

Walking Through the Valley of Shadows

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Abstract

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Article

(As I'd mentioned, it's time to move on from the previous discussion. I admit, I probably wouldn't have reacted as badly if the debate hadn't touched on something that was freshly raw for me personally, but as it is still a raw nerve, we'll leave the HBS thing be. I thought I'd go with something far less controversial. Politics is being overdone right now, what with all the stuff on the primaries, so I thought I'd take on Religion. -- Mercedes)

Modern churches do an excellent job of creating an equation between the questioning of fallible teachers, preachers, copyists and translators, and the questioning of God Himself. You can do one without necessarily doing another. But "all scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (2 Timothy 3:16) is usually used to rebuff any inquiries about the many interpretations of those scriptures.

Assuming that all scripture was given by inspiration of God, it should also be kept in mind that all scripture was also interpreted and worded by a myriad of authors, then recopied by hand for thousands of generations, passing through different translators and copyists, each with differing biases. All New Testament scripture was additionally collected at the Council of Nicaea, where it was decided which books (and which specific versions of them) to keep and which ones to ignore or destroy. This was done under the guidance of an appointee (Eusebius Pamphilus) of the first actual Pope (although they later retroscribed themselves back to the apostle Peter), the Emperor Constantine I, who wished to forge a new religion that was a synthesis of Mithraism, fledgling Christianity, and Constantine's own worship of the sun god, Sol. He also intended to set himself up to be portrayed as the returned Christ (although it did not quite end up working out that way), which was understood at that time to mean an earthly King-level saviour.

And in addition to the hands that scripture passed through being imperfect, so too are those of the preachers who deliver it on Sunday. Religious leaders have repeatedly abused and misused scripture for their own ends, right into modern times -- sometimes innocently but other times specifically for the acquisition of money, political power and fiercely loyal masses. 150 years ago, the church used scripture to justify slavery, alleging among other things that Black people had no souls. 100 years ago, scripture was used to resist emancipation, re-establishing womens' role as a subservient one and portraying them as not worthy or intelligent enough to be able to vote. Even today, scripture is twisted

to assert the subordination of women. Can we question the church's teaching while relying on our heart to sort the truth from the centuries of spin-mongering that has tainted it? I'd think we'd have to.

I will be perfectly honest, and admit that I am not a theologian or an ordained authority. I am someone who has delved into the subject passionately, from different angles, because it had strong personal importance to me. This is a brief overview of what I've come to believe with regards to transgender spirituality. My own belief system at the time of writing this is a blend of Christianity, Wicca and Native "Red Road" spirituality. And in this approach, I have still felt the Creator's guidance, support and assistance throughout my life, something I am daily grateful for. I do not, however, ask anyone to adopt my belief path... only that readers follow their own hearts and minds, rather than the preconceptions and connotations previously and relentlessly fed from the pulpit.

One of the hardest things for transgender and non-transgender people alike to reconcile is transsexuality and the Bible. And for someone who's already concluded that transgenderism is from the Devil, nothing I or anyone else says will ever make a difference. But for those willing to listen, this is the basics of my understanding of it.

With all of the shock, distaste and horror that exists in the Christian church regarding transgender issues, it may completely surprise people to learn that there are really only two scriptures that negatively address transgender people, and it is not for lack of awareness about them (which I will touch on in an upcoming discussion of transgender history). And the first scripture is also actually quite tenuous:

Genesis 1:27 (KJV) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

This scripture is often used to reassert that only two genders exist, and that variance is unnatural. However, even God can't deny the existence of intersex.

The prevailing belief, of course, is that there are two genders. It's supposed to be as simple as that. Either you're born with XX chromosomes and become a girl or born with XY chromosomes and become a boy. God is not supposed to make mistakes.

Except that fails to explain the catalogued numbers of chromosomal variances including Klinefelter's Syndrome and Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, or related genetic conditions such as Asperger's Syndrome. It doesn't explain Intersexed births, in which a person can have biological tissue form in ambiguous or mixed gender permutations. There are currently upwards of 50 known and documented forms of intersex.

I am inclined to agree that the Creator in fact does not make mistakes. But He does give us challenges (or She? I actually think that the Creator is either ungendered or bigendered, but that is for another discussion; I use He here simply because that's what most are used to). And He does give us people with different perspectives in order to give us wider insights into the human condition.

He delights in diversity. There are 34 species of deer, over 40,000 species of spiders, anywhere between 2 and 100,000 different species of life -- and that's not counting those that have become extinct. He created people with diverse hair colours, distinct voices, capacities for many different

personalities... why should he want to be rigid about gender?

Deuteronomy 22:5 (KJV) The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God.

Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are books compiled of thematic law for the Jews of that day. For example, three verses after the above scripture, the Bible clearly states that if you build a new home, it has to have battlements ("When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence." -- Deut. 22:8). The context does not set this up to be metaphor, either, it is clearly a straightforward directive. And shortly afterward, there's Deuteronomy 22:11 ("Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together." -- Are you wearing cotton/polyester?). This directive is so important that it appears again, in Leviticus 19:19.

Other commands in these books are that newlywed men should take a year off from work to spend with their wives ("When a man hath taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business: but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife, which he hath taken." -- Deut. 24:5), and that illegitimate children are not able to enter the House of God ("A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even unto his tenth generation, shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord." -- Deut. 23:2... You were born in wedlock, right? How about the previous 9 generations?). If a wife intervenes when her husband is involved in a fight, then her hand is to be cut off (Deut. 25:11), and no one with any physical defect can be a leader of a congregation (Lev. 21:16 -- does your Minister wear glasses?). What we see here, is a guide for a society in which the population was small and fragile, needing growth and prosperity, where women were kept subordinate, and which slavery was an accepted and encouraged practice ("Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids." -- Leviticus 25:44). In here, we also find the laws about not eating anything that comes from a pig, not eating lobster, about men keeping their hair long and not trimming their beards, and about men cutting their hair short.

These laws are considered the Old Covenant. It is said that when Jesus entered the picture, he brought with him a New Covenant. The old eye-for-an-eye legal system was to be updated. This is why we can now eat pork, they say.

I know that this may not convince many people, of course, but the fact is, in the New Covenant, it was not so important to address things such as transgender existence. Perhaps now that the population had grown and human life was not so endangered, it was now safe to acknowledge and accomodate a peculiar aspect of God's creation.

In fact, if you look, you might be surprised by positive references to transfolk in the Bible:

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." - Matthew 19:10-12

and:

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant- to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. Isaiah 56:3 - 5

In fact, eunuchs are mentioned favorably a number of times in the Bible, including one who God specifically sent Philip out of his way to minister to. Eunuchs of that day were not always as we think of them now, simple castrati. There have been more than a few in Palestinian, Greek and Roman culture who, from the eunuch process onward, adopted the lifestyle of the gender opposite to their birth genitals (or else non-gendered lives), including a couple known eunuchs who were taken as "wives" by a few different Caesars, politicians and generals. Eunuchs were seen by some as an opportunity to have more concubines, but without the risk of pregnancy. Several served as priests / priestesses in early Eurasian culture. They were often thought to be gifted with unique insight in many cultures, a trait which persists to a small extent with Hijras in India and Kathoey in Thailand (although the respect has dwindled in recent decades as well). There is also some suggestion in early writings that eunuchs did not always start out male-bodied (i.e. that some "transitioned" in a way, from female to male).

Now, none of this will sway hard right-wing believers. But just as the New Covenant does not condemn transgenderism, it does not necessarily condone it. All I can testify to is what I've known from my life.

I'd spent 38 years trying to make my brain match my body. This essentially led to a life of frustration, crippling depression, failed ambitions, fractured self-image, massive insecurity, a failed marriage, and countless nights of hedging on suicide. Everything was backwards. I felt freakish. I put on a mask to become someone else to make society happy, and all the time harbored what I believed to be this terrible, damnable secret identity that I couldn't manage to destroy, no matter what I did.

It wasn't until I decided to transition, as a final attempt to make my life work, that all the pieces of my life started to fit properly. I was able to stop acting. Things began making sense.

This isn't something that can be turned off like a light switch. We're talking about an integral need, as intrinsic as breathing and eating.

Any God who would create people to need something so fundamentally core to their being and then tell them to deny themselves for their entire lives would be a cruel, sadistic God who I could never respect. However, the Creator I believe in is not in any way like that. The Creator I believe in rejoices in diversity, and cultivates it. The Creator I believe in gives us challenges -- like the journey I am now on -- not tortures.

That is why I believe that condemnations of things transgender -- as well as homosexuality and bisexuality -- are only part of the Old Covenant, a mandate that made sense when the preservation of our species was important to Him, but no longer important in our day of overpopulation.

Resolving Christianity and Homosexuality is more complicated, because of the larger number of scriptures used to condemn the latter. But resolution is not impossible, and some of the above also

applies. Some references worth searching out include “Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church” (an examination by a Presbyterian theologian and former Moderator), and the film, “For the Bible Tells Me So.”

(crossposted to DentedBlueMercedes)

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