

The increasing acrimony of the battle of ideas surrounding the issue of gender identity makes a sensitive discussion of the human reality at its heart impossible / By DAVID ALBERT JONES

# One more way to be human

**I**T 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 and cultures.

The use of hormones and surgery to address gender dysphoria began in Europe in the 1950s but legal change has been slower. Only in 2004 did the United Kingdom provide for legal status in the "acquired gender". The Government was forced to act in response to a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. At that time the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales supported a call by the Church of England for conscience clauses to be included in the proposed Gender Recognition Bill. The bishops took the opportunity to restate Catholic teaching that marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

Their briefing note opposed "full legal recognition with the right to marry in that gender" but argued for provision of "appropriate medical and psychological help and support" and, for those who choose to do so, support "to ease their life in society when they choose to live permanently as a member of the opposite sex". The note was not a formal teaching document but reflected the views of respected Catholic theologians at the time. It contained no hint that, apart from the question of marriage, living as the acquired gender would be incompatible with full participation in the life of the Church.

It is striking how far such reflections seem in tone and content from contemporary discussion, whether in the Church or in society. In the last few years transgender has suddenly caught the public imagination, but all too often either as a means of virtue signalling or as an object of moral panic. What explains this drastic change in the way we talk about this complex human phenomenon?

**ONE CHANGE**, real, not simply imagined by the media, is a great increase in the number of young people identifying as trans. Referrals to specialist services for children have increased tenfold in six years. The proportions have also changed. It had mostly been male-to-female; now, there are more female-to-male. But greater than both combined are those who do not identify as male or female but describe themselves as nonbinary or gender-fluid. The reality is changing very fast



A person taking part in a trans pride march in Dublin last year

and no one knows why, nor how this will develop in the future.

**ANOTHER REAL** change is the way that gender dysphoria is treated, especially in children. Psychological approaches no longer explore whether gender dysphoria in children might be an expression of social or psychological problems that should be addressed. Instead, the recommended approach is to affirm the gender that the young person expresses without looking at possible causes. At the same time, the treatment pathway for minors has increasingly been medicalised. It has become standard practice to give younger adolescents drugs to delay puberty, with subsequent cross-hormone treatment available at 16 and surgery, if considered appropriate, from 18.

These changes in medical practice have been driven by a desire to alleviate suffering. However, they have been criticised by some because they have been adopted widely while the evidence of benefit is still weak and the long-term effects are unknown. A quite distinct cause of controversy has arisen since 2004 over how to apply the Equality Act 2010 to "gender reassignment". In some cases, there seems to be a tension between laws or regulations that aim to protect girls or women, and the rights of trans girls and trans women, especially those who have not had surgery. Examples

are: girls-only dormitories, sex-specific changing facilities and women's sports. A strand of feminism, exemplified by Germaine Greer, has never accepted trans women as women and some feminists have resisted any inclusion of trans women in women-only spaces.

**THE INCREASING** acrimony of the debate around gender identity has been amplified by the nature of social media. New forms of communication have helped people find information and stay in touch but have also helped spread misinformation and have tended to isolate people in "echo chambers". Social media exacerbate the problem of "culture wars", the deciding of issues based on tribal association as "conservative" or "liberal". The almost-instant character of social media also makes it easier for thoughtless or offensive remarks to be shared and to have a wide and lingering negative impact. At the same time, policing what people say online or creating "safe spaces" can lead to other forms of exclusion or to people being afraid to speak honestly. This makes discussion of sensitive human realities such as gender identity much more difficult.

In addition to these secular changes there has also been a development in Church teaching that has had an impact on the way gender identity is debated. In 2012, Pope Benedict warned that cultural attacks on marriage and procreation were based on a more fundamental repudiation of Christian anthropology. A new philosophy "put forward today under the term 'gender'" regarded sex not as a "given element of nature" but as "a social role that we choose for ourselves". This, Benedict insisted, contradicts the truth that God created human beings "male and female". Pope Francis has developed these themes further, especially in *Laudato Si'* and *Amoris Laetitia*. He has repeatedly condemned what he terms "gender theory", which denies the reciprocity between men and women and "radically separates" gender from biological sex, "thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family". The fundamental error of this "ideology of gender", in the eyes of the Church, is the idea that gender is a matter of "individual choice" rather than something to be accepted from God as a given. Papal teaching on gender ideology has since been echoed by bishops' conferences throughout the world, including – in April 2018 – the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

**THE COMBINATION** of these practical concerns, some real, some imagined, the effect of social media and the rise of populism, together with the condemnation of "gender ideology", has created a perfect storm. For some proponents of transgender rights, any issue that relates to someone's gender identity is now beyond criticism. For some opponents of "transgenderism", any acceptance of a person's acquired gender is regarded as a threat to women, children and society, to medicine, to freedom of speech, to religion, to education and to the rights of parents.

What is easily missed in this battle of ideas is the human reality of children or adults who



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feel deeply perplexed and sometimes deeply distressed because their sense of identity is discordant with their outward anatomy and with the gender in which they were brought up. In some cases this is a stable element of their personality that persists through life. It is experienced not as an "individual choice" that they have made but precisely as a "given" that they have had to negotiate and that they have come to accept. This resolution may not be what Pope Francis had in mind when he reportedly said to a gay man who had been abused by priests, "God made you this way and he loves you", but, for the person concerned, it may be a similar form of self-acceptance.

From my engagement with people of faith who experience their gender identity in this way, I have not found the denial of the duality of man and woman of which Pope Benedict speaks. I have not engaged with people who describe themselves as nonbinary and cannot speak with any confidence about their self-understanding. What I can say is that, for those who wish to transition, this desire is, in a curious way, an affirmation that the duality of male and female is profoundly important for the individual and his or her place in society. The very distress of gender dysphoria bears witness that one's identity as a man or as a woman is something very deep.

**IT IS ESSENTIAL** then to distinguish the false views rightly condemned as "gender ideology" from the views and experiences of trans people. They may understand themselves in this way or they may understand themselves quite in other ways. We do not know until we ask. My suspicion is that the errors identified by Benedict and Francis are at least as common among cis (non trans) people as trans people but they exist mainly outside the Christian community. It is inclusion in the life of the Church that is the surest route to coming to a deeper theological understanding.

The issue of gender identity raises profound questions about human nature. What was thought obvious stands in need of investigation. However, perhaps the first step in stilling this storm is not to think of gender identity as something unspeakable. It is perhaps helpful to separate out practical issues, using medical reasoning and legal reasoning and pastoral reasoning as we would with other issues. Perfect love casts out fear and when irrational fear is cast aside what remain are challenges common to other human situations. Perhaps then we will discover that being trans is one more way to be human and one more way to be Catholic.

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**Professor David Albert Jones** of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre is developing a project at St Mary's University, Twickenham with Dr Claire Jenkins to engage with trans people who are Catholic to help develop a Catholic understanding of gender identity. The views he expresses here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre, the University or of any other organisation to which he is affiliated.