

PART I

Gender and Violence

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CHAPTER I

Aims and Key Terms

Gender and Christian Ethics builds on three convictions. First, that the problem of gender, in the world and in the world's religions, ranks equal to the problems of climate change, the failure to eliminate poverty, to secure world peace, and to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. Indeed all these problems intersect and are 'gendered'. Any reader detecting a whiff of exaggeration here is asked to suspend judgment at least until the end of Chapter 2. Unfortunately the conduct of relations between the sexes at all levels – personal, social, national, international, and global – is too often affected by the presumption of male power and privilege, to the detriment of women. Throughout the world shocking violence against women is increasing, and the complicity of the world's religions in endorsing and legitimising it is becoming better known. The book is a contribution to more peaceable, more equal relations between women and men, especially in countries and places where Christian faith is practiced.

Second, that a theology of sex/gender has recently become embedded in official Roman Catholic and some Protestant Reformed thought, which, I argue, may be seriously mistaken. Not only does it ignore (or tacitly encourage) the misuse of gender power, this new theology, signalled by the term 'complementarity', significantly alienates everyone whose bodies and desires do not fit its chafing complementarian assumptions. Some criticism of emerging gender orthodoxies must be made, not simply against the churches, but *for the sake of* the churches, since the new gender theology is offending countless people who do not and cannot locate themselves within it.

Third, that an alternative theology of gender, already rooted in Christian thought, is able to enrich the self-understanding of everyone within the orbit of Christian faith, whatever their sex, orientation, or gender identity. It is able to overcome violence with peace, and is therefore able to assist the churches in their wider ministries. Christian ethics has at its disposal already a rich theological tradition begging to be reread.

Aims

The three main aims of the book correspond to each of these convictions, and the book is in three parts, each corresponding roughly to the aims. The aims are

1. To depict the relations between women and men as a pervasive human and global problem, in order to expand the range of theological thought required to address it (Part I);
2. To critique naïve and harmful theological accounts of the relations between women and men as binary opposites, to expose the harm they cause, and to replace them, and the exclusions they engender, with what will be called ‘the human continuum’ (Part II);
3. To demonstrate how the human continuum enables a more inclusive theological understanding not only of relations between women and men, but also among LGBTIQ people (Part III).

In the course of the book we will often encounter the uncomfortable and disturbing relation between religion and violence, raising the question (for Christians) how our sacred text has been allowed to justify it. So there remains a further, subsidiary, aim:

4. To contribute to a hermeneutic – an elementary method of interpretation of the Bible and tradition – which can never condone discrimination or oppression.

In my earlier years as a theologian I threw my energies into the intellectual commendation and defence of the Christian faith: in my later years I have come to see that the main barriers to belief for growing numbers of people are less likely to be intellectual, and more likely to be ethical. Sadly the continued association of the faith with violence against women and sexual minorities; the continued hostility towards LGBTIQ people; the continued practice of sexism in the churches; the toleration of the abuse of children on a global scale, and an inability to engage in self-examination and repentance for the crimes against them, can make it difficult for people of good will outside the churches to believe that there is Good News to be heard inside them. Despite the importance in the Bible of believing the testimony of witnesses, the testimony of lesbian- and gay-partnered Christians to their experience of the blessing of God on their unions is still called into question and their self-understanding has been rejected as erroneous. The moral crisis within Christianity cannot be ignored. Similar crises can be found in all the world’s religions. As the

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argument develops in the book, the need for a different ‘inhabiting’ of the tradition bequeathed to us Christians, and a different way of interpreting the Bible, will become obvious.

Key Terms

Already some key terms have been used – binary, continuum, gender, among them. The rest of this section explains how these terms will be used.

Gender

‘Gender’ has become a complicated term. Definitions of gender proliferate (Bradley 2007: 14–25). It has long been a *grammatical* term that classifies nouns as masculine or feminine (or neuter). Its etymology retains traces of *genus* (Latin – ‘type’, ‘class of things’) and *genre* (French). Only since 1945 did the term begin to be used of the distinct social and cultural influences exerted upon individuals, already biologically classified by sex as either women or men (for a full history see Vigoya 2015). By the 1970s, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ had become different realms, each contributing from different academic assumptions to the full understanding of the person. To add to the confusion, the acceptability of referring to sexual intercourse as ‘having sex’ probably led to the term ‘gender’ being adopted, in place of the term ‘sex’, to refer to the classification of a person as a man or a woman. Anyone applying for a passport or a driving licence now, knows this well. In the new century the distinction between sex and gender became blurred, largely because of the difficulties involved in assigning the origin of human behaviours and characteristics to either side of the sex or gender dichotomy. Consequently the compound term ‘sex/gender’ began to appear, less (one hopes) as an excuse for sloppy thinking, and more as an admission that sex and gender cannot finally be considered apart from each other.

In this volume, unless specified otherwise, gender will refer primarily to three broad areas. First, it clearly applies to ‘the *relations* between women and men’ (Bradley 2007: 1, emphasis added: see Porter 2015, xvii), whether at the personal, familial, social, cultural, religious, national, and international levels, together with the investigation of these. Many writings about gender rightly contain the caveat about the ‘intersectionality’ of gender, that, whenever it is discussed, it intersects with ‘a range of social and material categories, including race, religion, ethnicity, class, age and

sexual orientation’ (Anderson 2012, xii). ‘Gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act’ (Connell and Pearse 2015: 11). There are several advantages of emphasising relations or relationality in our treatment of gender. It provides a distinct focus. It accords well with the ‘central position’ which gender occupies in the human and social sciences, where ‘it structures our investigations into the relations between women and men, and between human beings in general’ (Heinamäa 2012: 216). And relations constitute the very being of God as Trinity – that glorious binary-busting doctrine – by reference to which striking theological contributions to the understanding of gender can be made. As Sarah Coakley observes, the ‘ontological threeness’ of the Trinity, ‘always challenges and “ambushes” the stuckness of established “twoness”, for ‘... in and through the Spirit we are drawn to place our binary “certainties” into the melting pot of the crucible of divine – not human – desire’ (Coakley 2013: 330–1). It will not be forgotten that there are non-binary and intersex people for whom the male–female distinction causes pain.

Our second area understands gender to be ‘a socially constructed system, one wherein our ideas about gender permeate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male–female relations’ (Duncanson 2016: 5). Christians are familiar with this idea. We have overarching beliefs which shape our lives and guide our actions, albeit in different ways. The Greek for ‘creed’ is *symbolon*. Our symbolic system has powerfully influenced the way we ‘do’ gender, and still does. In both areas, understanding how power is distributed will be crucial. The propensity for systems of belief to endorse violence will be examined. Our third area is ‘gender *identity*’. Gender identity is an intensely individual matter, yet even this is experienced only in relation to other people of whatever sex, for ‘our gender identity is formed by how we act in relation to two key things: our physical embodiment and social definitions of a man or woman’s place in society, which we can conform to, reinforce, resist, subvert, and so on, in a variety of ways’ (Duncanson 2016: 5). In all three areas comprising gender, there are very strong influences, often operating upon us unconsciously, often disguised as common sense or passed off as inevitable, natural, obvious, and so on. In all three areas, the power of these influences over us requires scrutiny.

Binary

Like Coakley I too want to ambush the idea of a human or a sexual binary, challenging the ‘stuckness’ of much theological thought about sexuality

and gender in binary opposites. ‘Binary’ is a key term in the book. A binary is a system or relation between two poles or opposites. From the Latin *bini* – ‘two together’ – a binary system of classification is ‘one by which each group and sub-group is perpetually divided into two, the one with a positive and the other with a negative character, till individuals (or genera) are reached’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online [OED]). Alert feminist readers will already have noted that ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ appear in this otherwise bland definition, already injurious to women if applied in a gendered context. A binary measure in music is one which has two beats to a bar. In such an arrangement the emphasis can be on only one of a pair. A binary system in astronomy requires two stars or suns, but does not require further information about their size, velocity, or orbit (OED). So there is nothing about a binary system that guarantees or even suggests equality or value of the items within the system, beyond the bare twoness of its operation.

Binaries appear to operate throughout academic discourse. Perhaps academics as a class capitulate to the temptation to assume that clean and sharp distinctions between concepts justify assuming equally clean and sharp distinctions between the complex and messy realities that concepts describe. ‘Mind–body’, for example, has often been understood as a binary of separate substances that then require to be reunited in some form of interactionism. We are now beginning to know how mental states and brain states are deeply and inextricably connected, while still being different. Even ‘sex–gender’ began to be treated as a binary, according to which biological and sociological facts could be neatly and conveniently separated out. Another popular binary, drawn from academic discourse, is the distinction between objective and subjective. I am sometimes told by medical students that humanities is ‘subjective’ (and justifiable for the cultivation of appropriate *feelings*), whereas *real* knowledge is *always* objective. Apparently there is a binary between objective and subjective knowledge dictating that only scientific knowledge is ‘real’ knowledge and has no human biases, whereas humanities, the arts, and ethics can be safely relegated to feelings and ‘mere opinion’.

Binaries are overly simplistic: worse, they positively encourage oversimplification. That is why they are popular wherever people struggle with complexity, and prefer simplicity even at the cost of misrepresentation or at the expense of the truth. Even night and day are not binaries – without qualification they exclude dusk and dawn. ‘In Genesis, God separates the dry land from the sea. But God also makes marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs’ (Hartke 2018: 28). In all the instances just cited, what starts out as an

important conceptual distinction drawing attention to difference, easily morphs into evaluation of one of the poles in relation to the other which can become unthinking and negative. Thus are binaries created, and once created they become difficult to unlearn.

A binary *sex* system is an overarching framework for organising and policing sexual relationships between human beings, which classifies them according to two, and only two, biological forms, male and female. The dark shadow of the biological binary is the orientation binary, by which the heterosexual–homosexual distinction pathologises and delivers moral judgement, depending on which side of the binary a person is located. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are sometimes assumed to be binaries, but right and wrong are often better understood as points along a moral axis. That is one reason why moral choices are often controversial and difficult. They are rarely, as we say, matters of black and white.

A *theological* binary sex system determines in advance that there are just two and only two sexes; that one of these is more positive or ‘prior’ in relation to the other; that the two sexes are ‘opposite’; that sexual desire (if we have any) in order to conform to the will of God and to our created nature as either male or female, must either be exclusively for members of the other sex, or be classified as sinful or deviant. Even ‘married–unmarried’ behaves as a binary in some theological thinking, since that neat distinction wilfully ignores the complex ‘in-between-ness’ of engaged people, and the options available to people who are post-married, and so on. I wrote about that distinction earlier in this series (*Living Together and Christian Ethics*)(2002). Gayle Rubin suggested removing twelve pairs of binaries in relation to her ‘rethinking’ of sex (Rubin 2011), but in this book I shall confine myself to three: female–male; homosexual–heterosexual; and feminine–masculine.

Jews and Christians have always believed, in accordance with Genesis 1.27, that God made humankind male and female. Reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that a generation of theologians has sought to impose on this unsuspecting verse a modern, binary, theological sex system that has the consequences of misrepresenting our humanity to ourselves, and oversimplifying the known complexities of sexuality and desire (Part II). Perhaps with the best of intentions, the text ‘male and female he created them’ is made to endorse the ‘biblical’ equality of the sexes, in contradistinction to Genesis 2 and 3 where the woman is depicted in several ways inferior to the man and has been interpreted as such right down to the second half of the twentieth century. What looks like a welcome doctrinal innovation, that men and women were created by

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God in some respects equal, carries with it other less welcome innovations: that there are two and only two sexes; that we are all one or the other; and that our sexual desires are or ought to be directed exclusively towards the ‘opposite’ sex. This new development is an excellent example of the meaning of gender as a ‘symbolic system’ or ‘construction’. But it sidelines the Christian belief that the system valorising men above women has already been brought to an end by the Christ in whom there is no longer male and female (Gal. 3.28). The male–female binary is no more. A positive Christian ethic of gender should engender more salvific ways of envisaging and living relations between women and men instead of generating and repeating binaries that treat them as opposites and generally evaluate them differently.

Binaries are dangerous in religion and theology. Binaries erect boundaries between what is thought to be holy and merely common; between what is pure and what is impure; between what is sacred and what is profane, and so on. Boundaries are policed with greater or lesser vigour, but it hardly seems possible that God may be honoured by exactitudes that divide. The only absolute binary that need be of concern to Christians is that between God and all that is not God – between uncreated and created being – and even this is no longer a binary, since in the arrival of Jesus Christ divine and human natures are united in one Person (Cheng 2011: 79). When the sexual binary is charged with assumptions about the ‘other’ sex being ontologically, morally, or physical inferior, then gender trouble begins. The distressing evidence is discussed in Chapter 2.

Continuum

In the previous section we considered binaries, a binary system, a binary sex system, and a binary sex system endorsed by theology. We now come to what might replace the binary. The answer is a *continuum*. This too is a key term in what follows.

A *continuum* is ‘a continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct’ (*OED*). The Latin adjective *continuus* means ‘uninterrupted’ (from *continere* to hang together). A continuum allows for a wide difference between elements within it, while acknowledging their continuity within the sequence. That is why it is particularly valuable in undoing the understanding of women and men as opposites. The term has a similar meaning and use in at least the disciplines of mathematics, plant sciences,

astrology, ecology, philosophy, physics, chemical engineering, and psychology (*OED*).

An alternative to ‘continuum’ is ‘spectrum’. In 1993 Anne Fausto-Sterling referred, with tongue in cheek, to the male–female binary as a ‘two-party sexual system’, which is ‘in defiance of nature’ (Fausto-Sterling 1993: 20). Nature has provided ‘many gradations running from female to male; and depending on how one calls the shots, one can argue that along that *spectrum* lie at least five sexes – and perhaps even more’. One particular meaning of ‘spectrum’ is ‘a band of colours, as seen in a rainbow, produced by separation of the components of light by their different degrees of refraction according to wavelength’, giving rise to the more general use where something is classified ‘in terms of its position on a scale between two extreme points’ (*OED*). It is now commonplace even for theologians to think of sexuality as a spectrum. ‘Over the course of the twentieth century, the human sciences clearly established that human sexuality *exists on a spectrum*’ (Davison 2016: 22, emphasis added). James and Evelyn Whitehead summarise the impasse reached by the religious repetition of the male–female binary:

Often male and female have been presented as clear and distinct realities, understood in an either/or dichotomy that has been well-defended by cultural and religious decrees. Today we are aware that human nature is more variable, even more mysterious, than we had once assumed. Ongoing research – physiological and psychological – confirms that gender is experienced and expressed along a wide *spectrum*. (Whitehead and Whitehead 2014: 173, emphasis added)

The idea of a ‘human continuum’ is used in this book, both for the positive contributions it can make to the Christian doctrine of human being, and as an alternative to the modern theological binary sex-and-gender system. It provides a more fluid, less binary, understanding of humanity which resists firm categorisations, avoids inequality, preserves difference, acknowledges fluidity, encourages inclusion, develops tradition, and enables the churches to incorporate minorities gladly and without equivocation. As the idea unfolds, it will become apparent that it will assist in recasting each of the three binaries just discussed. Some of the difficulties associated with the concept are discussed in Chapter 7. The book is in part a positive theological response to the view that ‘the division male/female has proved fuzzy on all levels of investigation ... that the sex characteristics of human individuals vary greatly, and on all levels, and that pure maleness and pure femaleness are two extremes on a *rich and multilayered continuum*’ (Heinamäa 2012: 226, emphasis added). The