

## GENDER AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In this book, Adrian Thatcher offers fresh theological arguments for expanding our understanding of gender. He begins by describing the various meanings of gender and depicts the relations between women and men as a pervasive human and global problem. Thatcher then critiques naive and harmful theological accounts of sexuality and gender as binary opposites or mistaken identities. Demonstrating that the gendered theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth, as well as the Vatican's 'war on gender', rest on questionable binary models, he replaces these models with a human continuum that allows for sexual difference without assuming 'opposite sexes' and normative sexualities. Grounded in core Christian doctrines, this continuum enables a full theological affirmation of LGBTIQ people. Thatcher also addresses the excesses of the male–female binary in secular culture and outlines a hermeneutic that delivers justice and acceptance instead of sexism and discrimination.

ADRIAN THATCHER is Honorary Professor in the Department of Religion, University of Exeter. He is the author of twelve books, most recently *Redeeming Gender* (2016), and editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (2015).

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present-day secular debate, are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science, or social science. *New Studies in Christian Ethics* aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications titles published in the series

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*(continued after the index)*

# GENDER AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

ADRIAN THATCHER

*University of Exeter*



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## *General Editor's Preface*

In 1996, Lisa Sowle Cahill contributed her widely praised monograph *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* to this Cambridge University Press series. Six years later, Adrian Thatcher contributed his *Living Together and Christian Ethics* to the series and, since then, has built a formidable reputation as a liberal theological voice on issues of sexuality and gender. In the last decade, the issue of 'gender' has received considerable fresh attention, partly as a result of changing medical and scientific understandings and partly as a result of radical cultural and political changes in the West. So a new volume from Thatcher on *Gender and Christian Ethics*, that takes full account of these changes, is particularly welcome.

There is a strong thesis running throughout his latest contribution, namely that the binary understanding of gender that has dominated recent Catholic, Anglican and some Reformed ecclesial reports and writings on sexuality is deeply misleading in terms of science, sociology, ethics and theology. He sets out clearly some of the medical and genetic evidence that suggests that human gender is more complex than a binary model allows. He examines some of the sociological and feminist studies that suggest that patriarchal culture shapes perceptions of sharp gender differences. He argues strongly that, at an ethical level, a binary model of gender does not do justice to individuals and groups that do not conform to it. And he develops a trinitarian theological position that sees gender as a (God-given) continuum. Finally he suggests that the gender binary continues to cause damage in the secular world, and explores different ways that hermeneutics within both Christianity and Islam can address sacred texts that appear to be patriarchal and discriminatory.

*General Editor's Preface*

Adrian Thatcher's writing is always wonderfully clear, well-informed, challenging and creative. His new book admirably fits the two central aims of the series:

1. To promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level.
2. To encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance, or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

**Robin Gill**

## *Acknowledgements*

Academic writing can be a long and lonely slog, but it is always dependent on the prior efforts of co-labourers, too numerous to acknowledge.

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends in Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter for my continuing appointment as Honorary Professor in the College of Humanities. I retired from Exeter in 2011, but have continued a happy association with them ever since. Without access to the university's library and its ever-growing number of academic databases, further research for this retired academic would have been impossible. I am most grateful to them for proposing, and to the Vice Chancellor for approving, my present honorary appointment, and enabling me to make further contributions to Theology and Christian Ethics.

I have benefitted from the advice of several academics during the writing of this book. I enjoyed correspondence with Sister Susan Rakoczy at St Joseph's Theological Institute at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Susan Gilchrist from TranschristianUK read and commented helpfully on all my references to gender-variant people. Dr Ronit Irshai, Senior Lecturer in the Gender Studies Unit at Bar Ilan University, shared her work with me on the Euthyphro Dilemma as I was writing Chapter 3. Professor Asma Barlas, at Ithaca College, New York, carefully and helpfully commented on my foray into her own work and that of other Muslim women academics in Chapter 10. Professor Gerard Loughlin, at the University of Durham, not only checked that I had read him aright but commented helpfully on the entire script. But I have benefitted most from the extensive knowledge of Dr Susannah Cornwall, Senior Lecturer in Constructive Theologies at the University of Exeter, who read the whole manuscript carefully and made several helpful recommendations.

My indebtedness is not only to my academic contacts and friends. I have been encouraged by the curiosity, enthusiasm and receptivity of medical students at the Plymouth University Peninsula Medical School.



For more than a decade I have taught short courses on kinship arrangements, gender and cross-cultural ethical issues, all within a medical humanities framework. The students have unwittingly helped me broaden my academic horizons, clarify my thoughts and pursue further research. For more than thirty years I have been a member, pianist and lay preacher in the congregation of Christ Church, Estover, a local ecumenical parish in Plymouth and the Anglican diocese of Exeter. The quiet, steadfast commitment of the small congregation at Estover has been inspirational in helping me bridge the gap between academic theology and the pressing vicissitudes of parish life on a housing estate. My long-standing membership of Modern Church, a voluntary society promoting positive, constructive Christian theology, has helped me to sustain my commitment to progressive theology more generally, and to making it more widely available to the churches. And not least I thank my partner, Caroline Major, for her unflagging interest and support over many projects, which helped me greatly to bring this long current project to its completion.