

## The Moral Issues of our Moment

### Reflection 6 – Gender

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Although it is a distinct issue, the debate about same-sex marriage has often raised the question of gender. On occasions, in the exchange of the debate, the concern about what the introduction of same-sex marriage might mean for the consequent introduction of perspectives about what is called ‘gender fluidity’ has been voiced. Though we need to be clear that these two issues are distinct and one need not necessarily translate into the other, the association of the two in the social debate impels us to reflect on the nature of gender and how we understand this essential part of our human identity from the vantage of our Christian faith.

In the designations that are often used today, we hear the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘intersex’. The terms recognize that there are a small number of people in society who experience themselves fundamentally uncomfortable in the gender into which they have been born. We call this ‘gender dysphoria.’ Some of these people will, through various means, seek what we term, ‘gender realignment.’ There are also people, a very small number, who are born with a congenital situation such that their gender is indeterminate or ambiguous. For these people, their circumstances can be an enormous source of confusion, and of pain. People who are in this situation require our profound understanding and acceptance. Neither their physical or their psychological stress is a barrier to their dignity as persons, and it is imperative for us as a Christian community to surround people in this situation with love, and to journey with them such that they might always continue to experience themselves as belonging to a community in which their personal value is never brought into question. Every person has dignity; every person has the right to be loved and to love. Every person has the right to contribute to the society in which they live. Sexual orientation, and questions about sexual identity, should never be a barrier to this participation and contribution.

One of the curious aspects of the cultural milieu in which we find ourselves, however, is that what is an exceptional situation, and even one that is rare, is now put forward as a norm. It is part of the postmodern demand to celebrate all that is different, and to give every difference the same platform as everything else. In this philosophical context, which translates into a social and political one, and in the vacuum of any unifying, cohesive cultural and social narrative, every claim has legitimacy. Therefore, into the debate about same-sex marriage, we also often hear about the rights of transgender and intersex persons.

Much of the current debate about gender involves discussion about what actually constellates ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness.’ Complicating the discussion further are notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity.’ How are these terms to be understood? How do they relate to gender? The terms can often be criticized for the way in which characteristics belonging to both men and women can easily be stereotyped in categories of exclusivity.

There is, however, a complication that has entered the consideration. This is the school of thought that gender is culturally determined, rather than something that is received and lived from conception. There are various historical influences that have contributed to this framework of thinking which we cannot explore here. However, in this view – what has been called a ‘transgenderist’ view – gender is not something that is assigned or discerned at birth but something which is subject to change, more or less at will.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernadette Tobin, “Gender and Personal Identity: Two views,” *Bioethics Outlook*, Plunkett Centre for Ethics, (Vol 28: 1, March 2017), 3.

As the Catholic ethicist Bernadette Tobin explains, it claims, further, that gender identity is ultimately an entirely personal matter. This viewpoint is accentuated by our modern emphasis on ‘affect’, on how we feel. As we have already shared in an earlier reflection, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has detailed, the way we feel has now assumed an authority beyond what it has ever in the evolution and development of human consciousness. How we *feel* determines the rightness or otherwise of something. Subsequently, one of the primary goals in life is what Taylor terms “authenticity.” The modern aim is to lead authentic lives, and living authentically means living according to what we feel to be true and right. In this framework, gender then is not something objective, but something subjective. “It is the feeling which a person has about his or her personal self (or ‘identity’). It is something that no one else can assess or judge.”<sup>2</sup> And, further, it is something that is ‘fluid’ dependent on the shift of feeling. Gender can change, according to the changes of feeling I have about myself. It is therefore a choice. “If I feel that I am an X, then I am an X, and should be respected and treated as an X.”<sup>3</sup> Discovering one’s gender is then not about acknowledging how I was born, and living from that with all its questions and struggle and possibility, but about finding out what I feel about how I was born, and living from those feelings.

The mix of focus on personal rights, the dominance of the affective life, and the celebration of difference and otherness result, then, in the demand that a person’s feelings about their gender identity must be believed and respected by others. They must stand equally alongside all other claims to attention and any discrimination to this claim must be removed. This then becomes incorporated into various approaches both in education and in public policy.

There is yet another complication that becomes inserted into this matter. As we detailed in the reflection on proposed legislation for assisted dying, ‘compassion’, according to Taylor, has become reduced to the ‘therapeutic’ - in other words, that which will restore good feelings. Therefore, extraordinarily, it is thought that it is compassionate to allow a child with gender dysphoria to claim their right to gender realignment if that is what will make them happy. The plea is sounded that the alternative is to render the child unhappy with the consequences of ongoing confusion and depression. Compassion, genuinely understood, however, is about entering the pain and struggle of another. It is about taking this pain into myself, and setting out with another person onto the long journey of a question that may not be quickly answered. It seems to me that the confusion created by acquiescing to the inevitable shift of feelings in a child who is growing, questioning and exploring their sexual identity is far more destructive than protecting that uneasy quest until it discovers its resolution when the child has come to the most mature perspective about their life well into their adult years. Many of our children will enter a phase of questioning their gender. This natural moment is not helped by abandoning them to what they simply feel to be right.

This matter has become a personal concern of Pope Francis. In his letter to the Church, *Amoris Laetitia*, “The Joy of Love” (April 2016), he rejects a theory of gender that “denies the difference and the reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman.” (n.56). He affirms that yes, biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.” And therefore, as he went on to say later, in October last year, “it is one thing for a person to have [a transgender] tendency, and even change sex. But it is another thing to teach it, gender theory, in schools along these lines in order to change mentality. I call this ideological colonization.”<sup>4</sup> He has come to this, many times. To cite but one example, to the bishops of Poland at World Youth Day, a little earlier, in July 2016 he declared:

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<sup>2</sup> Tobin, “Gender and Personal Identity,” 3.

<sup>3</sup> Tobin, “Gender and Personal Identity,” 5.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Interview on Return Flight from Georgia and Azerbaijan, 4 October 2016. See <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/02/world/pope-transgender-comments/index.html>

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these — I will call it clearly by its name — is [the ideology of] ‘gender.’ Today children — children! — are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this [is] terrible!

“Ideological colonization’ is an important term because we need to recognize that gender theory, as it is promoted, is simply an idea, albeit a dangerous one. It is a perspective, a philosophical and social *opinion*. And it is a recent one. But it is one that has gained considerable traction because it powerfully encapsulates the postmodern stance into which we have catapulted in the last fifty years. It is a highly-charged symbol of this cultural stance, and therefore possesses remarkable ideological force. However, in his current letter to us about marriage, Bishop Peter appeals to us to recognize that it is the collective memory we carry about something is vital to our future. When we abandon the memory we have about what constitutes what is best for our social life, then our future as community and civilization becomes fragile. Subsequently, it is important that we pitch what are very recent ideas about gender against a much longer collective understanding of the human person. Yes, the religious tradition provides us with this extraordinary resource of interpretation, but not only the religious tradition. We are also heirs to a long-standing and enduring understanding of human life from ancient philosophical traditions. We jettison these with great risk to our future.

From this long-standing community of reflection on human experience, we affirm that gender is not elective, but a biological reality that finds expression in the reciprocal and complementary differences between men and women precisely in their biological capacity to be a mother or a father. These biological differences have social, psychological and spiritual meaning and consequences. Our gender then is not incidental to who we are; it’s not an adornment that can be changed like a set of clothes. We are made bodily and spiritually. The two, though distinguishable, cannot be separated. As one writer expresses it,

If we are enfleshed, then there must be some meaning in it, some intention of God in it. Consequently, flesh and spirit are interrelated, at least in this life. Our spirituality must be worked out in the flesh and our biological and psychological existence must be worked out in the spirit. Such interrelationship must then provide us with a God-intended (not accidental) opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

This means that our maleness and our femaleness are who we are, through and through. It is something woven through the very fabric of our being. According to Jean Vanier,

The difference between man and woman is a radical and fundamental one which permeates the depths of their consciousness and it affects all human behavior . . . Man and woman are complimentary in their bodies and in their psychology. They each discover their being in relation to God who created them; each in the image of God, they are called to become like God.<sup>6</sup>

And so, as Tobin identifies, “though it is possible to change one’s gender, in the sense of how a person presents themselves to others, such a change does not occur ‘deeply enough’ to change the person’s *being* a man or a woman. To actually change one’s sex or one’s gender would be to change to become someone else.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Freeman, “Sexuality and Spirituality,” *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 9 (1988), 169-170.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them*, (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Tobin, “Gender and Personal Identity,” 6-7.

It could be suggested that the very fostering of a view of personal identity as *entirely* a construction of the individual may *itself* have contributed to the substantial increase, over the last few years, in numbers of young people who have suffered gender dysphoria.<sup>8</sup> We may be caught into a something of a treadmill here.

The best thing we can offer our young people today is a healthy sense of our own gender, to be good models of what it means to be a man or a woman, male and female. As Vanier again, states, “I am convinced that our society desperately needs the reconciliation of men and women. In order to build community together. They have such need of each other, and it is painful and even dangerous when there is no mutual respect and appreciation of one another.”<sup>9</sup>

Yes, our society is on a journey of freedom from unhelpful and destructive socially constituted stereotypes of what it means to be a man and what it means to be woman. However, there is something enduring beneath the stereotypes that we may rightly question: our God given identity as a man or as a woman. When we are comfortable with our own identity, and can nurture our children from this security, they are encouraged in their own identity, and especially in what struggles they may have along the way. Notwithstanding that there will always be exceptions to the norm – situations that we must attend with the utmost reverence and respect – it is in the celebration of the genuine reciprocity of the givenness of gender that the human community can best flourish.

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<sup>8</sup> See Tobin, “Gender and Personal Identity,” 8.

<sup>9</sup> Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them*.