

Review of Susannah Cornwall (ed.) *Intersex, Theology and the Bible: Troubling Bodies in Church, Text and Society*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, v + 241 pp., ISBN 978-1-137-36615-3

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The book is a collection of papers from a 2013 colloquium *Intersex, Theology and the Bible* attended by American, British and Australian researchers at the University of Manchester. The colloquium was further enriched by the wisdom of long-term campaigner, Sally Gross, founder and director of Intersex South Africa, who participated via Skype while too ill to attend in person. Interdisciplinary breadth is reflected in the three parts of the book: I Biblical Approaches (chapters by Joseph A. Marchal, Megan deFranza and John Hare); II Pastoral and Practical Approaches (chapters by Nathan Carlin and Stephen Craig Kerry); III Theological Approaches (chapters by Susannah Cornwall and Patricia Beattie Jung). The book will appeal to an interdisciplinary readership including students and practitioners in pastoral care, social work and medical ethics, as well as biblical studies and theology.

The editor's introduction, 'Troubling Bodies?' sets the context for individual chapters, with the clarity and challenge that is the hallmark of Cornwall's writing. Thus her opening paragraph clarifies the 'bodies' that need to be troubled in their engagement with intersex people, namely 'institutional bodies such as the medical establishment and the Church, and the bodies of discourse on sex, gender and sexuality': all fail to take account of intersex and so 'elide broader accounts of what it is to be a sexed human person' (p. 1). Readers who are unfamiliar with what the term intersex denotes will be assisted by Cornwall's account of a wide spectrum of intersexual bodies that fall outside the binary distinction of male or female, so making clear the diversity of embodiment named by this single term. Later in the volume, Cornwall refers to dominant medical practice of early corrective surgery between the 1960s and 1990s and beyond as having effectively 'disappeared' intersex bodies (p. 149); with relaxation of this routine approach, intersex people are emerging as an identifiable, if diverse group.

Cornwall identifies four areas that are troubled by intersex. First, the gender binary, with its assumption that both gender and physical sex is fixed; rather intersex suggests both are contingent. Second, parental assumptions that every child must be raised as either male or female are challenged, so contesting also parental demand for corrective surgery in every case. Third, medical confusion

between grounds of physical health and imposed aesthetic judgements based on the gender norm leads to assumptions that corrective surgery is always necessary; these are also subject to challenge. Finally, intersex may trouble intersex people themselves; given the diversity of intersex bodies, it can be difficult to distinguish troubling that arises directly from the condition, from difficulties that result from surgical intervention.

The introduction then turns to theological engagement with intersex and situates each chapter within this existing field. Intersex troubles theology, given the perceived 'imperative' of binary sex (p. 6), with its assumption that humanity made in God's image is necessarily male and female, and sexual difference is thus 'key to humanness' (p. 7). Review of existing work by Christian theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars finds that little attention has been given to intersex. Consideration of transgender and homosexuality has been used to shore up the binary gender norm with its supporting theological anthropology; with a few notable exceptions, as yet little note has been taken of how the existence of intersex bodies contradicts the logic of these arguments. The review points out the ambivalence of the biblical text to 'unusually sexed and gendered people,' repeating both 'the Bible's transgressive, disruptive, and antinormative qualities' as already noted by 'Queer and postcolonial scholars' – and this reviewer might add feminist, womanist and numerous other liberation theologians – but also the biblical underpinning of 'a host of socially and theologically conservative teaching on sex relations, gender roles, and creation' (p. 14–15).

In contrast to such conservatism, Cornwall insists this volume of essays is testament to the positive fruits that grow from intersex troubling of theology. So: 'Intersex challenges narrow norms of bodily legitimacy and goodness. It contests constricting ideas about the irreducibility of sex, and the gender norms made to rest in it, that have oppressed "normal" heterosexual, cisgender individuals as well as those who more obviously do not "fit." It casts doubt upon theological anthropologies in which maleness and femaleness are made to represent hierarchies of divinity and humanity and in which femaleness is relegated to a responsive role. It may trouble a host of rhetoric about sex and embodiment on which Christians commonly draw in accounts of other issues such as human sexuality' (p. 7). The book draws on existing work that challenges theological underpinning of sexual dimorphism, and so helps to distinguish intersex troubling from and within a broader spectrum of gender troubling, and to clarify the particular challenge of intersex to theology.

It is significant that this volume arises from a colloquium. The conversation facilitated when contributors met to share their ideas and perspectives enhances each chapter and deepens the reader's sense of being drawn into an emergent theological conversation that is of significance for the Christian Church, as well as for intersex people and those professionals who serve them. This conversation needs to grow and this book will help. Thus key themes resonate between chapters. Marechal concludes that 'Intersex advocates must continue to counter naturalized claims about dichotomous sex, the stigmatized effects of these claims and normalized responses to variety and complexity' (p. 44). DeFranza calls for discernment in developing a new kind of kinship based on inclusive friendship, and radical discipleship characterised by virtuous love (p. 70). Hare assesses biblical and medical evidence to conclude 'To a greater or lesser degree we are all intersex,' so we need to learn to relate to one another and to God

on the basis that the human race is a rainbow (p. 93). Carlin affirms the courage of the literary intersex figure Cal, in the novel *Middlesex*, as a model of the risk-taking before the Face of God that is the mark of faithfulness (p. 113). Both Kerry and Cornwall report fieldwork findings. Kerry identifies chosen religious practice as a source of well-being for intersex people (p. 134–5). Cornwall's insistence on intersex experience as source of theology (p. 163) makes its own distinctive contribution to the wider 'ethnography and theology' debate. Thinking with [intersex] others brings out implications of intersex 'community' experience for the wider ecclesial and theological community (p. 166). Jung reads Galatians 3:28 as leading us to set aside our focus on gender (p. 186). In his afterword, Hare reinforces the point that 'it is non-intersex people who need to move forward' in expanding notions of normal and healthy embodiment (p. 202).

This collection is recommended to its intended broad audience. It is important for intersex people and medical and social work professionals with no Christian identification to be aware of theological debates where conservative sexual dimorphism is challenged. The collection is particularly recommended to readers interested in Christian theology, as it offers intersex troubling as gift to theology and Church, and is a valuable resource not only for intersex Christians and pastoral carers, but also for the wider Christian community.