

BOOK REVIEWS

SEX DIFFERENCE IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: MALE, FEMALE, AND INTERSEX IN THE IMAGE OF GOD By Megan DeFranza, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, 327 pp. \$17.61

After reading every word of this book twice (once for a back cover endorsement, and again for this review), I come away wanting to read it again. I look forward to teaching it each spring in an undergraduate interdisciplinary course because it deserves careful reading and extensive dialogue.

Sex Difference contributes to theological anthropology by questioning how attention to the intersex condition may shape major domains of theology: the image of God, the ways in which Jesus images God, and what it means that each person bears God's image. The book begins by asking, "How do we measure the mysterious difference between a man and a woman? . . . What about those whose bodies and lives tend to bridge and blur the very distance of difference?" It claims that the binary model of male and female miscategorizes reality; in fact, it is "dishonest to the diversity of persons created in the image of God." More honest and true theology will see intersex bodies as truly created in God's image, not as merely or totally distorted bodies. Such a reframing would make way for all persons to become more human, and to know God more fully.

The book is organized in two parts. Part One explains the various conditions labeled intersex (conditions more common than often assumed), and describes how the biblical concept of eunuch both made space for intersex persons in the Christian tradition, yet also defined them as less virtuous, less capable, and less valuable than normative males. Part One concludes with a discussion of theological anthropology, explaining the contributions of various views, and justifying the author's investment in postmodern streams of thought, specifically, the social *imago Dei*.

Part Two offers a reconstruction of theological anthropology, maintaining close dialogue with social science, and with liberal, feminist, and queer theologies. In DeFranza's view, the social *imago Dei* has become too sexualized, focused on spousal/sexual relations. Broadening out to see God in a more Trinitarian way brings other dimensions of God's relationality into view. While some theologies encourage an abandonment of sex/gender categories, DeFranza argues instead for a broadening of binaries to include intersex. She also comments on the current slogan popular among conservatives, to find one's "identity in Christ" as a response to non-heterosexual sexual identities. While intersex is not an erotic sexual identity, it does raise the question of the utility of the heterosexual-homosexual binary. DeFranza argues that "identity in Christ" does not erase sex/gender identities; rather, it decenters all dimensions of personal identity, allowing for the self (that is, the egoic, or finite, self) to be held lightly enough to receive healing and reconciliation.

Sex Differences makes a strong offering on both straightforward and philosophical levels. On a straightforward level, it encourages Christians toward the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. It encourages respectful, dignified treatment of all human beings in their embodied sex and gender. It encourages theologians to take real human life seriously. It encourages sex/gender majorities to learn and benefit from sex/gender minorities in society.

Social scientists will appreciate this theological call to give “more careful attention to persons as they are found in the real world rather than in the ideal world of philosophical and theological systems.” DeFranza’s close attention to embodiment and real-world humanity is a treasure, and a model for making theologies that are more humane and livable.

On a more philosophical level, *Sex Differences* raises root questions about the Christian religion. What is necessary for Christianity to exist with integrity? Does it require sex or gender binaries, opposite-sex marriage, monogamous marriage, or a priority on heterosexuality? These questions could not be more pressing than in society today, and this book offers resources for thinking deeply within our religious tradition, not merely being persuaded by politicized theology, media slogans, or persuasive popular images. Surely sex, gender, and marriage are extremely important arenas in all societies – reproduction, family, and personhood are cultural universals – but perhaps the Gospel has a deeper root, or a more central center, that could allow us to proceed in unified worship and discipleship even during periods of rapid social change and deep theological differences.

The second deep and massively tangled root question is the depth of patriarchy in the Christian tradition. Chapter three explains various models of sex used in Christian theology over time, positing that for the vast majority of Christian history, the Aristotelean view of woman as “misbegotten” or “mutilated” male formed the presuppositional structure of theological anthropology. Women and eunuchs (not a synonym, but a rough approximation for persons of non-normative sex) have been seen not as even existing in and of themselves, but as declensions from a perfect maleness (many individual men, of course, also suffer for expressing less than perfect maleness). Patriarchy and misogyny are not ancillary oversights, or serious but correctable errors in an otherwise more-or-less linear theological trajectory; they have long been presuppositional Christian understandings of what it means to be human. That women, unmanly men, eunuchs and intersex are lesser, inverted, misbegotten males, still resonates today in religious exclusion, domestic violence, church abuse, and more subtle expressions of discrimination and devaluing. Many Christians today assert that traditional marriage norms are indispensable for the Christian religion; perhaps we need to probe the ways in which patriarchy and misogyny, in fact and unfortunately, serve that role.

The depth and pervasiveness of self-serving religious patriarchy in the tradition, and new questions regarding what about sex/gender is even necessary for a robust Christianity, lead to another root question: what is Christianity for? (By extension, then, what is religion for?) This is a prime question for those who integrate social science with religion, and warrants both empirical and theological investigation. If religion is about sin management, or moral proclamation, or

offering a trustworthy external existential and ontological locus of control for humans, it would seem a massive failure. *Sex Differences* concludes, instead, with a focus on Jesus as the “true image.” Leaning on Miroslav Volf’s theology of reconciliation and embrace, DeFranza suggests that in response to deep personal and ecclesial destabilization prompted by sex/gender changes and realities, we may turn to radical reconciliation made possible through the cross of Christ. As the true image, Jesus offers a frame for human identity that creates safety for distancing ourselves from socially salient identities (though not erasing them altogether), enough to receive healing and reconciliation in Christ. In this view, religion seems more about holding our humanity in all its complexity, bringing persons into contact with the sacred so they may become more fully and wholly human, and their communities and world more just and righteous.

As a social scientist, the concluding language about “healing,” “reconciliation,” and even “Jesus as true image” seemed metaphorical beyond comprehension. Stories about real-world persons and churches and traditions would paint a picture of what such holiness looks like in the real world. Delving into these waters as deeply as into theological anthropology, however, would require a second book, one that I hope DeFranza will write.

DeFranza addresses common conservative concerns by positing the ongoing importance of personal and sexual holiness, containing sexual activity within either celibacy or monogamous covenantal unions. These views seemed to be more a personal stance, or claim, than a necessary conclusion to the argument. The feminist, postmodern, and queer streams that inform the work more often lead to different moral stances. Regardless, the importance of religion for moral proclamation and sin management seems subordinate to the more existential matter of seeking and finding human identity, and proclaiming and witnessing the life and teachings of Jesus. This opens up, rather than settles, ongoing moral and ethical concerns around personal sexuality, family norms, and cultural norms. These questions will surely be important for my students in discussing the book, as we develop ways to link ethics with theological anthropology.

Sex Differences will be useful for individual readers, particularly those who have taken a course or two in theology and/or social science. Professors could use it in upper-level undergraduate courses in sociology, theology, gender studies, and interdisciplinary courses. In the near future, it will be an excellent resource for discussions of marriage in the United States, transgender, and other social changes around sex/gender. These topics are not addressed in a pedantic manner; rather, they take us to root questions about humanity, religion, and the sacred. *Sex Differences* is a rich, reliable resource for Christians wondering about, wrestling with, and living in the midst of these questions

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