nelson.<sup>277</sup> *The Argonauts* is not restricted to one genre. Rather, Nelson draws on autobiography, a broad range of theory, history, letter writing, and fiction to describe, explore question and challenge her own experiences of both becoming a mother and relating to her partner's transition. *The Argonauts* is notable for its appeal to both straight and LGBTQ+ people,

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<sup>273</sup> Hartke, *Transforming*, pp. 59-62.

<sup>274</sup> Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography', p. 3.

<sup>275</sup> Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography', pp. 4-5.

<sup>276</sup> Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography', p. 7.

<sup>277</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*.



exploring both queerness and heteronormativity, and 'shows the collapsible boundaries between thinking and feeling'.<sup>278</sup> In other words, it not only balances analysis and emotion but often intermingles them, analysing emotively or emoting analytically. Whilst Nelson does not use the term autoethnography, this text does meet the criteria. In it, Nelson a) draws on personal experience, b) systematically analyses it, and c) uses it to increase understanding of cultural experience, in particular experiences of pregnancy and gender.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson often uses the style of letter writing, either to an unknown other or to a known other, who becomes a character in their own right. Her treatment of others is compelling. Each character introduced is described in depth. Some are mentioned by name, whereas others are only known by an event or a relation to the author. Theorists are treated with the same familiarity as other characters. Nelson provides in-depth analysis of her own, often deeply emotive, diary entries, letters and memories, using both the words of family/friends and the words of theorists with equal weight.

Nelson's equal treatment of theorists and others challenges and upsets academic norms, suggesting that anyone's opinion is equally valid. She also evocatively persuades the reader, whether academic or lay person, to connect with words that may be 'foreign' to them in tone or genre. The book has been positively reviewed by several academics, including Samantha Brennan who praises it as an academic

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<sup>278</sup> Amelia Abraham, 'Exploring the cult appeal of Maggie Nelson with the writer herself', *Daze Digital* (2019), <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/45446/1/cult-writer-maggie-nelson-interview-the-argonauts-jane-a-murder>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

philosophical text as well as literature, despite claiming to usually prefer a separation between the two.<sup>279</sup> This highlights the power of this text to transform opinions.

Another inspirational tenet of Nelson's writing is her ability to queer, critique and question any thought, event, theory or understanding. She does not align herself to any one theory or identity label, rather questioning any theory or label that emerges. She is simultaneously apologetic and unapologetic, prepared to use a breadth of descriptive language unapologetically, even, perhaps especially, when ambiguities or tensions arise. What Nelson achieves is a powerful autoethnographical text that manages, at once, to be deeply evocative and extremely analytic.

#### 3.1.2.4 Doing Autoethnography

As a transmasculine Christian, I meet the inclusion criteria of my own research project. Autoethnography seemed, therefore, to be an appropriate, and potentially important, component of this project. The three examples considered above highlight the diversity of autoethnography and demonstrate three very distinctive ways of using and examining one's voice.

Nelson writes that 'I told you I wanted to live in a world in which the antidote to shame is not honor but honesty'.<sup>280</sup> Honesty, by which I also mean integrity and authenticity, is an ethical norm by which I seek to live. In many ways, my research attempts to

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<sup>279</sup> Samantha Brennan, 'The Argonauts: Review', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 26, 3, (2016), pp. 19-22 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2016.0029>> [accessed 25 February 2022]

Cf. Tess Edmonson, (2015), 'The Argonauts: Review', *International Contemporary Art*, 127, (2015), p. 68, <<https://www-proquest-com/magazines/argonauts/docview/1722627548/se-2?accountid=8630>> [accessed 10 March 2022]

Monica B. Pearl, 'Theory and the Everyday', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 23, 1, (2018), pp. 199-203, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435401>> [accessed 11 March 2022]

Constance M. Furey, 'Eros and the Argonauts', *Theology and Sexuality*, 22, 3, (2016), pp. 155-164, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1329812>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>280</sup> Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pp. 39-40.

reveal or create an antidote to the shame that many trans people are made to feel by Christian theology and churches. Personally, I have found that honesty is an incredibly powerful tool when dismantling shame, both privately and publicly. In the auto-ethnographical content of this research, then, I have attempted to recount my life experiences and theological understandings in a way that embodies honesty, rather than honour. Honour is not irredeemably bad. It often, however, intends to produce pride or shame in the self or the other. Conversely, honesty is truth without the intentional production of pride and/or shame; a simple – or, indeed, complex – statement of what is, rather than what ought to be or might have been.

My own understandings and experiences as a trans Christian were not only the foundation for my interest in this research, but also the desire for relevant data. To ignore my own understandings and experiences would have been to claim false objectivity. As a trans person, a Christian, and a minister I have vested interests in this project, though not any particular theological emphasis, which I do not wish to ignore or downplay. As well as providing additional data this research technique helps to ensure that the researcher is appropriately reflexive. It is important, however, that autoethnography is used carefully and that limitations are recognised. Overuse or misuse of autoethnography can be leading at best or an abuse of power at worst.

By using autoethnography, I hoped to not only create additional data, but also to record how my own theological views developed as I undertook this research. My autoethnographical process helped me to examine my own biases and reactions and served as a clear marker as to where my views and experiences intersected with, or diverged from, the views and experiences of research participants. Additionally, this

data shows how the views of other trans people can affect the theological understandings that I hold as a theologian and minister.

To achieve the aims noted above, my autoethnography had to be both distinct from the other research data and concurrent with the progress of this research. I provided baseline data detailing my theological understandings before the research began. I then continued to note my theological understandings, with a particular focus on any changes, as the research progressed. As such, autoethnography was not a single task. Rather, it was a continual process of reflection and self-evaluation.

I considered several different methods by which to collect autoethnographical data. One potential approach was to discuss my theological understandings with research participants before, during and after interviews. However, I felt that this approach would be leading; inadvertently pressuring research participants to concur with my own theological understandings and skewing the power balance between us. Further, this approach could have made participants feel uncomfortable which would have been both unethical and unlikely to produce satisfactory data.

A second potential approach was to ask a colleague to interview me before the research started and after each research interview. One example of fruitful and realistic collaborative autoethnography is research undertaken into the isolation that some academics experience, undertaken by ten academics, and involving mutual, reflexive participant-researcher research.<sup>281</sup> However, in the case of this thesis, this

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<sup>281</sup> Meriam Belkhir, Myriam Brouard, Katja H. Brunk, Marlon Dalmoro, Marcia Christina Ferreira, Bernardo Figueiredo, Aimee Dinnin Huff, Daiane Scaraboto, Olivier Sibai and Andrew N. Smith, 'Isolation in Globalizing Academic Fields: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Early Career Researchers', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 18(2), <<https://journals.aom.org/doi/full/10.5465/amle.2017.0329>> [accessed 23 September 2022].

approach seemed impractical. The time resources required of both myself and my colleague to conduct interviews and code them were unrealistic in the context of this study. Further, adding a colleague to the research team would have created another layer of subjectivity which would have required examination. This would have led to a slippery slope on which each researcher would have required the assistance of a further researcher to achieve subjectivity.

The approach that I selected involved writing, rather than interviews, and is a regular component of a minister's pastoral practice. This approach involved regular theological journal writing, using the pastoral cycle.<sup>282</sup> The pastoral cycle begins with a Kairos moment, an experience through which one learns something of God. The practitioner then goes on to ask critical questions, analyse and reflect upon the experience, and then come to the next Kairos moment – in this case, the next interview.

I wrote a journal entry before conducting any research and then after I transcribed and completed first cycle coding on each research interview. I only returned to a second cycle coding of autoethnographical material after completing a second cycle coding of the primary interviews. This ensured that my own developing theological understandings did not overly influence my interpretations whilst coding data provided by research participants. First cycle coding between each interview did, however, enable me to build grounded theory that was drawn from both the data collected from each research participant and my own reactions to that data.

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<sup>282</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, Francis Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, (London: SCM, 2005).

### **3.1.3. Participants**

Autoethnography, however, was secondary to the fieldwork that I undertook with other research participants. It was crucial to work with a range of participants, to avoid flattening or marginalising voices, and to work together to move towards a grounded trans theology.

#### **3.1.3.1. Inclusion Criteria**

In this research I sought the theological understandings of trans and gender non-conforming Christians. My main research question was how experiences of gender non-conformity and/or gender transition influence or affect Christian theological understandings. Rather than reaching a singular consensus, I allowed polyvocality by allowing differing trans theological voices to be heard and to queer the field by focussing on gender nonconformity amongst trans identities, rather than binary gender conformity. The key inclusion criteria, therefore, were self-identification as Christian and as trans and/or gender non-conforming.

It is possible to define these categories more precisely. I could, for example, have defined 'Christian' as referring to someone who believes in key tenets of the Christian faith or who attends church regularly. I could have defined 'trans' as referring to someone who has transitioned from male to female or from female to male. I could have defined 'non-binary' as referring to someone who lives as neither male nor female. It is also necessary to stress that the definitions of these categories included those who choose not to conform to any label or definition regarding their gender identity or faith identity, but who still recognised themselves as belonging to the identity groupings being researched.

To assert precise definitions would, however, have contradicted my methodological paradigm. I discerned that my methodology should prioritise the self-determined identity of the individual and should queer conventional systems and norms. To apply rigid definitions to the identity labels of 'Christian', 'trans', and 'non-binary' would have narrowed my field of potential participants to those who identified within the boundaries of those definitions or who were willing to mask their genuine identities in order to conform with my system. Further, Alison observed the positive effects of enabling participants to self-define, rather than relying on the clinical definitions that, for some, have been controlling.<sup>283</sup> Self-definition has been used in similar studies, most notably *Transfaith*.<sup>284</sup>

As such, I decided to rely upon self-definition. This may mean that some readers will not recognise some of the research participants as 'Christian' or as 'trans' according to their own biases and definitions. However, the benefits outweigh the risks. Allowing for self-definition enhances the diversity of the sample, queers perceived norms, and allows participants to be open about their own genuine self-identification. Additionally, this allowed for a questioning of those very definitions; what does it mean to be Christian if one is also trans, and vice versa? Links between each participant's definitions of their faith identity and gender identity were one compelling dataset which arose from our interviews.

### 3.1.3.2. Exclusion Criteria

As discussed above, there were no exclusion criteria related to definitions of key identity labels. A participant would only have been excluded on the grounds of their

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<sup>283</sup> Alison Rooke, 'Telling Trans Stories: (Un)doing the Science of Sex', in Sally Hines, Tam Sanger (eds), *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 69.

<sup>284</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, Tanis, *Transfaith*.

self-identification if they stated that they did not identify as Christian or as trans or non-binary. Some exclusion criteria were necessary, however, on grounds of ethics and practicality. These refer to age and severe mental health difficulties.

People under the age of eighteen were excluded from this research. This exclusion criteria was both ethical and practical. Those under the age of eighteen are likely to be in the process of forming their religious and gender identities and it would have been unethical to subject them to research that may overly inform or disturb those processes. Further, inclusion of participants under the age of eighteen would require parental consent and possible accompaniment. At best, this could have skewed data collected, given that participants may have altered what they said in an interview if their parents were present. At worst, this could have led to a participant disclosing information to or in front of a parent or guardian that they were not yet ready or willing to disclose.

People who disclosed that they were currently suffering from severe mental health difficulties were also excluded from this research. This exclusion criteria was based on my desire to limit potential harm to participants. A participant suffering from severe mental health difficulties may have found talking about their identity extremely distressing and would have required appropriate support. Further, they may have been overly suggestible, meaning that I could have unintentionally affected their own self-understanding or led them to question their identity further. This exclusion criteria relied on the participant's self-understanding, as well as my own judgement, respecting the participant's self-determination.

If a participant stated that they were mentally well enough to participate, I respected their decision, provided that there were no clear signs that a participant was unable to



safely make that decision. If a participant suggested, however, that they were unsure as to whether they were mentally well enough to participate, I suggested that they postpone or reconsider participation and signposted support where appropriate.

Participants who disclosed mental health difficulties but were confident that they were able to complete the research were not excluded. Most participants have had very difficult experiences. This means that it would have been impractical to have mental health difficulties as a clear exclusion criteria. Most participants expressed some mental health difficulties, and these were clearly related to their experiences of suffering. Avoiding interviewing participants who were experiencing mental health difficulties would have meant losing the rich data that they provided.

Experiences and stories related to suffering and mental health are an important part of this theology. I provided all participants with a list of local support services to ensure that they had access to care, if needed, following their interview. I also offered pastoral support both at the end of the interview and again when contacting participants to agree their transcript.

Current members of congregations within which I practiced ministry during the research were also excluded from participation. This exclusion criteria was determined for ethical reasons: preventing breaches of pastoral trust, skewed power dynamics, and safeguarding the ongoing pastoral care of congregation members. Some participants did choose to join my online church community, which is advertised widely and open to all, following the fieldwork process. It was interesting that, for them, a minister knowing their story seemed to be an enabling factor in joining the community.

### 3.1.3.3. Diversity

Gender is socially relational.<sup>285</sup> As such, it was vital to pay attention to the ways in which the experiences and opinions of those with trans identities are also shaped by other identities and cultural/societal factors. I attempted to gather as diverse a selection of research participants as possible. Diversity in trans theological discourse, as well as in trans visibility more generally, is still limited. The voices of trans women, trans people who identify with a binary gender, trans people over the age of forty-five, able-bodied trans people and white trans people are still predominant. As such, I particularly welcomed data from trans-masculine people, non-binary or non-conforming people, those under the age of forty-five, those who are disabled and those who are BAME.

I also attempted to gather data from participants with differing levels of education and theological education, and in varying levels and types of employment. It would have been possible to gain good data from a sample of trans theological students or graduates. However, I believe that all trans Christians have valuable theological insights to share.

An open and flexible style of interviewing was used to enable all people to share their views, regardless of education or background. I initially gathered data from ten participants, a sample which contained people from all of the above minority identity groups. The use of individual interviews, as opposed to focus groups, allowed for more diversity. Beardsley and O'Brien note the difficulty that they found in reaching trans men, given that the group that they chose to conduct their research with did not attract

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<sup>285</sup> Sally Hines (2010), 'Introduction', in Sally Hines, Tam Sanger (eds.), *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1-24, p. 12.

transmasculine people.<sup>286</sup> It is logical that most groups will encourage participation based on similarity, rather than difference. By interviewing individuals, I was able to focus on diversity rather than similarity.

I speak to gender diversity in the next section of this chapter. The other demographics that I gathered data about were age, education, theological qualifications, marital status, occupation, ethnicity, denomination, and disability. The one area in which I was unable to reach a diverse sample of trans/non-binary people was ethnicity. Only one of my ten participants was Black, and I did not find any Asian participants, despite contacting a wide range of organisations and individuals. There is a clear need for research into the ethnic diversity (or lack thereof) in LGBTQ+ Christian communities in the UK.

Out of the ten research participants, three were aged 25-44, four were aged 45-64, and three were aged 65+. Educational diversity was slightly less balanced. Half of participants had a graduate degree. Of the remaining five participants, three had undergraduate degrees, one had an undergraduate certificate and one had GCSEs. 80% of participants had no theology qualifications; I believe it is positive to be able to hear the theology of those whose voices are not already heard in theological institutions. Of the remaining two participants, one had an undergraduate degree in theology, and one had a doctoral degree in theology. There was no tangible difference in the transcripts of those who had degrees in theology, compared to those with similar, non-theological, qualifications. 70% of participants were single at the time of interview. Participants had a wide range of occupations, from unemployment to senior management. Three of the ten participants were in ordained ministry. Four of the

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<sup>286</sup> Beardsley, O'Brien, *This Is My Body*.

participants identified as 'other' than the four main UK church denominations. One described their faith identity as 'gnostic' and 'heretical'; another was dechurched at the time of interview and a third was questioning their denominational identity. Three identified as members or adherents of the Church of England, two of the United Reformed Church and one as a dechurched former member of the Baptist Union. Half of the participants identified as disabled, with four mentioning mental health difficulties, four mentioning learning disabilities and/or neurodiversity, and one mentioning physical disability. The intersections between neurodiversity and being trans/non-binary were raised several times.

### 3.1.3.4. Unheard Voices

The concept of ‘acceptable faces’ of being trans, wherein some trans voices, identities, experiences and/or narratives are deemed acceptable and others unacceptable, is a risk to academic integrity.<sup>287</sup> There are multiple layers to this construct of ‘acceptability’. One such layer is the acceptable binary; the idea that transitioning to a binary gender is more acceptable than living in the spaces between or outside of binary genders. Those spaces are, however, increasingly recognised by the trans community. In an analysis of resources by trans individuals and groups which seek to teach about trans identities, Laurel Westbrook highlights the breadth of diversity in the trans community, noting that gender is taught as ‘a continuum’, as ‘diverse’ and/or as ‘fluid’.<sup>288</sup> Each of these terms explicitly includes more than the binary male and female. Further, Jeffrey Alan Johnson notes that ‘the stigmatization of gender nonconformity [...] comes from being outside the valid data states’.<sup>289</sup> This means that those whose identities are not contained within the ‘data states’ ‘male’ and ‘female’ could be overlooked. As such, attention to non-conforming and non-binary identities is particularly important.

Westbrook also critiques ‘teaching transgender’ articles, noting that there is a tendency to naturalise trans identities.<sup>290</sup> It is understandable that trans people may defend our existence by attempting to prove the scientific truths or binary norms of trans identities. Naturalising in this way, however, risks flattening trans identities to the

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<sup>287</sup> Richard Ekins, Dave King, ‘The Emergence of New Transgendering Identities in the Age of the Internet’ in Sally Hines, Tam Sanger, (eds.) *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 25-42, p. 26.

<sup>288</sup> Laurel Westbrook, Laurel, ‘Becoming Knowably Gendered’, in Sally Hines, Tam Sanger, (eds.) *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 43-64, pp. 49-51.

<sup>289</sup> Jeffrey Alan Johnson, ‘Information Systems and the Translation of Transgender’, *Making Transgender Count: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2, 1, (2015), pp. 160-165, <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2848940>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>290</sup> Westbrook, ‘Becoming Knowably Gendered’, p. 52.

most societally acceptable version of transness and erasing those who do not fit the profile, propagating a problematic form of respectability politics. Much of the theology that defends the possibility of trans identities, is written from a binary perspective. In these accounts, trans-ness is sometimes treated as a medical condition or anomaly which can be cured, enabling the individual to live as male or female, as if they are cisgender, effectively erasing their identity as trans.

Whilst it is, of course, valid for an individual to identify in these terms, the theological anthropology of trans identities should not be limited to binary accounts. It is vital that the voices of non-conforming and non-binary people are heard, so that our theological understandings of what it means to be human are widened. In addition, it is important to pay attention to the effects of the 'acceptable faces' phenomenon on non-binary/non-conforming people's identities, experiences, and understandings. My concern about unheard voices led me to prioritise non-binary identities in recruitment and selection<sup>291</sup>. I also considered the effects of the 'acceptable faces' phenomenon when interviewing participants and coding their data.

Gathering and analysing demographics regarding gender identity is complex, partly for the reasons above. I chose to invite participants to write down how they identify in relation to gender, rather than offering tick-boxes. This allowed each participant to answer authentically, rather than having to choose a best-fit option. It offered them the open space for a narrative description, doing more justice to the complexity of identity and created richer data. It also de-centralised the normative gender binary. 60 percent of participants identified under the umbrella category non-binary, with 40 percent

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<sup>291</sup> Where I had to make decisions about who to interview, due to the amount of interest in participation, I prioritised gender diversity.

identifying with a more binary gender identity. Similarly, 60 percent of participants identified as transfeminine or female, whilst only 20% identified as transmasculine or male. 20% of participants did not identify at all with male or female identities. The following words were used by participants to describe their gender identities:

Agender, androgynous, genderflux, genderqueer non-binary, genderqueer, living full time as female, male, man, mtf,<sup>292</sup> non-binary transmasculine, non-binary, simply female, trans guy, trans, transgender female, transgender, transmasculine, woman.

It was also important for me to bring my own genderqueer, non-binary, transmasculine identity to this research, analysis, and writing. During this process, I have reconsidered my own identity countless times, and been challenged to further deconstruct the binary norms that I use to mask my own queerness in the public eye.

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<sup>292</sup> Mtf stands for 'male to female' and is used here to refer to a transfeminine person, as used by the person herself.

### **3.1.4. Fieldwork**

Having considered my sample, we are now able to explore how I worked with each individual. I felt incredibly privileged to be able to listen to them, to draw out their theological ideas, and to analyse the resulting data.

#### **3.1.4.1. Recruitment and Screening**

I used word of mouth, snowballing and contacts to recruit participants. I have a wide network of connections within both LGBTQ+ and Christian communities, as well as a good reputation as a minister working with, and representing, trans people. I used a plain text advert in order to attract those who are genuinely interested in participation, rather than using colourful and incentivising adverts to attract the maximum number of potential participants.<sup>293</sup> The LGBTQ+ community is sometimes distrustful of researchers, as many LGBTQ+ people have had experiences of research being done to them, rather than with them. I felt that my personal and low-key approach would help me to build up trust, rather than suspicion.

In addition to my personal networks, I also contacted churches and other Christian organisations that work with LGBTQ+ people such as the Metropolitan Community Church. This allowed me to recruit more participants of differing demographics. I only contacted churches and organisations that were explicitly affirming of, and welcoming to, those who hold trans identities so that I did not perpetuate harm. Further, I asked contacts to recommend that potential participants contact me, rather than asking the contacts for personal details. This discouraged contacts from outing trans people to

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<sup>293</sup> See Appendix 1



me without their permission. These further contacts helped me to recruit a diverse sample.

Potential participants were sent a participant information sheet and a demographics questionnaire, which they were asked to complete if they would like to participate in the research.<sup>294</sup> The demographics questionnaire enabled me to assess the accumulating diversity of the sample and use targeted advertising to further diversify where necessary. Initially, participants were then asked if they could travel to the University of Birmingham, or, alternatively to identify a public space with a private room, such as a church or community centre, where it was safe and convenient to meet.

After I had completed my first two interviews, Ash and Mary, Covid19 interrupted my fieldwork progress. My ministry moved online, and I had to decide whether to move my fieldwork online too, or whether to wait until the national lockdown ended. I made this decision in discussion with the ethics panel, whose agreement was sought before continuing. I contacted all the participants who had previously been sent a participant information sheet and a demographics questionnaire and asked whether they would be comfortable with meeting online. A significant majority of the participants were happy to meet online, so further interviews were held on the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Participants were given the opportunity to send a short introduction to themselves prior to interview which some, but not all, did. They were also asked to digitally sign their consent forms prior to interview.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>295</sup> See Appendix 1

### 3.1.4.2 Interviews

The first two interviews were held in meeting rooms in churches. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded. Participants were asked to let me know if they needed a break during the interview. I also suggested a break if I discerned that the interview was becoming very emotional. I also proposed arranging a follow-up interview or sending an email with follow-up questions if the interview exceeded two hours. At the beginning of each interview, I invited the participant to choose their preferred seat and to re-read the participant information sheet. I then asked them to read and sign the consent form, reminding them that they should feel free to ask if they had any questions.

In 2020, the Covid19 pandemic interrupted all our lives. For qualitative researchers who relied upon in person interviews, there was a clear need for a change in practice. After consulting the university ethics committee, my interview process changed. The following eight interviews were held on Zoom. After briefly introducing myself and giving the participant an opportunity to ask any questions, I asked them for permission to begin recording. I then recorded the interview on Zoom. I was very conscious of the risk of 'Zoom fatigue', as described by Julia Sklar.<sup>296</sup> To mitigate, I paused each interview at roughly 50 minutes and checked with the participant whether they were happy to continue. I was prepared to schedule follow-up interviews if necessary, but the need did not arise.

At the start of each interview, I told the participant a little bit about myself. This broke the ice and built trust and openness. I focussed on my trans and Christian identities,

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<sup>296</sup> Julia Sklar, 'Zoom fatigue is taxing the brain. Here's why that happens', *London: National Geographic*, (2020), <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/>> [accessed 13 November 2020].

and also explained a little bit about my ministry and my motivations in this research. As I was conducting grounded research, there was not an interview schedule. I did, however, use a list of prompts. The participant was also able to see these prompts in the Zoom chat window. The prompts changed slightly in each subsequent interview, where particular areas of interest arose.

I started by asking the participant to tell me about themselves, and then moved to topics of identity and theology. Rooke, when conducting research with trans young people, found that telling one's own story is incredibly important to trans people and that there is a lack of spaces in which one can do so.<sup>297</sup> As such, giving adequate time for personal testimony not only created rich data, but also had the potential to benefit participants. I asked non-leading questions in ordinary language, avoiding any technical language unless participants used it first. Where possible, I limited interjections and interruptions, allowing participants to talk freely and at length when they were able to do so. If the participant seemed unsure, I rephrased, asked a follow-up question, or used mirroring techniques in order to understand more fully what they were attempting to express. Whilst avoiding leading, I probed where helpful and appropriate using open questions.<sup>298</sup>

At the end of the interview, I thanked the participant and explained that I would contact them when I had completed their transcript and asked if it was OK to email them if I had any subsequent questions. I also provided the participant with a list of local support organisations. In her research, Rooke found that participating in research

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<sup>297</sup> Rooke, 'Telling Trans Stories', p. 67.

<sup>298</sup> These techniques can only be learnt over time, with practice. I, personally, began to learn how to probe in pastoral care courses whilst training for ministry and further developed these skills in ministry. Whilst interviews are somewhat different to pastoral care in aim, the appropriate respect for, and care of, participants is a key part of my interview style.

implicitly involved each participant doing personal work on their own identities.<sup>299</sup> As well as supporting this personal work during the research process, signposting to other resources allowed participants to reflect on and, where appropriate, continue this work. Several participants mentioned already having knowledge of local and national support groups, highlighting the fact that they were adept at managing their own self-care.

Moving to Zoom resulted in shorter transcripts. Having said that, the data gathered was fuller, with most sentences full of meaning. Several participants reflected feeling that they had been able to speak more openly over video conferencing, whereas two shared that they would have valued meeting face to face. As such, the move to video conferencing interviews was neither entirely helpful nor entirely unhelpful. It is notable, though, that it did impact upon participants' responses, enabling fuller responses from some, and being a source of disappointment for others. I have not found any correlated difference between the richness of the interviews of those who found video conferencing helpful and those who did not.

#### **3.1.4.3. Transcripts**

Following each interview, I transcribed and completed a first cycle of coding before the next interview. Once I had transcribed the interview, I sent it via email to the participant and asked them to confirm whether or not the transcription was an accurate record of the interview. I also asked them to check for any identifying details that they would like me to change and to suggest appropriate alternatives if possible. Participants had the

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<sup>299</sup> Rooke, 'Telling Trans Stories', p. 68.

right to withdraw from the research up until six months from the date on which they had received the transcript.

The participants were encouraged to choose an alternative name so that they could not be identified. Nine out of the ten participants expressed a strong desire to use their real names. As a trans person, this resonates with me. Names are, it seems, often important to us. This could be an interesting and fruitful topic for further research. I chose to use participants' real first names, where this was requested, and made them fully aware of the risk of identification. I believe that this made being involved in this research more rewarding for them, as they were enabled to speak authentically into Christian theology.

#### 3.1.4.4. Analysis

I experimented with various coding platforms and methods and eventually decided to firstly code by highlighting and taking notes on a paper transcript and, secondly, by transcribing codes into an excel spreadsheet. Each page of the spreadsheet contained codes on a particular theme. Pages were added when additional themes arose. The themes addressed were identity, faith, God, angels, scripture, createdness, sin and redemption, vocation, social justice, suffering, resilience, gifts, and church.

Table 3.1 illustrates an example from the 'createdness' page:

Category	Codes	Detail	Line	Person
relationship with creator	becoming, dancing, action, active God, participation	'joining into that dance, that Trinitarian dance'	335-343	[Participant's name]



I used the axial coding to help me to choose which themes to focus on in the arising theology. Some of the key words that appear frequently in coding are 'God', 'delay', 'lgbtq', and 'social'. This immediately gives you an insight into the theocentric nature of the data collected, the prominence of forced delays in transition as an issue encountered by participants, and the wider ways in which LGBTQ+ identities are relevant to some – but not all – participants' lives, as well as to the data collected during the course of this research.

As I moved from axial coding to thematic coding, I also drew on the 'voices' model, which gives attention to which voices are not being heard in any given experience and/or reflection.<sup>300</sup> The voices model asks the theologian to pay attention to each voice that is heard, and each voice that is not heard, in any given conversation, situation or theory. For each theme, I asked, in turn, whether each participant's views on this theme were being heard. If the answer was 'no', I returned to the codebook and transcript to consider whether the participant had expressed a view on the theme. Finally, I assessed the extent to which my own view on each theme was transparent and tried to ensure that my own voice was not dominating. It was challenging, but vital, to carefully balance the varying views of participants and my own theological understandings.

#### **3.1.4.5. Participant and Researcher Profiles**

I include the profiles of participants, including my own profile as researcher-participant here because rooting this thesis strongly in the identities, experiences and insights of each participant is essential to my method. As such, I believe our identities,

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<sup>300</sup> Jane Leach, 'Pastoral Theology as Attention', *Practical Theology*, 153, (2007), pp. 19-32, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13520806.2007.11759074>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

experiences, and initial insights should be foregrounded in the research. I have attempted to describe each participant as they would describe themselves, based on their interview transcripts. All identity labels are used verbatim. In other words, I only use labels which participants have chosen to use to describe themselves. In addition to these profiles, I use interludes before each of the three chapters in section B to re-ground the data from each chapter in participants' individual identities, experiences, and understandings.

Alex<sup>301</sup> (they/them) is a transmasculine non-binary person in their late 20s. Alex transitioned around a decade ago. Alex is a minister, serving as part of an online church and offering pastoral care to, and education and advocacy alongside, the trans community. Alex felt, whilst training for ministry, that there was little theology written by people like them and felt called to be part of changing that. Alex believes that testimony is central to discipleship and evangelism, and that all people should be invited, encouraged, and enabled to speak into Christian theology and ecclesiology. Alex contributes to this research as theologian, researcher, and minister, but also as a transmasculine non-binary participant, sharing something of their identity and experiences.

Ash (he/him) is a middle-aged transmasculine, genderflux person. Ash began to transition several years ago and has just begun to take testosterone. After initially identifying as genderfluid, Ash transitioned towards male, but retains a sense of gender nonconformity. Ash has a doctorate and works in education. Ash describes his faith as gnostic and non-traditional. He has a clear and distinctive understanding of

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<sup>301</sup> I have written my profile in the third person for consistency but do not claim objectivity. I note that there is a distinction between the role of participant and participant-researcher and do not wish to flatten or avoid attention to power dynamics.



Christian theology which draws on his own spiritual experiences, past and present multiple-religious-belonging, and wide reading from a variety of faith and theological contexts. Ash is a spiritual entrepreneur, creating safe spiritual spaces for people who wish to explore their own spirituality.

Bingo (they/them) is a genderqueer young adult. Bingo has been living in transition for several years. Bingo identifies in a manner that is playful and that queers and challenges gender. Bingo is a minister in one of the four main UK denominations and identifies with the evangelical/charismatic tradition, whilst noting tensions between their tradition and identity. Bingo has a growing and distinctive understanding of Christian theology, and they frequently note the importance of continued learning. Bingo's theology draws on their training for Christian ministry, which included an undergraduate theology degree. Bingo also applies the lenses of play, gender-queering, disability-theory and experience to their theological journey.

Edda (they/them) is a non-binary young adult. Edda came out as non-binary very recently and has identified as queer for quite some time. Edda is a minister in a mainstream European denomination and has found that telling their congregation about using they/them pronouns has led to helpful pastoral and theological conversations. Edda's theology is centred around social justice and queer theory, though that wasn't their initial intention! Edda feels that, as a queer person, work around queerness and intersectional social justice is the only way to be authentic.

Grey (they/them) has come out very recently as non-binary and works in the leadership of a major human-rights organisation. Grey is also discerning a call to ministry. Grey's passion for social justice is woven into their DNA and has always informed their vocational journey. Authenticity is very important to Grey and was a

motivating factor in coming out. Grey's theology centres on God's love, and their vocation is strongly pastoral. They feel an affinity with, and vocation amongst, LGBTQ+ communities but can also see themselves in a rural, traditional parish.

Jackson (he/him) is a young trans man. Jackson transitioned a few years ago and moves through the world as a man. As a Black man, Jackson feels that both race and gender have informed his experiences, identity, and theology. Suffering is central to Jackson's theological understandings, but joy is central to his transition. He is moving towards a freer, more joy-filled understanding of God, too. Jackson is a writer, and his theological understandings are beautifully and poignantly poetic. As an advocate for social justice, Jackson has lots of questions for God and the Church and raises the vital issue of structural injustice.

Jo (she/her) is a non-binary transwoman in her 70s, a father and a grandmother. Jo is also a playwright. Jo says that she is not a theologian, but her biblically inspired plays suggest otherwise, and she believes that theatre is a missional arena. Jo has known that she was trans since childhood, but only felt able to transition after the tragic loss of her wife, some years ago. Jo's theology centres around a passion for transformation, and extensive reading in early religious writings. She has also been strongly influenced by a family friend who taught her to meditate. Her clear resilience and creativity through, at times, very painful circumstances shine through her theology.

Mary (she/her) describes herself as an elderly woman. Mary transitioned socially and medically many years ago and now simply identifies as female, though her identity as a child of God is more important to her than gender. Mary is retired, having worked in the sciences. Mary now attends a medium-sized, inclusive local church that she started to attend when invited by a transwoman she met online. Mary is also a lay-

preacher and treasurer at her church and feels called to street evangelism and industrial chaplaincy. Mary's deeply held and confidently expressed theology is based on tradition and experience, as well as her scientific knowledge. She feels strongly about social justice and has been known to shout about this when she preaches.

Pat (she/her) is in her forties. Although Pat identifies as female – which is also her sex assigned at birth – she also identifies as gender non-conforming. Pat's identity has been, in part, shaped by a single (male) parent upbringing, and a diagnosis of PCOS,<sup>302</sup> which she describes as an intersex condition. Pat is a minister and feels that her androgyny and gender non-conformity is a positive in ministry. Her theology centres around her belief in a loving God and her passionate understanding that the church should speak up for the marginalised. She also feels strongly that better understandings of trans and gender non-conforming identities would enable the church to understand the lives of cis people who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Sarah (she/her) is a middle-aged transwoman, who transitioned socially around three years ago and takes oestrogen. Sarah feels that her transition is a less important part of her identity than other factors, like being a parent and having a successful and fulfilling career. Sarah is a member of a local cathedral, although her background and preferred tradition is charismatic/evangelical. Sarah has a history of church-planting and youth ministry and is in a process of vocational discernment. She works in talent management and is an entrepreneur, co-managing her own organisation. Sarah's theology is both practical and spiritual, biblically informed and continuing to develop. Sarah says that she is still learning a lot about both gender and theology.

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<sup>302</sup> Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) refers to a clinical condition whereby cysts form on the ovaries. This is usually correlated with higher-than-average levels of testosterone.

Yve (she/her) is a woman in her late sixties. Yve transitioned a while back and lost her family and her career as a result. Yve used to work in education and has an unfilled ministry vocation. Yve has felt very isolated since being rejected by her local church leadership and speaks with both wisdom and sorrow about her difficult experiences in professional, ecclesial, and family contexts. Yve is very spiritual and widely read and feels a particular affinity for both the mystics and well-known Lutheran minister Revd. Nadia Bolz-Weber. Yve's theology draws on a wide variety of texts, as well as her own experiences. Suffering is central to her theological understandings.

Each of the ten participants above has, in the data they provided, contributed something unique and important to Christian theology. I have been, and continue to be, inspired by them, by their stories, and by their understandings. In and amongst and through and around the complexities of paradigms and theories, methods and analysis, their voices are heard. It was necessary to pay careful attention to method, so that their voices are amplified, not flattened or diminished. It is also necessary to note, though, that human lives defy rigid codification, academic norms, and theological orthodoxy. Such is the nature of a grounded, feminist, queer theology.

### **3.1.5. Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have summarised the paradigm in which I am working, and all of the key aspects of the fieldwork undertaken. I have introduced and considered the benefits and risks of the paradigm and methodology used. I have shown the ways in which this paradigm is located in standpoint epistemology and is grounded, feminist, and queer, and explored the rationale for researching and writing within this paradigm.

I have noted the diversity of the fieldwork sample and highlighted the need for further research where adequate diversity was not possible, particularly regarding the theological understandings of Black trans Christians. I have also introduced the reader to the participants whose stories they will hear in subsequent chapters. The positioning of our stories at this early point in the thesis is an essential step towards ensuring that our voices are centralised throughout and that, in them, the arising thesis is grounded.

## 3.2. Theological Method

### 3.2.1. Experiences of Four Sources

Throughout my training for ministry, I was taught that attention to Albert C. Outler's 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' was the foundation of good theological method.<sup>303</sup> During my research, however, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which the marginalisation of experience in the usage of this quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience does harm to those whose lives are adversely affected by the traditions, theories, and scriptural interpretations of those who hold power. In July 2020, I wrote the following in my theological journal:

One of my fears when I started this research project was that it would be criticised as overly focused on 'experience', rather than all of the sources from which theology is drawn. Because of this, I have had the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (WQ) in mind as I have been interviewing participants and coding their interviews. The WQ is scripture, experience, reason, and tradition.

As it happens, I needn't have worried, as my participants have had really intricate and well-articulated theological understandings that draw on scripture, reason, and tradition as well as their experiences. I wonder if sometimes we forget that experience is inextricably woven into the other three sources. They have repeatedly reminded me that by focussing on reason and tradition, the church ignores their theological insights and revelations and uses dispassionate theory to control and to wound them. Each individual who articulates theological understandings does so as a human being, with their

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<sup>303</sup> Albert C. Outler, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley', *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20, 1, (1985), pp.7-18.

own experiences, understandings, and perspectives. Our study of scripture and ecclesial tradition is a series of experiences, as is our use of our reason, and our reception and examination of the reason of others.

Sometimes we experience scripture, tradition, and reason as things that are done to us. I have experienced scripture as done to me time and time again when people have told me that I have to be either a man or a woman. I have experienced tradition as done to me when someone in the hierarchy of my tradition questioned whether I was living a holy life, as a queer person. I have experienced reason as done to me when I have read each of the countless articles written by theologians in which they rationalise their opposition to trans people's identities.

I have been moved, and often horrified, by the ways in which my interview participants have experienced scripture, tradition, and reason as done to them, which has caused real harm in terms of faith, church belonging, spirituality, mental health, physical health, financial well-being, and relatedness. When will those with power stop hurting us? I love, though, the way in which we can actively engage in doing scripture, tradition, and reason for ourselves and in relationship with others.

Reflecting on the above journal entry, I realise that my discomfort was related to the marginalisation of experience in theological method, and the fallacy that it is possible to separate reason, tradition, and scripture from experience. Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart highlight the importance of reflexive attention to experience, arguing that 'We should not split experience and interpretation and fall into the trap of cold, harsh, universally applicable objectivity, that god of truth that disregards all but

itself'.<sup>304</sup> The problem is that objectivity is an illusion, which misleads us to believe that one objective theory can inform universal practice without doing harm. Nuanced, reflexive treatments of tradition, reason/theory, and scripture must acknowledge the experiences out of which they arise. In this way, prioritising experience can diversify praxis, critique and correct harm, and enable new insights.

Unfortunately, the prioritisation of tradition, reason/theory, and scripture has created a divide between philosophical/theoretical and practical theologies. At a recent conference regarding theological methodologies, Heather Walton highlighted the theoretical turn towards relational ontologies and suggested that, in the discipline of theology, relational ways of working should include a blurring of the boundaries between the theoretical and the practical.<sup>305</sup> In order to have continued relevance, theologians must move beyond our differences to create and curate theologies that speak into the academy, churches, and society.

Moving beyond the difficulties of marginalisation and the problematic distinction between philosophical and practical theologies has, for me, meant moving away from traditional or systematic theological method towards a nuanced method which draws insights from grounded theory, and from queer, embodied, indecent and practical theologies. Chris Greenough notes that it 'is more helpful to consider what queer theologies do, rather than what they are'.<sup>306</sup> The slipperiness, or indefinability, of queer

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<sup>304</sup> Lisa Isherwood, Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 40.

<sup>305</sup> Heather Walton, 'Making Meaning: Being Spiritual in Social Research', *Reconsidering Methods and Methodologies in Theology Event*, (Manchester: Lincoln Theological Institute, 5 February 2021), [conference paper].

<sup>306</sup> Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, (London: Routledge, 2020), p.34.



theologies requires and enables me to define my theological method by what I do – and avoid doing – rather than by normative labels.<sup>307</sup>

In this chapter, I explain the ways in which the theology that follows is grounded in trans experience. I argue that centring trans voices necessitates interrupting kyriarchy, critiquing churches from insider-outsider perspectives, freeing bodies from cisnormative chains, and informing praxis. I then move to suggest that it is essential to accept theological incoherence in order to curate a genuinely grounded, queer, trans theology.

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<sup>307</sup> For more on the 'slipperiness' of queer theologies see:  
Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, p.45,  
Marcella Althaus-Reid, Lisa Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology*, (London: SCM, 2007), p.129,  
Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp. 9, 24, 247.

### 3.2.2. Grounding Trans Theology

I explored grounded theory, and the way in which it informed my fieldwork, in chapter 3, section 1.1.1. of this thesis. By drawing on grounded theory this thesis not only prioritises, but centralises, trans voices. Mercia McMahon notes that the 'ideal trans theology is one written by members of trans communities, but with so few trans identified theologians this is a long way from becoming reality'.<sup>308</sup> My literature review shows that, five years later, there is still a distinct lack of trans theologians and trans-authored trans theologies. As a corrective to the silencing and/or absence of trans voices in trans theologies, the theology that follows draws exclusively on trans voices. It is not a trans-inclusive theology; it is a cis-exclusive theology. This is not exclusion for its own sake; rather, this method correlates directly to the trans exclusion in dominant theologies from biblical times to the present. It is essential that trans voices are allowed to speak for ourselves, by ourselves, as well as alongside cis voices. In other words, if the majority of theologies are written entirely by cis people, at least one theology should be written entirely by trans people. This is not a criticism of cis-authored trans theologies. Rather, I offer a trans-authored trans theology in order to further a trajectory towards the hearing of all voices in this complex dialogue.

As well as the importance of hearing trans voices, I am motivated by the potential theological insights of trans people. Marcella Althaus-Reid writes that 'Binary thought can only be challenged in theology and capitalism alike by people whose bodies are living parables of transgression'.<sup>309</sup> This suggests that trans voices have the potential

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<sup>308</sup> Mercia McMahon, 'Trans Liberating Feminist and Queer Theologies.' pp.59–68, Christina Beardsley and Michelle O'Brien (eds.), *This is My Body. Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016), p.61.

<sup>309</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 179.

to challenge and undo some of the theological binaries that have trapped many people – trans and cis – for a long time.

It is important to note here, that not all queer theologies are grounded in the experiences of queer people. As Greenough explains, whilst LGBTQ+ contextual theologies – which are rooted in LGBTQ+ experience – might appear to be a direct antecedent of queer theologies, the latter move beyond sexuality to the critique and disruption of norms more generally, and are often theoretically complex.<sup>310</sup> Nevertheless, queer theologies are not monolithic, and their extensive variety includes experience-based theologies.<sup>311</sup> Several theologians highlight the importance of a continued strand of queer theologies which centralise LGBTQ+ experience.<sup>312</sup> This thesis is part of that strand.

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<sup>310</sup> Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, pp. 4-33.

<sup>311</sup> Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, p. 108,  
Althaus-Reid, Isherwood, *Controversies in Feminist Theology*, p. 129,  
Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, p. 199.

<sup>312</sup> Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, p. 195,  
Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, p. 126,  
James Alison, 'The Gay Thing: Following the Still Small Voice', in Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp.50-62.

### 3.2.3. Interrupting Kyriarchy

To curate a queer theology which is grounded in trans experiences, it is essential to consider the effect of cisnormative power on trans identities, experiences, and theological understandings. In the feminist context, Janet Wootton observes that, for female readers of theology:

Resisting [...] manipulative power, from a lifetime of reading, is painful and exhausting. [The reader] must be shored up not only against every attack from literature but in the face of the onslaught of words and images in a whole variety of media'.<sup>313</sup>

The question that logically follows is how one might do the work of resistance whilst avoiding representative fatigue. In Wootton's striking analogy, she retells the narrative of Goldilocks and the three bears, positing 'Daddy Bear' as the patriarchal theologian asking not, 'Who's been eating my porridge?' but, instead, 'Who's been reading MY Bible, endangering MY values?'.<sup>314</sup> This retelling functions too for the trans reader, who takes on the characteristic of thief in the dominant theological and ecclesial cultures. The cisnormative kyriarchal theologian asks not, 'Who's been sleeping in my bed?' but, instead, 'Who's been troubling MY binaries, questioning MY norms?'. For the female reader, Wootton suggests, it is both difficult and necessary to resist patriarchal readings of scripture and theology. The same is true for the trans reader except that, as well as patriarchy, we must also challenge cisnormativity and

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<sup>313</sup> Janet Wootton, (2016). 'Who's Been Reading MY Bible? Post-structuralist Hermeneutics and Sacred Text', pp. 74-90, Isherwood Lisa, McPhillips Kathleen (eds.), *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 75.

<sup>314</sup> Wootton, 'Who's Been Reading MY Bible?', p. 74.

transphobia. Further, if our work is to be intersectional, we must challenge all kyriarchal norms, difficult though this task might be.

Isherwood and Stuart argue that the problem of theological power imbalances has functioned since the early church, highlighting the legislative control of embodiment enacted by the Church Fathers.<sup>315</sup> Greenough highlights the disruptive nature of queer theologies, in particular the disruption of unjust power.<sup>316</sup> This prompts me to consider how I might ensure that this trans theology disrupts unjust theological and ecclesial power systems which seek to control trans identities, bodies, and people.

The key to this disruption, for me, is found in whose theology is brought into dialogue within the theology chapters of this thesis. Gerard Loughlin highlights queer as ‘the insult turned’, noting the turn from shame to pride.<sup>317</sup> It is vital to consider how trans theologians might enter into theological discourse without the manipulation, power, control, and shame that we have experienced being repeated in the creating of theology. In my review of *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*,<sup>318</sup> I highlight the unequal power dynamics that arise when trans people are invited to discuss or debate our identities, experiences, and arising theological understandings with cis people who seek to invalidate them.<sup>319</sup> It is important to me that, in this theology, trans voices be allowed to speak for themselves. As such, no cis theologians are brought into dialogue in the theology chapters. This means that I do not compare and contrast the theology herein with the insights of other theologians, with the

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<sup>315</sup> Isherwood, Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>316</sup> Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, pp. 4-34.

<sup>317</sup> Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, p. 8.

<sup>318</sup> Owen Strachan, Mark A. Yarhouse, Julia Sadusky, Megan K. DeFranza and Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

<sup>319</sup> Alex Clare-Young, ‘Book Review: Owen Strachan, Mark A. Yarhouse, Julia Sadusky, Megan K. DeFranza and Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*’, *Anglican Theological Journal*, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00033286211017127>> [accessed 28 May 2022].

exception of occasional reference to the limited field of trans-authored theological literature. Instead, I bring my participants', and my own, identities, experiences, and understandings into dialogue with each other. In doing so, I highlight the breadth, depth, and diversity of trans people and our theological understandings and enable a more equitable dialogue. In doing so, it is not my intention to suggest that cis people cannot critique or come into dialogue with this theology. Rather, I encourage that dialogue to follow, after careful listening that prioritises trans voices.

### 3.2.4. Freeing Bodies

To listen well to trans voices, it is necessary to engage with the trans bodies that our voices speak out of. Some trans-apologetic accounts marginalise elements of trans embodiment by resorting to medicalisation and problematisation.<sup>320</sup> Each of my interview participants has experienced similar erasure, as have I. Theologians who write body theology highlight the importance of reclaiming the body in our theologies.<sup>321</sup> Their prioritisation of the body is rooted in their understandings of incarnation and its inextricable entwinement with liberation. The incarnational embodied methodology that they argue for prioritises the connections between embodiment, emotion, and reason.<sup>322</sup> As trans people, we reclaim our bodies every day from theories and norms that seek to marginalise them. In this theology, I centralise trans embodiment, and ask what it reveals about incarnation. I also consider the ways in which both the marginalisation and reclaiming of trans bodies are active in the identities, experiences, and insights shared.

Althaus-Reid also locates theology in the body, suggesting that only transgressive embodiment can transform regressive norms.<sup>323</sup> She also argues that the body, particularly its suffering, is objectified by systematic theology.<sup>324</sup> In the theology that follows, trans people speak for ourselves out of, and about, our bodies. I avoid medicalising the identities, experiences, and bodies that are a part of this theology and do not compare the insights shared to cis understandings of trans embodiment. I refuse to analyse or deconstruct other trans people's understandings of their own

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<sup>320</sup> The clearest examples of this are Chalke, *The Transgender Agenda*, and Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*.

<sup>321</sup> Isherwood, Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*.

<sup>322</sup> Isherwood, Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, p. 32.

<sup>323</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>324</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 27.

bodies. Nor do I prioritise any one form of trans embodiment. Where suffering arises as a theme, I strive to allow the individual to tell their own story, and to theorise for themselves. This allows their suffering to speak out as a precious strand in dialogue, rather than being an object, used and manipulated by others.

Isherwood and Stuart ask, 'Is theology, and particularly Christian theology, moral enough to lift all the negative injunctions against the body and allow celebration to take the place of guilt and repression?'.<sup>325</sup> Yarhouse's disability model of trans identities treats the body as a problem, rather than an integrated part of the person that might be celebrated.<sup>326</sup> Yarhouse's integrity model, which he suggests is the way in which most Christians and churches understand trans identities, is even more problematic, as it is used to argue that it is appropriate, even necessary, to regulate and, ultimately, erase trans bodies.<sup>327</sup> 'Negative injunctions against the body' are persistent and persuasive in both trans-critical and some trans-supportive theologies and ecclesial statements.<sup>328</sup> By creating space for trans people to speak openly about our own experiences of embodiment, this theology seeks to not only 'lift' but also to deconstruct these injunctions, in the hope that negative understandings of the trans body might ultimately be resected from this field and replaced with celebration of authenticity.

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<sup>325</sup> Isherwood, Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, p. 19.

<sup>326</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*.

<sup>327</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*.

<sup>328</sup> Isherwood, Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, p. 19.



### 3.2.5. Informing Praxis

This theology queers the philosophical/practical theological divide. It is my belief that theory should inform praxis and that praxis should be informed by theory. Mary T. Condren, explaining the concept of philosophia – the love of wisdom – writes that it is:

fluid rather than rigid; tentative rather than petrified; open to new challenges rather than defending the orthodoxy. Philosophia works not only toward right theory but, more importantly, toward praxis, the union of action and theory devoted to creating a more just social order.<sup>329</sup>

The separation of theory from praxis is an illusion. Rather, supposedly orthodox, traditional theory informs contemporary ecclesial, political, and civic praxis. *Living in Love and Faith*, the most recent substantial U.K. denominational response to LGBTQ+ identities, was largely constructed by cis people and relies heavily on traditional understandings of theological anthropology. The binary categories of male and female are treated as the norm throughout.<sup>330</sup> The U.K. Government has failed to address the inadequacy of the Gender Recognition Act (2004), which prioritises the cisnormative binary categories of male and female.<sup>331</sup> Transphobic hate-crime is still under-reported, under-charged and under-convicted.<sup>332</sup>

Cisnormative understandings of sexual-dimorphism and related gender theory are foundational to all of the above ecclesial, political, and civic limitations on trans theory,

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<sup>329</sup> Mary T. Condren, 'Melting Hearts of Stone', pp. 143-161, Lisa Isherwood, Kathleen (eds.), *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 158.

<sup>330</sup> The House of Bishops, *Living in Love and Faith*, (London: The Church of England, 2020).

<sup>331</sup> U.K. Government, 'Gender Recognition Act', (2004), <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents>> [accessed 15 November 2019].

<sup>332</sup> Stop Hate UK, 'Transgender Hate', <<https://www.stophateuk.org/about-hate-crime/transgender-hate/>> [accessed 7 November 2022].

trans voices, trans lived experiences, trans bodies, and trans lives. There is a need to expose the link between limited theory and limited praxis.<sup>333</sup> Further there is a need to suggest the ways in which trans-authored trans theory can enable better praxis.<sup>334</sup> As such, this theology links theory to praxis throughout. Further, it avoids complex theoretical language which might create barriers to a wide range of practitioners in the relevant fields.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> See Isherwood, Althaus-Reid, *Controversies in Feminist Theology*, pp. 17-18, 133, Loughlin, *Queer Theology*, p. 9.

<sup>334</sup> See Wootton, 'Who's been reading MY Bible?', p. 77, Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, pp. 199, 225, Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, p. 4, McMahon, 'Trans Liberating Feminist and Queer Theologies', p. 61.

<sup>335</sup> See Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, pp. 225, 238, 248, Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, pp. 45, 126.

### 3.2.6. Turning the Church Inside Out

Relating theory to praxis requires a mobile stance in relation to the church. It is not possible to engage with a grounded trans theology unless the listener/reader is willing to stand outside of churches and critique their unjust power. Conversely, it is also necessary to engage with trans people inside of churches and to consider what the hope of new life means for us. This necessary mobility also functions for each research participant and for me, as researcher. Laurel C. Schneider argues that:

To the extent that religion produces and legitimises coercive norms, queer theology must critique it and stand outside of it. To the extent that religion transforms fear into life and denial into risk, queer theology should articulate it and support it.<sup>336</sup>

This mobility is not straightforward for trans Christians, particularly those engaged in church ministry, lay or ordained. The voices brought into dialogue in this theology have complex relationships to churches. Each self-identifies as Christian. Each experiences religious belonging differently. Further, each is critical of particular aspects of Christian theology and praxis. Some of those whose stories and understandings are represented herein are actively considering leaving their churches. Whilst we remain, however, we are unafraid of offering strong critique. This introduces an element of risk into this theological project. This risk is, however, essential to the curation of grounded trans theologies. Steps taken to protect participants, as well as risks voluntarily taken, are outlined in chapter 3. I take care, herein, to represent participants' identities, experiences, and understandings accurately and sensitively. I do not, however, soften

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<sup>336</sup> Laurel C. Schneider, 'Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology', *Religious Studies Review* 26.1. (2000), p.11.

their critiques of churches or their disclosures of the harm done within them. Whilst I cannot determine your answer, I ask you, the reader, to 'do no harm' as you engage with the selves that we lay bare.

### 3.2.7. Indecent Incoherence

Before beginning fieldwork, it was my intention to create a theology which spoke to most, perhaps all, of the key topics raised in systematic theology. I also intended to limit content to philosophical/theoretic theology, to the exclusion of practical theology. I now realise that these intentions were rooted in a fear of being found to be incoherent. Althaus-Reid suggests that 'Decent theologians struggle for coherence [...] Yet, we may ask, what is wrong with being incoherent theologically?'<sup>337</sup> The radical authenticity and honesty of my research participants, as well as the increasingly hostile religious, political and societal context in which trans people in the U.K. find ourselves, have challenged me to deconstruct my own biases and to take a methodological hammer to my own imposter syndrome. I have experienced the expectation of theological coherence as a kyriarchal insistence on appealing to normative systems. Althaus-Reid, conversely, suggests that 'queer in-betweenness' and disarticulations are the sites at which God might break in.<sup>338</sup>

My research interview with Jackson ended like this:

I think the only thing for me is just the, as has been said, there's so much that the church could learn from trans perspectives and kind of trans lens on theology. It's really frustrating that it gets stuck in apologetics because there's a real liberty.... I think, that comes when you start to unpick gender, because gender is so informative of how we live our lives. I think it's, and I think it's probably part of the reason why that, the church has just kind of just ignored

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<sup>337</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>338</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'The Bi/girl Writings: From Feminist Theology to Queer Theologies'. pp. 105-116, Lisa Isherwood, Kathleen McPhillips (eds.), *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 107-110.

trans people, I guess, as opposed to, gay, lesbian folks. I mean, I, I omitted bisexual because again, the church doesn't really talk about bisexual people that much. I think anything that seems to challenge binaries, I think the church just is a bit like, don't really know what to do with that. [...] I think that's very powerful and how it just disrupts that whole thing.

Jackson suggests that the disruption to normative systems that trans people enact has the power to enable change. Jackson's striking testimony impels me to be indecently incoherent, to allow trans voices and the topics that matter to us to speak out, interrupting and deconstructing theological norms, including the idol of coherent systems. By doing so, it is my hope and belief that this theology can be a part of enabling real change.

### 3.2.8. Summary

In this section, I have explored the grounded nature of my theological method, considering the ways in which my research is positioned against kyriarchy, is located in the body, is both practical and academic, does not hesitate to critique the church, and is intentionally incoherent, rather than in any way systematic. My theological method, which I have been developing over many years, has been impacted immensely by Jackson's call to an unpicking of the anthropological and theological norms which restrain us, so that we might centre truth and justice. This unpicking is necessarily incoherent, as norms are claimed to be coherent. It is unflinchingly critical of the church, where norms may be reinforced. It is specifically located in the body, as our bodies testify to the lies of binarism. Finally, it is anti-kyriarchal, seeking to tear down the panopticons<sup>339</sup> that reinscribe and reinforce normative, hierarchical values.

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<sup>339</sup> In architecture, the panopticon is a prison building that is circular. Panopticons originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the behest of Jeremy Bentham. The inhabitants of a panopticon self regulate because it creates the feeling of being watched by your peers. In 1975, Michel Foucault used the image of a panopticon as a metaphor for society, suggesting that society is no longer governed by rulers but, instead, is self-regulating due to mutual observation. He suggests that this self-regulation is not automatic but imposed as a tool of power. See Michel Foucault tr. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

## **Section B. Data and Reflections**



## Interlude 1. It's Important – Grey

'I have always known that I am non-binary genderqueer, and I've had that self-identification in my head for 25 years or more but generally speaking, I haven't lived in the words. I haven't owned that identity or that label and over the last 18 months, I actively started to think about it and realised that it's been a really limiting thing for me to not be fully open about that, and out in the world. And, of course, the world's a very different place now from what it was like in the mid-90s in terms of the ability to even explain what that means and expect any kind of understanding around that. And I just got to the stage where it's no longer worth restricting or limiting who I am for the benefit of other people's comfort. [...] I thought, "actually this time it's not impossible, and I can do it and it will make my life better, and it's important". [...]

One of the ways I coped with not being out in relation to my gender identity was to create a performance of a kind of gender that took me just as far as I needed to go for me to be just slightly more comfortable in my skin. I needed people to see in some way that I'm gender-nonconforming at least. I was creating an image of myself to allow just a tiny bit of visibility; visibility that wouldn't necessarily be labelled as trans but would signal something other than conventional feminine, womanly gender.

So, if I can signal that in much more straight forward ways like, "This is my name and these are my pronouns", then I no longer have to do all of that. I can wear what I like. A lot of what I do around my presentation has been a kind of code for, "Try not to see me as this thing but see me as that thing", but if I'm much more open about who I am then I don't have to do that. I don't have to play this game with myself and with the

world. I don't have to create coded ways of being in the world that aren't quite what I'm trying to say, but are a sort of vague approximation towards it, in a very restricted or limiting way. I can just say "This is who I am", and then people can just know that. I don't have to create other signifiers. [...]

All my life there has been this stuff I know about who I am and where my sense of self is and how I think I'm finding my identity and part of that is my gender and who I am in Christ needs to acknowledge that. And I've effectively been hiding that part of myself and that's been such a big tension; trying to be open about that quest, if you like, but at the same time not actually living. It is so freeing to not have to hide this huge part of who I am.'

## 4. Narrating our Experiences

Suffering, Resilience, and Joy

### 4.1. Introduction

Before considering the theological insights of trans and non-binary Christians, it is vital to explore trans and non-binary people's experiences and the narrative themes, or lenses, through which we understand God, ourselves, and others. Narrative identity is the unfolding story which a person creates in order to understand themselves and others. It is not static but, rather, continually transformed by our experiences and evolving understandings.<sup>340</sup> Trans narrative identity is formed in relation to, but not necessarily limited by, embodiment, lived experiences, and communication with others.<sup>341</sup>

Although narrative identity formation is relational, and affected by social context and communications, there should be an element of autonomy – everyone should be free to construct their own narrative identity, selecting the themes or lenses through which they understand themselves, their lives, those they connect with, and the world. Talia Mae Bettcher argues that 'trans politics ought to proceed with the principle that trans people have first person authority (FPA) over their own gender'.<sup>342</sup> In other words, trans people should be able to form their own narrative identity; to tell their own, authentic gender story without question or disbelief.

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<sup>340</sup> Dan P. McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', Schwartz, S. J., Luyckx, K. Vignoles, V. L. (eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, (London: Springer, 2011), pp. 99-115.

<sup>341</sup> Julie L. Nagoshi, Craig T. Nagoshi, Stephan/ie Brzuzy, *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*, (London: Springer, 2014).

<sup>342</sup> Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Trans Identities and First-Person Authority', Laurie Shrage (ed.) *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 98-120, p. 98.

However, trans people's autonomous narratives are often denied; said to be false by others who claim expertise in regard to trans people's lives and identities.<sup>343</sup> Graham Mayeda suggests that this denial means that 'the trans person is treated as a child who must justify [their] actions rather than as an adult who is simply asserting [their] identity'.<sup>344</sup> I believe this denial of autonomous narrative and the subsequent need to justify our identities and actions, rather than simply asserting them, is one of the key reasons for the prevalence of trans-apologetic literature in the field of trans theology, as explored in my literature review. I have certainly often felt the need to explain and defend who I am, and why I have transitioned, rather than being able to simply share my identity, experiences, and insights without justification.

Dan P. McAdams observes that in constructive narratives, 'people draw heavily on prevailing cultural norms and the images, metaphors, and themes that run through the many narratives they encounter in social life'.<sup>345</sup> In the U.K., a study of 256 trans and non-binary people found that 95% of participants felt that the media did not care about their perceptions of self and 70% felt that media representations of their identities were negative or very negative. Under 5% felt that they were positive.<sup>346</sup> More recently, in the U.S.A., a study of 545 trans and non-binary adults showed that 97.6% had experienced negative media coverage of trans identities.<sup>347</sup> It is inevitable that these

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<sup>343</sup> Bettcher, 'Trans Identities'.

<sup>344</sup> Graham Mayeda, 'Who Do You Think You Are? When Should the Law Let You Be Who You Want to Be?', Laurie Shrage, *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), pp. 194-216.

<sup>345</sup> McAdams, 'Narrative Identity', p. 99.

<sup>346</sup> Trans Media Watch, 'How Transgender People Experience the Media: Conclusions from Research', *TMW*, (2010), <<https://transmediawatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-Transgender-People-Experience-the-Media.pdf>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

<sup>347</sup> Jaclyn M.W. Hughto, David R. Pletta, Lily Gordon, Sean Cahill, Matthew J. Mimiaga, and Sari L. Reisner, 'Negative Transgender-Related Media Messages Are Associated with Adverse Mental Health Outcomes in a Multistate Study of Transgender Adults', *LGBT Health*, 8, 1, (2021), pp. 32-42, <<https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0279>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

negative media perceptions of trans identities help to create and support tropes which affect trans people's narrative identity formation and must be considered when exploring trans identities, insights, and experiences.

In the next three chapters I describe participants' experiences and arising theological insights. Before moving to theology and theological anthropology, I explore which of the key narrative themes of suffering, resilience, and joy arose in each participant's interviews. This will enable me to consider, in following chapters, how these themes impact, and are impacted by, participants' lived experiences and arising theological and anthropological insights. It is important to note that these are the themes I perceived in one interview and are not necessarily representative of a participant's whole narrative identity. I suggest that narratives of joy are necessarily dependant on narratives of suffering and resilience and argue that there is a need for an increase of trans theology and theological anthropology which utilises joy as a narrative frame.

## 4.2. Suffering

One clear narrative theme shown in the media in relation to trans identities is that of suffering/pathologisation. Jaydi Funk, Steven S. Funk, and Sylvia Whelan show that pathologisation of trans and non-binary people is the norm in media produced in the U.S.A. It is worth noting that U.S.A.-produced media is widely viewed in the U.K., particularly since the advent of content streaming.<sup>348</sup> Craig McLean concludes that both mainstream and social media in the U.K. push a narrative of trans people as being unsafe.<sup>349</sup> These limiting narratives observably impact the lives of trans and non-binary people.

For three participants, Yve, Mary, and Edda, experiences of suffering have contributed to the narratives of identity that they shared with me, and suffering was a key theme throughout their interviews. This does not mean that suffering is the key theme of their narrative identity formation. Nor does it suggest that they view their selves, others, and trans/non-binary identities in a negative light. However, it is notable that their experiences of suffering informed the narrative course of our interviews together and have been influential in their theological development.

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<sup>348</sup> Jaydi Funk, Steven S. Funk, Sylvia Whelan, 'Trans\*+ and Intersex Representation and Pathologization: An Interdisciplinary Argument for Increased Medical Privacy', *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 34, (2019), pp. 117-147, <<https://doi.org/10.15779/Z380C4SK4F>> [accessed 10 March 2022], p. 124.

<sup>349</sup> Craig McLean, (2021) 'The Growth of the Anti-Transgender Movement in the United Kingdom. The Silent Radicalization of the British Electorate', *International Journal of Sociology*, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2021.1939946>> [accessed 10 March 2022].

## 4.2.2. Experiences and Insights

### 4.2.2.1. Yve

Yve (she/her) is a woman in her late sixties. Yve transitioned a few years ago and lost her family and her career as a result. Yve used to work in education and has an unfilled ministry vocation. Yve has felt very isolated since being rejected by her local church leadership and speaks with both wisdom and sorrow about her difficult experiences in professional, ecclesial, and family contexts. Yve is widely read and feels a particular affinity for both the mystics and well-known Lutheran minister Revd. Nadia Bolz-Weber. Yve's theology draws on a wide variety of texts, as well as her own experiences. Suffering was a key narrative theme throughout Yve's interview.

Yve's transition itself has been very positive. Despite the joy of transition, however, Yve suffers greatly due to the reactions of other people, specifically other Christians, to her identity and transition. Yve explains:

It's hard to know where to begin as there's so much I could say about a life of neglect, an absence of genuine love. A life of betrayal, denial, abandonment and what feels like a complete absence of justice with total rejection of me either in a life completely void of professional or vocational fulfilment, pre or post transition. I have no problem with being transgender in and of itself and my GRS<sup>350</sup> was both necessary and an unqualified success. Since then, I'm happy in my own skin having only ever presented as female once my 25-year marriage broke down. What I wasn't prepared for was the total rejection of me as a female, in professional and church circles. It's this which has caused and

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<sup>350</sup> This refers to 'Gender Reassignment Surgery'. See 'Gender Reassignment' in glossary.

still causes me the most grief in life, leaving me hideously unfulfilled professionally, vocationally.

It is striking that Yve's suffering is not internal but, rather, related to society, family, church, and vocation. Yve's familial relationships have been a cause of difficulty since young adulthood. Yve reflected that societal pressure to live as 'a normal young man' was central to her marriage and subsequent divorce. She felt a strong sense of guilt in relation to her marriage, believing that she should not have married, given her own uncertainty, at the time, as to her identity. When Yve went on to transition, as an older adult, she was outed to her children, which led to her relationship with them ending. This led Yve to feel that coming out has 'cost me everything'.

Yve described experiences of spiritual abuse in churches and faith-based settings.<sup>351</sup>

Yve's experiences of spiritual abuse included attempted conversion, which included 'counselling' and being accompanied to her home to 'get rid of female presentation tools'. In the so-called 'counselling' that Yve experienced, being trans was 'linked to the devil'. Yve also described receiving 'no pastoral contact' when she was seriously ill for months and unable to attend church. Yve explained that a change in church leadership meant an 'instant change' from inclusion to exclusion, including losing her

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<sup>351</sup> To define spiritual abuse, I draw on Lisa Oakley et. al.'s observation that spiritual abuse is experienced as 'the employment of belief leading [directly or indirectly] to harm of another', which may include 'coercion and control', 'manipulation and pressuring of individuals', 'control through the use of religious texts and scripture' and 'divine rationale' for the mistreatment of others.

Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond, and Justin Humphreys, 'Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: definition, policy and practice guidance', *The Journal of Adult Protection*, 20, (2018), pp. 144-154, <<https://doi.org/10.1108/JAP-03-2018-0005> 11> [accessed March 2022].

Herein, therefore, I define spiritual abuse as using beliefs, scripture, and God as rationales and tools for harm including, but not limited to, coercion, control, manipulation, pressuring, and mistreating others. In the case of the trans and non-binary people interviewed, this included control or attempted control of identity and presentation, including attempted conversion, control or attempted control of religious belonging, including exclusion from church communities, and financial, emotional, verbal, physical and sexual abuse in a religious setting and/or with religion as rationale.



job as floor manager. This led Yve to feel that she was 'ostracised just for being myself'. Yve expresses that 'I've felt about as isolated as I think it's possible for anybody to feel'.

Yve uses the word 'insincerity' to describe her experiences of church, having encountered both a bishop and a priest who claimed to support inclusivity but then made all LGBTQ+ employees redundant. Yve also witnessed a degree of secrecy in church discussions around LGBTQ+ identities which compounded the sense of duplicity.

Yve's experiences in church led to what she describes as 'a complete mental breakdown' and the continuing feeling that 'people are messing with my life', as well as the loss of her job plunging her into poverty. Yve struggles to forgive the church for its 'false welcome and empowerment followed by utter exclusion'. Over time, Yve has come to feel that all churches 'reject me as female' and describes this as causing 'real grief' as well as a feeling of 'being broken'. This has led to doubt and confusion around concepts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption.

Despite these painful experiences, Yve described having 'tried to walk away from church over and over again', but finding it too hard to leave entirely due, in part, to a sense of vocation towards ordained ministry. As in her attempts to connect with others, when seeking vocational fulfilment Yve found herself rejected and isolated. Yve is not alone in these experiences. Four out of my ten participants were single at the time of interview, and eight out of ten have experienced difficulties in significant relationships in reaction to their identity or transition. Similarly, eight out of ten have experienced vocational delays or difficulties in relation to their identity or transition.

For Yve, then, suffering is a lived reality and, rather than avoiding suffering in her theological understandings, Yve embraces it. In particular, Yve relates to theological reflections on suffering by Nadia Bolz-Weber, Julian of Norwich, and St. John of the Cross. Empathy – shared reflections on suffering – seems to have spiritual value to Yve and means that she feels drawn to the suffering experienced by the mystics. Both her own suffering, and her reading of theology, impact her understandings of God and humanity.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, who Yve mentioned regularly throughout her interview, writes that:

The image of God I was raised with was this: God is an angry bastard with a killer surveillance system who had to send his little boy (and he only had one) to suffer and die because I was bad. But the good news was that if I believed this story and then tried really hard to be good, when I died I would go to heaven, where I would live in a golden gated community with God and all the other people who believed and did the same things as I did.....this type of thinking portrays God as just as mean and selfish as we are, which feels like it has a lot more to do with our own greed and spite than it has to do with God.<sup>352</sup>

Yve explained that Nadia Bolz Weber:

talks about the ‘angry despot’ from a ‘killer surveillance system’, and that’s the God that I’ve come to see because of my experiences of human nature, basically, that’s robbed me of everything and the life I might still have had but

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<sup>352</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*, (New York: Worthy Publishing, 2014).

seems further away with each passing day. And so, I live with that frustration, that pain, what did I do wrong?

In other words, Yve's negative experiences of human beings affect her intuitive understandings of God, leading her to feel that God, like the humans who have hurt or abandoned her, is a judgemental, negative force.

The theology that Bolz-Weber describes could be understood as relating to a relatively traditional understanding of atonement; the idea that Jesus suffered and died because of our sins, and that his death is a necessary step in our redemption. Yve's testimony is a stark reminder of the dangers of sin-and-punishment-based understandings of God. She struggles to glimpse any redeeming factors of humanity, because the humans that she has encountered have not been hospitable to her. Her negative experiences of humanity are projected onto God, meaning that she experiences God as her judge and punisher. This has a strikingly negative effect on Yve's sense of self-worth.

The eschatological reach of Bolz-Weber's religious upbringing is also a part of Yve's understandings. Like Bolz-Weber, Yve believes that, after she dies, she will meet God in heaven. Yve, despite her pain, ultimately understands that 'God does love me' and believes that 'at some point [...] we shall be one', describing the day of her death as 'a great day as far as I'm concerned' and asking, 'why don't you take me back now?'. This suggests that, for Yve, life is negative compared with the eschatological future. Whilst this may be seen as theologically orthodox, it is concerning in terms of pastoral and psycho-social well-being and leaves me wondering whether there is adequate pastoral support for people whose experiences are similar to Yve's. Since the time of her interview, Yve's life has improved significantly, and she has appropriate support in

place. Nevertheless, it is clear that Yve's lived experiences and theological understandings challenge her wellbeing and resilience.

Although the comments expressed above echo atonement theories that rely on personal belief, Yve goes on to explain that her reading of Bolz-Weber has 'really helped me to rethink this whole business of sin and grace'. Yve believes that we are 'all fallen' and 'all reconciled' and that in reality God is not an 'angry despot' but is, rather, a gracious host. In expressing this understanding, Yve transforms her own suffering into grace for the people who have inflicted it. This draws my mind to the reported words of Jesus from the midst of his own suffering, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.<sup>353</sup> Jesus's words, spoken on the cross, suggest that he does not blame the people who have called for his crucifixion. To my mind, this speaks to a critique of the system which both glorifies and enables human suffering, in this case crucifixion, instead of a critique of the people who enact the warped mechanisms of that system.

#### **4.2.2.2. Mary**

Mary (she/her) describes herself as an 'elderly woman'. Mary transitioned socially and medically many years ago and now simply identifies as female, though her identity as a child of God is more important to her than gender. Mary is retired, having worked in the sciences. Mary now attends a medium-sized, inclusive local church that she started to attend when invited by a transwoman she met online. Mary is also a lay-preacher and treasurer at her church and feels called to street evangelism and industrial chaplaincy. Mary's deeply held and confidently expressed theology is based on tradition and experience, as well as her scientific knowledge. She feels strongly

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<sup>353</sup> The Holy Bible, Luke 23. 34.

about social justice and has been known to shout about this when she preaches. The narrative themes of struggle and injustice were clear throughout Mary's interview.

Like Yve, Mary struggled with 'feeling lost' as a young adult, transitioning in later life, and losing all of her family and friends when coming out as trans. Mary said, 'my wife divorced me before I came to the point of decid[ing] to transition but that did mean that when I made the decision to transition I had already lost everything you are liable to lose when doing so; I'd lost my family, my friends, my job, everything'. Further, Mary was 'kicked out' of the church that she attended due, in part, to the minister's misunderstanding that being trans is a form of cross-dressing and cross-dressing is a form of homosexuality. Mary explained that being forced to leave her church at the time of coming out meant that, alongside the difficulties of repeatedly coming out and losing family and friends, she lost her entire church-based support network. She expressed that 'all of my friends were members of that church and none of them ever spoke to me again, so I was completely alone'.

Mary felt that the effect of her previous church's exclusionary teaching is 'universal hatred'. She suggested that when a person is taught to hate their sin, they are also taught to hate themselves. For Mary, this brought to mind Jesus's commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself'.<sup>354</sup> Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God, and that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour as you love yourself. For Mary, the 'love yourself' clause must function. Mary explains that if we love our neighbour as we love ourselves, then when we hate ourselves, we inherently hate our neighbour. Mary's church-inspired self-loathing was amplified by the fact that her minister felt that homosexuality is 'the most serious sin of all'. Mary's

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<sup>354</sup> The Holy Bible, Matthew 22. 39.

experiences and insights hints at the negative psychosocial effects of damaging understandings of sin. Mary feels that being taught to hate sin leads people to hate themselves and, therefore, disobey Jesus's command to love.

One effect of the anti-trans views of the minister of the church she was attending was that Mary's transition was delayed whilst she deconstructed and reconstructed her own theological understandings. This delay had serious effects on Mary's well-being and faith. Mary felt that she was 'living a false life. Whatever it was, I wasn't living the truth. I lost my faith and my relationship with God'. Mary felt that she experienced this 'false life' as 'hypocrisy' and as a 'sin', for which she had to 'repent'. Mary's delayed authenticity was worsened by a two-year wait for hormone therapy due to the three-year Gender Identity Clinic waiting list. Mary noted that many people obtain hormones via unofficial channels due to these lengthy waiting times.

Mary is not alone in experiencing and critiquing long waiting times for trans-identity-related support from the U.K. N.H.S. In a 'letter before action', the Good Law Project notes that 'the NHS has a legal obligation to see those referred to GIDS [Gender Identity Development Services) within 18 weeks. But the average waiting time is 18 months' and goes on to report that some people have waited up to four years for an initial appointment.<sup>355</sup> This letter, and the intention to pursue action that it indicates, highlights that these long waiting times are not only painful, but also unlawful.

Given these difficulties, for Mary, it was trans peer support that enabled resilience and led to a gradual return to faith. Mary explained:

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<sup>355</sup> Good Law Project, The NHS must fulfil its duty to young people, 2020, <<https://goodlawproject.org/update/nhs-duty-to-young-people/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

I asked for help on a trans support forum and was invited to church with someone. St. [church name] was down this little back alley and, when I got there, I found that the person was the visiting preacher and I thought, 'the visiting preacher is a trans woman. This is my church!' A few months later, I transitioned. Then I regained my faith and my relationship with God. My understanding is that hypocrisy is quite unacceptable to God. And that is my testimony on that. And I'm now in a very supportive church.

Despite this positive turn in Mary's faith story, the narrative theme of suffering has continued to affect her understandings of her trans identity. Mary identifies 'more as a woman than a trans woman' but does consider her identity as 'very relevant' on 'Trans Day of Remembrance'.<sup>356</sup> This highlights the correlation of trans identities with oppression, violence and grief.

Further, Mary suggested that she understands her identity as inherently problematic for others. For Mary, 'history' is the cause of transphobia. She explained:

When we were young, we were taught that God was exclusively male which is why men are more important than women. So, if you challenge that, men in particular are going to feel unstable, they feel threatened. So are many women because it's much easier for a woman to know that a man is in charge and men run the church. I mean, that is a nice stable, understandable set up. You know where you are. And so, if you say, 'No, it's much more fluid than that',

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<sup>356</sup> Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR) refers to the events held annually on the 20th of November to remember those trans people who have been killed during the previous year.

you upset the status quo. You take away stability. And anybody can be upset about that.

Mary's understandings of trans problematisation and transphobia are strongly based on a binary gendered privilege model, which she went on to suggest means that she lost her male privilege by transitioning. Mary explained, 'I never understood anything about privilege, until I lost it because I had all the privilege. I gave up male privilege and cisgender privilege and [as an elderly woman] I've lost the privilege of being the right age.' Mary's understanding of herself as oppressed, and her concern for other people who may be oppressed, was apparent throughout her interview. Despite her suffering, Mary sees herself primarily as a beloved 'child of God' and sees her vocation to care for others and work for social justice as being core to her identity.

#### **4.3.3.3. Edda**

Edda (they/them) is a non-binary young adult. Edda came out as non-binary very recently and has identified as queer for quite some time. Edda is a minister in a mainstream European denomination and has found that telling their congregation about using they/them pronouns has led to helpful pastoral and theological conversations. Edda's theology is centred around social justice and queer theory, though that wasn't their initial intention! Edda feels that, as a queer person, work around queerness and intersectional social justice is the only way to be authentic. Queer identities and their links to experiences of oppression and marginalisation were clear narrative themes throughout Edda's interview.

Similar to Yve and Mary, Edda's family was also affected by their identity, as well as the fact that their partner was also trans. These difficulties were, again, related to churches. Edda and their fiancé experienced considerable difficulty gaining their



bishop's permission to marry despite the fact that when colleagues asked for the same permission, the response was immediate and was 'like congratulations, go ahead. May God bless your union'. As such, Edda understandably believes that transphobia was at the root of the delay.

As well as a delayed marriage, Edda experienced a transition delay as a result of ecclesial transphobia. Edda was not initially able to come out in the parish in which they worked, as multiple meetings were required in order to agree that this was permissible. Once technically out, Edda still experienced barriers, as their supervisor suggested that they should not tell people about their pronouns, as this would be 'too difficult'. Since being ordained, Edda has experienced increasing difficulty, reflecting that 'within the church it is a struggle. And I'm learning more and more how much of a struggle it is'. Edda's care for others led them to accept that 'people tend to use 'she''. I'm kind of trying to move away from that but I'm fairly open. Some people will not get there'. Although this attitude demonstrates resilience, I feel that this level of resilience should not be necessary, particularly in churches. Edda, themselves, admits that 'it is not an easy path'.

Similar to Mary, Edda's experiences of suffering led to vocational and theological emphases on social justice. Edda correlated 'queerness' with 'marginalisation' and explained that their marginalisation as a queer person impelled a hermeneutic lens of 'intersectional social justice' when interpreting scripture. Whilst Edda did describe queer hermeneutics as related to marginalisation and suffering, they also highlighted the richness of queer theology, explaining that 'for my theology and my own spiritual development and practice, it's so enriching being non-binary and embodying a queer way of reading scripture'. Edda also described a practice of embodying each of the

Persons of the Trinity when reading scripture, a playful practice of 'just trying to shift between aspects of it'. Edda spoke about 'playing with scripture, in a sense of entering a certain realm and just exploring without knowing what the outcome will be'.

### 4.2.3. Summing Up Narratives of Suffering

Yve, Mary, and Edda have each experienced significant suffering which has contributed to their identity formation. For Yve, this meant that suffering was a key theme in her interview, and also contributed to her theological understanding. Mary has also experienced suffering, particularly in relation to church, which was referred to frequently throughout her interview. Mary understood her suffering as injustice and, as such, the narrative themes of struggle and injustice were key themes. Edda has also experienced suffering, which they have codified as a theme of queer theory. As such, the inter-relatedness of queerness and suffering were clear themes throughout their interview.

In each case, themes of suffering were related specifically to the action, or inaction, of churches. Teresa Caprioglio argues that the theme of 'queer trauma' is overused in society and the media as a trope which has negative effects on queer people and may be partially responsible for the lack of any appropriate response to anti-queer violence.<sup>357</sup> Following Caprioglio's argument, perhaps the common themes of suffering and apologetics in trans-related theological literature have negatively impacted churches' understanding of, and responses to, trans people. It is vital to challenge the trope of trauma, without ignoring people's suffering, in order that individuals and institutions recognise the need for change.

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<sup>357</sup> Teresa Caprioglio, 'Does 'Queer Narrative' Mean 'Trauma Narrative' on TV? Exploring Television's Traumatized Queer Identity', *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 22, 4, (2021), pp. 452-464, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2021.1925865>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

### **4.3. Resilience**

The media trope of trans suffering, as well as the negative experiences that participants have had, suggests that trans resilience is necessary. Like the participants considered above, Sarah, Ash, Grey, and Jo have experienced suffering. However, resilience was a more notable narrative theme in their interviews.

## 4.3.2. Experiences and Insights

### 4.3.2.3. Sarah

Sarah (she/her) is a middle-aged transwoman, who transitioned socially around three years ago and takes oestrogen. Sarah feels that her transition is a less important part of her identity than other factors, like being a parent and having a successful and fulfilling career. Sarah is a member of a local cathedral, although her background and preferred tradition is charismatic/evangelical. Sarah has a history of church-planting and youth ministry and is in a process of vocational discernment. She works in talent management and is an entrepreneur, co-managing her own organisation. Sarah's theology is both practical and spiritual, biblically informed and continuing to develop. Sarah says that she is still learning a lot about both gender and theology. Developing resilience both before and during transition was a clear narrative theme throughout Sarah's interview.

Sarah's resilience prior to transition was evidenced by repeated attempts to change her identity, as well as remaining in church contexts that were hostile to her identity for a prolonged period of time. Sarah described life pre-transition as 'a resistance against the inevitable'. She spent years in a church where 'being trans was very unacceptable' and continued to attend due to 'internalised transphobia'. Sarah described being outed at a prayer meeting and reflected that 'when I wasn't careful about who I felt to be inside, people latched on immediately. And I was terrified'. Sarah went on to explain that:

I'd confessed to being trans in prayerful situations. They told some people outside of the church about it and broke the kind of confidence of the kind of prayer room. So, the church were mortified and obviously they expected me

to kind of go off on one and be like, 'How dare you do that?' And my reaction was more, 'Well, I am. If people find out about that, I'm not surprised because that's who I am as a person.'

This nonchalant response to being outed against her will highlights Sarah's resilience in an unsafe context.

Sarah was eventually asked to undergo 'deliverance ministry' by church leaders and reflected that 'after 20 years of pleading with God to not let me be like this, pushing me to do that again was just the last straw'. For Sarah, it was this attempt at converting her gender that led her to leave her church and begin the journey towards transition.

Despite the spiritual abuse that Sarah experienced in her church, she continued to sense a vocation towards ministry. She explained, though, that 'the church wouldn't let me do that'. Sarah turned to entrepreneurship in order to fulfil her vocation elsewhere, explaining that:

I do for the work world what I think I should be doing for the church. I love helping people to move on in their development and in their capability, all that type of stuff. The church wouldn't let me do that really, so I turned to the world of work and did it there. Ironically, I talk about a lot of Christian principles in the work that I do. I stand out in the field because I'm a huge believer in inclusive talent management. And that's exactly what the church should do. Church should just say, 'We've got a phenomenal group of amazing members who we want to be the best they can possibly be in their relationship with God, with their ministry and contribution to the world', and enable that.

Instead of shaping her narrative around the suffering of being hurt and having her vocation rejected by the church, Sarah has shaped her narrative around how she can take the gifts and theological insights that she has and use them in secular contexts.

Both family and friendship were key to Sarah's resilience. Sarah highlighted the importance of the acceptance her female friends treated her with, which she explains 'really meant the world, really mattered to me'. She also mentioned her children throughout her interview, explaining that both their positive reaction to her transition and spending time with them is 'just amazing. It's everything'. This shows that the narrative theme of resilience, for Sarah, is not constructed in isolation but, rather, is supported by collaboration from those around her.

#### **4.3.2.2. Ash**

Ash (he/him) is a middle-aged transmasculine, genderflux person. Ash began to transition several years ago and has just begun to take testosterone. After initially identifying as genderfluid, Ash transitioned towards male, but retains a sense of gender nonconformity. Ash has a doctorate and works in education. Ash describes his faith as gnostic and non-traditional. He has a clear and distinctive understanding of Christian theology which draws on his own spiritual experiences, past and present multiple-religious-belonging, and wide reading from a variety of faith and theological contexts. Ash is a spiritual entrepreneur, creating safe spiritual spaces for people who wish to explore their own spirituality. Ash's creative practices of resilience were a narrative theme throughout Ash's interview.

Similar to Sarah, Ash has experienced explicit attempts at conversion, which he describes as attempts to 'pray the gay away' and attempted 'exorcisms'. He also experienced attempted conversion through prayer. It is notable that he was married to

a man, and living as female, at the time of these attempts, which suggests that the religious community in which he was situated interpreted his gender nonconformity as homosexuality. Ash has also experienced difficulty mirroring gender norms and regular misgendering as well as being forcibly dechurched when he transitioned.

Ash curates resilience in light of these difficulties by thinking creatively and engaging in creative practices. Ash argued, 'I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for art', explaining:

I was in a very, very bad place mentally and I went to a spiritual counsellor, and she was the one that got me back into painting and I think painting really did save me. Going on pilgrimage was the other thing that she got me into and also song-work. I sometimes meditate through painting or through writing but also through walking the land and what I find is when I'm doing that, songs and prayers come up naturally.

For Ash, painting, writing, walking, and singing are creative practices that support resilience. It is notable that these are also highly embodied and tactile practices. Ash is connected with both the inner and outer world through intentional creativity.

Ash's creativity has not only supported his resilience, but also his understandings of identity and spirituality. Ash explained:

I'm transmasculine genderflux. Sometimes I identify as fully male, sometimes more kind of demi-guy/trans-masculine. Mostly I just introduced myself as a trans guy. If I get forms with male or non-binary or female I always go for male and I um present male, but spiritually I'm more non-binary if that makes sense. The way I present and the way I live my daily life and go into the practicalities



and the logistics is a bit different from where I see myself on a more spiritual level.

Ash later suggested that it was difficult for others to understand his most authentic identity, hence the use of multiple descriptors. This suggests an ability to manage complexity for the sake of others and/or of recognition.

Ash also used creative thought to explore how he might best reflect his spiritual ideal of 'balance' in his gender identity and presentation. He explained, 'When I first came out I experimented with half and half. I have some photos with my hair down on one side and short on the other, wearing a suit jacket on one side and flowery sparkly stuff on the other'. This creative experimentation, as well as the willingness to stand out, is striking.

Like Sarah, Ash's resilience was not formed in isolation. For Ash, it was on social media that people first used his correct name and pronoun, enabling him to continue to transition. He described living in a 'visibly LGBTQ+ community' as a foundational element of his transition and explained that he met his partner at an 'LGBTQ+ faith group'. Ash spoke warmly about the 'supportive relationship' between trans people, his membership of ftm (female-to-male) groups, and the importance of members of LGBTQ+ groups using his pronouns correctly. Ash experienced mutual support in the LGBTQ+ community when he was able to swap gendered items with his differently gendered friend, who went on to become his partner. In this way, as well as through creating and leading spiritual practices for trans and non-binary people, Ash has used his own resilience to support the resilience of others.

#### 4.3.2.4. Grey

Grey (they/them) has come out very recently as non-binary and works in the leadership of a major human-rights organisation. Grey is also discerning a call to ministry. Grey's passion for social justice is woven into their DNA and has always informed their vocational journey. Authenticity is very important to Grey and was a motivating factor in coming out. Grey's theology centres on God's love, and their vocation is strongly pastoral. They feel an affinity with, and vocation amongst, LGBTQ+ communities but can also see themselves in a rural, traditional parish. The narrative theme of developing resilience was significant throughout Grey's interview.

As with Sarah, Grey waited a long time to transition. Grey explained that 'I'm not comfortable in my femaleness at all' and described their pre-coming-out life as a 'gender struggle', which they related to norms around being a mother and being assumed to be/labelled as lesbian. Despite this struggle, Grey shared the experience of waiting until a partner is ready, to transition. Grey described the experience of another person putting 'boundaries around my [gender]'. For Grey's partner, this reaction was due, in part, to the ways in which Grey's trans identity affected her own lesbian identity.

Grey explained that being a parent delayed their transition, as they felt comfortable with their mothering role, despite discomfort and incongruence with gender more generally and, further, that it was difficult to be trans and/or non-binary 'in the 90s', and that the societal 'cost of transition' would have been too high. However, Grey also described not being out as a kind of 'self-restriction' or limitation that is enacted for the comfort of others and explained that they experienced micro-aggressions at work, where people didn't always know 'the right way to speak about' trans identities

Grey prioritised resilience by ceasing to attend church as a young adult due, in part, to a feeling that life was very difficult for LGBTQ+ people in church. They have recently started to be a part of LGBTQ+ specific churches, where they reflect that coming out was 'easy'. Grey is an ordinand and, when I interviewed them, they had not yet told church leadership about their non-binary identity and were nervous about doing so. This nervousness is not surprising, given the difficult experiences that many participants have had in church contexts and Grey's own pause in church membership due to those difficulties. Grey was determined to continue to explore their vocation, however, repeatedly reminding me that 'it's not about me, it's about everyone who is more vulnerable than me'.

Similar to Ash, LGBTQ+ community was essential for Grey. Grey suggested that correct naming and use of pronouns within LGBTQ+ spaces was a vital practice in supporting resilience. They also expressed a sense of belonging to and prioritising a 'queer tribe' as they transition and begin to explore ministry, explaining that encountering other non-binary people in the LGBTQ+ community 'contributed to my sense of belonging'. Drawing on my own lived experiences, I suspect that Grey's sense of belonging and resilience will both increase, and be challenged, as they continue their vocational journey.

#### **4.3.2.1. Jo**

Jo (she/her) is a non-binary transwoman in her 70s, a father and a grandmother. Jo is also a play-wright. Jo says that she is not a theologian, but her biblically inspired plays suggest otherwise, and she believes that theatre is a missional arena. Jo has known that she was trans since childhood, but only felt able to transition after the tragic loss of her wife, some years ago. Jo's theology centres around a passion for

transformation, and extensive reading in early religious writings. She has also been strongly influenced by a family friend who taught her to meditate. Her clear resilience and creativity through, at times, very painful circumstances shine through her theology. The narrative theme of resilience was perhaps most clearly represented by Jo, who exclaimed that, 'I did have resilience, or I'd be dead'.

Out of all of my participants, Jo waited the longest to transition, only beginning her journey after her wife tragically passed away. Jo described 'life as male', which had been her life for the past five decades, as 'unliveable' at that point. Jo's wife had suggested that they would have to separate in order for Jo to transition, but Jo felt that they may have found a way forward together, given more time. Jo described living for her children at her most difficult times and referred to herself as a 'father and grandmother', highlighting her ability to hold facts that may sometimes be seen as contradictory in tension.

Similar to Ash, Jo's resilience was supported by creativity. Jo described her career in theatre as 'a safe vocational space where I could be myself' and highlighted that this was an essential foundation to her process of identity discernment, coming out, and transition, as well as her well-being more generally. For Jo, 'reading', 'learning', and 'imagination', as well as her vocation as a writer, were experienced as a 'refuge' from the lack of understanding that she experienced in society. It was reading about the ways in which some of the indigenous peoples of America 'honoured' people who they described as 'two-spirit', as expressing gender in diverse ways, that gave Jo 'some comfort', and instigated her journey of understanding regarding her own gender. For Jo, this journey led to writing, which became of primary importance in supporting her resilience. Jo spoke of 'staying alive' for her vocation as a playwright and actor.

Jo developed a lens of storytelling and explained that telling God's story was foundational to learning to tell her own story and that, in the process, she 'discovered the stories that I didn't know'. Interestingly, Jo also felt a connection with God not, initially, as a supreme being, but as a biblical character. Reading about God in the Hebrew Scriptures, and supplementary interpretive texts, Jo developed a sense that God might be 'unhappy about being confined' to the gender binary and explained that in the Hebrew Scriptures 'Female G/gods<sup>358</sup> are being denied and told that they are abominations [...] and I held the Bible as responsible [for binary understandings of God], as corrupted.' This sense of empathy with God is important to Jo, widening her understandings of both God and of herself.

Jo referenced a range of biblical passages, from the Hebrew Scriptures, through the Gospels to the Letters. As well as her understandings of God's gender, readings from the Pentateuch helped Jo to discern her own gender identity, explaining that she 'discovered' herself in the Bible when she realised that the second creation narrative, found in Genesis chapter two, mirrored the androgynes of Plato's creation narrative.<sup>359</sup> Plato describes the initial creation of human beings as two-faced, eight-limbed, androgynous creatures who were then split apart by a vengeful god, who could not tolerate their cooperative power. They were then destined to go through life searching for their other half.

Jo found the Gospels to be an essential tool of resilience, noting that 'Jesus says, "Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you", so I had to treat my enemies that way'. For Jo, this understanding of scripture enabled a gracious, and even

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<sup>358</sup> I use G/gods to note that Jo was referring both to female aspects of God and to other gods outside of the Christian tradition.

<sup>359</sup> Plato tr. John Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 385-370BC/1903CE), para. 172a.

thankful, response to anti-trans protestors who picketed the initial release of her ground-breaking play. Jo also mentioned the narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, explaining that her initial reaction was, 'Wow, salvation really does encompass me'. This narrative describes a disciple, Philip, meeting a person from Ethiopia who was a court official and a eunuch – someone who was sex-and/or-gender diverse – who is reading scripture which they ask Philip to explain to them. The encounter ends with the person asking Philip what there is to stop them being baptised. They are, then, baptised. For Jo, it was not a particular understanding of salvation, or the story of Jesus's resurrection, that enabled her own resilience, but this less well-known story of a disciple whose story connects with Jo's own.

### **4.3.3. Summing Up Narratives of Resilience**

Sarah, Ash, Grey, and Jo have each formed attitudes and practices of resilience, in response to suffering, which have become central to their narrative identities. These attitudes and practices are borne out of necessity and informed by vocation, creativity, and supportive social and familial relationships. There is clear potential for learning around the ways in which vocation, creativity and support can be used to support the resilience of anyone who has experienced suffering.

It was impossible to avoid being impressed by participants' resilience. Nevertheless, I was struck by the way in which resilience is a direct result of suffering. This does not elevate suffering but, rather, highlights the limitations of any overarching narrative of trans identities which relies on resilience and, contingent, suffering. This risks suggesting that suffering is a good thing, whereas the suffering of trans people is a painful reality rooted in unjust systems and practices. The theme of suffering underlies the theme of resilience. If resilience is seen as a virtue of trans identities, that means that our suffering is seen as a virtue too. The implied glorification of suffering is intensely problematic. I am concerned about the ways in which negative societal attitudes towards trans people have impacted participants' wellbeing and impelled them to find ways to manage and respond to pain.

#### 4.4. Joy

Trans resilience is directly correlated to trans suffering. Perhaps a move is needed from discussing trans suffering and resilience to noticing trans joy – from a voyeuristic focus on pain and survival to a participative practice of new life. Trans people are initiating this move through practices and narratives of trans euphoria.<sup>360</sup> It would be inaccurate to suggest that this is in any way a critique of the participants described above. Rather, I suggest that the resilience developed in light of suffering enables the euphoria lens. Suffering is perhaps inevitable for trans and non-binary people in the U.K. at present, whether or not we believe that this should be so. When resilience is developed, however, it is possible to reframe experiences of suffering in the light of joy, or euphoria. For example, considerations of bodily suffering may be balanced with considerations of bodily transition and congruence. In conversations with cis people, I often note that the questions asked, and statements of support made, assume great suffering, and focus thereon. The idea that I might experience bodily congruence or pleasure, euphoria, does not seem to occur to many conversation partners. Similar to each other participant, including myself, Pat, Bingo and Jackson have experienced considerable suffering and developed striking resilience. Their narratives, however, are framed around the concept of joy in both implicit and explicit defiance to cultural and ecclesial tropes of trans suffering and pathology.

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<sup>360</sup> Will J. Beischel, Stéphanie E. M. Gauvin, and Sari M. van Anders, 'A little shiny gender breakthrough: Community understandings of gender euphoria', *International Journal of Transgender Health*, (2021), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1915223>> [accessed 11 March 2022].



## 4.4.2. Experiences and Insights

### 4.4.2.3. Pat

Pat (she/her) is in her forties. Although Pat identifies as female – which is also her sex assigned at birth – she also identifies as gender non-conforming. Pat's identity has been, in part, shaped by a single (male) parent upbringing, and a diagnosis of PCOS, which she describes as an intersex condition. Pat is a minister and feels that her androgyny and gender non-conformity is a positive in ministry. Her theology centres around her belief in a loving God and her passionate understanding that the church should speak up for the marginalised. She also feels strongly that better understandings of trans and gender non-conforming identities would enable the church to understand the lives of cis people who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Narrative themes of suffering and resilience were apparent in Jo's interview, but a narrative theme of joy was also clear throughout.

Like Jo, reading, learning, and engagement with scripture has informed, and is informed by, Pat's narrative of joy. For Pat, learning a 'new language' has enabled her to better understand herself and, accordingly, to develop a greater sense of self-worth. That sense of self-understanding went on to mean that Pat's sense of faith has 'grown' and 'expanded' since she began to recognise herself as non-binary. In particular, Pat has developed a sense that 'God doesn't judge' and explains that sin is universal, that we cancel each other out and that, therefore, the concept is irrelevant. Rather than developing a theory of redemption in order to counter a theory of sin, Pat suggested that we are redeemed simply because we exist and are loved. Likewise, Pat responded to her lived experiences of suffering by choosing to focus on life and love.

Pat found 'reading the Bible for myself' important and has valued broadening her reading to extra theological disciplines, suggesting that the Bible is a 'teaching document', but not the only important text. For Pat, female biblical characters were of key importance. She related to Mary Magdalene, Hagar and Rahab, who she described as 'strong women' who 'queer gender' and 'challenge biblical and the church's gender stereotypes'. She suggested that these 'strong women' were not referenced enough in mainstream churches, highlighting the problem of a suffering/marginalisation theological lens.

For Pat, it was Jesus's words about what it means to be human that inspired joy. Pat explained that:

Jesus talks about eunuchs being blessed and you can easily re-write the beatitudes in relation to that; to say that blessed are non-binary people, trans people, people who just refuse to fit in a box, women in jeans and men in skirts. Blessed are those of us who defy sex and gender norms because Jesus said so.

For Pat, gender and sex are material, but that materiality does not contradict trans and non-binary freedom and blessing. Rather, for Pat, it is as the embodied and clothed fleshy beings that we are that Jesus blesses us. It is in our daily lived experiences that we can encounter unapologetic joy.

#### **4.4.2.2. Bingo**

Bingo (they/them) is a genderqueer young adult. Bingo has been living in transition for several years. Bingo identifies in a manner that is playful and that queers and challenges gender. Bingo is a minister in one of the four main UK denominations and

identifies with the evangelical/charismatic tradition, whilst noting tensions between their tradition and identity. Bingo has a growing and distinctive understanding of Christian theology, and they frequently note the importance of continued learning. Bingo's theology draws on their training for Christian ministry, which included an undergraduate theology degree. Bingo also applies the lenses of play, gender-queering, disability-theory, and experience to their theological journey. Bingo's playful hermeneutics were a narrative theme which was evident throughout Bingo's interview. Bingo's sense of joy is a gritty one, rooted in protest. Bingo told me that they sometimes experience their ministry as a kind of 'rebellion against oppressors'. This leads me to wonder what a euphoric rebellion against gender-based religious oppression might look like.

For Bingo, listening to and sharing music which mirrors their experiences and/or identity is a vital element of self-expression. They centre their vocational practice of leading retreats for trans people around creative practices including music and visual arts. This creativity spills over into Bingo's biblical hermeneutics of play and 'genderfluid hermeneutics', highlighting the ways in which trans and non-binary resilience can influence theological practices and understandings. Bingo explained that they used the term 'genderfluid hermeneutics' and 'biblical play' to describe a process of experimenting with the genders of biblical characters, not as a definitive practice but as a playful one, through which new resonances might develop.

Drawing comparisons between themselves and 'fleshy' biblical characters was important to Bingo, who explained that 'lived experience' was an essential element of connection. Bingo referred to a number of biblical characters, highlighting Joseph and Samson. Regarding the latter, they described their interpretation like this: 'Proper

headcanons;<sup>361</sup> Samson is transgender, and I need it be fleshy. I need it to be about the way they dress, the things that they do with their hair.’ Bingo’s use of the term ‘headcanons’ shows the way in which popular cultural has influenced their practice of ‘biblical play’, enabling Bingo to experiment with the biblical characters and interpretations that resonate with them.

Bingo found the Genesis creation narratives to be revelatory texts. Bingo related that:

the first thing that [online anti-trans commenters] tend to do is throw Genesis 1:27 at me, ‘male and female he created them’, and it was through prayer and study of that very scripture that I believe that God revealed to me who I am and my identity as a trans person. I was writing an essay on Genesis 1:23 and I had this powerful spiritual experience, and it was like in John [4.39] when the woman says he told me everything that I was, so even from the very beginning it was a spiritual as much as it was an emotional journey.

Bingo went on to explain that ‘I felt like God saying that I could live in the ‘and’ [of male *and* female, Gen.1:27], it wasn't like two sides of a team that I needed to pick’. For Bingo, God’s affirmation in Genesis 1:27 was strengthened by what they interpreted as God’s condemnation of the gender binary in Genesis 3. Bingo explained:

I had to play around with the fall, and I really like the idea that binary understandings of sex and gender are the result of the fall and the curse that Eve and Adam experience in Genesis 3 is basically gendered lives. God effectively says, “Adam you’re a man and this is your job, and that's what men

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<sup>361</sup> Headcanons is a term used in popular culture to describe a personal interpretation that is relatable but is not used in the ‘universe’ of a particular series or story.

do, and Eve you're a woman and this is what women do." A lot of people say that being trans is the result of the fall, and I want to flip it the other way round, and actually say that binary understandings of gender and gender roles are the actual result of the fall.

Whilst 'the fall' is not a key part of my own theological understandings, I found this explanation fascinating and helpful. It is certainly worth noting that gender roles do seem to be introduced in the biblical narrative immediately after Adam and Eve discover their own nakedness. This could be used to argue for correlated sex and gender. However, it is just as possible to see gender differentiation as the result of knowing too much. It is also clear that Bingo's interpretation of 'the fall' is strongly related to the interpretations that have been used against them. Bingo has developed a creative understanding of this difficult text that enables resilience, rather than shame.

Bingo also referenced the transfiguration,<sup>362</sup> relating it to trans lives by suggesting that 'in all our coming outs and transitions and things we're revealing that which is hidden to the rest of the world but is known to God and is blessed by God'. In the transfiguration, Jesus's divinity is revealed to three of his disciples, enabling them to see him as he truly is. Similarly, Bingo suggests that, in coming out and transition, trans people reveal their hidden identities to those close to them. Bingo used this idea to help other trans people, leading a retreat with transfiguration as the theme, showing how practices of joyful revelation can positively impact the trans community.

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<sup>362</sup> The Holy Bible Matthew 17. 1; Mark 9. 2; Luke 9. 28.

#### 4.4.2.1. Jackson

Jackson (he/him) is a young trans man. Jackson transitioned a few years ago and moves through the world as a man. As a Black man, Jackson feels that both race and gender have informed his experiences, identity, and theology. Suffering is central to Jackson's theological understandings, but joy is central to his transition. He is moving towards a freer, more joy-filled understanding of God too. Jackson is a writer, and his theological understandings are beautifully and poignantly poetic. As an advocate for social justice, Jackson has lots of questions for God and the Church and raises the vital issue of structural injustice. These questions arise out of Jackson's experiences of gender euphoria<sup>363</sup> and his correlated strong sense that euphoria can and should be a framing narrative theme for exploring trans and non-binary identities and lives.

For Jackson, experiences of suffering were inversely correlated with joy. Jackson explored the danger of narrow/exclusive theological understandings, explaining that 'bad evangelical theology' caused him severe anxiety, and led him to 'repress my desires and needs'. Jackson further noted the resilience needed to manage 'not conforming to people's notions of gender in public [which] was very hard' and expressed that it was difficult to navigate life during a time of physical and social dysphoria. Despite this, Jackson's focus is not on dysphoria but, rather, on 'euphoria'. Jackson explained that 'my transition is about noticing what brings me joy and following those breadcrumbs of delight'. This attitude is in direct challenge to the trope of trans suffering and suggests that an intentional focus on joy can not only resource trans people, but also those who have the privilege of dialogue with trans people.

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<sup>363</sup> Gender euphoria is a feeling of joy related to the correlation of gender identity, expression, and perception. It can be described as the opposite of dysphoria.

Jackson described having held 'narrow' and 'authoritarian' theological understandings prior to coming out which 'broadened in my twenties', enabling his transition. Contextualisation of scripture and reading for oneself were essential components of transformation. Over time, Jackson has come to notice, and see the importance of 'certain themes and motifs' through scripture, rather than 'specific passages'.

As with Bingo, Jackson has grown into a hermeneutic of contextual questioning, noting that he has questions to ask of the Bible 'as a queer person' and 'as a Black person'. He expressed that he was 'trying to decide whether there is still something valuable here or whether it all needs to go'. In this decision-making process Jackson was able to prioritise his own value over 'harmful interpretations' of scripture. This process has led to a lens of social justice, through which Jackson assesses the potential of biblical narratives and interpretations.

#### **4.4.3. Summing Up Narratives of Joy**

Pat, Bingo, and Jackson all expressed themes of joy, exploration, play and euphoria in their interviews, which were often in contrast to their experiences of suffering, and which contributed to their theological understandings as well as their own identity narratives. Jackson, in particular, showed a way in which trans euphoria can be an intentional framing choice, encompassing experiences of suffering and resilience but refusing to be defined by those experiences. This was a poignant reflection, which affected my own understandings.

#### **4.5. Reflection**

There is a cultural and clinical assumption of trans pathology and/or suffering. There are clear indications in the data explored above that some participants' lived experiences are correlated with similar narratives of trans suffering. For some participants, these experiences shape their narratives and hermeneutical lenses. There is also evidence, however, that some participants choose narratives of resilience and joy regardless of, or perhaps in light of, their experiences of suffering. These choices are evident in how participants frame their stories, in their tools and practices of resilience, and in their ways of reading and interpreting scripture. These narratives are significantly under-represented in the texts reviewed in my literature review and deserve renewed attention.

Below, in section 4.5.2., I consider the theologies of Nadia Bolz-Weber and St. John of the Cross and bring these into dialogue with the writings of the eminent liberation theologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid. The pastoral cycle starts with experience, which is then considered through exploration of arising themes and reflection on theological



sources, before the practitioner asks what might change in light of this exploration.<sup>364</sup> These stages can be referred to as experience, exploration, reflection, and reaction. I will use these stages to reflect on my own responses to experiences and narratives of suffering, resilience and joy.

#### **4.5.1. Experience**

My own experiences of suffering as a trans Christian were never far from my mind as I listened to, transcribed, coded, and wrote about participants' experiences. Because of my experiences and empathy with participants, this process of research has been an emotional experience in itself. It has been important for me to take time to rest and reflect regularly. This element of being a researcher with a similar identity to my participants has been far more difficult than I had appreciated. However, I also believe that being a trans researcher has enabled me to empathise with, understand, analyse, and respond to participants' experiences and insights more effectively. This chapter, where I have explored suffering, resilience, and joy, has been particularly difficult, considering my own experiences.

I experienced suffering related to dysphoria, coming out, and transition in the early parts of my transition. Much of my childhood was clouded by feelings of alienation, both from my body and from other children. As a teenager, that alienation morphed into severe depression and anxiety. I experienced difficulties with self-harm and eating. I also experienced spiritual abuse, including attempted conversion of my sexuality by prayer. In my early transition, I was isolated from my family and friends, and experienced several hate crimes as a result of my visible gender non-conformity.

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<sup>364</sup> United Reformed Church, 'Pastoral Cycle', (2021), <[https://urc.org.uk/images/WalkingtheWay/documents/Pastoral\\_Cycle\\_Summary.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/WalkingtheWay/documents/Pastoral_Cycle_Summary.pdf)> [accessed 10 March 2022].

Trans-related suffering has lessened as my transition has progressed and I have gained 'passing privilege'.<sup>365</sup> I have written more about my experiences in childhood and in transition in *Transgender. Christian. Human*.<sup>366</sup>

Nevertheless, I continue to experience suffering related to the intersections of my trans and Christian identities. In churches, I am often encouraged to hide or marginalise the trans/non-binary aspects of my identity in order to avoid conflict and support normativity. I refuse to do so, as I highly value authenticity and openness. This often leads to hostile media and social media attention, hate mail, and threats. I have had to seek aid from the police on several occasions due to this. I have developed a 'thick skin' through necessity, and practice resilience daily. Until interviewing Jackson, I had never considered my own identity through the lens of euphoria.

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<sup>365</sup> Passing privilege is the idea that a trans person gains privilege, their life becomes easier, when they look like the gender that they are.

<sup>366</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human*.

#### 4.5.2. Exploration and Reflection

Many of the participants' experiences, as well as my own, can be categorised as experiences of suffering, abuse, marginalisation, and isolation. Some experiences were extreme and shocking. All of them were painful to hear. I have a strong sense of empathy with each participant, and care about their lives. Painful experiences should not be minimised. Nor should a person be judged for an identity framed by suffering. However, trans suffering should also not be over-stated or used as an overarching narrative of trans experience. Each participant also shared their tools of resilience and some shared experiences of euphoria and joy. This led me to wonder if more work is needed to highlight narratives of euphoria in trans theology.

I've drew on Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Pastrix* to theologically reflect on her experiences of suffering.<sup>367</sup> Despite Bolz-Weber's own suffering, she goes on to explore the life-long difficulties of being enculturated into a suffering-based belief system and the ways in which she has been able to expand her theological understandings. Bolz-Weber's later text, *Shameless*, is particularly helpful here (2019).<sup>368</sup> In this text, Bolz-Weber unpicks, piece by piece, narratives of shame and suffering and offers, in response, narratives, theological insights, and ecclesial practices of embodied euphoria. In her concluding 'Benediction', Bolz-Weber reminds readers of the positive theological tenets of 'incarnation', 'abundance', radical welcome and dialogue, 'forgiveness', 'connection', 'holiness', and 'shamelessness'.<sup>369</sup> These are euphoric principles that are inextricably related to suffering and resilience and yet draw the reader's attention to joy and thanksgiving. Bolz-Weber's reflections move me from suffering to joy.

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<sup>367</sup> Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*.

<sup>368</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019).

<sup>369</sup> Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, pp. 185-200.

Marcella Althaus-Reid's writing, however, helps me to take a further step, given her challenge to a theological focus on suffering, which she suggests is inevitable in systematic theologies. In her seminal text, *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid calls out the dangerous practice of 'sacralis[ing] oppression'.<sup>370</sup> In other words, it is risky, both theologically and practically, to make oppression into an idol and, thereby, excuse ecclesial inaction. Althaus-Reid suggests that 'systematic theological production has traditionally made reflection on human suffering its object of exchange', her thesis being that 'incoherence' is the only appropriate mitigation.<sup>371</sup>

Reflecting on the participants' experiences and insights, and Althaus-Reid's clear rebuke, I am compelled to a) actively consider a lens of euphoria when creating the theological and anthropological insights presented in the following two chapters, b) to avoid glorifying suffering, oppression or marginalisation, and c) to risk 'incoherence' where a 'coherent' or 'systematic' presentation of theological themes would contradict the former two considerations.

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<sup>370</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 25.

<sup>371</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 27.

### 4.5.3. Reaction

This process of interviewing, coding, writing about, and reflecting on participants' experiences, lenses, and narratives of suffering, resilience, and joy has affected me both personally and theologically. I have tended to dwell upon my own experiences of suffering and have focussed on a narrative of suffering when writing and speaking about my identity and trans identities more widely. Participants' experiences of suffering were both intensely painful and hopeful to hear about and explore, precisely because they so closely mirrored by own and those that I hear and read about from other trans and non-binary people every single day. Jackson's comments regarding trans euphoria encouraged me to consider my transition and identity in a new light. This has led to me exploring how it might feel to use practices and narratives of joy in my own daily life, writing, and speaking.

Further, Bingo's playful hermeneutics have affected my own theology, leading me to consider how foci on affirmation, resilience, and mirroring in the Bible might become a helpful addition to my historic foci on suffering and justice. I have begun to play more with the Genesis creation narratives, and to focus on affirmation, resilience, and mirroring in my reading, writing, and ministry practices. This is an ongoing journey, which I am finding both helpful and fun! I am keen to ensure that my changing experiences, narratives, and lenses are communicated to others, recognising that the ways in which participants' descriptions of their own experiences and understandings have affected me. Althaus-Reid reminds me of the harm that a theologian can do by focussing on suffering.<sup>372</sup> Rather, I hope that a progressive focus on joy can extend

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<sup>372</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p.25.

the tools of resilience and experiences of euphoria to more trans and non-binary people.

## Interlude 2. Euphoria – Jackson

'In terms of my own personal journey, I can only say that I've been led by the idea of gender euphoria and the idea of what feels right; what feels congruent with who I am internally, externally, psychologically, emotionally. [...] I guess my story is not the classic trans narrative, where people assume that all trans people have always known that they were trans from a young age and things like that. I think for me that sense was there, but it wasn't so prominent or intense. It didn't feel like something that I had to act on or pursue. I mean, I remember asking my mum if I could be a boy, but I asked it in a really theoretical, hypothetical way, as kids do. From her response, I understood that that was something that society would frown on. That was the end of the conversation for me at that point.

It was like, "Okay, well, I guess I'll just be a girl." Honestly, I probably could have lived a kind of average okay life that way. But then, when I realised I was bisexual, it meant that I stopped living for the male gaze for the first time and started dressing and presenting more authentically and inhabiting masculinity more. I guess I felt like I was able to do that. And the more that I did that, the more that the gender feelings became quite pertinent, and I sensed that there was something else at work there. [...]

For me the journey, at least at the start, wasn't led by dysphoria. It was about finding things that made me feel good. It was about the fact that the first time I tried on a binder, I felt like I could breathe. It was about being in a space where people weren't assuming my gender for the first time. It felt very freeing, and it was following those

breadcrumbs of delight that led me to my final realisation and the point where I am now. [...]

More recently, with transition and things like that, the first steps out of the closet were particularly hard. Being visibly trans, or in any way not conforming to people's notions of gender in public, was very hard. It was a gruelling experience for me, it was a really hard time to navigate and to get through. [...] That was a rough period. I really had to dig deep into self-affirmation to get through that time and into trying to divest from cis-normative concepts of gender and working hard to affirm myself in a society that didn't see me as I was. [...]

There's so much that the church could learn from trans perspectives and a trans lens on theology. It's really frustrating that it gets stuck in apologetics because there's a real liberty that comes when you start to unpick gender, because gender can be so informative of how we live our lives. I think it's probably part of the reason why the church has just ignored trans people. I think that anything that seems to challenge binaries is something that the church doesn't know what to do with.'



## 5. Breadcrumbs of Delight: Theological Anthropology

In the previous chapter I highlight which of the three themes of suffering, resilience, and joy largely framed each participant's narrative during our conversations. It is also the case, however, that each participant experienced and touched on all three of these themes. In the following explorations, I highlight the ways in which themes of suffering, resilience, and joy shaped each participant's understandings of being human.

### 5.1. Experiences and Insights

In Section 5.1. I introduce participants' experiences of, and insights about, being human by considering the themes of createdness, mirroring, and the personal qualities that became apparent during participants' interviews. Many of these themes are explicitly related to gender identity, non-binary identity, and/or transition. They also, however, have implications for how we might understand theological anthropology more widely. In particular, they point towards an anthropology rooted in resilience and joy, in a sense of inherent human goodness, rather than in suffering or sinfulness.

#### 5.1.1. Continuing Createdness

The idea that we are created by God is a core element of theological anthropology.<sup>373</sup> Participants expressed clear views about how that createdness presents. In particular, participants suggested that createdness is related to processes of growth and transformation/becoming, and to identity and embodiment. Congruent inter-relationship between, rather than a disarticulation of, identity and embodiment was

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<sup>373</sup> The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed describe God as 'creator' and 'maker' respectively. Similarly, the United Reformed Church's Basis of Union describes God as 'creator'.

The Church of England, 'What we believe', < <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/apostles-creed#na> > [accessed 3 January 2022].

The United Reformed Church, 'The Manual', 17, <[https://urc.org.uk/images/the\\_manual/A\\_The\\_Basis\\_of\\_union.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/A_The_Basis_of_union.pdf)> [accessed 3 January 2022].

found to be an essential characteristic of human createdness. This congruence suggests resilience and enables joy. Disarticulation is, conversely, described as an element of suffering.

#### **5.1.1.1. Processes of Creation**

Participants experience createdness/being created as a process. Rather than experiencing creation as an initial and finite historic event, which is now over, createdness is repeated and/or continuous. For some, these ongoing processes of creation and recreation include moments of revelation. These moments are often connected to coming out to oneself, coming out to others, and daily curation of presentation and embodiment in dialogue with identity. For several participants, processes of 'becoming' are central to what it means to be human. These are processes of transformation. Transition is a process of transformation in which authenticity, in response to God's call, is one aim. This process requires resilience and consists of moves towards joy.

Some participants experience changes in identity over time or experience identity as a journey. Grey noted that they were 'still working a lot of stuff out about myself', later explaining that they initially felt that they were a 'trans man', but at the time of interview, identified as non-binary. Conversely, Ash began his transition 'thinking initially that I was genderfluid and expecting that I was going to have femme days and masc. days', but at the time of interview, identified as transmasculine, after noticing that they 'just felt so much more comfortable and so much more myself presenting masculine'. Edda suggested that gender is 'a nice category to play with because it is an aspect in which many people express themselves. It's so much more fluid and creative than people

think'. For Yve, the journey was a liberative one, wherein God was 'in the process of freeing' her.

These experiences of journey suggest a continued process of God's creation and highlight the ways in which individuals can notice and/or participate in that ongoing process. Both Bingo and Edda highlighted growth as part of the process of createdness. Bingo explained that 'God doesn't create us to stand still, God creates us to become, God creates us to change, God creates us to grow'. Further, as previously noted, Bingo cited transition as a process of revelation. I am struck by the ways in which Bingo and Edda's understandings resonate with observations of the natural world, wherein both plants and creatures grow from a place of hiddenness and, in time, reveal themselves to the world.

#### **5.1.1.2. Identity and Embodiment in Transition**

Identity and embodiment are distinct and yet intertwined elements of our created selves. They are sometimes separated in anthropological understandings. An example of separation of identity and embodiment that is related to trans identities is the trope that trans people are 'born in the wrong body'. Ulrica Engdahl highlights that this is an essentialist trope which leads to the over-regulation of trans bodies and identities by others.<sup>374</sup> This trope asserts the correlation of 'femaleness' with a vulva and 'maleness' with a phallus. It implies that particular clinical treatments are required in order for transition to be valid and reduces trans and non-binary people to sexed aspects of our embodiment, thereby objectifying us.

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<sup>374</sup> Ulrica Engdahl, 'Wrong Body', *TSQ*, 1, (2014) 267–269, <<https://doi-org.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/10.1215/23289252-2400226>> [accessed 23 December 2021].

Participants had much to contribute on the connections, and disarticulations, of identity and embodiment. Several participants suggested that authenticity is key. Several participants had, however, experienced separations or fracturing of body from identity, and of identity from presentation. In particular, fracturing was experienced prior to transition. Many participants described transition as a journey from limitation towards fullness of life. All participants described transition as a necessity. When explaining the need to transition, whilst some participants described experiences of dysphoria, euphoria was also described as a motivator.

Prior to transition, several participants experienced suffering as a fracturing of body from identity in something akin to a Cartesian split. Grey explained that 'I've always felt massively disconnected from my physical self' and hoped that 'if I have surgery, I might feel less disconnected'. Similarly, Mary, who had undergone gender-affirming surgery, felt that this was an essential part of her transition, providing 'a sense of rightness'. There was also, however, a sense in which embodiment and identity are spiritually disconnected for Mary, who suggested that as 'a child of God', each of us is primarily non-binary. For some participants, personal and social transition, rather than clinical transition, enabled reconciliation of body and identity. Sarah noted the 'joy' of changes to her body related to hormone replacement therapy, but prioritised social transition, suggesting that physical changes have 'just been more helpful to other people', enabling them to 'latch on to what it is I'm trying to project'. As a result, Sarah felt that surgery had become, whilst potentially helpful, less urgent. For Pat, 'masculinising traits' as a result of polycystic ovaries (PCOS) led to a feeling of disconnection between embodiment and identity, prior to coming out to herself as non-binary. For Pat, self-understanding, rather than surgical treatment, was key to reconciling body and identity.

The nuances of participants' understandings of the disconnection of body from identity and the ways in which they had sought to overcome this disconnection is striking. Whilst medical ethics is beyond the scope of this project, it seems important to note that, for some participants, non-clinical changes enable reconnection, whereas for others surgery is essential. This diversity should be represented, without judgement, in theological reflections on trans identities. If theological reflections on trans identities focus overly on the body, as distinct from the mind, they impose a dualistic narrative. There were some problematic examples of this dualism in the texts I reviewed. In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, for example, Yarhouse premises his understandings by describing sex as biological and gender as psychological and goes on to describe trans identities as a rupture of the two.<sup>375</sup> This understanding is prevalent in trans-related healthcare in the U.K., with the National Health Service describing Gender Dysphoria as the result of 'a mismatch between [a person's] biological sex and their gender identity.'<sup>376</sup> This common assumption ignores the realities of trans people who are intersex, trans people who experience congruence between some parts of their sexed embodiment and their identity, and trans people whose sexed embodiment and/or gender identity change over time. Further, this understanding pathologises and problematises trans and non-binary identities. It does not correlate with the ways in which interview participants describe their identities and embodiment.

Wholeness and authenticity, as opposed to fragmentation and hiddenness, was expressed as being important to several participants. Grey explained that 'if I'm much

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<sup>375</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 16-22.

<sup>376</sup> National Health Service, 'Overview: Gender Dysphoria', (NHS, 2020), <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/gender-dysphoria/>> [accessed 17 January 2022].

more open about who I am, I don't have to play this game with myself and with the world about wanting to create coded ways of being in the world'. For Grey, who experienced life before transition as 'compartmentalised and fragmented', moving towards wholeness and authenticity was essential. They also related having felt 'guilty' regarding their prior lack of authenticity. Similarly, both Sarah and Mary expressed feeling that their inauthenticity prior to transition was problematic. Yve suggested that authenticity is 'key' to transition and is 'empowered' by God. If transition is a form of revelation, perhaps authenticity is akin to being revealed.

This kind of revelation of God through the authentic human self, however, is linked for participants to a congruence between identity and presentation. For several participants, a lack of societal understanding contributes to a continuing incongruence between their authentic identity and the presentation of that identity which they reveal to those around them. Jo and Sarah described their incongruence between identity and presentation, prior to transitioning, as 'repression', each explaining that they had tried, for many years, to hide their gender identities due to external expectations. Similarly, Grey described previously creating a 'performance of a kind of gender that took me just as far as I needed to go to be slightly more comfortable in my skin', rather than transitioning, and compared this to the freedom experienced in coming out.

However, Ash reflected that 'spiritually I'm more non-binary' but that he introduces himself as 'a trans guy' because, 'you have to go with people's level of understanding', as many people 'just go, 'What?'. This suggests that Ash is unable to reveal his authentic spiritual identity due to a lack of societal awareness and understanding. As someone with a binary identity, Mary enjoys the congruence between her identity and presentation, and explained that 'I do have passing privilege' and that, as a result, 'I

can just go shopping and I'm a woman'. This leads me to wonder whether revelation might be more fulsome if other people were able to see Ash similarly intuitively as non-binary. Whilst, for trans people with binary identities, incongruence between identity and the perceptions of others can be overcome, for non-binary people it is sometimes a continuing difficulty.

As well as enabling the reconciliation of body, identity, and presentation, transition was also described as a journey from limited life towards life in all its fullness, which Jesus describes as his intention for humanity. Jackson echoes Jesus's intention that people 'may have life, and have it abundantly', as opposed to being robbed of abundant life by 'the thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy'.<sup>377</sup> Jackson related a journey of moving away from repression and 'a kind of average, OK life', towards a realisation that 'actually there's a lot of life and fullness in being authentic to those things'. Yve described life, pre-transition, as a 'lie'. Ash expressed being in a 'very bad place mentally' prior to transition. In contrast to post-transition energy and purpose, Sarah described life, pre-transition, as 'tiring', and also expressed a sense of secrecy and related terror. Mary suggested that the 'stress' of pre-transition life affected her 'symptoms' of 'Asperger's', meaning that following transition, she is now able to contribute more to society. All participants described ways in which their life has become 'fuller' in coming out and in transition. Perhaps the 'thief' that Jesus describes in John 10:10 can be understood, in this context, as that which limits life, whereas transition enables 'life in all its fullness'.

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<sup>377</sup> The Holy Bible, John 10. 10.

Considerations of fullness versus limitation do raise the question of dysphoria, a form of suffering which is an integral part of clinical understandings of trans identities and is referred to in several theological reflections on trans personhood. Referring to dysphoria, for example, Chalke suggests that trans people 'feel trapped [...] in the body they are in'.<sup>378</sup> This is a problematic trope which I hear frequently as a trans person and relies on the disarticulation of body and mind critiqued above. Additionally, as Dowd and Beardsley note, 'trans people don't necessarily feel dysphoric'.<sup>379</sup> Some participants do experience or have experienced dysphoria, which Jackson described as 'gruelling'. Jo explained that dysphoria made her feel unlovable and led to 'breakdowns, emotional breakdowns, mental breakdowns' causing her to realise that she 'had to see a gender specialist'.

However, some participants highlighted limits of the dysphoria model as a framework for understanding trans identities. Despite his experiences of dysphoria, Jackson suggested that he has been 'led by the idea of gender euphoria and the idea of what feels right; what feels congruent with who I am internally, externally, psychologically, emotionally', a process which he described as 'following those breadcrumbs of delight'. Yve explained that 'I have no problem with being transgender' and that she is 'happy in my own skin'. Sarah reflected that it is 'tempting' to focus on a model of dysphoria but suggested that it can make trans people 'hard to know how to relate to'. For Sarah, a suffering model of understanding trans identities limits the potential for meaningful dialogue, as the assumed suffering is the focus of the conversation partner's attention. Further, Sarah highly prizes resilience. Pat noted the personal

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<sup>378</sup> Chalke, *The Gender Agenda*, p. 3.

<sup>379</sup> Dowd and Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*.



benefits of a 'euphoria model', expressing that 'I've got a bit of this, and a splash of that', that 'knowing that I'm not a cookie cutter person deepens' her understanding of personhood and that 'God makes us the way we are for a reason, and we can be so much happier if we accept that and get on with it and try to puzzle out what the reason is rather than lamenting'. Whilst experiences of dysphoria are clearly authentic, serious, and deserve attention, it is also clear that experiences of euphoria are an important part of transition. Given the media focus on mental ill health and suffering related to trans identities, it is striking that for participants transition was a move away from suffering towards authenticity and joy. There is a need for theological literature that uses a euphoria framework to consider trans and non-binary personhood. Further, there is a need for pastoral praxis that takes trans euphoria seriously, rather than centring dysphoria.

## 5.2. Mirroring

The understandings and experiences of personhood raised by my participants suggest that mirroring is an aspect of theological anthropology to which trans and non-binary theologians have much to contribute. ‘Mirroring’ is my own term referring to the telos, as described by Alistair I. McFadyen in the seminal theological anthropology, *The Call to Personhood*,<sup>380</sup> of relating to God and to the other in genuine dialogue. In doing so, we hold up a mirror to the other, through which they receive the gift of recognised personhood, and we hold up a mirror to God, through which humans can discern and relate to something of the divine. My MPhil thesis explored the telos of mirroring in relation to trans identities; I argue that:

The ways in which we relate to others should mirror the ways in which we relate to God. It follows that we should allow others freedom and independence whilst responding to others freely and thankfully. Our relationships with others image God when they are dialogical, as opposed to monological. Dialogical conversations are those in which two or more partners converse with the intention to genuinely hear the voice of the other.<sup>381</sup>

The concepts of mirroring and dialogue raised above are inextricably related and co-reliant. In the following sections I explore:

1. Mirroring ourselves – the process of curating identity and embodiment that enables authentic and effective communication.

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<sup>380</sup> Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian theory of the individual in social relationships*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>381</sup> Alex Clare-Young ‘Towards a Theology of Trans Personhood: MPhil Dissertation’ (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2018), 26-27.

2. Mirroring each other – processes of dialogue in which we help each other to understand something of what it means to be human.

3. Mirroring God – the ways in which our modes of being, living, and communicating demonstrate something of God.

These mirroring concepts are a way of understanding personhood that is applicable to all. Herein I explore the ways in which trans and non-binary participants' lived experiences and contributions to this research demonstrate these concepts and will point to some broader implications.

### **5.2.1. Mirroring Ourselves**

Before we can be a mirror for others some trans people find that we must curate a sense of internal mirroring – a sense of coherence between our identity, embodiment, and presentation. Jo compellingly highlighted the importance of mirroring as she described the terror of not recognising herself in the mirror, saying:

My first memory is looking in the mirror and not really recognising the boy that I saw and not being able to make any sense of that experience at all, because in the fifties there was no way of making sense of that experience. It was terrifying, absolutely terrifying. All I could do is try to ignore it and hope it went away, but of course it didn't go away.

Grey compared the lack of internal mirroring to game play, explaining that:

A lot of what I do around my [...] presentation, has been a kind of code for 'try not to see me as this thing but see me as that thing' but if I'm much more open

about who I am I don't have to [...] play this game with myself and with the world about wanting to create coded ways of being in the world.

Jackson described 'a rough period' in which he had to work 'to divest from cis-normative concepts of gender and work hard to affirm myself in a society that didn't see me as I was.' This seems to be a process of self-mirroring. Jackson was unable to see himself mirrored back by other people in his communities. As a result, he used affirming self-talk to provide that missing mirror. For Jackson, the self-mirroring process was not only a process of self-understanding, but also a process of shedding systemically harmful understandings in order to prioritise his own personhood.

When we talk about mirroring dialogue as a key part of our telos, it is important to consider the steps that trans and non-binary people take to enable that mirroring. I would argue, however, that we should also consider these steps as an example of how each person, trans, non-binary, or cis, might learn to curate their own authenticity so that each person might attend to their part in dialogue. This has broader implications for how each individual might curate their own identity in order to enable mirroring and dialogue, either intentionally or unintentionally, and how this might inform both theological understandings and ecclesial practice.

### **5.2.2. Mirroring Each Other**

The way in which others act as mirrors for us, giving us the gift of recognising our full personhood, can be disruptive or enabling in our attempts to curate a mirroring identity. People act as mirrors through their words and actions in relation to other people. Mirrors reflect an image of ourselves back to us. The mirrored image can be accurate or inaccurate. When people make assumptions about us or misgender us, the mirrored image is inaccurate and problematic. Inaccurate mirroring can be damaging.

My participants had experienced many examples of inaccurate mirroring including the male gaze, the problem of assumptions, and the use of incorrect pronouns. Sarah observed that repeated misgendering often, in her view, leads trans people to focus on surgery, not as related to personal dysphoria but as related to inaccurate mirroring. Jo also found the narrow representation of trans people in the public eye unhelpful. Jackson's centring of euphoria led him to feel under-represented, noting that 'my story is not the classic trans narrative'.

Conversely to inaccurate mirroring, when people recognise our identity and respond affirmingly, the mirrored image is accurate and helpful. Accurate mirroring is enabling. Mary described a powerful moment of accurate mirroring in her interview:

I remember [...] I was having my one to one with my boss [...] and that day [...] I was wearing a dress instead of my usual skirt and t-shirt [...] And I commented to him that I'd gone to check my ID on my belt [...] and realised that I didn't have a belt on that dress, and he just came back with, 'Well, what do the other women do?' I mean, he just said 'other women' without thinking, which was very good [...] it mattered to me.

For Bingo, the importance of mirroring goes beyond how other people treat them, to their spiritual practice and scriptural hermeneutics. They explained why it is so important to them to find a mirroring resonance with God and with the characters they read about in the Bible:

I'm not a-gender – my gender is a very specific and grounded thing that is part of my lived and fleshy experience of the world – so when I think of a gendered God, I need a God whose gender is similarly fleshy. It's the same kind of with

like finding characters [...] to relate to in the Bible [...] I love the whole non-binary angels thing [...] but I need someone with a bit more of a fleshy lived experience [...] I need it be fleshy – I need it to be about the way they dress, the things that he does with his hair.

Jo and Yve, similarly, find mirroring in theology. Yve finds a resonance with St. John of the Cross, and asked, 'How can it be that a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic seems to be writing so accurately about me?'. Jo remembered discovering the mirroring narrative of Philip baptising a eunuch,<sup>382</sup> and reflected that 'wow... salvation really does encompass me'. Pat, Jo, and Edda each suggested that the ability to mirror others enhances their ministry. Pat explained that her non-binary identity allows her to be 'the blank canvas on which people can put whatever they need to'. Sarah and Edda both described their identities as enabling others to hear their story reflected back, and to share more of themselves.

As explored briefly in reflections on self-mirroring, most of my participants carefully curate their presentation in order to encourage accurate mirroring and prevent inaccurate mirroring. The responsibility for accurate mirroring is largely placed on trans and non-binary people, not on the others who mirror us. There is a clear need for cis allies to pay attention to accurate mirroring in order to enable trans and non-binary people to flourish. There is also the potential for further research regarding how and why people curate presentation and how this curation weaves itself into hermeneutics.

As we are transformed, we can also act as agents of transformation. We can act as mirrors for others, giving them the gift of recognising their full personhood, enabling

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<sup>382</sup> The Holy Bible, Acts 8.

them to curate a mirroring identity. LGBTQ+ communities intentionally practice positive mirroring. All of my participants spoke of the importance of mutual mirroring within the LGBTQ+ community. Both Mary and Grey were enabled to return to church because of mirroring identities. For Mary, this meant attending a church with a trans friend. For Grey, this meant attending identity-specific churches.

Trans people often mirror both trans and cis people of the same gender. This can be positive, enabling the formation of an authentic presentation of one's identity and the full participation in society. However, this can also be negative, furthering gender norms and emphasising toxic forms of extreme binaries. Participants shared examples of both positive and toxic mirroring, and highlighted the need for diverse visibility, to increase opportunities for authentic and healthy mirroring.

The ways in which we mirror each other point towards potential dialogue between the fields of communication theory and theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and missiology. If communicating in ways which mirror the other accurately has positive effects, and vice versa, perhaps learning to mirror well could improve the ways in which humans engage with each other more generally.

### **5.2.3. Mirroring God**

As well as mirroring each other, humans also mirror God. Whilst we will explore understandings of God in more detail in chapter 6, it is helpful to consider here the ways in which participants mirror God in their own lives. The ways in which we mirror God, as individuals and in our relatedness, are central to discipleship. All of my participants understood God as gender-full – as a being who contained aspects of all sexes and genders, rather than just some or none. This was foundational to their understandings of God. However, participants' understandings of God's

characteristics, beyond gender, were particularly compelling. There were three areas of mirroring God that were important to participants:

1. Creativity, complexity, and diversity.
2. Suffering, resilience, and reconciliation.
3. Processes of becoming.

All participants suggested that God is an active Creator who holds within themselves complexity and diversity. Participants mirrored these aspects of God in creative spiritual practices and in their ability to manage complexity and diversity. Bingo demonstrated creativity through their playful biblical hermeneutics. Ash described the importance of creation in the spiritual practice that they have developed:

... the third circle is creating, so from the fusion of the talking and the listening from what's come up with what people have shared and then what's coming back from the spirit speaking to people, each person expresses that in their own particular creative way.

Jo highlighted the importance of theatre as a spiritual discipline throughout her interview and exemplified the ability to manage complexity in the matter-of-fact statement, 'I'm a father and a grandmother'. Pat described the complex God which we mirror in a uniquely contemporary way, saying that God can only be described as 'multifaceted', having 'infinite sides'.

Suffering was a part of the lived experiences of each participant. Edda suggested that suffering is central to queer identities. Yve spoke about how her experiences of suffering were mirrored, both in Christ's suffering and in the suffering of mystics



including Joan of Arc and St. John of the Cross. She implies that suffering is a necessary component of spiritual growth/insights. This is problematic, due to the implication that suffering is good. Nevertheless, it is notable that Yve's suffering draws her to relate most authentically to those theologians who also describe their own suffering. Each participant also demonstrated great resilience. Often, this resilience was woven together with suffering, creating a sort of gritty hope that involved a deep desire to contribute to the healing and reconciliation of other marginalised and suffering people.

When I asked Bingo, who is a priest, if their suffering, caused by the church, has affected their personal sense of calling, they said:

Yeah, it's affected my calling in that it's kind of doubled down on it, I really held on, and the fact that this is the just the right thing for me, and this is what I am called to do, and I will fight every step for it [...] my entire calling has gotten fiercer. [...] On the darkest days, on the days when I really despair for the church that I'm working for, I remember that there are so many LGBTI people who just need a way out, and if nothing else I'm in a burning building making sure that people get out before the roof collapses but that's the calling if nothing else – that's what I'm left with, when I've not got anything else to do.

Bingo's vulnerability in the church could cause fear and uncertainty but, instead, Bingo experiences what I would describe as 'righteous rage', not for themselves but for the other. This gritty entanglement of suffering, resilience, hope, and reconciliation lead me to consider the cross and resurrection. In his interview, Ash suggested that 'transition is this sort of resurrection experience'. Jesus experienced bodily suffering knowing that it was the key to transformation, not only for himself but also for the

reconciliation of others. Trans people experience bodily suffering, knowing that it is the key to our transformation, and finding that it enables us to be reconcilers for others. This lends a new perspective to the hackneyed Christian phrase 'carry your cross'.

Finally, participants experienced God as in a continual state of transformation, a state that they believe that trans and non-binary people mirror.

Bingo explained that:

God is becoming – God doesn't sit still – God delights in transformation and its potential is like just the edge of a moment – and so that really feeds into my experience of God through my transition – God doesn't create us to stand still. God creates us to become – God creates us to change – God creates us to grow – because that's what God does.

Edda shared a similar sentiment, and furthered that idea by using dance as an analogy:

I understand the Trinity, or the church's teaching on the Trinity, this is kind of God's desire for relationship. Also, that movement, that kind of dancing God. I think it is various, for me, there's a very strong sense of love, but also connection, community within that. [...] I think [what God wants for us is] growing into that love, but also in a way joining into that dance, that Trinitarian dance.

In their analogy, Edda showed how by 'joining into the dance', by transforming, being transformed, and being in transformative communication with others, we can mirror God. Their analogy links the latter two parts of this section – mirroring each other, and

mirroring God – together. We mirror God through the ways in which we mirror each other. The ways in which we mirror each other have clear theological implications, if we are understood, as in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, to image God. If we mirror each other in ways that are inaccurate, we may mirror God in ways which are inaccurate. If we only mirror difficulty and dysphoria, our theological framework is one of suffering. If, conversely, we also mirror joy and euphoria, we can join in with the God who dances, as described in chapter six.

### 5.3. Personal Qualities

Trans theology has often focussed on a defence of trans identities in response to critiques. I believe that a shift to theologies that highlight the positives of trans identities is necessary. I notice several striking personal qualities shared by my participants. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that all trans/non-binary people have the same, or similar, qualities. Rather, I am highlighting the qualities of these ten participants in order to highlight just some of the distinct contributions that they, as individuals, make. This is, in itself, an act of mirroring. By mirroring participants' gifts, this thesis can contribute to affirming literature that counters the negative voices that trans people regularly hear. Further, by learning more about trans people's gifts we more accurately mirror God who looks at creation and says, 'it is good', who looks at humanity and says that 'it is very good'.<sup>383</sup>

I begin by focussing on some of the personal qualities that participants demonstrated, including authenticity, justice, creativity, and resilience. I then move to explore the ways in which participants discussed complexity, in which striking giftedness was demonstrated. I suggest that this is an area in which trans people can offer guidance to churches and communities.

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<sup>383</sup> The Holy Bible, Genesis 1.

### **5.3.1. Authenticity, Justice, Creativity**

Authenticity and truth, combined with openness regarding their personal truths, were held as vital by each of my participants. Several participants showed high levels of care for other people. Several participants were extremely humble, sometimes overly so. Most participants were non-judgemental, even regarding people who had caused them considerable harm.

A clear sense of social justice, intersectionality and caring for others are evidenced by several participants. Grey chooses to only work in places where inclusion and diversity are embedded and actively considered and is a key player in implementing change. Sarah, who consults in the area of human resources, suggested that ‘democratising’ and ‘inclusion’ are central to her practice, in contrast to some others working in the same area. Mary also showed a passionate interest in social justice, explaining that ‘I want to rock the boat, if we are not doing what Jesus told us to do, I want to make a fuss’. Jackson expressed frustrations at the lack of attention to systemic social injustice in the church. As well as sharing Mary and Jackson’s passion for intersectional social justice, Sarah expressed an understanding of the intersections between her identity, the business sector, and the church. Pat was passionate about ecclesial accessibility at the intersections of gender and disability. Bingo also described working at the intersections of justice and identity, specialising in theology and neurodiversity. Jo’s work as a playwright is influential in improving lives at the intersections of marginalised identities around the world. All participants showed care for others. Most poignantly, Ash remembered a spiritual experience when ‘the thing that came up for me most strongly was ‘tell K that she’s held and loved’”.

Several participants are creative and open teachers and leaders. Edda demonstrated openness about their own identity in dialogue with others, explaining that 'people ask the questions, and you realise how liberating it can be for people to talk to somebody who is openly out'. Jo described writing plays about being trans when 'nobody wanted to', a practice which has been transformative for many. Bingo demonstrated creativity in their leadership of a retreat for trans and non-binary people, and Ash described practices of creativity throughout his interview. This sense of openness and creativity often seemed to relate directly to participants' experiences of transition. For example, Sarah explained that when it comes to the business sector and intersectional identities, people value her 'ability to connect those two things together'.

Participants expressed a high degree of self-sufficiency, self-understanding, and humility. When facing isolation, Yve explained that she continues to 'get on with it', relying on herself and on God. Each participant described processes of identity formation that involved serious examination of their own beliefs and personhood. Grey explained that 'who I am in Christ needs to acknowledge that', where 'that' refers to their identity. Each participant apologised at various points in their interviews for talking about their gifts. Grey exemplified this, explaining that 'within my field I'm reasonably well known, but I generally don't like drawing attention to myself'. This humility was compelling and is a positive personal quality in itself.

### 5.3.2. Complexity

Participants displayed striking giftedness in the ways in which they engage with complexity. Complexity and diversity are experienced by some as core elements of being human. Further, privilege and oppression interact in complex ways that, together, can be described as kyriarchy. Several participants were skilled at recognising complexity, holding seemingly contradictory narratives together, and navigating nuance. Some participants had strikingly similar understandings of kyriarchy that recognised the complexities of intersectionality. These understandings of kyriarchy were foundational to their theological understandings and vocational practices. These understandings are especially relevant to churches and communities today.

Jackson referred to systemic injustice and kyriarchy throughout his interview and suggested that trans and non-binary identities ‘fundamentally disrupt[s]’ unjust systems by ‘subtly embodying’ diversity. Mary related gender to kyriarchy in theology, suggesting that ‘Jesus had to be male because if he had been female nobody would have paid any attention to what he said.’ Mary also showed an ability to recognise and navigate the complexities of gender in theology, stating that ‘God the Father is without gender’. Similarly, Jo navigated complexity in her own identity, relating that she is ‘a father and a grandmother’. Pat also used nuanced language, referring to herself as a ‘non-binary female’, and Ash used a variety of terms including ‘transmasculine’, ‘genderflux’, ‘male’, ‘demi-guy’, and ‘non-binary’. The expansive use of gendered language that may be experienced as contradictory by others highlights the nuance with which participants experience, understand, and explain the complexities of identity. Participants’ treatments of complexity were refreshing, in light of what I have experienced as an increasingly binary, ‘either/or’ society. It is my experience that

society is increasingly divided into 'sides' of debates. Left or right, trans or cis, male or female are just a few of many possible examples. Debates are becoming increasingly hostile. The hateful comments and threats that I, and other trans people in the public eye, experience are becoming a daily reality.

This exploration of each participant's personal qualities points towards the way in which identity-based theological anthropology can celebrate, rather than problematise, individuals across a myriad of axes of diversity. Engaging with complexity emerged as a particular skill held by several participants. I am in no way attempting to suggest that all trans and non-binary people hold this skill. I am led to ponder, however, the fact that this skill is not celebrated explicitly in any of the trans-apologetic literature which I have reviewed. In my own vocational process, I have not been asked whether I perceived such skills in relation to my vocation. All of my participants describe experiences of problematisation within churches and denominations, rather than considerations of their particular skills. I wonder whether such organisations are under-utilising identity-related skills, due to a culture of ignoring diversity at best, and problematising it at worst, rather than celebrating the resulting diversity of skills and giftings.



#### 5.4. Summarising Breadcrumbs of Delight

The humans who are described in this chapter are humans who mirror. Further, they are humans who seek to mirror delight rather than sorrow. This chapter has shown that research participants have perspectives on theological anthropology which speak both into how trans identities are explored in theology, and what it means to be human more generally. Three key findings are that participants a) experience continuity in createdness, b) practice mutual mirroring which, in turn, mirrors God, and c) use complexity as a lens through which their understandings of what it means to be human are filtered. These findings suggest the need for further exploration of a) continuity versus discontinuity in theological anthropology, b) the way in which discussions around morality/ethics can limit perceptions of *imago Dei*, and c) the potential of applying complexity as a hermeneutical lens in dialogue regarding what it means to be human.

## 5.5. Reflection

Participants' understandings of their identities, embodiment, and lived experiences are diverse and varied. However, continuity, mirroring, and complexity are key arising themes. As before, the stages 'experience', 'exploration', 'reflection', and 'reaction' are referred to herein to include a part of my reflection spiral in which I consider my own responses to experiences of, and insights about, being human. In particular, I explore the ways in which my experiences and understandings of being human have included continuity, mirroring, and complexity. I go on to consider my experiences and insights, and those of participants, in conversation with the theory of identity as performance, as described by Judith Butler,<sup>384</sup> and the theological anthropology of Alistair I. McFadyen in *The Call to Personhood*.<sup>385</sup>

### 5.5.1. Experience

As far as I know and remember, I did not meet another trans or non-binary person until I moved to Manchester to attend a music conservatoire at the age of seventeen. I had come to realise that I did not identify as female some years earlier but had no way to put words to that realisation. Instead, I felt that my feelings were errant and possibly pathological. I now realise that I was experiencing considerable dysphoria and that this was one of the root causes of the clinical depression and anxiety with which I had been diagnosed.

During my first year in Manchester, mirroring became possible in two contexts. Firstly, I began to attend a LGBTQ+ affirming church, where members were encouraged and supported to read and interpret scripture for themselves, with reference to helpful

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<sup>384</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>385</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*.

supporting literature. This mirrored both God and Christian discipleship in ways which were compelling and helpful, and reignited my faith. Secondly, I was invited to a LGBTQ+ youth group by a friend who knew that I was struggling. There I met other trans and non-binary people for the first time. It was like looking in a mirror. Reflected back was a sense of who I was, who I could be. In this way, the mirroring of other trans and non-binary people enabled me to understand my own identity and to access transition. In the early days of my transition, mirroring was essential. When I went to youth group, I was referred to by my then new name and pronouns. This enabled me to explore and understand who I was before coming out in less affirming environments, as well as being vital for my sense of self.

Despite this mirroring support, I did initially stumble into some of the trans tropes mentioned above, which meant that it was difficult to mirror myself authentically in early transition. Rather, I bought into the idea that disarticulating my past from my present, and my body from my mind, was the only way to counter the agonising dysphoria that plagued me every moment of every day. I distanced myself from my past and was unable to see any good in who I had been. Further, I conformed to toxic masculine stereotypes in order to strengthen my rejection of myself as feminine. For me, this disconnection did not feel healthy. I was not living life as fully as I could.

Over time, however, it became important for me to create and sustain a sense of continuity between my past and present, and my body and mind. The hormone replacement therapy which I access has gradually enabled me to understand and enjoy my body. I have also gained a more realistic view of my past, enabling me to both remember and talk about the past and present more openly and without distress.

Further, I now accept and embrace feminine aspects of my personality, identity and embodiment, whilst still identifying as considerably nearer to male than to female.

In chapter four, I raised the importance of forming an authentic frame within which to understand and describe our identities, experiences, and insights. As I developed congruence and continuity between past and present, body and mind, I came to realise that the frame within which I had conceptualised my identity no longer functioned. Dysphoria and maleness were poor representations of the rich tapestry that I have woven of my body, identity, experiences, and insights. In the chapter entitled 'Transformative', I explain that:

pretending a binary identity was limiting the ways in which I lived and the ways in which I lived out my calling. I think that by identifying solely as male, I tried to hide the more female or feminine aspects of myself in order to fit more easily into church and society. The problem is that doing that hurt me and limited my communication with others.<sup>386</sup>

I go on to describe my non-binary identity as 'living in a state of flux', listening to God's calling, and being 'continually open to be called somewhere else'.<sup>387</sup> For me, identifying as non-binary and using the pronouns 'they/them' or just my name enables accurate self-mirroring and is a part of the continuity between various spaces, times, and parts of who I am.

Another part of who I am is that I am an autistic adult, which leads me to consider complexity. I have always relished complexity and go out of my way to understand and

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<sup>386</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, p.88.

<sup>387</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, p. 89.

map complex concepts and apparent contradictions or debates. When someone tells me that something is complicated, or impossible, I see a map of stars in my mind, connected by fluorescent strings. I can move the stars around, reconnecting the strings. In this way, I can integrate complexity and process what, to others, may seem to be a confused mess. I had always attributed this unusual cognitive process to autism. However, participants' skill in managing complexity and accepting supposed contradictions has led me to give due credit to the ways in which identity formation, transition, and related communications have given me valuable skills and insights.

### **5.5.2. Reflection**

Similar to participants, mirroring is key to my anthropological understandings. For me, mirroring has relied on dialogue. I initially noticed this dialogically informed mirroring as I was conducting research on trans-related theological literature during my Master of Philosophy degree. The resulting thesis considered the relevance of McFadyen's theological anthropology to trans-related theology. As such, I begin this reflection by exploring the theme of 'mirroring personhood' with reference to McFadyen.

Mirroring enabled me to begin to perform masculine identity in a way that was helpful, but not fully authentic, for me. This element of performance in transition, which was also described by several participants, raises the theory of identity as performance, as explored by Judith Butler. I go on to consider Butler's theory and the ways in which performing gender has been both helpful and problematic for myself and for participants.

Although mirroring and performing have been experienced by research participants and by myself, authenticity is an attribute that we have come to find highly important. I conclude this reflection in dialogue with McFadyen and Butler, by considering the

ways in which continuity and complexity are parts of authentic personhood. I argue that these qualities can be life-giving for all people, not only for those who are trans and/or non-binary.

### 5.2.2.1. Mirroring Personhood

McFadyen's monograph, *The Call to Personhood*, asks and attempts to answer the questions 'What is a person? What is individual identity, and where does it come from?'<sup>388</sup> McFadyen suggests that personhood is dialogical, both in relation to God, and in relation to the other.<sup>389</sup> McFadyen further argues that by participating in genuine dialogue, we are able to gift dialogue to the other – that our individual identities are 'a sedimentation of interpersonal relationships'.<sup>390</sup> It is this gifting of personhood that I suggest is reminiscent of mirroring. McFadyen also considers the 'distortion' of dialogue that occurs when one dialogue partner makes 'the assumption that one already knows what is right'.<sup>391</sup> It is this practice of making assumptions about others' identities that I describe as inaccurate mirroring.

Mirroring – both accurate and inaccurate – were key themes throughout my research. Participants experienced accurate, dialogical mirroring as enabling transition and inaccurate mirroring as disabling transition. Further, participants' experiences and insights showed that accurate mirroring amongst people enabled them to mirror something of God. Mirroring, then, is not only anthropological, but also theological.

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<sup>388</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, p. 1.

<sup>389</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, p. 17.

<sup>390</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, p. 24.

<sup>391</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, pp. 40, 44.

McFadyen addresses the theological aspect of dialogue, noting that dialogue is both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' – relating respectively to other humans and to God.<sup>392</sup> Further, McFadyen argues that it is in our horizontal dialogues that we form the *imago Dei*, the image of God.<sup>393</sup> It follows that in accurate, dialogical mirroring trans and non-binary people, and those who engage in dialogue with us, are able to participate in the image of God. Conversely when mirroring between humans is inaccurate, based on assumptions, God is also being inaccurately mirrored.

Whilst accurate mirroring enables us to form authentic identities and to image God, inaccurate mirroring counters this. My participants and I have each experienced both accurate and inaccurate mirroring. This has led to performative presentation, falling short of authentic and open identity.

#### **5.5.2.2. Performing Personhood**

The element of performance in trans identities has led me to consider the anthropological theory of Judith Butler. Butler argues that identity formation develops through both communication and action, which she describes as performance.<sup>394</sup> Butler's theory of gender as performance posits gender as socially constructed, rather than biologically implied. For me, it is vital to hold gender as performance in creative tension with the realities of trans bodies and transitions, which go beyond performance to fully incarnate life. Nevertheless, the concept of performed identity correlates with the understanding developed above of identity formed in dialogue by mirroring. For Butler, though, individual 'agency' is enacted when one breaks with expected

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<sup>392</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, p. 17.

<sup>393</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*, p. 17-21.

<sup>394</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

performance in order to act outside of those expectations.<sup>395</sup> This enables Butler to show how the normative categories of gender might be destabilised or deconstructed.<sup>396</sup> Mirroring is limiting when it is understood as necessary – the individual must be free to form their identity both in congruence with, and in dissonance with, the mirroring partner.

Whilst identity as performance is congruent with dialogical mirroring, this raises concerns that performance may be shallow or false, particularly where mirroring is assumed, expected or compelled. Further, the suggestion that it is individual performance that destabilises or deconstructs inaccurate or unjust norms relies on individual confidence, ability, and energy. It is unsurprising, then, that participants and I have, at times, found ourselves performing identities that are normative and partial, rather than authentic and holistic, particularly in response to external, relational and/or societal pressures.

The limits of identity as performance relate to audience, as well as performer. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler turns specifically to trans identities.<sup>397</sup> Butler describes trans presentation, particularly in relation to gatekeeping authorities such as Gender Identity Clinics, as a type of performance ‘in relation to a certain audience’ and in adherence to gendered norms.<sup>398</sup> She goes on to explore the artificial nature of both the norm and the audience’s observation, and to suggest that the trans person’s self-understanding ‘exceeds the norm’.<sup>399</sup> Butler argues that diagnostic approaches to

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<sup>395</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 198.

<sup>396</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>397</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 57-101.

<sup>398</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 67.

<sup>399</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 72.



trans identities 'assert pressure' to perform gender in particular ways, whereas 'social recognition' is necessary for identity formation and development.<sup>400</sup>

It is this performance that I described as a 'toxic masculinity' which I felt was required to 'pass' as male. I believed that my gender presentation, my clothing, my movements, my attitudes, and my actions had to be understood as being masculine in order for my transness to be valid. This binarism risks trapping the trans person in gendered stereotypes and both performing and suffering under toxic masculinity or femininity. It is the part of myself which goes beyond, and frankly rejects, the norms and/or stereotypes of masculinity which leads me to identify as non-binary. It would be simplistic, though, to suggest that the category 'non-binary' eludes norms and performances. It is all too tempting to perform a non-binary identity in order to justify one's self-identification. The public perception of transition as disjunction is a logical progression of this sequence of partial performances and is a clear problem given the need for social recognition, which McFadyen describes as dialogue, and I describe as mirroring.<sup>401</sup> Perhaps genuine authenticity can provide the necessary communicative bridge of the gap between self and other.

### **5.2.2.3. Authentic Personhood**

Authenticity is vital to my participants and to me. We strive to present our identities honestly and authentically to live life fully and to mirror God in our communications with others. The data described in this chapter suggests that continuity and complexity are key elements of our identities, which must be recognisable if we are to experience

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<sup>400</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 99.

<sup>401</sup> McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*.

accurate mirroring in dialogue with others, and to progress beyond partial performances which are congruent with external norms and pressures.

Butlerian performativity implies an entire disconnection between body and mind, past and present, sex and gender. This seems to be overly simplistic, given the complexities of trans and non-binary people's embodied experiences of gender identity, or the lack thereof, and the processes of transition – both social and clinical – that we experience. If sex and gender were entirely disjointed, trans bodies would essentially be disregarded, irrelevant to our authentic identities. This does not correlate with the experiences of real trans people.

None of the participants interviewed in this research, nor my own lived experience, demonstrated the disjunctions between body and mind and between past and present self which are a part of Butlerian understandings of trans identities. This suggests that the image of trans and non-binary identities portrayed in public discourse differs significantly from the reality of at least these ten trans and non-binary lives.

Rather, both myself and participants experience, and/or work to curate, continuity between all aspects of our beings, our identities, and our lives. This sense of continuity is also evident in our understandings of our createdness, and our beliefs in a God who continues to create and re-create. We do not experience our identities, actions, and embodiment as final and immovable. Rather, we experience life as a continuous process, open to change and growth.

The nuanced understandings of complexity described and demonstrated by participants are essential to our understandings of identity as continuous. Any assumed disjunctions are, after all, logically straightforward. It is logical to assume a

body/mind disconnection if one sees a straightforward link between sexed embodiment and gender. Conversely, if one can accept the complexity of the full variety of human embodiment, it is possible to understand that bodies and minds can hold unending possibilities whilst being continuously connected. It is logical to assume a past/present disconnection if one sees an obvious difference between a person's past and current presentations of self. Conversely, if one can accept the complexity of multi-layered, multi-hued human lives and identities, it is possible to understand that during our time on earth we might hold together multiple truths in an unbroken timeline.

If trans and non-binary people are to participate the mirroring dialogues that enable relational mirroring of God, public narratives of trans and non-binary identities must embrace the complex authenticity of trans and non-binary people. In doing so, perhaps other problematised and simplified human identities can also be better mirrored. If achieved in the discipline of trans-related theology, this has ambitious far-reaching anthropological and theological potentials that stretch beyond our discipline.

### **5.5.3. Reaction**

The data explored in this chapter, as well as the reflection above, suggest a need to continue to diversify the way that trans-related theologies explore trans identities. Trans-apologetics have attempted to explain trans identities with reference to norms and narratives that do not correlate with the lived experiences of all trans people. Rather, approaches which take complexity and authenticity seriously, and which take trans theology further than explaining trans lives, have the potential to enable more accurate mirroring of both the people and the God to whom we relate.

### Interlude 3. Isn't That Wonderful? – Jo

'It's funny, isn't it? "God"... that's a short word to say, but the essence of God is completely beyond our understanding. After my wife died, one of the valves in my heart stopped working properly, so I almost died, but God was inside my body. I kind of knew about this theoretically, but it was amazing that that intelligence was trying to keep me alive. You can just see how there is this amazing, incredible intelligence inside all our bodies that preserves our health as best it can, but there is also something that seems to be looking at getting us through this world. I think you must be aware of it as well because we could all have gone so completely wrong. We are so lucky to be ourselves. Somehow, we have been guided to meet the right group at the right time so that we are able to be ok.

So that's one understanding of what God is. It's that intelligence. But, of course, it's much greater than that because if you look at the world religions there's this wonderful concept in India that there is some enormous, incredible intelligence that is doing its best to look after us despite a war, despite crap humans. I would call that another dimension of God.

Beyond that, there is something that keeps us on the tracks... but there's also so much room, so much space. We know it intellectually, but somehow gravity functions. Somehow  $e = mc^2$ . Somehow this universal will seems to operate. And we don't understand all of God because that's beyond our understanding. That is maybe the biggest cosmic dimension of God.

If you try and put all these amazing intelligences together and add something – goodness knows what it is – then maybe you'll get close to describing it. Maybe then

we'd be getting close to being able to define God. But, of course, at the end of the day, we can't, and isn't that wonderful?

Isn't it wonderful when we meditate some, when we pray, we are turning our attention to something, and we are entering that beautiful cloud of unknowing? That, of course, is also where creativity comes from because we create something that wasn't there before. And it's just incredible that we try to use a one syllable word to define that.'

## **6. Dancing with God: Theology**

Narratology informs theology. Themes of suffering, resilience, and joy were apparent in participants' experiences and understandings of God. In the following theological explorations, I highlight the ways in which themes of suffering, resilience, and joy shaped participants' understandings of God.

### **6.1. Experiences and Insights**

In this Section I introduce participants' experiences of, and insights about, God. I begin by exploring participants' contributions regarding how well we can understand God, before moving on to consider participants' understandings of God as Creator, Spirit, and Christ.

#### **6.1.1. Can we Understand God?**

Throughout our conversations, participants reflected on the limited nature and scope of our human understandings of God. They questioned how much we can really know about God, explained how limited language affects the way that we talk about God, and explored how understandings of God's gender are sometimes overly impacted by these limitations.

##### **6.1.1.1. Knowing God**

The idea that God cannot be fully known was informed by participants' suffering.<sup>402</sup> Participants have experienced the suffering caused by theological understandings and expressed that theology which confines or over-defines God is limiting and can be harmful. Jackson noticed the difficulty of limited understandings of God in his own lived experience, arguing that 'some bad Evangelical theology is behind the anxiety that I

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<sup>402</sup> See also 4.2: Suffering.

experience'. Jackson's comments specifically referred to the problems of a judgemental understanding of God. Before speaking about personal harm, Jackson also highlighted the wider harm done by these understandings and questioned 'whether there is anything still good, whether there is still something valuable here, or whether it all needs to go'. Jackson cited 'the idea that the Old Testament God is big and scary' as evidence of harmful understandings of God.

Similarly, Yve pointed to the harm that limited understandings of God can cause, reflecting on the anger that she has perceived God as holding 'because of my experiences of human nature, basically, that's robbed me of everything'. Yve's lived experiences of human injustice, combined with her understanding that humans reflect the image of God, led her to feel that, perhaps, God is also unjust. This focus on harm and injustice seemed to be related to Jackson and Yve's regular questioning of their sense of belonging and faith. In the previous chapter, I suggested that Jackson's narrative was framed by joy, whereas Yve's was framed by suffering. The similarity between the theological understandings that they critique, however, is striking. The conclusions they come to are, however, different. Whereas Yve seemed to accept that there is a judgemental aspect to God, Jackson focussed on filtering out harmful understandings in order to further social justice and limit harm.

Jo also recognised the danger of narrow understandings of God and cited the Bible as cause and even perpetrator. Referring to a play that she wrote, Jo said:

I tell the story of God getting unhappy and grumpy. This is recorded in the Bible. I held the Bible responsible, the Bible as corrupted. The Bible as a work of pornography. In that sense, the Bible was put on trial and found to be guilty.

This reflection was Jo's response to the treatment of God's gender in the Bible, which is explored in more depth later in this chapter. Jo explained that she believes that the Bible confines God through over-defining God as male. Further, she related the harm of confining God to the confining of the humans who image God. In this exploration, Jo pointed towards the theological harm, as well as the personal harm, of narrow understandings of God. Narrowness or definitiveness limit our theology as well as our lives.

Similarly, Sarah and Mary both questioned treatments of God that are over-used or, in Mary's words, 'well-worn'. Mary described her pre-transition picture of God as 'a man with a long white beard sitting on a cloud', an image from her childhood which she 'never unthought'. Grey analysed similar treatments succinctly, reflecting that 'it feels like you are making God smaller'.

For some participants, understandings of God were described as being inextricably linked to understandings, processes, and experiences of trans identities and transitions. Jackson's transition relied on a broadening of his theology, a process through which he said that his understandings became 'less dogmatic and authoritarian'. Jo experienced a similar process of theological expansion preceding and enabling transition, seeing something of herself in the gender-full God described above. It seems that theological resources and skills were, therefore, essential to their transitions.

For Mary and Sarah, transition preceded, and enabled, their theological transformations. Mary explained that 'transition was what prodded me into asking the questions'. Similarly, Sarah noted that 'it was literally at the point where I transitioned that my intellectual grasp of the salvation message made me say, 'I am a Christian



and before I wasn't". Despite many years of church membership prior to transition, it was transition that ultimately informed Sarah's theological understanding and Christian identity. Similarly, Edda credited their non-binary identity as a key element in their theological understandings, noting that their identity is 'very enriching'. It seems that, for Mary, Sarah and Edda, their identities and/or transitions are essential to their theological understandings. This suggests a practice of theological resilience, whereby participants are able to rethink understandings that have previously limited their perceptions of God.

Rather than being certain, fixed, and comprehensible, participants generally expressed an understanding of God as beyond the realm of human understanding, suggesting resilient responses to more rigid understandings of God. Jo pointed out that God is 'a short word to say, but the essence of God is completely beyond our understanding'. Jackson explained that 'I can't pin God down'. Mary expanded on similar understandings:

God has no physical form [...]. There's a problem there. God is spirit. I can meditate, which I'm not very good at, I can pray, which I'm a bit better at but not that good, and I can have a relationship with God in that way... But who is God...?

For Mary, God's form as spirit logically dictates an element of mystery, liminality, or slipperiness. Mary suggested that we can reach toward relatedness with God but can never fully explain who God is.

Participants also framed lack of knowledge regarding God positively, as mysterious, as liminal. Pat highlighted the importance of an understanding of God as 'multifaceted'.

Edda described an intentional practice of 'praying more with the trinity' and 'inhabiting the different places within it', which they said is 'a growing thing for me, just trying to shift between the aspects of it' and also described as 'joining into a dance' with God. When Pat and Edda describe the trinity, there is a distinctive hermeneutical style, which is exploratory and playful rather than definitive. Pat refers to 'viewing' or 'trying on' different characteristics of God by using the images of rolling a dice or playing dress up. No side of the dice, or set of clothing, is preferable to any other. Rather, it is the process of play itself in which one meets God, not in finding a supposedly correct answer. Edda's shifting between different aspects of God is similarly playful given its intentional motion, rather than any attempt to reach a view from any one specific location. They describe this motion as 'dancing'. In these practices of exploration and play, participants strived to connect with God, developing their understandings through intentional, joyful, creative practice.

#### **6.1.1.2. Talking About God**

As with the limitations of knowledge, participants explored the limitations of using human language to refer to God. Perceived limitations related to attempts to concretise or unify understandings of God in absolute language. Mary pointed succinctly to the problem of describing God, stating that 'our language doesn't cope'. Sarah noted the problematic lure of 'well-worn language'. Similarly, when asked to describe God, Edda noted that it is 'hard to put words to it', and Pat suggested that 'God is all things to all people'. All four seemed to hint at limited or fractured language. Grey suggested a rationale for this difficulty explaining that that it's 'quite difficult to articulate in some ways, because my experience of God is quite intangible'.

Relying on limited language can cause harm. When reflecting on how to describe God in worship, Ash explained that limited 'language will put people off right from the start'. Jackson reflected that 'it is scary when you've been used to living within a very small box to then expand into a new understanding', highlighting the potential harm that language can do to an individual's faith journey when used in a limited way.

However, several participants suggested that expanding and multiplying descriptors can move us closer to helpful language about God. Reflecting on changes in their use of religious language over time, Bingo also questioned concrete descriptions, sharing that 'things are a lot less black and white – I'm much more comfortable sitting in grey areas and much more comfortable in not knowing, in not being sure – I think that's really important'. Similarly, Mary listed multiple roles as descriptive of God, including military roles and parenting roles, noting that each of them is 'true' but that they are also 'just fragments'.

Bingo expanded further, highlighting the creative imagery of Christ as 'mother hen' and 'Christa'. Sarah highlighted the ways in which expansive understandings of God enter lived experiences, expressing that 'God is a whole range of things and God is interwoven into so much of my life in so many ways'. This interweaving strikes me as an image of God in motion. Rather than Sarah dancing with God, like Edda, God dances into Sarah's life at particular moments, in varying ways. God is not a person or object which Sarah can view from an objective distance but, rather, a dancer who reaches in and invites Sarah to notice their presence. Similarly, Bingo said that 'God is becoming – God doesn't sit still'. These descriptions of a living, moving, weaving God highlight the difficulties of describing God in static or concrete language. Edda

noted the personal growth that comes from expanding language and images, suggesting that 'it's good to use images that stretch our understanding'.

Some participants went further than expansion to explain how exploring and complexifying descriptors can help us to find new ways to speak about God creatively and joyfully. Ash described God as 'God, Goddess and Deep Mystery'. For Ash, 'God refers to the 'God who speaks', Goddess refers to the one 'who listens', and the 'Deep Mystery' part of God is liminal and playful and is present when we engage in dialogue



Figure 6.1: A 20-sided dice

and communal creativity. The contemporary imagery Pat used to describe God as multifaceted is particularly compelling. Pat asked me to 'imagine a 100-sided dice that gamers use but more and more and more and more sides than that, infinite sides – if I could picture God that way then there's nothing God can't do'.

Many-sided dice are used in gaming and, like a conventional dice, the number on top, facing upwards, is read. However, due to their shape, the more sides the dice has, the more visible other sides and numbers are. When you focus on one side of a many-sided dice you can glimpse some of the other sides but cannot see the whole picture. Similarly, when focussing on any one aspect of God, we might glimpse some other aspects but will not be able to see every aspect. Each side is intrinsically related to, and reliant on, each other side, and yet each side is distinct. By rolling the dice, we are enabled to explore diverse aspects of God.

For example, if God is number sixteen on the twenty-sided dice shown in figure 6.1, you can also see numbers three, six and eight – representing the parts of God that you see most intuitively – and you can glimpse the numbers twenty, fourteen, nine, and nineteen – those aspects of God that you see, but don't prioritise. The dice has fourteen sides that you cannot see. That does not mean that those sides of the dice – of God – do not exist. Rather you have to roll the dice – experiment afresh with your understanding of God – to understand something more. Alternatively, Jo found joy simply in the fact that God cannot be defined, expressing that 'of course at the end of the day we can't, and isn't that wonderful?'. For Jo, embracing the limits of human language and knowledge is key to creative linguistic freedom.

I have observed that some trans and non-binary folks, like Pat and myself, work creatively to discern and explain aspects of God's identity and attributes in part due to their experiences of discerning and explaining their own identities. I also feel that some trans and non-binary folks, like Jo, are better able to embrace God's being beyond definition because of our own experiences of living lives that cannot be trapped in small boxes and insufficient words.

### **6.1.1.3. God's Gender**

The limits of knowledge and language also affect understandings of God's gender. Many participants highlighted that God is not exclusively male. For some, this is integrated into their understandings of, and relationships with, God. For Grey, God is simply not gendered and, therefore, not male. For Ash, God is male, female, and non-binary; described as 'God, Goddess and Deep Mystery'. Pat noted that 'God is not just one gender'. Yve simply stated that 'God isn't male'.

For some, decentring God's masculinity is more complex and/or challenging. Mary introduced complexity with the idea that 'God the Father is without gender'. Mary went on to explain that 'if God created mankind, humankind, male and female in their image, then they are male and female. And I would say that includes non-binary of various sorts'. Jackson and Sarah both reflected that they are on a journey in relation to their understandings of God's gender. Jackson noted that this is:

something that I need to work on and reflect on because I've always felt very comfortable with the idea of God being male. There's always been a very rich appeal to me in being fathered by God. I know how patriarchal and exclusionary that is. Theoretically, I don't think that God has one gender. In terms of how I will instantly picture God, it feels masculine, and I don't think that's what I want to always feel.

Similarly, Sarah recognised that:

I always use 'he' pronouns for God and I think that is just literally the way I've been socialised into my relationship with God. I have tried of late, actually. I've read your little booklet that you've published recently online, and I noticed that you're using 'they' pronouns. There's a lot to be said for that. It just feels weird not to call God he, but I guess I'm probably on a journey with that one.

Both Sarah and Jackson referred here to the understandings of God that have been part of their psycho-social-spiritual development. Both suggested a dissonance between their spiritual and intellectual understandings, and both expressed a desire for expansion. This highlights the power of linguistic norms, and the importance of expansive language and understandings.

Ecclesial understandings of expansive language regarding God's gender can, however, be problematic. Edda shared their thoughts on the limitations of gendered language:

It's actually something I've been thinking about in the last couple of weeks because my boss here insists on calling God Mother wherever possible. Using that kind of very gendered language, I'm realizing that I never found it helpful. I notice a lot of people do and I'm willing to do it, but it's just, I don't know... I like the idea of using more provocative images, provocative gender imagery around that... feeling very progressive by calling God Mother is already so obvious that it almost doesn't... it doesn't add much for me. God is beyond gender almost... just traditional gendered language for God... I don't find particularly helpful in the theological literature context.

It seems as if supposedly expansive descriptions of God in Edda's context are limited to the addition of female descriptions, rather than a broader expansion. Whilst expansive language does include masculine and feminine language, it is important to consider whether reliance on gendered language furthers binary normativity and alienates those who do not relate to gender and/or binary gender roles/norms.

Edda's concerns also raise the question of whether God is gender-less or gender-full. Edda's concept of God as almost 'beyond gender' implies gender-less-ness. Grey expressed a definite understanding of God as gender-less, explaining that 'I don't think God has a gender; I know that people talk about having a... but it's just meaningless to me to suggest that God would have a gender... Just... No!'. This description of God as gender-less seems to be a resilient response to the pain caused by male-only or binary understandings, and to Grey's struggles with embodied dysphoria.

Several participants, however, challenged this understanding, relating more intuitively to a God who is gender-full; whose gender is actual, specific, and enfleshed. Jackson explained that he doesn't 'think that God has *one* gender', implying that God has multiple genders. For Mary, God's specific gender is related to the gender of human beings, as noted above. Mary suggested that 'God created humans in his – or their – image, male *and* female'. Sarah described God as 'genderfluid' and Pat suggested that God is 'so many genders'. Bingo spoke more specifically about their preference for an enfleshed, gendered God, explaining that:

God goes beyond the binary of gender – and that's really cool – but for me, needing a fleshy rooted-in-the-earth kind of God that [gender-less God] doesn't quite work for me. My experience in my own gender is that I'm not outside of gender – I'm not a-gender – my gender is a very specific and grounded thing that is part of my lived and fleshy experience of the world. So, when I think of a gendered God – I need a God whose gender is similarly fleshy.

Like Mary, Bingo said that they relate to God as that which is reflected in human identity, including their own identity as non-binary. For Bingo, understandings of God as gender-less correlate directly with assumptions that God is flesh-less, and that non-binary people are both gender-less and disconnected from their bodies. Rather, Bingo advocates for a playful, enfleshed God who mirrors and enjoys trans and non-binary people's complex, nuanced, changeable, fleshy nature.

Pat explored the possibility of God's gender as gender-full and yet also gender-less by suggesting that 'God is without gender and is with so many genders'. This suggestion seems, in its simplicity and in its complexity, to reflect many of the nuances and tensions above. Much like understandings of God more generally, understandings



of God's gender are both constrained and enabled by the limits of language. This is one of many topics explored in this research for which a sense of holding seemingly contrasting understandings in tension is evident. This suggests an ability to hold creative tensions in a way which enjoys liminality and contrast, rather than becoming mired in binary debate. For trans and non-binary participants, it is entirely possible for God to be both entirely gender-less and entirely gender-full. This holding of tension allows for a nuanced and diverse set of understandings and descriptions of God.

## 6.2. Christ, Spirit, Creator

The focus in this chapter now changes from how we define and speak about God and God's gender to understandings of God Godself. Participants related to God as Christ, Spirit and/or Creator. These categories are loosely used to organise the material in this section. It is important to note, however, that the three are inter-related and overlapping. In particular, both God as Spirit and God as Creator were frequently used by participants to refer to God more generally/holistically.

### 6.2.1. Christ

Participants' understandings of God as Christ/Jesus are diverse and complex. Some participants suggested that Christ provides God with incarnate lived experience, gaining lived experience through injustice and empathy. Yve noted Christ's suffering and its relation to her own lived experience, recognising that 'Christ went through the ultimate and so must we'. Pat, however, referred to the absence of ecclesial attention to Jesus's suffering as a barrier to a fulsome understanding of Jesus, explaining that:

we need to get rid of the white-bearded buddy Christ, the kind of cheesy Jesus, holding a lamb and being so very white. We don't see, ever see Jesus really looking weak – unless we're talking about the passion – men are men, strong men – we need to think about the imagery we have.

Bingo, however, explained that:

it's Christ's life as well as Christ's death that redeems the world and it's the fact that Christ experienced what it's like to be a human being and with all the shit that we have to deal with that comes with that, that's the redemptive power, and the crucifixion is kind of the result of that enormous act of empathy,

and the crucifixion is just one of a series of sufferings that God experiences through Christ.

For Bingo, understandings of redemption that rely wholly on the crucifixion and resurrection are problematic. Rather, Bingo believes that all Christ's lived experiences, not only those of suffering, are redemptive. Bingo's reference to empathy is both key and interesting. If God cannot change, a conventional theological understanding, the idea of God gaining empathy might seem problematic.<sup>403</sup> And yet, God's empathy as related to Jesus's experience, if understood as extratemporal, is compelling, involving both suffering and joy. The joy of eating and drinking, of making friends around many diverse tables, is intermingled with the sorrow – albeit temporary – of Lazarus's death, and Jesus's own torture and crucifixion. For Bingo, Christ is a complex character whose lived experiences include experiences of tangible humanity and emotion that counter strength-based masculine gender norms.

Rather than focussing on redemption theory, Pat explained that she relates to Jesus as:

a moral exemplar – I don't believe he won a victory over death, I don't believe he is the lamb that was slain for my misdemeanours, I don't believe he wrestled with the devil so that I might have eternal life, but I do see Jesus as a moral exemplar.

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<sup>403</sup> See R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) for an exploration, and rebuttal, of divine immutability in Christian theology.

Whilst no other participant rejected traditional atonement theories this clearly,<sup>404</sup> no other participant referred to them at all. It is clear, therefore, that traditional atonement theories were not vital to the participants of this research. Rather, several participants described Jesus as a moral exemplar. Sarah explained that:

Jesus is actually more of a role model about how I want to live my life. I mean obviously I respect and understand him as God intellectually but actually it's more like a brotherly relationship with someone who is helping me to see the kind of person I want be.

Sarah feels that she is supposed to understand Jesus as God, in theory, but in her own experience, Jesus is clearly human and, further, Jesus is a human whose example she feels compelled to follow.

Participants' understandings of the example that Jesus provides are particularly compelling to me. For Pat, love and non-judgement are key aspects of Jesus's example. Pat noted that 'you don't see Jesus judging anyone – all of the individuals he meets he treats as valuable'. Similarly, Jo highlighted Jesus's command that people 'love your enemies, bless those who persecute you'. Conversely, despite arguing that God loves evildoers, Grey also argued that 'their day of judgement will come'. They were clear, however, that 'we can't say that God doesn't approve of' any particular 'point of view'. Grey's understanding of judgement here, however, seems to be eschatological, rather than related to Jesus's lived example. Grey points to

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<sup>404</sup> See Ben Pugh, *Atonement theories: a way through the maze* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2014) for an exploration of traditional atonement theories.

spiritualised judgement after death rather than of temporal justice here and now. At other points in our interview, however, Grey points to social justice as a moral norm.

Rather than judging and problematising, Bingo believes that Jesus humanises people and gives them agency. Reflecting on both their own experiences and on scripture, Bingo explained that:

It's the classic thing of seeing me as a problem and not as a person. You see over and over again in the accounts of people that Jesus encounters, they have spent their lives being treated as problems and not people and the first thing that he does is that he humanises them. My favourite passage of all time is the woman caught in adultery, because she's just this object, and Jesus personalises her, and humanises her and puts agency into her hands, and all that kind of stuff, it's really powerful.

It strikes me that Bingo's example, here, refers to someone who would be seen by those with power as problematic, as someone to be judged. This suggests that Jesus's practices of humanising people and giving them agency applies to those who are often judged and problematised. Similarly, Jackson sees Jesus's example as having a particular focus on social justice. Jackson noticed a 'lack of integrity and hypocrisy' when 'people are preaching about love and being Christlike' and yet they don't 'ask questions' about injustice or 'treat queer people with gentleness and with dignity and empathy'. For Jackson, the Jesus who Christians are called to image does question injustice and treat people well. Edda described a process, throughout their faith journey, of 'moving away from a mainstream hermeneutic to hermeneutics of social justice'. Similarly, Grey described their secular career as 'very much aligned with my faith – focussed on human rights, social justice, dignity, equality'. Pat connected social

justice with eco justice suggesting that 'we are supposed to live caring for the earth, caring for fellow humans'.

There is a sense of both resilience and joy in participants' reflections on a non-judgemental Jesus. The freedom and social justice that participants both long to experience and work to enable for others is apparent in their descriptions of Jesus. Rather than focus on the cross, most participants focus on the positive ways in which Jesus treats others. In their desire to be understood as fully human, participants also humanise Jesus by refusing to objectify him based solely on his suffering.

Christ was understood in a subtly different way than Jesus by some participants. These participants understand themselves as playing a part in Christ. For Bingo, this is a mirroring relationship whereby 'we look at Christ and see ourselves'. Similarly, Pat understands everyone as 'being made in the image of Christ and that everyone is different and seeing that being non-binary is part of the amazing difference [...] knowing that I'm not a cookie cutter person deepens my understanding of that'. For Pat, then, non-binary identity is an explicit and valued part of the image of Christ. For Ash, Christ is internal, whereby a person finds 'the Christ within yourself'. Mary referred to Christians as 'members of the Body of Christ and went on to note that in Christ 'there's no slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female [...] so we're all non-binary'. For Mary, the non-binary nature of Christ frees her to understand herself as eschatologically non-binary, as stretched beyond her human identity as a woman. Whilst, for now, Mary's identity and lived experiences are definitively female, she holds a theological understanding that gendered identity and experiences are temporal and, as such, finite. Mary presents this as an academic, rather than personal, reality. In this understanding, Mary highlights both the challenge and the potential, for everyone, of

life in Christ. The potential to be freed from the gender binary is also a challenge, if that binary is an important part of one's identity; a part that one has struggled and fought for.

Further, Mary highlighted the scientific impossibility versus what she understands as the miraculous reality of Jesus's maleness:

Jesus was male. He had to be one or the other or... I mean he might have been intersex. You know, nobody did a chromosome test did they? [...] And parthenogenic births do happen. They're very rare but they do happen. The offspring is always female, so Jesus was a trans man. [...] Alternatively, Mary was XY and totally androgen insensitive, so she was a trans woman. [...] Now, I don't actually believe that, what I believe is that God did a miracle because God does miracles. But it's an interesting argument.

When I challenged Mary as to whether science and miracle could be one and the same, rather than either or, she clarified 'Why not? I think with any miracle you ask how God did it and the answer is that it doesn't matter. The point is that He did.' In considering Jesus's scientifically impossible sex and gender as miraculous, Mary elevates trans, non-binary, and intersex bodies/the bodies of people who live with intersex traits to the realm of the miraculous. This is in stark contrast to the pathologisation that many trans people experience.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> See 4.2: Suffering, where trans pathologisation is considered in more depth.

### 6.2.2. Spirit

Several participants related predominantly to God as Spirit. Pat described God as 'heart', 'centre', and 'spirit', highlighting 'spiritual' practice as key to relatedness with God. Pat explained that:

I think the Holy Spirit and God are largely interchangeable for the main [...] The Holy Spirit is exactly that multifaceted thing that is all around us all the time in everything we do, say, feel [...] I think that the Holy Spirit is much more useful as an idea than God the Father.

For Pat, God as 'Father' and as 'Spirit' were described as, in essence, inextricably related, perhaps even identical. Pedagogically and personally, however, Pat's preference for understanding and relating to God as Spirit was clear. Jackson, similarly, described God as Spirit, suggesting that God is 'nonhuman, hard to grasp, transcendent'.

For Mary, God's spiritual nature, and transcendence, are related to understandings regarding God's gender. Mary expressed that 'it's difficult because God has no physical form, so... I'm not one of these who, as some of our friends are, would say that God is exclusively male. Yeah, there's a problem there. God is Spirit'. The connections Mary made hint at the Spirit as a way of describing God that transcends sex, gender, and norms.

Other participants also relate to Spirit as between and beyond genders. Ash referred regularly to God as 'Deep Mystery'. For Ash, Deep Mystery is the 'Spirit' aspect of God, in which genders and other characteristics overlap and combine. Pat expanded on this concept of the 'gender-queer' Spirit, explaining that 'I know it is often portrayed



as female, but somehow it is a lot easier for us to allow the Holy Spirit to float between genders and ages and classes and forms than it is to allow God to'.

Mary also connected Spirit to gender-queering, reflecting that 'the gender of the Holy Spirit is an interesting one. In the Greek and the Hebrew, it is a neutral word that is gendered variously in translation.<sup>406</sup> I liked that one when I found that out'.<sup>407</sup> Here Mary pointed to the ways in which the translation of the Bible from biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, through Latin, to English affects our understandings of God. The queer potential of Spirit enables creative exploration of God, of the self, and of the other, as well as resilience in light of masculine treatments of the other two trinitarian aspects of God.

### 6.2.3. Creator

Several participants described how God the 'Creator' is understood through actions which lead to an understanding of the Creator's essence. Bingo related to God as incarnate, stating that 'I don't really sit very well with a kind of floaty, transcendent God. I need God to be walking in the garden, I need God to be hungry, I need God to be incarnate'. Sarah explained that she experiences talking to God as like 'talking to another human being' whilst also recognising a sense of 'intimacy' in relation to 'a spiritual entity'. Jackson described 'the times when I felt like I've heard from God', recalling that:

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<sup>406</sup> Mary's recollections regarding the Holy Spirit's gender are inaccurate. Rather, *ruach* in Hebrew is grammatically female, whereas Hebrew does not have a neuter. Regardless, her recollections regarding the gender of the Holy Spirit, though inaccurate, are relevant to her theological understandings.

<sup>407</sup> For an exploration of the Holy Spirit's gender in early Christianity, see Johannes van Oort, 'The holy spirit as feminine: Early Christian testimonies and their interpretation', *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 72.1 (2016) 1-6, <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/holy-spirit-as-feminine-early-christian/docview/1817997487/se-2>> [accessed 1 December 2021].

the first time that I had sex and wasn't married, and it was like, oh, I think this is okay, actually. I think God is okay with this. I had had this image of God in the sky, just waiting to pounce on me for any mistake that I made. That is shifting.

This suggests that Jackson's perceptions of God's actions have shifted from a feeling of judgement, drawing on experiences of being judged by humans, to a feeling of affirmation, drawing on positive experiences of gender euphoria during transition.<sup>408</sup> Continuing the theme of affirmation, Pat explained that her understanding of God includes the idea that 'like any good creator slash parent, God chooses to see those good times rather than those bad times – I certainly don't think God judges me for anything that I am because I think he made me to be me, and to be free, and to be...'.

For Mary, describing God started with noting that God 'is the creator' and that 'God is the ultimate cause and the ultimate reason'. Mary also referred to God as the doer of miracles and as nurturer. Again, these descriptions reference action rather than essence. Jo described God's protective action when 'I almost died, but God was inside my body. I kind of knew about this theoretically, but it was amazing that intelligence was trying to keep me alive'. In this case, Jo's experience of God's action in her life correlates with her theoretical understandings of God. Bingo's understandings of God are intertwined with a different part of their life – transition. Bingo explained that:

God is becoming. God doesn't sit still. God delights in transformation and like, it's all potential... just the edge of a moment. And that really feeds into my experience of God through my transition. God doesn't create us to stand still.

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<sup>408</sup> Jackson's experiences of gender euphoria are described in 4.4.1 and 5.2.1.2.

God creates us to become. God creates us to change. God creates us to grow.  
Because that's what God does.

For Bingo, God's constant action is reflected in the actions of human transition, change and growth. Similarly, Edda described the Trinity as God's 'desire for relationship. Also, that movement, that dancing God. There's a very strong sense of love, connection, community within that'. There is a sense in Bingo and Edda's descriptions that it is difficult to define that which is in constant motion and that that difficulty releases creative potential and connections.

Three key aspects of God's actions are loving care, creation, and recreation/transformation. Grey said that 'God is love' and explains that 'God loves even Donald Trump, I do think that it is our job as Christians to proclaim that'. For Grey, God's universal love is central. Jackson credited that love with his continued faith, reflecting that 'the thing that keeps me in the game is the moments when I feel like I have felt God's presence and God's love, and that knowing what that feels like it feels almost impossible to walk away from.'

For Mary, God's central action is creation, which impels theology to be theocentric. Mary explained that God:

is the creator, it's... One thing I do see as fundamental to my theology is that this is God's world, He made the world for His purpose and put us in it. Any theology which starts with mankind and then says 'that's God' has got it wrong. Even Christians do that. They say they're not, but their world view is human centred. God is the ultimate cause and the ultimate reason.

Further, Mary added that 'God created humans'. For Mary, God's identity as Creator is linked to our identity as created. The latter, Mary suggested, is entirely dependent on the former. Similarly, Pat reflected on God's creative action, suggesting that 'I've got a bit of this and a splash of that – you know a dollop of this and that... a kind of cartoonish recipe idea when God is making a person'. Further, Pat said that 'God is what's behind it all'. Pat's understanding of God is artistic, rather than ordered, focussing on creativity, rather than power. She retains, however, a strong understanding of God as the foundational source.

For Jo and Bingo, God's continued role in our lives, in sustaining, transforming, and re-creating us is central. Above, Jo explained the feeling of God being inside her body, keeping her alive in a time of ill-health. She went on to relate this to God recreating her through her transition. Similarly, Bingo linked God's creativity with transition, highlighting 'becoming' as a key divine characteristic. Whereas Mary and Pat's reflections largely defined God in the initial act of creation, Bingo and Jo's understandings relied more specifically on present and continuing creativity and care.

In participants' understandings, then, the Creator creates and loves humanity and continues to act through processes of transformation, which may be described as loving recreation. These are understandings of a God who fully loves the human beings whom they create and transform.

### **6.3. Dancing with God**

The God who is described in this chapter is a God who dances. Further, they are a God who dances with their created and creative people. Any sense of certainty or univocality in knowing or talking about God is challenged. God is considered to be gender-full and gender-less, rather than merely male. Finally, God, experienced as Creator, Spirit, and Christ, is continually in positive action, communication, and transition, working over and against forces of normativity, judgement and injustice.

## 6.4. Reflection

It is clear that participants' understandings of theological knowledge, language, and of God themselves, is affected by their experiences and narratives of suffering, resilience, and joy. In research involving gay and lesbian participants, Kirk A. Foster, Sharon E. Bowland, and Anne Nancy Vosler found that 'transforming theological meaning' was foundational to forming resilience after experiences of homophobia.<sup>409</sup> This process of transforming meaning may include deconstructing a prior understanding of faith, often formed in childhood, and discerning an alternative system of meaning. Similarly, for the trans and non-binary participants interviewed in my research, theological transformation via deconstruction and transformed/transformational rebuilding is foundational to forming resilience after experiences of transphobia. Further, they engage in joyful participation in the theological narrative. As in the previous chapter, I use the stages as 'experience', 'exploration', 'reflection', and 'reaction' as part of an ongoing spiral of reflection on my own responses to experiences of, and insights about, God.

### 6.4.1. Experience

As a child, God was my friend. My dad was a Church of Scotland minister and a hospital chaplain, and faith was an important part of my childhood. I spent much of my time in the faith space in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and, with our church congregation, on the Isle of Iona, and both of these entirely different spaces, one very urban, the other very rural, felt like 'thin' places to me: places where the tissue between this world and another world, the world of God – of spirituality, of justice, and of peace

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<sup>409</sup> Kirk A. Foster, Sharon E. Bowland and Anne Nancy Vosler, 'All the Pain Along with All the Joy: Spiritual Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Christians', *Am J Community Psychology* (2015) 55:191–201, <<https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com/doi/epdf/10.1007/s10464-015-9704-4>>, [accessed 1 December 2021], p. 195.

– was incredibly thin.<sup>410</sup> These were places where God and I could enter into dialogue with each other. Dialogue with God felt like freedom; conversations in which I could really express anything, and where responses were loving and creative.

When I was thirteen and my dad moved to full-time chaplaincy, I began to attend a city centre church alone. During my time at that church, the experiences of God that I had centred around control and obedience. My accessory choices exemplified that control, and my efforts at obedience. I wore a cross around my neck representing not Jesus, the person, but crucifixion, the punishment for my wrongdoing. I never removed a What Would Jesus Do? (W.W.J.D.) wristband, reminding me of the commitment to sinlessness that I believed Jesus held me to. I also wore a purity ring, given to me by an emotionally abusive boyfriend, symbolising my commitment to abstaining from sex until after marriage that was enforced by both a controlling boy and a judgemental Father God.

That church was unable to welcome me fully as someone who was starting to explore my LGBTQ+ identity and, after a very difficult time of debate and prayer that was intended to change me, I was asked to leave. This led to me being out of church for two years, during which time I struggled with severe anxiety and depression as I attempted to reconcile my experiences of church and of God with my understandings of who I was.

At university, I was able to reconnect with the church. I began to attend a church related to the university. Food and hospitality were core to their ministry, which has gone on to influence my own understanding of ministry. Genuine, all-encompassing

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<sup>410</sup> Mindie Burgoyne, 'What is a Thin Place?', (2007), <[www.thinplaces.net/openingarticle.htm](http://www.thinplaces.net/openingarticle.htm)>, [accessed 24 September 2022].

welcome was a given, and it was made very clear to me that I was welcome as an LGBTQ+ person from the first time I stepped through the door. At that church I was encouraged, for the first time, to read the Bible for myself, without relying on devotional booklets or a minister or youth worker's interpretation. This was transformational for my own spiritual and theological journey.

I feel that my transition, my vocation, and my understanding of God are deeply intertwined. In transition, I was not only able to not only re-enter into dialogue with God, but also to participate in the Body of Christ. In *Transgender. Christian. Human.* I refer to 'God's creativity, grace and love'.<sup>411</sup> In the chapter 'Transforming Discipleship', I paraphrase Isaiah 43:1, suggesting that 'God created me, formed me, shaped me and calls out to me'.<sup>412</sup> Throughout that chapter, I highlight the way in which I believe God transforms or recreates.<sup>413</sup> In exploring the image of God in humanity, I suggest that God is reflected in our 'flexibility; our ability to transform and to be transformed in communication with God and with other people'.<sup>414</sup>

Much of the above refers more to God's actions, perceived by human beings, rather than God's essence. I describe God, throughout, more in action than in essence. My personal understandings of God's essence, I now realise, are largely informed by the experiences that I and others have of God's actions. As such, I am generally reluctant to attempt to describe God's essence knowing that such attempts will always fall short.

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<sup>411</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, p. 16.

<sup>412</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, p. 55,

Original: But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name; you are mine.

The Holy Bible Isaiah 43. 1

<sup>413</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, pp. 55-60.

<sup>414</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, p. 87.



Rather, I attempt to participate in God's actions, to dance with God, in my own small ways by working for social justice, freedom, and peace, and by resisting over-definition, instead, playing with new ideas and experiences.

## **6.4.2. Reflection**

### **6.4.2.1. Multi-Sided Dice**

I have been struck by Pat's image of God as being like a many-sided dice (figure 6.1). Further, it was notable that participants had varied understandings of God, particularly around God's gender-less-ness and gender-full-ness. As Jo quips, 'isn't it wonderful' that we rely on each other to glimpse ever more sides of God, and still cannot claim to see the whole picture, or comprehend the whole of God? My own understandings of God, described above, suggest that at various times in my life I have been looking at various sides of the God-dice.

As a child, I saw God as friend, or dialogue partner. As a teenager, I saw God as a Father and ruler and Jesus as both moral exemplar and victor over my supposed sins. As a dechurched young adult, I saw God as a mystery, a puzzle to be solved. At university, I saw God as teacher, carer, and kin, and began to understand Jesus as a radical rebel. In transition, I saw God as creator and re-creator. Now I see God as many of those things and many more things still. I focus less on what side of the dice I see and more on the ways in which I can participate in God's action.

Participants' understandings, and my own, incorporate many more characters of God, or sides of the dice. One trans-related theological text which explores theology in a broadly similar way is Barnsley's 'Grounding Theology' which is explored in the

literature review of this thesis<sup>415</sup>. I am struck by the ways in which the understandings of research participants, and my own understandings, are similar to, and diverge from, Barnsley's theology.

Barnsley's dice, differing from Pat's, might be described as three-sided, in as much as it mirrors the identities of three research participants, who Barnsley views as *imago Dei*. Rather than hearing participants' own theological insights, Barnsley analyses their lived experiences and theologises from them. Barnsley suggests three arising divine metaphors: 'Thinness', 'Proteanism', and 'Opacity'<sup>416417</sup>. The Thinness of God which Barnsley describes is correlated with the thinness of the participant Leigh's gender.<sup>418</sup> Thinness refers to a sort of transparency whereby the viewer can see something extraordinary in and/or through the ordinary. Thinness relies on and celebrates embodiment whilst also suggesting that the image of God can be seen both in and through/beyond it. Thinness, for Barnsley, challenges rigid definitions of gender and of God. Proteanism is witnessed by Barnsley through the experiences of their participant Robin and highlights the mutability and complexity of both human embodiment and of God.<sup>419</sup> Barnsley uses this concept to challenge ideas of orthodoxy and idolatry and suggests that God's identity and embodiment mirror the internal inconsistencies of human identities and bodies. It roots God firmly in flesh whilst also freeing them from any particular enfleshed body. Barnsley draws the idea of opacity from Sol's story. This refers to the aspects of ourselves, of each other, and of God that we cannot see. Similar to Pat's many-sided dice, opacity recognises that

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<sup>415</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology'.

<sup>416</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', p. 322.

<sup>417</sup> Barnsley capitalises these characteristics when referring to God and uses lowercase when referring to human research participants. I have retained this pattern.

<sup>418</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', pp. 322-323.

<sup>419</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', pp. 323-325.

each person cannot see every side of God and that that very Opacity, or ystery, is an important part of how we understand God. To deny it, Barnsley argues, is unethical<sup>420</sup>. For Barnsley, this quality is related to God's presence in and around and outside of every aspect of the material, rather than any artificial separations.

Thinness posits the body as a site of potential connection – primarily between God and the human person – rather than as an essential facet of who a person is. This is similar to the concept of 'thin places', wherein the physical place is the site of potential connection between the spiritual and the material, rather than being defined by its physicality. Similarly, God's Thinness is a liminal characteristic which enables connection between the human person and God.

This Thinness is congruent with some of the theological insights of participants, in particular the sense that God 'dances', 'plays', or otherwise enters into human, material space. The sense of Thinness is especially relatable to Sarah's relating to God primarily as Spirit, and Ash's sense that God, both as Christ and as Spirit, can be located within a human being through spiritual practice and attention. Edda's intentional praxis of engagement with each person of the Trinity suggests the human quality of thinness, whereby Edda decentres themselves in order to meet the divine. Conversely, Bingo and Mary express a relationship with a fleshier God, who is concretely accessible to human beings as the person of Christ. Nevertheless, their God is still a God who enters into human realities, albeit as a human being Godself.

As noted above, Barnsley suggests that Leigh's thinness, the indefinability of their gender, mirrors God's Thinness. The idea of personal thinness, particularly as relates

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<sup>420</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology', pp. 325-326.

to gender, is compelling to me. I certainly do not define myself in a static or material manner. Rather, my identity is liminal, fluid, and often incoherent. It makes sense, to me, that this thinness mirrors both thin places, and the Thinness of God. This is not, however, mirrored in the God to whom I most intuitively relate. Rather, like Bingo, the God with whom I relate is inherently fleshy. I hold in tension a belief in the Thinness and/or liminality of God, particularly as Spirit, whilst personally struggling to relate thereto. Rather, I relate to Christ, both in the flesh of Jesus and, latterly, in the flesh of the human beings who strive to be the Body of Christ, the Church, on earth. This is not to deny God's Thinness, but rather to suggest that the ways in which my non-binary identity mirror it do not mean that it is a central tenet of my own beliefs.

The concept of Proteanism is, therefore, more relatable to me, given that it highlights God as material, as well as liminal. Proteanism is also described as the capacity to change in substance as well as character. In other words, it is explanatory of a God who has the capacity to be both Spirit and Flesh, or only Spirit, or only Flesh, at any given time.

Whilst Proteanism is congruent with the varying understandings of, and relationships with, God that participants of this research hold, it is not an understanding that many participants explicitly shared. Rather, most participants related more to God as Spirit *or* as flesh, rather than relating to God as changeable. Conversely, both Edda and Ash engage in practices which intentionally recognise God's changeability and are intended to enable relationship thereto. It is notable, though, that this recognition is not innate but, rather, takes practice.

This is similar to my own personal experience of logically understanding God as Spirit and Flesh, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, whilst also recognising that I relate

most intuitively to one aspect of that Trinity, an aspect which is definitively and expansively enfleshed. Nevertheless, I do wonder if my understanding of Christ as moving from the Body of Jesus to the Body of Many Believers is, in itself, reliant on Proteanism, on changeability.

Barnsley's final characteristic of God, Opacity, is entirely congruent with the insights shared by participants of this research. Each participant is keen to point to the mysterious nature of God, to the aspects of God that could not, as yet, be known. Concern and/or suspicion in relation to theological understandings that rely on, or assume, certainty repeatedly arise.

In our current, temporal reality, I share this concern or suspicion about certainty, which I view as an idol, and believe that the capacity to accept mystery is important in relating authentically to God. Nevertheless, I do not believe that this mystery is without end. Rather, congruent with strong objectivity, I believe that the truth(s) of God will be discernible in the eschaton, by which time the understandings of all people will be contributed to our theological knowledge. In other words, I believe that we currently see God 'as in a mirror dimly' (1 Cor. 13:12), whereas we will ultimately see God clearly. This relies on the gathering of multiple truths, or multiple mirrors. The image of God is clarified as each new voice is heard.

#### **6.4.2.2. The Reciprocal Mirror**

This reflection leads me to consider how the image of God functions. The theological concepts which Barnsley explores are clearly congruent with my own understandings and the understandings of the research participants who participated in my research. Nevertheless, I find myself yearning to know what Barnsley's interview participants experience of God in their lives and where they see the image of God in other people.

Further, I wonder how the way in which they form this mirror has changed throughout their experiences of identity formation, coming out, and transition.

Throughout this chapter, it has been clear that participants' understandings of God are intertwined with, and mirrored in, their experiences of humanity. It is the way in which they recognise and express that mirroring as reciprocal, though, that is compelling to me, rather than the phenomenon itself. Barnsley observes God through the mirror of the participant. My interview participants meet God through the mirror of their dialogue partners in each of their lived experiences. They can only see the God-likeness that is reflected in them because it is reflected back and forth in relationship and community with others. That communal, participative aspect of discerning the image of God is a key finding of this research. The God who is known and yet unknowable, gender-less and yet gender-full, enfleshed and yet transcendent, participative and yet just beyond our grasp.

#### **6.4.3. Reaction**

Speaking with other trans and non-binary Christians about our understandings of God has helped me to gain confidence in my own understandings, particularly where they differ from commonly held or denominational understandings. As expressed in the introduction, one of the reasons that I undertook this research was the need for increased theological output from trans and non-binary people, which relies on increased confidence in expressing and amplifying our experiences and theological understanding. I have come to realise that my previous experiences and their harmful effects have undermined my theological confidence. This process of research, analysis, and writing has helped me to begin to reclaim it. As such, I feel that there is a clear need for spaces where trans and non-binary people can, as members of the

Body of Christ, engage in mutual theological discernment, writing, curation, and amplification.

In considering Barnsley's research further, though, I also realise that it is my relationship with each participant, as a trans non-binary researcher, that has made me feel enlivened by the process of research. I have come to a more authentic and nuanced understanding of God through the dialogue that I have personally experienced with each research participant. This has been similar to my growth in dialogue with fellow ordinands when training for ministry and, yet, has been so much more meaningful to me. I believe that these relationships of 'similar difference', wherein a core identity characteristic is shared by dialogue partners, have been vital for me. I am also strongly aware that very few trans and/non-binary ordinands, or even Christians, can hope to find such a community. In the future, I would love to bring together a community of trans and non-binary participants to discern how we form, transform, and reform the image of God together in a dialogical, practical process of theological formation.

## **C. Concluding Material**



## 7. Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, I consider Elaine Graham's contention that 'theology itself must engage with the pluralism and complexity of interdisciplinary theories of gender at a profound level'.<sup>421</sup> I have further found that each of the authors whose texts I have considered for the literature review of this thesis pointed towards further trans/non-binary-led theological research which is unapologetic.

I suggest that, some twenty-seven years later, this thesis is a vital early step in moving towards the engagement that Graham demands, and which trans-related theological research points towards. This thesis is situated in trans-related theology, but also considers how trans and non-binary theologians can speak beyond trans-related theology, if our identities, experiences, and insights are embraced, rather than being problematised and defended. By doing so, I show both the potential that fulsome theological engagement with trans and non-binary people holds, and the steps necessary in order to enable that engagement.

This thesis arose as an attempt to exceed the trans-apologetic norm by asking the questions:

1. What are some of trans and/or non-binary Christians' understandings of being human?
2. What are some of trans and/or non-binary Christians' understandings of God?

The arising narratological, anthropological and theological content, however, raises more nuanced questions around: gendered norms; understanding gender; diversity

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<sup>421</sup> Graham, *Making the Difference*, p. 222.

and lived experience; the intentional embrace of trans and non-binary identities, experiences and understandings; and trans and non-binary perspectives in wider theological discourse.

## 7.1. Reconsidering the Literature

Before I move to consider the conclusions that this thesis draws, I return to the literature I have reviewed in order to consider the ways in which it points towards this thesis. I argue that the literature condemns the lack of progress towards trans and non-binary theologies and, therefore, the lack of support for trans and non-binary theologians.

Trans-apologetic texts point towards the lack of an first-person authority of trans and non-binary people in theological researching and writing and the need for future research, which is founded on first-person authority and, as such, progresses trans-related theology beyond apologetics. Writing in 2006, Savage argues for increased theological attention to trans identities.<sup>422</sup> A decade later, in 2016, Woolley points to the lack of trans and non-binary theologians as a rationale for the scarcity of trans-written theologies.<sup>423</sup> Despite this, Beardsley and Dowd's series of trans-apologetic texts continues to focus on teaching trans pastoral care and ecclesial affirmation, rather than trans-written theology. They also prioritise dysphoria and transphobia and do not explore euphoria or trans gifts.<sup>424</sup>

Even though most of the research participants for this thesis did experience dysphoria and transphobia, each of them also explored joy, giftedness and vocation. I find it hard to believe that the trans and non-binary participants that Beardsley and Dowd consulted in writing their three major contributions to this research did not, also,

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<sup>422</sup> Savage, 'Changing sex?'

<sup>423</sup> Woolley 'The Social Construct of Gender' in in Beardsley, O'Brien, *This is My Body*.

<sup>424</sup> Dowd, Beardsley, Tanis, *Transfaith*.

Dowd, Beardsley, *Trans Affirming Churches*.

explore these affirming themes. Perhaps only questions around suffering were asked. This thesis shows the problematic nature of this focus.

Those who do move beyond ethics to explore the gifts of trans and non-binary people also point to the need for trans-written theologies. Whitehead et al. posit gender dysphoria as a virtue that 'can lead to a new appreciation of God's extravagance'.<sup>425</sup> If gender dysphoria is a virtue, then those who experience it clearly have theological understandings to share. Derouen argues that trans and non-binary people have increased self-knowledge.<sup>426</sup> This surely points to the capacity to helpfully contribute to anthropology. I question, however, work which points to the self-knowledge of trans and non-binary people but doesn't stretch to allowing and/or enabling trans and non-binary people to write about their own understandings.

Even Thatcher, who does not address trans or non-binary identities in any detail, suggests that our identities are key to ending gendered violence and that there is, therefore, a need for increased theological and anthropological understandings of diverse gender identities.<sup>427</sup> He argues for this work, without completing it himself. However, Thatcher, whose whole thesis relies upon the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people, does not interview or cite a single trans or non-binary person or call for an increase of trans and non-binary voices in theology. This practice, which uses trans and non-binary people rather than uplifting their voices, must be critiqued and redressed.

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<sup>425</sup> Whitehead, 'Transgender Lives'.

<sup>426</sup> Derouen, 'Proclaiming the Truth of God's Transgender People'.

<sup>427</sup> Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*.

Some literature explores trans and non-binary people's lived experiences. Conroy and Buser, et al. show that theological understandings affect the clinical treatment provided to trans and non-binary people.<sup>428</sup> In doing so, they provide a clear and compelling rationale for theological research about and by trans people, showing the ways in which theologies affect people's lives outside of the church and the academy.

Cornwall and Armour each argue explicitly for an increase in trans-related theology.<sup>429</sup> Armour further argues that the lived experiences of trans and non-binary people have the potential to impact other theological disciplines.<sup>430</sup> In highlighting that theological and anthropological 'language and understandings [...] are often inadequate',<sup>431</sup> Beardsley and Dowd also show the need for trans and non-binary theologies that expand our language and understandings. Ladin argues that the identities and experiences of trans people can contribute to theology by 'exceed[ing], confound[ing], or defy[ing]' categorisation.<sup>432</sup>

Some of the literature reviewed does move towards the trans and non-binary theologies sought above. Clare-Young uses autoethnography to raise theological insights.<sup>433</sup> Drawing similarly upon her own experiences, Mann considers theology, anthropology, theological hermeneutics, and ecclesial praxis.<sup>434</sup> She also calls for further work in trans theology which attends to diversity.<sup>435</sup> It is striking, however, that the one work that explicitly offers theological insights based on the experiences of

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<sup>428</sup> Conroy, 'Treating Transgendered Children: Clinical Methods and Religious Mythology'.

Buser, Goodrich, Luke, 'A Narratology'.

<sup>429</sup> Cornwall, 'Recognizing the Full Spectrum of Gender?'

Armour, 'Transing the Study of Religion'.

<sup>430</sup> Armour, 'Transing the Study of Religion'.

<sup>431</sup> Dowd et al., *Transfaith*, p. 144.

<sup>432</sup> Ladin, 'In the Image of God, God Created Them', p. 57.

<sup>433</sup> Clare-Young, *Transgender. Christian. Human.*, see p. 28.

<sup>434</sup> Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, pp. 17-21.

<sup>435</sup> Mann, *Dazzling Darkness*, pp. 25-26.

trans and non-binary people is written by a cis person, Barnsley, and does not call for an increase in trans voices in theology.<sup>436</sup>

Wilcox argues that 'religion is already transed; religious studies is not (yet) listening'.<sup>437</sup>

I would suggest that the same is true of theology and theological anthropology. God is already trans and non-binary; theologians are not yet listening. People are already trans and non-binary; theological anthropologists are not yet listening. As such, the literature points overwhelmingly to a need to listen to the voices considered in this thesis.

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<sup>436</sup> Barnsley, 'Grounding Theology'.

<sup>437</sup> Wilcox, 'Religion is Already Transed', p. 84.

## 7.2. Findings and Implications

Having reconsidered the relevant literature, I move to explore some of the findings of this thesis and the implications thereof.

### 7.2.1. Methodological Findings and Implications

The first set of findings I would like to consider are methodological findings. In researching theology and anthropology with nine other research participants, I discovered that we share experiences and insights about aspects of theological and anthropological method that are unhelpful and must be addressed in trans-related theological research.

#### 7.2.1.1 Gender Norms

The assumption of gender norms is both prevalent and limiting. The varied way in which such norms are treated in trans-related theological literature is exemplified by the widely differing contributions of Woolley and Yarhouse. Woolley critiques gendered norms and posits the defence thereof as the reason for transphobia.<sup>438</sup> In other words, for Woolley, gender norms play a foundational role in the suffering of trans people. Instead, Yarhouse suggests that trans people should embrace, and Christians should witness to, gender and sex norms.<sup>439</sup> For Yarhouse, such norms are foundational to the construction of gender – by both trans people and our critics. Sadly, this norm-based approach is still prevalent in ecclesial conversations about trans identities, such as the *Living in Love and Faith* report<sup>440</sup> and in legislative documents such as the ‘Gender Recognition Act’.<sup>441</sup> Throughout my literature review, I find that gender norms

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<sup>438</sup> Woolley ‘The Social Construct of Gender’ in Beardsley and O’Brien, *This is My Body*, pp. 34-44.

<sup>439</sup> Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, p. 160.

<sup>440</sup> Church of England House of Bishops, *Living in Love and Faith*.

<sup>441</sup> U.K. Government, Gender Recognition Act.

are reinforced by trans-related theological literature which relies on binary accounts of gender. This is not good enough. Theological literature and ecclesial praxis must thoroughly deconstruct binary gender and associated norms.

The deconstruction of gender norms is central to my research paradigm, which is both grounded and queer. Grounded research is rooted in the lived experiences of participants, rather than in norms, theories or assumptions about their identities. Queer theory, further, seeks to que(e)ry and deconstruct norms. Halperin argues that queer theory is definitively non-conforming.<sup>442</sup> As such, queer theorists must question and deconstruct norms without inadvertently imposing new ones. Trans-apologetic literature, conversely, risks reinforcing normative modes of trans identification in order to defend the existence of trans people. This problematic impulse is common to all 'teaching transgender' disciplines,<sup>443</sup> a fact which highlights the need for a move from literature about being trans towards literature by trans people about a wide range of topics. Far too much of trans-related theological literature is trans-apologetic and, therefore, focusses much of its content on 'teaching trans'.<sup>444</sup> This reinforces the gender norms that harm us. As such, it is beyond time to move on from 'teaching trans' to actually hearing trans voices.

I find that my participants, even those who hold binary identities, que(e)ry and deconstruct gender norms, rather than reinforcing norms or suggesting new ones. Yve, whose narrative is informed and shaped by a theme of suffering, posits societal norms as foundational to her life pre-transition. Ash, whose narrative is shot through with gritty resilience experiences considerable difficulty in mirroring or enacting gender

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<sup>442</sup> Halperin, 'The Normalization of Queer Theory'.

<sup>443</sup> Westbrook, 'Becoming Knowably Gendered', p. 52.

<sup>444</sup> Teaching trans refers to documents which teach about trans identities.



norms. Similarly, Grey posits norms around motherhood as foundational to their 'gender struggle'. Those whose narratives are framed by joy actively deconstruct norms. Pat proclaims that 'Blessed are those of us who defy sex and gender norms because Jesus said so'. Similarly, Bingo plays with norms, deconstructing them in describing a 'breastfeeding Christ', and a 'transgender Samson', as they explain their process of 'genderfluid hermeneutics'. Jackson moves beyond the importance of deconstructing gender norms to argue that the ways in which trans and non-binary people do so are a key to the deconstruction of societal norms and injustice more generally. In doing this, participants pose a clear challenge to theologians who rely upon gender norms to defend trans identities. They show the limitations of these norms and highlight creative alternatives.

When it comes to God, participants further dismantle gender norms, with no participants experiencing God as entirely male. Grey suggests that the idea of God having a gender is 'meaningless', Edda describes God as 'a dancer', and Jackson suggests that God has many genders. Mary and Sarah posit God as 'genderfluid', male, female, and non-binary, and Pat compares describing God to describing a multi-sided gaming dice. Bingo describes a God whose gender is 'fleshy' but, nevertheless, queer. Pat sums up an understanding of God that is both entirely outside of, and yet entirely embraces, gender, stating simply that 'God is without gender and is with so many genders'. Even the idea that 'gender-full-ness' and 'gender-less-ness' can co-exist deconstructs binary norms of sex and gender.

It is clear that trans-related theology must not rely on gendered norms. Gendered norms are experienced as problematic and are not central to the theological understandings of participants. Rather, participants actively deconstruct and re-

imagine ideas of gender both in relation to being human and to God. Further, some participants suggest that this deconstruction and re-imagining stretches beyond trans identities to a dismantling of all kyriarchal structures.

Non-binary voices, however, are still in the minority in this thesis. The strong challenge posed to gender norms herein could, as such, be further strengthened by the inclusion of additional non-binary perspectives. There is scope for further deconstruction of gendered norms in theology and new queer theologies grounded in non-binary identities, experiences, and insights. This has the potential to impact all normative assumptions, not only those concerning gender. The deconstruction of norms cannot, however, start from a place of defence against those who reify them. If it does, it will only ever be partial and reactive, rather than fulsome and authentic.

#### 7.2.1.2. Understanding Gender

Prevalent models of exploring gender do not encapsulate the diversity of trans and non-binary people's lived experiences. Nevertheless, trans-apologetic accounts are reliant on them. *This is my Body*, for example, includes two chapters which describe prevalent gender models.<sup>445</sup> Further, Chalke relies on dysphoria-based understandings of trans identities.<sup>446</sup> Most strikingly, *Gender and Christian Ethics* relies entirely on binary understandings of gender, despite its claim to support LGBTQ+ identities.<sup>447</sup> Given the toxic and binary debates about the gender in public discourse, it is clear that new ways of talking about gender are desperately needed.<sup>448</sup> Trans-related theological literature which relies upon prevalent models of gender

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<sup>445</sup> Beardsley, O'Brien, *This is My Body*, pp.11-33

<sup>446</sup> Chalke, *The Gender Agenda*.

<sup>447</sup> Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*.

marginalises trans and non-binary people's lived experience. It is vital that new ways to explore and understand gender are found and considered.

I found that participants are exploring emerging models of gender and creating new ones. No participant 'teaches transgender' in a typical way. Rather, each explicates their own unique identities and understandings. This shows the value of a trans researcher, with whom participants can be in authentic dialogue rather than in a teacher-student relationship, as is logically the case when trans participants are interviewed by cis researchers. Participants' explanations of gender include concepts as diverse as eschatology, euphoria, complexity, gift, pilgrimage, and empathy. None of the participants talk about sex and gender being entirely different or separated, a common misconception. Most participants continue the process of gender-exploration even as they tell their stories, suggesting that these explanations of gender identity are not definitive but, rather, provisional. They enjoy playing with new understandings of gender and exploring the gaps in old ones. This sense of provisionality touches on the way in which normative theological understandings of 'truth' can be dismantled through deep engagement with lived experiences. The truth of gender is never static for participants but, rather, is a perpetual process of discovery.

For Jackson, being trans is much more about euphoria than dysphoria. For Sarah, her gender as perceived by the other is of primary importance, more so than her embodiment, and is primarily relational rather than internal. For Mary, gender identity has an eschatological element – with all people ultimately being genderless children of God. Jo embraces the apparent contradictions of her non-binary identity as both father and grandmother without over-defining what being non-binary means to her. Bingo plays with gender. Ash experiences gender as a pilgrimage, with a non-binary

destination. For Pat, gender, particularly non-binary gender, is that which enables empathy with the other – whatever their gender. For Grey, gender is a process of autonomy enabling authenticity – a series of autonomous choices that allow one to present authentically to the world.

These ways of understanding gender are individual and personal, not generalisable or academic. They are lived and embodied, not written or abstract. They are complex and contradictory, not straightforward or coherent. It is vital to recognise that participants' experiences and understandings of gender do not align neatly with gender theory or trans-related theological anthropology. Rather, participants' experiences and understandings of gender que(e)ry theories and highlight the provisionality of anthropological knowledge.

Trans-related theology must engage with emerging models of gender and suggest new ones. It must also, however, avoid creating new normative models. There is still a sense in which emerging and new models of gender fail to capture the variety and complexity of trans and non-binary lived experiences. There is a risk of suggesting that there are correct and incorrect ways to understand, and live out, trans and non-binary identities. As such, there is scope for further theological writing which deals in detail with the lived experiences of trans people without attempting to codify those experiences into a coherent, apologetic narrative.

Churches must stop engaging in processes which rely upon 'teaching trans' as if there is one fixed way to understand trans identities. This does not lead towards trans inclusion, affirmation, or liberation. Rather, it codifies new norms and reinforces new hierarchies, suggesting that there are correct and incorrect ways to be trans and/or non-binary. Churches must actually lift up and listen to the voices of a diverse range

of trans people in the same way that they lift up and listen to the voices of a diverse range of cis people. On a personal note, I am sick and tired of being asked to 'represent' trans people in meetings of tens, or even hundreds, of cis people who are not asked to represent anyone other than themselves. We are not representatives, we are individuals with unique identities, experiences, and insights. This thesis proves that.

### **7.2.1.3. Diversity and Lived Experience**

The lived experiences of a diverse selection of trans and non-binary people are largely absent from theological discourse. My literature review shows that trans-related theology often draws on a limited sample and homogenises trans narratives. Non-binary identities are largely excluded, and biblical interpretation focuses on texts that have been used to critique trans identities, and those used to defend them. Trans-apologetic literature focusses on points that are disputed by trans-critical writers. Literature that moves towards a broader theology still focusses on topics that are associated with being trans. Hartke, whose writing is a step towards trans-authored theology, writes that:

Christians these days have questions about what the Bible has to say regarding clothing, changing bodies, new names, and the way God created human beings to exist in this world. I am thankful that trans Christians, who have been living and studying these questions for years, have come up with some pretty fascinating answers.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Hartke 5

This is clearly true and yet limits trans and non-binary Christians to answering the questions posed to us by others. Questions that assume that clothing, embodiment, names, and creation are the only topics on which we have something to contribute. It is appalling that trans and non-binary Christians are rarely if ever asked about our relationships with God, our thoughts about what it means to be church, our Christological and eschatological understandings, our perspectives on theological hermeneutics or ecclesial praxis.

The identities of interview participants are diverse in every sense, and particularly in terms of gender or gender-less-ness. The participants whose identities, lived experiences, and understandings are explored in this thesis are agender, androgynous, genderflux, genderqueer non-binary, genderqueer, living full time as female, male, man, mtf, non-binary transmasculine, non-binary, simply female, trans guy, trans, transgender female, transgender, transmasculine, woman.<sup>450</sup> This breadth of gender identities is not found anywhere else in the literature.

This is not simply a methodological or inclusion-related observation, though. Rather, the methodology impacts the arising insights. By including a wide range of trans and non-binary identities in this thesis, I have moved beyond trans-apologetic topics to highlight the diversity of trans identities, lived experiences, and insights. Participants raised topics as broad as suffering, resilience, euphoria, the continuation of createdness, the problem of the Cartesian split, vertical and horizontal mirroring, kyriarchy, complexity, the limits and risks of theological hermeneutics, God as gender-full and gender-less, God as participative, and God's fleshiness. These topics go far

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<sup>450</sup> See 3.3.4. in this thesis.

beyond the specifically trans-related, contributing insights that speak into theology and anthropology more widely.

Further, this diverse sample of participants highlights the problem of trans-related theology's attempts to homogenise trans identities, experiences and insights. Rather, this thesis highlights several points of diversity and divergence. This diversity begins in the realm of narratology, wherein I show that participants variously frame their narratives with themes of suffering, resilience, and joy. These varying frames contribute to the diversity of participants' anthropological and theological understandings.

Participants differ, for example, in their understandings of the connections and disarticulations between body and identity, which is also variously referred to as mind and/or spirit. Whilst most participants suggest a progressive congruence between body and identity, Grey and Mary variously highlight the disconnections between body and identity. Grey cites this fracturing as a pre-transition reality whereas Mary believes that it is part of our earthly existence, with the full spiritual connection of body and identity only possible in the eschaton, wherein both body and identity are non-binary. Further, Mary highlights the importance of surgery, and Sarah and Grey reference surgery as a site of hope, whereas other participants focus on social transition as the primary locus of hope.

However, participants' divergent anthropological understandings reach beyond their gender identities. In describing queer identity, for example, Edda focusses on suffering, Jackson focuses on euphoria, and Pat focusses on the empathy with others queerness facilitates; three distinctive understandings of being both human and queer. Further, whereas trans people are generally assumed to have demonstrated abilities

in specific areas, such as change and diversity, participants demonstrated a wide range of personal characteristics and qualities, including authenticity, a strong sense of justice, creativity, resilience, empathy, entrepreneurship, honesty, and complexity. It is also notable that not all participants had the same characteristics.

In theology, participants' understandings differ even more. It is striking that the one point of agreement is that God cannot be fully known or described. Beyond that hermeneutical consideration, participants had diverse understandings of God. In terms of God's gender, some participants understand God as gender-less whereas others understand God as gender-full. Some use male language for God, albeit with some discomfort, whereas others use any language but male language, still others only use language which is explicitly non-gendered. Divergent opinions stretch beyond God's gender to God's materiality, Christ's characteristics, and God's perspective. For Mary, theology should be theo-centric and for Jackson, social justice is a key priority of God and, therefore, central to theology. Their perspectives are subtly different, though compatible. For Mary, her primary attention is on God. For Jackson, his primary attention is on what he discerns God's primary attention to be on, namely justice. Some participants feel that God is distant, whereas others experience God as intimately involved in human life. Some participants experience Christ as spiritual, whereas others perceive Jesus as a human exemplar. Some participants experience God as fully human, others as fully spirit, others as both. For some participants, spiritual understandings are deeply important whereas, for others, anthropomorphic understandings are key.

The aforementioned indefinability of God leads Pat to describe understandings of God as a many-sided gaming dice, whereby we can only describe the sides we can see at



any given time. This highlights the need for attention to diverse perspectives. Trans theologians might be able to glimpse sides of the dice that cis theologians are not looking at. Non-binary theologians might be able to see sides that trans theologians have turned face-down. Further, various trans and non-binary theologians will be looking at different sides of the dice at any given time. In other words, each of us can only glimpse part of humanity, and part of God. Each of our perspectives are vital if anthropology and theology are to be further expanded.

Trans-related theology must highlight the experiences and voices of diverse trans and non-binary people. However, attention to the identities, lived experiences, and insights of global majority trans and non-binary Christians and disabled trans and non-binary Christians are still missing. Further, more attention is needed to the identities, experiences, and insights of those who hold a number of marginalised identities. Whilst this thesis attempts to prioritise subaltern identities, there are still gaps. In particular, only one Black voice is heard herein, and treatment of disability is limited to neurodiversity. This has also made it impossible to examine the impact of multiple marginalisation on identities, experiences and insights.

As such, there is scope for theological research which intentionally explores particular identity combinations. For example, it would be helpful to explore the theological understandings of Black trans people in more depth. Further, this thesis hints at links between trans theologies and disability theologies. These links deserve further exploration. There is practically unlimited scope for research with trans and non-binary theologians – both researchers and participants – on every anthropological and theological topic that we have no trans and/or non-binary perspectives regarding. There is a lot of catching up to do! This work will not be complete until one third of the

books on the shelves of theological libraries are written by trans and non-binary people.

#### 7.2.1.4. First-Person Authority

First-person authority means, in practice, trans people being able to form and express their own narrative identity and to be believed and accepted.<sup>451</sup> Each of my interview participants described times at which they were not able to express their identity and times at which they expressed their identity and were subject to questioning and/or criticism. They spoke openly about the harm caused. They also spoke to the ways in which this harm has inhibited their contributions. I believe that first-person authority should also be central to ministerial praxis and theological research. It is not adequately demonstrated in trans-critical or trans-apologetic literature.

Trans-related theology has sought to defend trans identities, rather than fully embrace them. Trans-related theology is often, therefore, rooted in the problematisation of trans identities. Rather than continue this legacy of problematisation, this thesis is rooted in the assumption that it is not only acceptable but also positive to be trans; that trans people exist and that God says that we, too, are good. This intentional embrace of trans identities, experiences, and insights, draws a route map from theological literature about trans people to theological literature by trans people, about being human and about God. That does not mean that there should not be any further theological research or writing about trans people. Rather, this research should be complemented by wider theological research and writing by trans people that can benefit the theological discipline more widely, rather than only having relevance to trans people and those who wish to discuss the ethical ramifications of our existence.

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<sup>451</sup> Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Trans Identities and First-Person Authority', Laurie Shrage (ed.) *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 98-120, p. 98.

I note that further theological research and writing about trans people is necessary, because literature that fully embraces our identities, from a theological perspective, is still marginal and is entirely lacking in certain disciplines. For example, there is no clear ecclesial embrace of trans identities. Such an embrace is contingent upon a full theological exploration of trans identities, founded on first-person authority. I believe that any denomination which is currently debating trans identities from trans-critical versus trans-apologetic standpoints is failing to respect first-person authority in relation to trans and non-binary people and, as such, is failing us both pastorally and theologically. Surely this must be challenged and must change.

Churches should respect our first-person authority in dialogue with – not about – us. Only once churches stop debating and start fully embracing trans and non-binary people exactly as we are, will it be possible for churches to draw on our identities, experiences, and insights to contribute to anthropological and theological knowledge.

### **7.2.2. Anthropological and Theological Findings**

The research questions which inspired this thesis are ‘What does it mean to be human?’ and ‘Who and/or what is God?’ from a trans and/or non-binary perspective. I will now explore the anthropological and theological findings of this research. As explored in the methods section of this thesis, autoethnography is an aspect of my method. Further, I am keen to find a balance between analytical and evocative autoethnography. The previous section, considering methodological findings, was largely analytical.

Now, as I move to draw conclusions about humanity and God, I write in an evocative style. What follows consists of storytelling in normal type and analysis in italic type. This serves to highlight the provisionality and incoherence of human understandings which participants suggested was important to consider. Further, it continues the biblical tradition of storytelling. I think that the nuanced treatment of truth as portrayed in story, rather than in theory or in fact, is a characteristic of a theology which is genuinely grounded in the identities, experiences, and insights of specific, named, beloved human beings.

#### **7.2.2.1. Dancing with God**

God dances with us. They leap and twirl and spin. They hold our hands gently as they follow our first tentative steps, then grip our waists firmly as they lead us in a daring twist and bend. God, you see, is neither leader nor follower, both leader and follower, neither male nor female, both male and female. God is gender-full and gender-less – an ambiguous fleshless being who leaps into fleshy delight to join in our dance. God is under our skin, in our skin, gently breathing on our skin. Our God cannot be separated from us or contained within us.

*God is participative. God is fully gendered and fully without gender. God is flesh and spirit.*

Even as we feel God's embrace, we cannot define or confine them. God will not be caged. We want to keep God still so that we can understand them. Cautiously separating ourselves from God, backing off from the dance, goosebumps rising on our chilled skin, we run to our tool sheds to grab the bars which we have built out of words and theories, like 'father', 'him', 'theocentric', 'kingdom', 'law', 'son', 'atonement', 'sanctification', 'exemplar', 'spirit', 'justification', 'eschatological realisation', 'church'. These words and theories feel strong in our aching hands. God sits still as we construct arrogant theological walls and cages around them. They will not disrupt our freedom to name and confine.

*God cannot be fully defined or explained. Nevertheless, we desire to understand God. This causes us to separate ourselves from God and examine them, creating theological theory. This, however, limits our understandings and descriptions of God.*

When we are finished, we sit back and admire our work, occasionally pausing to throw the odd stone at the people who dare to question or live in ways that undermine our construction. We feel safe. It is easier not to dance with God. It is easier to keep them at a distance. But the people who question and deconstruct keep coming back and threatening to tear down the box. Our piles of stones dwindle, and some of our number even leave to join them. The more we shiver in fear the harder we lob our lumps of rubble and ruin.

*Theological certainty leads to a 'them and us' dynamic, wherein those whose views are considered unorthodox are subject to attack. It becomes difficult to question or challenge inherited theological understandings. Questions feel threatening.*

Then, one day, some people dance up to the cage enclothed in mirrors. As they encircle it, we step away from our stones, curious, to observe them. Their dancing looks fun. We edge closer and closer, carrying a box in each hand. In one box, we keep our minds, separated from our trembling bodies so that we do not risk sin. In the other box, we keep our past, separated from our tenuous present so that we do not risk contamination.

*We mirror each other. That mirroring enables us to begin to question our understandings of anthropology and theology and to be open to transformation. We need the other – the one who is both similar and differentiated – to enable accurate mirroring. However, the assumption of both a Cartesian split of mind from body, and a temporal split wherein we disown our past selves, create barriers to authenticity.*

As we approach the others, we realise that they do not have any boxes. "Where are your boxes?" we demand, terrified and bewildered as we stare at their empty hands. "We don't need boxes," one of them responds. "Our minds are swirled into our bodies, inseparable from our very selves. Our pasts are the root cells on which our present flesh grows, continuously transformed and transforming ourselves and each other. Our hands are open and empty, ready to receive and join in with the complexity and apparent contradictions of the dance."

*When we hear the stories of trans and non-binary people in their own words, moving beyond assumption, we learn that trans bodies and minds, pasts and presents, are*

*not split but congruent. This congruence indicates a process of continual becoming. It defies the logic of binary categorisation.*

As we listen, we remember the dance. As we watch the others dance, we catch glimpses of ourselves in the mirrors, static and staring, trembling and tenuous. Some of our feet start to tap. We want to join in. But our hands are full of boxes. We cannot dance. We feel like aliens – like there is no-one here quite like us. We try to put down our boxes, but we can't do it. We are stuck, staring in incomprehension and dismay at the boxes of words that we have built to cage in our pasts, our minds, and our God. We grip our boxes tighter, until they begin to dig into our flesh.

*Being open to continual becoming allows us to fully participate in God's dance of creation. Mirroring enables us to enter into dialogue with others and to form communities of likeness and distinction. The instinct to categorise can hamper these processes.*

As the others dance round and round, I spot one who looks a bit like me. Fragments of who I am, of all that I have lived through and hope to become, of what I dare to believe and try to think, are mirrored not only in their clothing but also in their shining eyes. They pause in their dancing and stand in front of me. "Kindred," they whisper kindly, and for a moment, just a moment, I feel euphoric. A wonderful realisation that I am looking into the eyes of God flits into my heart. In confusion, I glance at the theological box that we build around God. "Don't worry," my new friend laughs, making a face to draw my eyes back to them, "We'll get to that ugly thing in the end." Glancing at the box, and back at my friend, I realise that the walls and cages that we struggled to build are, indeed, quite ugly now. They seem misshapen, lacking something... something essential.



*The recognition of the authentic self by the other is essential to congruent personhood. We receive our personhood from the other who recognises us even as we recognise them. This is how we mirror each other – it is a reciprocal process. This mutual recognition helps us to begin to glimpse the problematic orthodoxies and missing elements in our partial theological constructions.*

I look back at my friend, their mirrors glimmering with grace and hope. “But I can’t reach you,” I murmur, dismayed. “Let me,” they suggest, confidently. They carefully uncurl each of my stiff fingers and slowly lift the boxes out of my open hands. Setting my boxes down in a fragrant bed of brightly coloured flowers, they blow on my hands, warming them. We sit down together on either side of the boxes. They take out a tool that I’ve never seen before and begin to pry open the boxes as I watch in awe and wonder.

Holding my past in both hands, they show me who I was, and they accept all of me. I look at the scenes with new eyes, fresh tears springing up as I realise what I have done by rejecting my very roots. They offer me my story, and I take it from them reverently, and begin to rewrite my present, from the roots upwards. I smile a little. Here I am. Then they pick up my mind, struggling to hold the wisps of it as it curls around their fingers, searching for flesh. Suddenly I understand – I am held in grace. I do not need to be ashamed. I reach out for my mind, and it enters me, intertwining with each molecule of flesh, becoming me. I look in the mirrors my chosen kin holds up and I see myself as I am becoming.

*We cannot become our full selves in isolation; we rely on dialogue partners who see us as we truly are and show us the beauty and potential in the parts of ourselves that we have tried to hide away.*

As I look around, I see other people sitting in pairs and small groups, boxes discarded all around them. They are laughing and talking, playing together freely, mirrors glinting in the sunlight. The last box in the midst of us rocks slightly, as if daring us to go one step further. We have deconstructed our own boxes and embraced our authentic selves. Don't we owe God the same courtesy?

*Only once we can see the other as they truly are and accept both ourselves and the other can we begin to see that our theological understandings are never complete in and of themselves and, therefore, deconstruct problematic theological constructions.*

Joining hands as one diverse, messy, complex, wonderful body we approach the box and start to read the bricks and bars. Each word that once sounded so strong, each concept that once felt so right, now seems incomplete, insufficient, in the warm hands of real human bodies who matter so much more. We don't discard the words, we set them aside, ready to examine later, ready to create something new, something better, something more fitting.

*Together, we can approach deconstruction. That does not mean throwing out inherited traditional and theological understandings or devaluing them. Rather, it means recognising their use as components that must be reconsidered in the light of new contexts and knowledge.*

As the bars are removed, we begin to see more and more of God. The part of God who looks like us reaches out their wounded hands. In turn, we reveal our wounds and scars. They come to join us, holding each of us in love. The part of God who looks like my mum smiles generously and walks over to a pile of bricks. Sitting down with their legs crossed, they begin to play with the bricks, laying out lots of creative new designs.

The part of God who looks nothing like us swirls round our heads in bright colours and extraordinary sounds, composing a rainbow of music that tastes like sheer joy. Following its motion we begin, once more, to dance, together, mirroring each other and God. We are no longer hiding behind masks of uniformity. Instead, we wear our diversity authentically. We are no longer separated by boxes of division. Instead, we enjoy our unity together. May it be so.

*Deconstruction allows us to fully recognise the participative nature of God and to participate in turn. God is creative, inspirational, and wounded. We must recognise God in the wounded other, allow God to inspire change, and co-create with God.*

### **7.2.3. Implications of Anthropological and Theological Findings**

You might find the above difficult to read. I found it tricky to write. My imposter syndrome urges me to adhere to academic norms and to make my points in ways which fit neatly into a theological system. My creative and brilliant trans and non-binary co-participants, though, inspire me to play with words and to mirror God in new ways. Perhaps I'm not the best writer. Perhaps I miss out bits of the anthropology and theology contained in this thesis in my loose prose. Perhaps I am not making this clear enough, easy enough. But perhaps that is the point. Perhaps this thesis is not academic, but enfleshed; not written down, but lived out; not fact, but narrative; not constructive, but deconstructive.

One of the major implications of this thesis is the call to deconstruction. Each of my participants was keen to highlight the provisionality of our understandings of each other and of God. Many of them utilised creativity and play in order to mirror glimpses of each other and glimpses of God. All of them called out the harm done by words and theories which claim to objectively describe humanity or God. The insights of my participants challenge any organisation or text which claims to know the full, academic truth. Rather, they call upon each individual and institution to tell our own, honest, authentic stories, inconsistencies and all. It is time for both academics and churches to confess to the ways in which they have constructed false boxes and binaries around people and around God. Then, it is time for listening to more stories, as we work together to deconstruct those binaries and boxes and to create something better, together.

A further key implication is that this work cannot be done alone. No theologian or minister, no matter how experienced or wise, can understand and/or describe

humanity and/or God fully. Rather, we must work together with people who are both similar to and different from us to enable us to see ever more sides of the divine dice. This means that further theological exploration relies on the full inclusion of trans and non-binary voices in both the church and the academy. There is a significant amount of work needed to enable that inclusion.

### **7.3 Summing Up**

Together, ten incredible and unique individuals have contributed to material which makes clear methodological, anthropological, and theological steps towards grounding theologies and anthropologies in the authentic identities, lived experiences, and insights of trans and non-binary Christians. Together, we have uncovered the problems of restrictive understandings and norms of personhood. We have found new ways to talk about being human including complexity, mirroring, and continuity. Together we have unpicked the problems of restrictive understandings of, and teaching about, God. We have found new ways to talk about God including God's gender-full-ness and gender-less-ness as well as the ways in which we are called to dance with and mirror God.

This thesis is unique in its presentation of the identities, insights, and anthropological and theological understandings of ten, diverse, trans and/or non-binary Christians. This is an essential step in the inclusion of trans and non-binary voices in Christian theology, which fills the knowledge gaps created throughout theology by the current marginalisation and underrepresentation of trans and non-binary theologians. This theology is not complete in itself, forming a crucial part of a sorely needed watershed of support and platforming of trans and non-binary theologians and our resulting theologies, both in the academy and in the church.

## 8. Afterword

This thesis is personal. And as it is personal – deeply involved in ten real lives – it is also provisional. As I have been writing, our lives have moved on. Our identities, relationships, and experiences have changed. Perhaps many of our insights have to. I have been regularly – and rightly – encouraged to remove from the thesis the tentative language that comes naturally to me. I have done so gladly, as I am confident in what the data are asking me to write. And yet, I feel strongly that theology – particularly where related closely to the personal – must relearn humility.

The curation of this thesis has, undoubtedly, been personal as well as academic, humble as well as confident, provisional as well as actual. It would be disingenuous to ignore my role as participant-researcher. However, far from overwriting participants' identities, experiences, and understandings with my own, my own identity, experiences, and understandings have been enriched and transformed by participants. The level of challenge and encouragement that I have experienced has been far beyond my expectations.

I have historically framed my own identity, experience, and understandings with the theme of suffering. I now realise that this framing was an apologetic response to the trans-critical understandings against which I attempt to offer a differing perspective. Further, I had not found trans, non-binary, Christian kin who could demonstrate a framing of joy. This narrative shift, as well as participants' understandings of humanity and of God, has affected my own understandings and altered the ways in which I describe them. I now describe God as being gender-full and relate this to the continuity of my own identity, enabling a self-understanding that is celebratory, rather than apologetic. This has led to a change in practice, too. I no longer participate in debates

about, or offer explanations of, trans and non-binary identities. Rather, I participate in events that celebrate or affirm trans identities, and in academic work that describes our identities, experiences and understandings, rather than seeking to explain them.

It is my fervent hope that trans-related theology, more widely, may be on a similar journey. It is a journey from suffering to joy, from defence to affirmation. It is a journey from merely persuading others to accept trans and non-binary people, to wholeheartedly celebrating our identities, experiences, and understandings. It is a journey from inclusion for its own sake, towards a recognition that our anthropological and theological understandings, and our churches, will be incomplete for as long as the voices of trans and non-binary people are not being heard.

In October 2022, I was pleased to be able to speak about trans theology for ten minutes, as part of the final of SCM Press's 'Theology Slam', a competition for young theologians. I would like to share my reflections and talk here, as they indicate the way in which my own, personal theological understandings have been reframed and have flourished as a result of completing this thesis. They were originally published on my blog, with the title 'Christ's Queer Body'.<sup>452</sup>

Theology can inspire either hope or fear in the body. The linking of personal guilt and shame to the cross is an oppressive practice that embeds fear deep in our consciousness. The cross is misused as an instrument of oppression based on simplistic, supposedly either/or truths. Divine or human, good or bad, innocent or

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<sup>452</sup> Alex Clare-Young (2022), 'Theology Slam 2022', <<https://alexclareyoung.co.uk/2022/09/28/theology-slam-2022/>> [accessed 7 October 2022].



guilty... This misuse means orienting our gaze towards binary division, towards the piercing and splitting of the body and – ultimately – towards death.

My name is Alex and my pronouns are they/them. My journey started with the obscuring, fear-inducing divisiveness of guilt and shame. When I was a child I felt like an alien, completely unable to comprehend where I fit in a binary – male or female – world. That alienation led to terror in my teens as I began to understand the complexity of my identity but had no words to express it.

When I began to describe my complicated relationship with my body, I was diagnosed with gender dysphoria – extreme discomfort with my body and the way that society perceived my gender. The word dysphoria is heavy with the assumption that my mind cannot embrace and love my body. This supposed division of body from mind mirrors the divisive binary of man = XY/phallus versus woman = vulva and XX chromosomes – a false binary that both school and church had tried to teach me as a child.

Theologians who start at guilt and shame often ask if I think God made a mistake with my body. I wonder why they assume that I hate this wonderful, resilient body, which I love. In asking this, they imply that body and mind can be separated, and that bodies should be revered. The cross alone doesn't allow for this supposed reverence for the human body, though. Instead, on the cross, the body is obliterated by hatred born of systemic oppression. The cross – with attendant guilt and shame – is a part of the Christian narrative that I have heard and experienced over and over since birth.

The incarnation, less so. Perhaps the inherent queerness of incarnation is why churches seem to talk about it less. Incarnation is all about changing things. God stretching flesh by bursting into time ruptures our normative understandings. In kenotic

incarnation, God tumbles out of power into fleshy vulnerability. In prophetic creativity, Mary's autogynephilic – or virgin – birthing of God stretches flesh, science, credulity, and respectability politics to their very limits by producing a son who should, if genetics are to be believed, have been female. Jesus's masculinity shatters the idea that you need X and Y chromosomes to be male.

The Queen in Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass* exclaims that: "Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast".<sup>453</sup> To believe in Jesus, I had to believe in complex bodies. I had to believe that the human body can be stretched to birth, to cradle, to contain, and, yes, to touch divinity. I even came to believe that the body can be stretched beyond death to new, transformed life.

After going on that theological learning journey, I began to experience my own trans, genderqueer body through the lens of transformative incarnation. I came to realise that my body is not a static fact but, rather, a queer, living, fluid collection of cells into which God breathes almost infinite potential. My queerness mirrors the seahorse, which both fertilizes the eggs that their mate creates and carries them in their brood pouch, bursting forth in a display of androgynous birth. And my queerness mirrors the incarnate God, who chooses to embody fleshy transformation. My queerness is *imago Dei*. My queerness is part of the Body of Christ.

So why is the body ecclesia – the church – still stuck at crucifixion, at division, at an orientation towards death? My complex body is both part of the church and reflective of the body of Christ. Or, to put it another way, the body of Christ is both trans and genderqueer. The church includes members who are male, who are female, and who

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<sup>453</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2016), p. 51.

are not defined by binary gender. And that has to impact how we do things. We cannot go on pretending that the church is only one thing, or one way. We – the body of Christ – cannot, must not be limited to normative binaries or polemical debates.

St. Paul refuses to separate mind from body from community. Paul's vision of Christ is an image of unity in diversity, of a body which contains millions of human hands, and feet, and eyes, and ears and – yes – genitalia in a complex creative being which is all the better for its internal contradictions and constant recreation.<sup>454</sup> Elizabeth Stuart suggests that the body of Christ is stretched by each new believer that joins it.<sup>455</sup> Christ's body is inevitably trans, inherently queer, beautifully beyond binaries.

The church must urgently learn to mirror incarnation, relying on the capacity to stretch, to grow, to change. We need to practice queerness, to pay attention to those voices who challenge normativity, ready to be transformed rather than to debate. We need to speak about the fleshy hope that we embody more loudly than we squabble over the norms we should be reaching far beyond.

And so, I choose the lens of incarnation over the blindfold of crucifixion. I choose hope over fear. I choose to dance towards new life, rather than to trudge towards inevitable death. You can choose to be a part of the sorely needed transition from a terrified church that clings on by its fingertips, to a euphoric church that allows for the stretching of its skin to embrace its many unique parts, so that every person may encounter Christ's queer body.

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<sup>454</sup> 1 Corinthians 12. 12-27

<sup>455</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, 'Sacramental Flesh' in Gerard Loughlin, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 65-75.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Participant Information Pack

#### Trans-Formation:

Exploring the theology of those who transcend and transform gender binaries.

#### Plain Text Invitation

Do you identify as trans or gender-nonconforming and Christian? Would you like to share your understandings of God and humanity with others? If the answer to these questions is 'Yes!', you are warmly invited to participate in this research. As a trans minister, I am keen to explore your understandings and enable others to benefit from them.

#### Participant Information Sheet

##### Description

I am exploring the particular ways in which people who identify as trans or gender-nonconforming understand God and God's relationship with humanity through in-depth interviews. Whilst trans experiences have been explored ethically, from many different viewpoints, we have not yet been enabled to share our deeper theological understandings – our knowledge about God and God's relationship with humanity - widely. As a transmasculine minister in the United Reformed Church, I am passionate about collating and sharing our distinct experiences and arising insights.

This research will enable you, as participants to share some of your stories, and the ways in which those stories have shaped your understandings of God, with a wider audience. I hope that you will find the opportunity to chat about your unique insights rewarding. The benefits, however, do not end there. The theology published as a result of this research will be shared widely, allowing theologians and churches to engage with trans/gender-nonconforming understandings. My hope is that this will encourage a more confident and positive attitude towards those of us who identify as trans/gender-nonconforming, contributing to gradual transformation both of churches and of the messages that churches convey to wider society.

To summarise, this research is a step away from ethical debates about trans/gender-nonconforming identities towards positive engagement with the valuable theological insights that those who identify as trans/gender-nonconforming Christians have to offer.

##### Invitation

Do you identify as trans or gender-nonconforming and Christian? Would you like to share your understandings of God and humanity with others? If the answer to these questions is 'Yes!', you are warmly invited to participate in this research. As a trans minister, I am keen to explore your understandings and enable others to benefit from them.

If you would like to participate, I will send you an email with a demographics form and an initial question: 'Tell me a bit about you!' which you can answer as fully as you like. We will also arrange an interview, which will last around one hour, via Zoom. Don't worry if you haven't used zoom before, I can help you to get set up. There will be some flexibility in the length of the interview – but if we go over an hour, I will ask you whether you wish to continue or would prefer to arrange a second interview.

During the interview, we will have a conversation about your identity, your understandings of God,



and your understandings of what it means to be human. Although I have a few particular topics that I would like to touch on, the interview will be largely guided by you and should feel like an informal chat. I will also be happy to share some of my own identity and journey with you – it's a two-way process!

The interview will be recorded, and I may also take a few notes. This is to make sure that I record what you say accurately and will only be used by me. Sometime after the interview, you will be provided with a typed transcript and asked whether you agree that it accurately represents what was said during the interview. You also may be contacted by email with a few follow-up questions. If you decide that you would rather not continue to participate in the research, you will have the right to withdraw from the study at any point up until six months after we have agreed your transcript without any consequences. You will be asked to sign the relevant section of the consent form, to confirm that you would like to withdraw, after which all data relating to your participation will be destroyed.

I hope that the opportunity to talk about your identity and faith will be enjoyable and beneficial. However, our conversation might touch upon some topics that bring up difficult emotions. If you would like to take a break, or to change topic, just let me know. I can also provide you with the details of some relevant support services, which you can contact if that may be helpful to you.

### **Reward & Expenses**

I appreciate your time and your sharing. As such, I am able to offer a small reward to you for taking part in this research. You will be sent a £10 shopping voucher after your interview. This is yours to keep. You will not need to return this compensation should you choose to withdraw from the study during or at any time after the interview.

### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

Protecting your confidentiality and anonymity is important to me. Before we start the interview, you will be asked to sign the consent form attached to this information sheet. You will be given a participant number and asked to choose a name to be referred to during the research (not your real name). This will allow me to protect your identity. You will also be asked to fill in a short demographics form, so that I can make sure that I am attending to diversity. This form will be labelled with your participant number, not your name, to make sure that you are not identifiable.

All research data will be treated as confidential. I might need to change some of the details of your story (such as significant places or other identifying characteristics) in order to protect your identity. I will inform you of this, and check that you agree with the changes made. You will also be able to request the removal of any identifiable information from the transcript. It is possible, however, due to the small number of out, trans Christians, that you could be identified by elements of your identity or parts of your story. Please consider this carefully when discerning whether or not to take part.

Your data will be stored on encrypted pen-drives and in a locked filing cabinet. Consent forms will be stored in a separate file from other data in order to protect your personal details. All data will be stored securely for at least 10 years, or until you withdraw from the project, after which it will be destroyed.

### **Results**

Results of this study will be written up in the form of a dissertation, which will be submitted for examination as part of my PhD. Please let me know if you would like to receive an electronic copy of the dissertation upon completion. This material may also be published in the future, in different

formats, in journals and/or books.

### **Funders**

This study is being funded by the Council for World Mission (CWM). CWM is a worldwide partnership of churches who are committed to sharing resources of money, people, skills and insights globally to work for the good of all. Their support of this project is part of their ongoing commitment to diversity and intersectionality.

### **Contact Details**

If you would like any more details about this research, please contact me (the primary researcher):

Alex Clare-Young,  
PhD Candidate; Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham.  
Email: [REDACTED]

If you have any concerns about this research, you may wish to contact my supervisor:

Dr. Deryn Guest  
Senior Lecturer in Biblical Hermeneutics; Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham  
Birmingham  
Telephone: + [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

**Trans-Formation: Exploring the theology of those who transcend and transform gender binaries.**

### **Consent Form**

This information is being collected as part of a research project concerned with exploring the theology of people who identify as trans/gender-nonconforming by the Department of Theology and Religion in the University of Birmingham.

The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project.

The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information, you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. No identifiable personal data will be published.

- I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information leaflet for this study.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that, whilst this study is confidential, it may not be possible to fully anonymise my experiences.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time up until six months from the date at which the transcript has been sent to me without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.

I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.

Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant..... Date..... Signature.....

Name of researcher ..... Date..... Signature.....

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To be completed on withdrawal from the study.

I wish to withdraw from the above research study. I understand that my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.

Name of participant..... Date..... Signature.....

Name of researcher ..... Date..... Signature.....

## Demographics Questionnaire

**Participant Number:**

**Please indicate what words would best describe your gender identity:**

**Age:**

- 18-24
- 25-44
- 45-64
- 65+

**Education:**

- n/a
- GCSE or equivalent
- A Level or equivalent
- College certificate or equivalent
- College diploma or equivalent
- Bachelors degree
- Graduate degree

**Do you hold any formal qualifications related to theology and/or religion?**

**Please describe your marital status:**

**Please indicate your current occupation:**

**Please indicate what words would best describe your ethnicity:**

**Please indicate what words would best describe your denominational identity (if any):**

**Do you experience any disability(ies)?**

**Are there any other demographic factors that you wish to record?**

**Appendix 2. Glossary**

Ally refers to a cis person who supports/affirms/works for justice alongside trans people.

Antinomian refers, here, to the rejection of legalism.

Autoethnography refers to the practice of research based on the researcher's own experiences and insights.

Binary refers to pairs of characteristics which are assumed to be completely opposite and separate. Male and female are binary genders.

Cis refers to people whose gender identity and/or presentation does not differ from their sex assigned at birth.

Cisnormative refers to theories, texts and practices that rely on social norms asserted by a system which prefers cis people, those who identify with the same gender as their sex assigned at birth.

Constructive theology, a departure from and/or re-evaluation of systematic theology, refers to theological material which allows for incoherence and does not allow any pre-determined system to constrain it.

Dimorphic sex model refers to the belief that there are two distinct and separate sexes, indicated by chromosomes, reproductive organs, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics.

Equitable refers to the quality of equity whereby people are treated fairly according to their support needs, as contrasted with equality, whereby people are treated equally regardless of their support needs.

First-person authority is the philosophical idea that a person uniquely knows their own mind. For example, the way I know what I think and feel is distinct from the way that my sister knows what I think and feel. I use this term to suggest that the individual has expert self-knowledge, and their avowals – self-declarations – should not be denied rather than to suggest that the individual's self-knowledge is entirely inerrant.

Gender confirmation refers to social and clinical steps taken to transition to a person's authentic gender. It implies a continuity, rather than a change in gender identity.

Gender dysphoria refers to the discomfort a person may feel in relation to their body and/or the way in which society perceives their gender.

Gender essentialism refers to the idea that set characteristics, including bodily and psychosocial norms, can be attributed to the respective binary genders of male and female, correlated with sex accordingly.

Gender euphoria refers to the joy a person may feel in relation to their body and/or the way in which society perceives their gender.

Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) refers to an N.H.S. service which manages the clinical treatment of people in relation to their gender identity.

Gender identity refers to a person's sense of self in relation to being female, non-binary, or male. For example, my gender identity is transmasculine non-binary.

Gender reassignment refers to social and clinical steps taken to transition to a person's authentic gender. Some critique this term as it suggests a change in gender, preferring the term 'gender confirmation'.

Gender Recognition Certificate refers to a legal document which enables a trans person to live in their gender.

Gender-full refers to the state of being full of/containing every possible gender identity.

Gender-less refers to the state of being completely empty/outside of any possible gender identity.

'God-trick' refers to the idea that a single source can observe the objective truth as if from above, as if the person claiming to tell the truth was God, and therefore removed from any particular location or perspective. It challenges the ideas of universal facts and objectivity.

Grounded theology/ies refers to theological material grounded in the lived experiences of particular individuals.

Headcanons is a term used in popular culture to describe a personal interpretation that is relatable but is not used in the 'universe' of a particular series or story.

Incoherence is used herein to refer to disruption of systematic theological norms.



Intersex refers to a person whose sex characteristics do not correlate with their binary sex as assigned at birth. The term 'intersex traits' may also be used and is preferred by some.

Kyriarchy refers to the social system apparent when hierarchies are multiple and/or interconnecting, leading to widespread power imbalances. It stems from feminist biblical studies and was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

LGBTQ+ refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning or who are otherwise subaltern in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality.

Mirroring is used, herein, to refer to the ways in which people reflexively reflect each other and God.

Mtf stands for 'male to female' and is used here to refer to a transfeminine person, as used by the person herself.

Multiple religious belonging (MRB) refers to the membership of multiple faith groups or religions by one person. It can be inherited and/or chosen. E.g., a child whose parents are respectively Muslim and Christian or a person who follows Buddhism and Islam.

Non-binary refers to the gender identity of people who identify as something other than the binary gender identities of male and female.

In architecture, the panopticon is a prison building that is circular. Panopticons originated in the 18th century at the behest of Jeremy Bentham. The inhabitants of a panopticon self regulate because it creates the feeling of being watched by your peers. In 1975, Michel Foucault used the image of a panopticon as a metaphor for

society, suggesting that society is no longer governed by rulers but, instead, is self-regulating due to mutual observation. He suggests that this self-regulation is not automatic but imposed as a tool of power.

Passing refers to a trans person appearing to others as a cis person of the same gender. It is problematic when seen as a marker of success.

Passing privilege is the idea that a trans person gains privilege, their life becomes easier, when they look like the gender that they are.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) refers to a clinical condition whereby cysts form on the ovaries. This is usually correlated with higher-than-average levels of testosterone.

Practical theology refers to theology that is related to the practices of a faith group e.g., the Christian church.

Psychosocial refers to the connections between wellbeing and, psychology and social context.

Que(e)rying refers to a play on words, combining 'queer' and 'query' to denote the questions raised of norms by queer theories.

Queer is a reclaimed word which refers to some subaltern sexual and gender identities when the person concerned uses this word themselves.

Spiritual abuse refers to using beliefs, scripture, and God as rationales and tools for harm including, but not limited to, coercion, control, manipulation, pressuring, and mistreating others.

Standpoint theory refers to post-modern approaches to knowledge whereby power and experience are acknowledged by noting the standpoint from which human beings view the world and recognising that all theories are partial, given the particular standpoint of the theorist.

Subaltern refers to those who are marginalised and/or oppressed in relation to characteristics including, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, financial status, and beliefs. The term is used in postcolonial studies and critical theory to refer to populations who are excluded from a social power hierarchy. It was coined by Antonio Gramsci in relation to those excluded from hegemonic institutions and systems.

Teaching trans refers to documents which teach about trans identities.

Trans Day of Remembrance (TDOR) refers to the events held annually on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November to remember those trans people who have been killed during the previous year.

Trans refers to people whose gender identity and/or presentation differs from their sex assigned at birth. Trans is an umbrella term which I also use to include non-binary.

Trans-apologetic refers to theological literature which explains and/or defends trans identities.

Transition refers to the social and/or clinical process of changing one's presentation/embodiment in line with one's authentic gender identity.

Transmasculine refers to the gender identity of people who have transitioned/are transitioning towards masculine or male.

Transfeminine refers to the gender identity of people who have transitioned/are transitioning towards feminine or female.

Transphobia refers to the holding and/or expressing of anti-trans views and resulting marginalisation, exclusion, and/or abuse.

Trans-related theology refers to theology that related to the identities, experiences, or insights of trans and/or non-binary people.

Transsexuality refers to the practice of gender transition. It is no longer widely used, due to its focus on sex characteristics rather than identity.