

Entering the fray or tending to the wounded? Christian responses to gender incongruence

Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter books, 2018) 251 pp. £19.99 (hbk) ISBN 9781594039614

Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) 186 pp. £16.99 (pbk) ISBN 978-0-8308-2859-3

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It seems very likely that gender dysphoria, the distresses caused by a mismatch between someone's natal sex and their sense of gender identity, has existed throughout history, though expressed differently in different ages. However, it is only in the twentieth century that this has been addressed with hormones and reconstructive surgery and only in last five years or so that this phenomenon has suddenly caught the wider public imagination.

How then should Christians respond to this "transgender moment"? Ryan Anderson and Mark Yarhouse represent two Christian responses and it is useful to contrast their approaches.

Anderson is a Catholic and a political philosopher. His book charts the dramatic rise in the prominence of divergent gender identity through Hollywood, celebrity interviews and reality television to the attempt of the President Obama administration to reinterpret anti-discrimination legislation so that "sex" refers to "gender identity". The starting point, and a recurrent theme of the book, is thus the phenomenon as it manifests in popular culture and political debate. While the book has an impressive 649 footnotes, the bulk of these are references to news and popular media from *Vanity Fair* to *CNN*, from the *Daily Mail* to the *New York Times*, from websites to blogs and YouTube videos. Scattered among these are only 30 or so peer review articles and most of these are in chapter 4 – on the biology of sex. Overall the book is and should be read as a popular and political work rather than a reflective scholarly tome.

Having set the scene Anderson gives an account of "what the activists say". This is taken primarily from The Human Rights Campaign and the LGBT campaigning organisations PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) together with declarations by expert witnesses in various court cases. Anderson construes these activists as promoting a shared "transgender ideology" which, among other things, renders gender identity entirely subjective. However, because, in Anderson's words "transgender activists... don't want to have a debate at the level of philosophy" (p. 29) he is led to attribute philosophical views to them. Having done this he finds these attributed views full of contradictions, "they claim that the real self is something other than the physical body, in a new form of Gnostic dualism, yet at the same time they embrace a materialist philosophy in which only the material world exists. They say that gender is purely a social construct while asserting that a person can be trapped in the wrong body" (pp. 45-46). Of course, they claim none of these things in so many words. These are Anderson's descriptions.

In chapter 3, Anderson shares several accounts by people who have transitioned and then later "detransitioned". To me this chapter was the most interesting part of the book and I appreciated the way that he allows these people to speak for themselves. What gives these narratives power is that they are authentic personal stories of people who have struggled with their journey of self-

discovery. However, there is a problem with their role in the book. It is not that they should not be heard or that they mislead us in relation to the journey these people have taken. The problem is only the absence of similar narratives of those who have transitioned without regret.

Where a serious transition in life involves some decision there is always the possibility of regret but we do not get a full understanding if we focus only on those who regret. What would we think of a book on marriage based only on interviews with people who had subsequently divorced? It should also be noted that the overwhelming majority of who take the step of transition as adults, whether socially, medically or legally, do not detransition. While they often find that transitioning has not solved all their problems, they rarely regret their decision.

Chapters 5 and 6 concern the place of transitioning in the medical treatment of gender dysphoria in adults and in children. These chapters are clinical and empirical and Anderson reads the evidence largely through a lens provided by Professor Paul R McHugh, former psychiatrist-in-chief at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. McHugh is a profound influence on the book. He is thanked prominently in the acknowledgements, given the very last line in the book, and cited over 80 times in its 250 pages (though Anderson does not cite any peer review journal article by McHugh). These chapters bring out well the weakness of the evidence-base for current standards of treatment and certainly provide grounds for caution. On the other hand, abstracting from the intrinsic ethics of surgery involving sterilization (which is not an issue Anderson addresses) the weakness of evidence does not provide a basis to condemn any more than it does to commend current practice, or at least not practice with informed and consenting adults. In the context of low-level evidence and contested clinical practice it is worth recalling the words of the great moral theologian Gerald Kelly SJ (in a classic article on "The Morality of Mutilation" published in *Theological Studies* 17 (1956) at p. 335):

It is well to keep in mind that, like theologians, physicians also have their "schools"; and it is my opinion that scientific men, as a group, are much less tolerant of opposing views than are theologians. It seems to me that in medically debatable cases we have to allow a physician liberty, provided his own view has sound backing and that he conforms to accepted rules for consultation and has the enlightened consent of his patient.

At the beginning of chapters 4 Anderson states that "understanding biological sex isn't all that difficult" (p. 77), a quotation that epitomises his breezy approach to the whole topic. As he says later, "Are these people confused or deluded? I don't know. I do know that they're wrong" (p. 116). Some truths seem beyond question: obvious, basic or fundamental. Ludwig Wittgenstein explored this idea in his work *On Certainty*. There are beliefs that are like hinges on which thought turns. However, to say this is not to say that such beliefs could not turn out to be mistaken or confused. Certainty is not justification. To justify such unequivocal conclusions Anderson requires serious philosophical anthropology of a kind that he neither cites nor provides. I would not expect Anderson to cite Wittgenstein but there are no references to Aquinas nor even to Aristotle. Two footnotes refer to further reading on natural goodness and natural law (notes 49 and 50 for chapter 7) but Anderson himself does not engage with these resources. It is not that kind of book. Rather, after a discussion of gender roles and stay-at-home mums in chapter 7, he returns in chapter 8 to pragmatic debates on public policy which is where the book started and where Anderson seems most confident.

This book provides ammunition for those engaged in a culture war that is bitter and dysfunctional. Anderson has been praised as "fearless" (in the accompanying endorsements) for entering the fray but what is needed in this area is not only bravery but also wisdom and in my view this book is more a symptom of a problem than it is the basis of a solution. Anderson has chosen to focus on

“transgender activists”, frequently caricatured but sometimes seeming to invite caricature, rather than engage seriously with the experiences of transgender people: their own narratives, their self-understanding, their faith, where they have faith, their negotiating of relationships with families and communities, their encounter with rejection, harassment and violence. The book advocates tolerance and kindness towards “those who struggle with their gender identity” (p. 173) but there is little sense that this book is the fruit of learning by accompanying and listening to such people. This weakness is evident from the very title of the book. *When Harry Became Sally* is of course a joke and not a mutual or self-deprecating joke but a joke about other people. It is a book about them without them.

Mark Yarhouse is an Evangelical Christian and a clinical psychologist. Both perspectives inform his contribution to the topic. He is overtly religious and construes gender dysphoria primarily as a form of psychological distress. Where Anderson is most concerned to address the transgender moment as a political challenge, Yarhouse is most concerned to take seriously the needs of people who are negotiating a divergent sense of gender identity, especially those who are seeking to do so in a Christian context.

Yarhouse begins with an account of the terminology of sex, gender and gender identity. While he sets out these categories very clearly, he also emphasises the complexity of this area and limitations on the clinical evidence. Where Anderson exhibits and advocates courage, Yarhouse exhibits and advocates humility: “if ever there was a topic that elicited simplicity in the face of remarkable complexity, it is gender dysphoria” (p. 142).

Having introduced the basic concepts Yarhouse sets out a Christian understanding of sex, gender and gender dysphoria. He begins with Scripture and some key passages. These he elaborates through the doctrinal themes of creation, fall, redemption and glorification. On this basis he shows how the fundamental distinction of male and female is good and created by God and, while the relationship between the sexes has been affected by the fall, it is redeemed in Christ and will have a part in glory. We will not marry in heaven (Matthew 22.30), but heaven is not a “genderless existence” (p. 44). Yarhouse quotes Christopher Roberts with approval “sexual difference is an ontologically significant feature of humanity in every era of theological history, from creation to eschaton” (p. 45). This theological vision Yarhouse terms the “integrity framework”.

Yarhouse next introduces two further lenses through which to understand gender dysphoria. The first is a “disability framework”. If gender dysphoria is understood as a medical diagnosis, then it is a condition not a choice. Personal morality is no longer the primary reference point. Yarhouse seems to be attracted to the disability framework in part because he is a clinician and it is within this framework that he seeks to support people professionally. He also sees advantages in that this framework can mitigate a tendency of some Christians to shame the person with gender dysphoria. On the other hand, Yarhouse is aware of limitations to this perspective. A disability framework will not address the concern within the integrity framework to “redeem gender and sexuality in the direction of God’s intentions” (p. 49). At the same time the disability framework also fails to provide a compelling narrative for the transgender person to answer questions of self-worth or belonging.

Yarhouse therefore introduces the “diversity framework”, which understands a person’s sense of his or her own gender in relation to the person’s identity and the community to which the person belongs. Yarhouse distinguishes between what he calls “strong” and “weak” diversity frameworks. The former is a framework that deconstructs the very categories of sex and gender and is antithetical the norm of marriage. This framework, which Yarhouse associates with the writings of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others, is deeply problematic from a Christian perspective.

On the other hand, Yarhouse thinks it possible to affirm “a weak diversity framework”, which has a place for identity and community concerns, without being committed to this radical deconstruction of gender categories. It is not clear why Yarhouse chooses to call this more relational or inclusive sense of diversity “weak”.

Having made these distinctions Yarhouse seeks to combine the three perspectives in an overarching “integrated framework”. However, it is at this crucial point that Yarhouse is least clear. How is each perspective supposed to inform the others without doing violence to the integrity of each? What is needed, and what Yarhouse does not supply, is a return to the integrity framework to show how it can accommodate disability and diversity concerns. Without this theological work some will continue to believe that seeking to affirm the experience of transgender persons necessarily implies moving away from an authentically Christian vision.

The central chapters of the book concern clinical aspects of gender dysphoria, its causes and prevalence, its prevention and treatment. Yarhouse describes the hypothesis of brain-sex as well as Blanchard’s contested typology and other theories and models but he also sets out the criticisms that have been levelled against each approach. The tone remains cautious and critical of opposing certainties.

Finally, in the last two chapters, Yarhouse addresses the practical and pastoral question of how the Church should engage with people who experience gender dysphoria. He argues that addressing behaviour should be preceded by a sense of belonging, very much as Pope Francis has argued that discernment should be preceded by and informed by accompaniment. It is in these chapters that we hear most from transgender people themselves, though generally in conversation with Yarhouse.

What is most valuable in Yarhouse’s book is not the theological discussion, which is rather thin, nor the scheme of frameworks, which he does not quite succeed in integrating. What is most valuable is the Christian and scientific humility evident throughout the book. Yarhouse advocates “listening to the experiences of faith believers who are navigating gender identity conflicts in their own lives” (p. 159). It is “one modest step” (p. 160), no more but no less, away from the drum beat of the cultural battle and towards a concern for the victims of this war, especially those who, already struggling with the challenges of gender dysphoria face spiritual or communal rejection. “I am walking wounded, dry bones, defeated, tired of the struggle for normalcy or acceptance” (p. 141).