

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF TRANS AND NONBINARY IDENTITY IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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Trans and gender nonbinary Latter-day Saints have become increasingly visible in recent years, sparking public debates about their place within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ These debates have emerged as transgender visibility gains prominence in American and global political discussions, leading to conflicts over access to long-standing medical protocols, bathrooms, sports participation, housing, employment, religious belonging, and more. The heightened panic and polarization surrounding this topic have resulted in alarming rates of surveillance, regulation, violence, and harassment faced by transgender individuals, even as some sectors of society have shown greater tolerance.

Latter-day Saint Church leaders have evolved their understanding of and teachings on trans identity and practice alongside these broader cultural changes. The Church's teachings have generally discouraged individuals from transitioning. Such policies and teachings were once peripheral issues for the mainstream Church, but in recent years, its

1. Special thanks to Kate Mower, Joanna Brooks, Laurie Lee Hall, and other reviewers for input on drafts of this article. All errors are my own. Some paragraphs setting historical context in this essay are adapted from sections in Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

leaders have issued numerous updates on trans-related policies. These policies are often rooted in a theological claim about fixed differences between males and females, including teachings about preexistence, creation, and embodiment, as well as a scientifically questionable concept of binary “biological sex.”² The Church has struggled to balance its strong opposition to transgender identity with an ethics of compassion, resulting in a lack of a singular perspective and shifting values on this topic.

Over the past decade especially, trans and gender nonbinary Latter-day Saints have attempted to bring greater awareness of and education on their experiences to Church leaders and the general membership through interviews, publications, and in-person interactions. These have often included theological reflections and commentary on official and semi-official doctrines. Some have critiqued Church teachings while others argue that transgender identity is compatible with traditional LDS doctrines on eternal gender. While there is no singular trans identity or perspective, let alone a singular trans theological perspective, the public discourse has advocated for their place in society and within the Church community. In general, transgender Latter-day Saints have worked to make it clear that their identities and real existence should take precedence over ideological ideals.

The deepening cultural divide on transgender issues emphasizes the urgent need for greater historical, sociological, and theological clarity. The circumstances demand a critical and responsible engagement

2. L. Zachary DuBois and Heather Shattuck-Heidorn, “Challenging the Binary: Gender/Sex and the Bio-logics of Normalcy,” *American Journal of Human Biology: The Official Journal of the Human Biology Council* 33, no. 5 (2021): e23623; Aja Watkins and Marina DiMarco, “Sex Eliminativism,” *Biology and Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (2025): 1–30; Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (Routledge, 2012); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 2000); Sarah S. Richardson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male & Female in the Human Genome* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

with history and tradition, interpretive possibilities, and ethical considerations of the past and the future. Are trans practices and identities necessarily in conflict with religious practices and identities, including those of the Latter-day Saints? The answer is complicated in this case. LDS theology is a loose concept, deriving from authoritative scripture, teachings of past and present Church leaders, and official publications like manuals and handbooks.³ Nevertheless, the shifting historical teachings, competing authorities and texts, and the ways that Latter-day Saints critically engage their faith creates new possibilities for reconsideration of the answers.

Trans and nonbinary topics have raised critical questions about gender, priesthood, desires, sexuality, and embodiment. Numerous popular and scholarly books and articles have offered critical and constructive engagement of the broader Christian tradition from a transgender perspective.⁴ Trans Latter-day Saints have only recently begun to articulate their theological views, reconciling their experiences with Church doctrines or rejecting those that do not align with their lives. While there are shared interests with other Jewish and Christian explorations of transgender figures and concepts in the Bible and other ancient religious literature, the distinct teachings and authorities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints necessitate an

3. There are numerous treatments of this question of Latter-day Saint theology and doctrine. I find this one particularly compelling: Nathan B. Oman, "Jurisprudence and the Problem of Church Doctrine," *Element* 2, no. 2 (2006): 1–19.

4. An influential sample includes Christina Beardsley and Michelle O'Brien, *This is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians* (Darton Longman and Todd, 2016); Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, *Trans/Formations* (SCM Press, 2009); Austen Hartke, *Transforming: the Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2023); and Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Wipf and Stock, 2018). For a survey of the scholarly methods, see Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).

independent engagement with these issues. However, this preliminary analysis of the history, theology, and more reveals a lively conversation and several avenues for further consideration that offer alternatives to a simplistic mythology of a naturalized male/female gender binary.

History of Latter-day Saint Teaching on Trans Identity

Gender variability has a long history in practice, including in religious traditions.⁵ Nevertheless, the risk of anachronism and the need to analyze analogous practices across time remain complex issues in trans historiography.⁶ This essay uses the terms “trans” and “nonbinary” as distinct but overlapping analytical concepts that include a spectrum of atypical or nonconforming gender practices, bodily morphology and biology, and socio-psychological identities. As a basic definition, trans individuals seek to transition from one category of sexed or gendered cultural expectations to another, including nonbinary.⁷ Various terms have been employed to describe these practices, including clinical terms often associated with pathologizing psychological states like

5. Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (Columbia University Press, 2021); Max K. Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature* (University of California Press, 2022); Colby Gordon, *Glorious Bodies: Trans Theology and Renaissance Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2024); Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, Will Fisher, “Introduction: Early Modern Trans Studies,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 1–25.

6. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Seal Press, 2017); Susan Stryker and Are Z. Aizura, “Introduction: Transgender Studies 2.0,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Are Z. Aizura (Routledge, 2013), 1–12.

7. Rebecca Weigel, “Trans Historiography and the Problem of Anachronism: Eunuchs and Other Non-Men in Matthew 19:1–15 and 1 Corinthians 6–7,” in *Trans Biblical: New Approaches to Interpretation and Embodiment in Scripture*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal, Melissa Harl Sellew, and Katy E. Valentine (Westminster John Knox Press, 2025), 151–66.

gender dysphoria, though not all accept these.⁸ Modern practices may include name and pronoun changes, public presentation, hormone treatment, and occasionally surgeries of primary and secondary sex characteristics.

Just as trans and nonbinary identities have a lengthy history, so does their opposition, especially ramping up in the early modern and colonial era.⁹ The mid-nineteenth century is a crucial turning point for understanding trans identity and practices in the modern period as it intersects with Mormonism.¹⁰ In these years, a social panic in the United States about “cross-dressing” led to a great deal of media coverage and municipal ordinances banning the practice.¹¹ The medical establishment also began in earnest in the mid-nineteenth century to diagnose and classify various gender and bodily anomalies. At first, researchers and commentators connected much of what we would call trans practices to homosexuality. Austrian and German scholars Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Karl Maria Kertbeny, writing in the 1860s, coined the term “homosexual” and described “a female soul enclosed within a male body.” A few decades later, sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing developed a series of terms to describe those who desired to change

8. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 10–41.

9. Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024). Gill-Peterson argues that violence against trans women is rooted in colonial and imperial structures. These structures forced rigid gender binaries onto colonized people, who often had more fluid understandings of gender.

10. Herculine Barbin and Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (Pantheon Books, 1980); Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

11. Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (University of California Press, 2011). For some discussion of “cross-dressing” in Latter-day Saint contexts, see D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 134–36.

their gender. Havelock Ellis called it “inversion,” connecting trans and homosexuality as joint experiences turning on the same desire. While these early scientists described what they observed, the terms they utilized did not gain enduring traction.¹²

While some of these new theories pathologized trans phenomena as degenerate, others were sympathetic and sought to normalize trans people and dispel persecution. Among them was German scientist and activist Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in 1897 and the Institute for Sexual Science in 1919. These organizations studied same-sex relationships, coined the term “transvestite,” and performed the first documented sex reassignment surgeries in the modern era. The institute became a gathering place for the first community of trans people and also sponsored successful legal reforms in favor of LGBTQ rights, including providing gender-affirming state identification cards that allowed transgender people to dress as their gender in public. After the rise of Nazism and its coalition with religious conservatives in Germany, the institute was violently attacked, its library publicly burned in 1933 in the first Nazi book burning to take place in Berlin, and soon after LGBTQ people were severely persecuted by the state.¹³ Though facing severe setbacks, this early research formed the basis for bringing trans issues into scientific research once again soon after World War II.

In Utah, scholarly histories of early trans individuals and the evaluation of the contested criteria for adopting this category are just beginning. Besides reports of Indigenous practices that acknowledge and respect gender-variant individuals, recent research among the Mormon settlers has uncovered an early twentieth-century trans woman in Utah with a Latter-day Saint background. Historian Connell

12. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 51–54.

13. Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement* (Monthly Review Press, 2014); Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

O'Donovan tells the story of Eva McCleery (born William McCleery in 1850) who came out in 1911 in the *Salt Lake Tribune* as having been born a woman but dressing as a man throughout her life. At last, she finally resolved to only wear "female attire when I again went on the streets." The truth was more complicated. A few days later the *Salt Lake Herald* exposé headline read "Man Who Said He Was a Woman, but Is Real Man."¹⁴ Rather than being assigned woman at birth and living as a man, Eva was assigned male at birth and had lived as a man, but was now living as a woman. Eva lived for more than two more decades, though her family continued to refer to her as William. Other early stories remain to be discovered, though many such lives may escape or be excluded from the archives.

Despite this early attention, it wasn't until the 1970s that LDS leaders began to engage in public discussions about the issue. The broader sexual revolution, gay rights movement, and feminist movement in these years alarmed Church leaders. Their understanding of trans issues drew on those earlier anti-trans scientific perspectives. LDS leaders believed that transgender identity was an extreme consequence of homosexuality and feminism, citing theories of homosexuality that classified it as a form of gender "inversion." Church leaders believed that a male engaging in intercourse with another male or a female with another female must identify with the other gender. The nascent transgender medical movement also occasionally accepted inversion theories but concluded differently. Rather than seeing trans identity as the outcome of homosexuality, they believed that medical transitions would render the bodies and desires of transgender individuals heterosexual.¹⁵

Church leaders accepted these gender inversion theories but believed psychological and moral "cures" were more suitable than

14. Quoted in Connell O'Donovan, "Gender-Variant and Transgender People in Early Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

15. Stryker, *Transgender History*, 118.

transgender medical intervention. In 1970, Harold B. Lee quoted the Genesis creation account of “male and female” and asked, “Do you need anything else to prove the falsity of any such hellish doctrine as this so-called ‘transsexuality’ doctrine of some wild dreamers?”¹⁶ In 1974, Spencer W. Kimball reiterated this point by invoking creation and providence: “God created man in his own image, male and female he made them [Gen 1:27]. With relatively few instances of natural variation, we are born male or female. The Lord knew best. Certainly, men and women who choose to alter their sex status will be accountable to their Maker.”¹⁷ While the statement acknowledges intersex individuals who deviate from the purported binary, he makes no explicit accommodation for those variations who thus are rendered outside of divine providence.

During these years Kimball tended to interpret transgender individuals through the lens of homosexuality, establishing an early precedent for LDS categories. He asserted: “The promoters of homosexuality say they were born that way, but I do not believe this is true. There are no female spirits trapped in male bodies and vice versa. He who made them made them male and female.” Kimball’s concept of a providential creation of a binary between male and female conflated homosexuality with transgender identity, stigmatizing both as unnatural and a transgression of the Creator’s intent. Consequently, other Church leaders also publicly taught gender inversion theories of homosexuality and invoked creation to support their arguments. In 1978, Boyd K. Packer had warned that some individuals who had sexual contact with their same gender might “flip” to identify with the “opposite” gender.¹⁸ Yet Packer emphasized in a talk on homosexuality that “there

16. Harold B. Lee, *Fifth Annual Genealogical Seminar Address* (Brigham Young University Press, 1970). Delivered Aug. 7, 1970.

17. Spencer W. Kimball, “God Will Not Be Mocked,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, 8.

18. Boyd K. Packer, *To the One* [pamphlet] (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978).

is no mismatching of bodies and spirits.”¹⁹ Gender identity was both highly vulnerable and divinely fixed.

Church policies came to reflect these beliefs in compulsory cis-heterosexuality. After the public condemnations of the 1970s, the 1980 *General Handbook of Instructions* addressed the issue formally for the first time: “Members who have undergone transsexual operations must be excommunicated.”²⁰ Those who had transitioned before joining the Church could be baptized but faced permanent restrictions on their membership. Ecclesiastical disciplinary action was also to be meted out to any doctors who performed such procedures. As the 1980 guidelines explained, “Any disciplinary action is deferred until the individual has made a decision whether to undergo the operation.”²¹ Which operation was not specified. The 1983 revision slightly softened the requirement from a mandatory excommunication, indicating such a medical procedure “ordinarily justifies excommunication.”²² In the 1989 update to these policies, the disciplinary action against doctors was dropped, but the procedure was now classified as an “elective transsexual operation.”²³ Exceptions were possible with approval of the First Presidency, but no criteria were given for when an exception might be granted. This prohibition of surgical operations remained the policy with little change for over thirty years until 2020.

Church leaders persisted in linking homosexuality and transgender identity in the early twenty-first century. During the 2008 campaign to pass Proposition 8 in California, a measure that prohibited same-sex marriage, the Church released a policy paper titled “The Divine

19. Boyd K. Packer, *To Young Men Only* [pamphlet] (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980). Delivered Oct. 7, 1976.

20. “The Church Judicial System,” revision to the *General Handbook of Instructions* (1980), 2.

21. “Church Judicial System,” 2.

22. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1983), 52–53.

23. *General Handbook of Instructions* (1989), 10–13.

Institution of Marriage.” This document presented theological and social scientific arguments in favor of mixed-sex marriage, particularly emphasizing reproduction and child rearing as its foundation. It asserted, “When marriage is undermined by gender confusion and by distortions of its God-given meaning, the rising generation of children and youth will find it increasingly difficult to develop their natural identity as a man or a woman.”²⁴ This concept of “gender confusion” as both the cause and consequence of same-sex marriage continued to rely on long-outdated psychological inversion theories of homosexuality and contagion of homosexuality and trans identity through parenting.

The relationship between sexuality and gender identity continued to elude Church leaders, although they became more precise in their approach in the past decade. In 2015, high-ranking Church leaders engaged in a Q&A session with the public. A mother shared: “I have a transgender son who came out to us about a year ago. . . . I hate having to fear what retaliation [from church leaders] I might have for supporting him. . . . I think we as members need that assurance that we can indeed have our own opinions, support our children, and still follow our beliefs.” Apostle Dallin H. Oaks responded to the mother’s request with a rare admission: “This question concerns transgender, and I think we need to acknowledge that while we have been acquainted with lesbians and homosexuals for some time, being acquainted with the unique problems of a transgender situation is something we have not had so much experience with, and we have some unfinished business in teaching on that.”²⁵ The following year, the Church updated the pastoral website MormonandGay.lds.org, explaining: “Many of the general

24. “The Divine Institution of Marriage,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 15, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/8/15/20379638/the-divine-institution-of-marriage/>.

25. Jennifer Napier-Pearce, “Trib Talk: LDS Leaders Oaks, Christofferson on Religious Freedom, LGBT rights,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 30, 2015, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2112602&citype=CMSID>.

principles shared on this website (for example, the importance of inclusion and kindness) apply to Latter-day Saints who experience gender dysphoria or identify as transgender. However, same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria are very different.”²⁶ While generally prohibiting transitioning among its membership, Church leaders also sought to balance that with “inclusion and kindness.”

These changes were coming amid greater inclusion and public attention to trans folks in and outside of the Church. In 2013, the flagship gay and lesbian Mormon organization, Affirmation, changed its name to Affirmation: LGBT Mormons, Families, and Friends and now explicitly included bisexual, trans, and allies. In 2014, *TransMormon*, a fifteen-minute documentary film, told the story of a young Mormon’s gender transition and of her supportive family. The film won numerous awards, was featured in dozens of media outlets, and went viral on social media. That same year, the LGBT advocacy group Equality Utah sponsored a Transgender Awareness Project that featured transgender Mormons.²⁷ Further, Laurie Lee Hall, then employed by the Church as a leading architect, was working with General Authorities for accommodation for her transition in these years.²⁸

Change was not always progressive and inclusive. In 2019, Oaks stated that the proclamation “will not change . . . [but] may be clarified as directed by inspiration.” This clarification meant that that the proclamation’s teaching that “gender is an essential characteristic of premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” actually referred

26. “FAQ” Mormon and Gay (website), updated Sept. 1, 2016, archived Oct. 28, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161028193837/https://mormonandgay.lds.org/articles/frequently-asked-questions>.

27. Troy Williams, “Equality Utah Foundation,” Equality Utah, Oct. 27, 2014, archived Apr. 13, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150413013117/http://equalityutah.org/state-of-the-movement-report/item/167-october-2014>.

28. Laurie Lee Hall, *Dictates of Conscience: From Mormon High Priest to My New Life as a Woman* (Signature Books, 2024).

to “biological sex at birth.”²⁹ That is, the “biological sex” of the newborn as determined by a doctor revealed the true sex of the individual’s spirit. Oaks continued, “Binary creation is essential to the plan of salvation.”³⁰ He did not define what “biological sex” referred to. The teaching was particularly confounding for intersex folks who are not a part of the “binary creation,” and who make up a meaningful percentage of the population.³¹ Further, Church leaders did not clarify the relevance of “biological sex” to gender performances, hormone therapy, or surgery.

In recent years, the Church has updated policies to increasingly clarify its teachings on nonmedical “social transitioning.” In 2020, the Church’s *General Handbook* section on “transgender” received a major rewrite. The previous policy since 1980 only prohibited surgeries but had not identified which surgeries were prohibited nor whether non-surgical transitions were also prohibited. The result was some confusing interpretations. Were genital reconstructions alone prohibited, or were mastectomies, chest contouring, breast augmentation, as well as facial and vocal feminization or masculinization procedures also forbidden? What about other kinds of plastic surgery, electrolysis, lip filler, and so on? What about cases where no surgery was undertaken at all?

The 2020 policy now distinguished between social and surgical transitions and provided clearer rules. It explicitly allowed the use of hormone therapy “to ease gender dysphoria or reduce suicidal thoughts.” The updates ended the practice of excommunication of those who transitioned and allowed for trans members to receive blessings and take the sacrament. However, it now discouraged “social

29. For a history of interpretation of this document, see Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 138–74.

30. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “In ‘Dark Day’ for Transgender Latter-day Saints, Oaks Defines Gender as ‘Biological Sex at Birth’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 2, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/10/02/dark-day-transgender/>

31. Katrina Karkazis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience* (Duke University Press, 2008).

transitioning” explicitly. That is, it acknowledged a legitimate medical need for hormone therapy, but not for changed dress, pronouns, and other public practices. While excommunication was no longer on the table, there were restrictions on trans folks’ membership relating to priesthood and temple.³²

In 2024, the Church expanded these restrictions on trans people’s participation in church worship and activities. The updated policy now prohibited them from serving with children and youth, required that they attend meetings and activities that align with their sex assigned at birth, required extra supervision for trans youth at overnight activities, required bathroom supervision of trans individuals, and introduced more strictures on hormone therapy and social transitioning.³³ In general, these policies worked from the assumption that trans Latter-day Saints presented some threat to those around them or would make others feel uncomfortable, without much consideration to the threats and discomfort faced by trans individuals.

In response to questions asking for greater clarity, the Church produced policies that were often less accommodating and open than those before, raising questions about which way public pressure leans. As these policies show, Church leaders have discouraged gender transitions because trans and nonbinary practices and identities empirically frustrate the belief in a gender binary. Some church and temple practices are segregated between male and female, creating confusion as to whether a person’s sex assigned at birth or their social identity is the determining factor. The idea that “biological sex at birth” is the determining factor for normative gender performances overlooks that such gender performances themselves are also prescribed. For instance,

32. *General Handbook* (2020), sec. 38.6.23.

33. *General Handbook* (2024), sec. 38.6.23. Tamarra Kemsley, “New LDS Policies Relegate Trans Members to ‘Second-Class’ Status, Scholars Warn,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 19, 2024, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2024/08/19/lds-church-updates-transgender/>.

when it comes to priesthood ordination LDS leaders have chosen the ambiguous standard of male “biological sex” combined with normative gender performance as the qualification. In this case, biological sex alone is insufficient to be ordained to the priesthood. A “biological” male must also perform and present as male socially in order to be eligible. Consequently, a transgender person may not be eligible for the priesthood regardless of their biological sex, necessitating that both sex and gender conform to cisheteronormative expectations.

Church leaders have also opposed transgender and nonbinary identities in relation to marriage and reproduction, regardless of the biological reality.³⁴ Some medical transitions can disrupt reproductive functionality, which concern Church leaders who view reproduction as a divine commandment to “multiply and replenish” and as a source of individual and social benefits. However, this standard of reproductive capacity is inconsistently applied as a theological and practical matter. For instance, a fertile cisgender male and a transgender male may biologically reproduce, but their relationship is ineligible for sealing. In contrast, an infertile cisgender male and female may adopt or use in vitro fertilization, sperm, egg donors, or surrogacy and are eligible for sealing.³⁵ Even in the context of reproduction, gender performance supersedes biological function and ultimately determines ecclesiastical acceptance.

The guidelines for the treatment of transgender individuals inside the church have also affected how church leaders have thought about trans rights in secular society. In a September 2025 amicus brief to the Supreme Court, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints argued that trans rights are in conflict with religious rights and that to accept trans people in society will bring “stigma” upon anti-trans

34. Blaire Ostler, “Queer Bodies, Queer Technologies, and Queer Policies,” *Dialogue* 54, no. 4 (2021): 99–109.

35. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (BCC Press, 2019), 69.

religious people. Religious organizations and some religious individuals must not be required to respect trans people's rights because doing so would violate their "sincere religious belief that sex and gender are divinely created and indistinguishable," regardless of the reality of trans and nonbinary people from science, psychology, and history. The brief draws on a recent trend in conservative jurisprudence that suggests that accommodating the existence of trans people in public is itself a challenge to religious freedom.³⁶

These teachings constitute what scholars call a "cisgendering of reality." As J. E. Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A. B. Mathers have explained, religious cosmologies that proceed as if trans and gender nonbinary people do not exist are engaged in harmful myth making: "Rather than describing our world, they breathe life into an imagined world entirely composed of cisgender people."³⁷ By excluding trans folks from the mythological and cosmological realm, the theology expresses a hope to erase them from the real world as well.

Trans Experience in the Church

In the current environment, Church leadership and trans Latter-day Saints have often found themselves in conflict over theological paradigms and ethical principles. While local pastoral leaders have sometimes been more accommodating toward gender variability, the institution has yet to find a way to fully accept transgender people as individuals. Trans and nonbinary members had hoped that their religious communities would provide a sanctuary and support for their

36. Amicus Brief, Nos. 24–38, 24–43, in *Little v. Hecox and West Virginia v. Jackson*, Sept. 19, 2025, https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/24/24-38/375225/20250919133444530_24-38-24-43acTheChurchOfJesusChristOfLatter-DaySaints.pdf.

37. J. E. Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A. B. Mathers, "Contemporary Religion and the Cisgendering of Reality," *Social Currents* 3, no. 3 (2016): 295.

needs and talents, but they have often been ostracized, abandoned, and wounded, undermining the ethical care that the community is called to exhibit and impoverishing the tradition itself as these members are diminished or excluded.

Transgender members' experiences may vary widely across the Church. The 2020 and 2024 policy changes aimed to provide greater uniformity. Factors such as a transgender person's age, family connections, socioeconomic status, race, and their degree of passing can influence how they are received. Additionally, bishops and stake presidents often impose their own opinions on what constitutes right and wrong in such situations. While this has sometimes led to more accommodating policies, it has also resulted in suspicion and negative treatment that exceeds the policies' requirements. These varying experiences can be frustrating for transgender individuals.³⁸

There are some limited quantitative survey data that illustrate these conclusions. In 2015, researchers Sumerau and Cragun surveyed 114 trans and nonbinary Latter-day Saints. Among the sample, 38 percent were members and identified as Latter-day Saints, 43 percent were members but no longer identified as Latter-day Saints, and 19 percent were not members of record but had once been. While these numbers showed a relatively high percentage that were still affiliated with the Church, 82 percent reported that "some teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to accept." The same number also reported that they were "concerned about different gender roles" in the Church. Since 62 percent of the respondents were no longer identified with the Church, they likely make up the vast majority of those who expressed concerns. But still over half of those who were identified with the Church would have agreed that they had concerns. Only 7 percent of all respondents

38. Keith Burns and Linwood J. Lewis, "Transcending Mormonism: Transgender Experiences in the LDS Church," *Dialogue* 56, no. 1 (2023): 62–63.

reported “I believe wholeheartedly in all of the teachings of the LDS Church.”³⁹

Some qualitative social scientists have also interviewed trans LDS folk to get their experiences. These interviews confirm what the quantitative data also showed. The respondents noted that the Church actively discourages transitioning in any way and engages in a range of disciplinary activities to accomplish those goals. Many believe that the Church has created a forced choice between membership and their authentic identity. For many trans folk, the choice to be themselves must take priority over remaining in an institution that does not want them.⁴⁰ “I’ve yet to test the waters of acceptance and tolerance in this new ward,” recalls one writer, “so for now I’ll continue living in my invisible identities.”⁴¹ A recent Brigham Young University master’s thesis found that transgender Latter-day Saints experience “a sense of being pulled in two directions,” as well as “sacrifice” and “experiences of loss and rejection.”⁴² Consequently, we see high instances of disaffiliation with the Church. Those who attempt to stay report that they sacrifice a feeling of authenticity and mental health. Some see it as their responsibility to attend and be “out” in order to educate their co-religionists. Others find it beneficial to stay close to their family and community at the expense of their identity. Further, trans Latter-day

39. J. Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun. “Trans-Forming Mormonism: Transgender Perspectives on Priesthood Ordination and Gender,” in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Feminism*, ed. Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 122.

40. Sumerau and Cragun, “Trans-forming Mormonism,” 115–32.

41. Ari Glass, “The Binary,” in *I Spoke to You with Silence: Essays from Queer Mormons of Marginalized Genders*, ed. Kerry Spencer Pray and Jenn Lee Smith (Signature Books, 2022), 178.

42. Morgan Monet, “It’s Like Being Pulled in Two Directions’: Experiences of Transgender Latter-day Saints” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University School of Family Life, 2021).

Saints define their own identities in a variety of different ways and relate to others around them and to Church teachings differently as a result.

Trans Latter-day Saints have increasingly been telling their stories in autobiographical essays and books. Telling one's story is an act of theorizing about oneself and the world. For instance, Emily English recounts a brief story about her awkward first time attending her home ward after her transition.⁴³ Others like Erran Speaker relish in the positive experiences of acceptance while visiting a new ward.⁴⁴ One trans woman described a more selective approach: "It's okay if I don't go to church one week. And it's okay to not believe every single thing. Once I decided that, I felt a lot more free to, like, figure out what I actually liked about the Church or how I actually felt and who I was."⁴⁵ This "cafeteria" approach is one strategy that these members use to take what is good and helpful for their spiritual and community lives and avoid the rest.

Regardless of their success at navigating church experiences, trans Latter-day Saints often report on deeply spiritual experiences that guide their lives. For instance, many trans folks rely on personal revelation over institutional revelation.⁴⁶ This balance between the competing authority of the Church and personal revelation from God is one way that many people navigate gray areas. Ash Rowan described spiritual experiences upon naming their transness: "A warmth of assurance spread through my entire figure, like sunlight spilling to fill a room. It felt good. And every time I think back on it, the same phrase comes to me: *I know it, and I know God knows it, and I cannot deny it.*" Such a declaration echoed the words of Joseph Smith's First Vision (JSH 1:25).

43. Emily English, "Trans in the Chapel: Attending Church as a Newly Out Transgender Woman," *Dialogue* 55, no. 3 (2022): 107–109.

44. Erran Speaker, "A Revelation," in *The Book of Queer Mormon Joy*, ed. Kerry Spencer Pray (Signature Books, 2024), 121–28.

45. Quoted in Burns and Lewis, "Transcending Mormonism," 53.

46. Quoted in Burns and Lewis, "Transcending Mormonism," 55; Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 120.

The very next day, President Dallin H. Oaks declared in general conference that “gender is eternal.” Rowan recalls the emotional burden of this moment while speaking to God looking in the bathroom mirror: “*But I’m trans! I thought, putting clammy hands to cold porcelain. You told me I’m nonbinary, and that felt so right and good. How can one of Your servants—one of Your prophets!—say otherwise? No answer came . . . I’d been given a choice. Which voice would I listen to—the one that made me feel like this?*”⁴⁷ The appeal to personal revelation as superior to external authority draws on long-standing structures of authority in the Latter-day Saint tradition and provides resources for trans individuals to reconcile competing imperatives.

Other personal essays from trans and nonbinary Latter-day Saints have also wrestled with theological topics, like the weight of tradition and the possibility for change. Ray Nielson writes: “For if there are only two heavenly parents—a man and woman—then there is no divine precedent for genders outside of that, at least in the Mormon conception of deity. It is difficult to make an argument for nonbinary or gender-fluid individuals within the way that Mormons understand gender today. But I have no interest in abandoning the traditions of my heritage, and so I must try.”⁴⁸ In this case, it is not just competing authorities of personal or institutional revelation, but the invisibility of trans people in the LDS conception of the heavens. Nielson’s sentiment represents many who hope to see themselves in the Mormon cosmos but acknowledge the uncertainty the official theology creates.

While not formal works of academic theology, these personal narratives nevertheless have been important venues for theological reasoning. Two recent autobiographical memoirs from trans Latter-day Saint women have been places for addressing Church teachings about

47. Aisling “Ash” Rowan, “I Give You a Name (& This is My Blessing),” in Pray and Smith, *I Spoke to You with Silence*, 36.

48. Ray Nielson, “On Tradition and a Non-binary Revolution,” *Dialogue* 56, no. 1 (2023): 87.

gender as they have affected real people's lives. Laurie Lee Hall's harrowing memoir offers a medical account focused on the benefits of mental health she has achieved. But the book also engages closely with the main theological objections to her identity. Hall, a former stake president and prominent architect for the Church, provides an account that offers a close glimpse of how the Church, as her employer, behaved. She frequently speaks in theological terms, reporting that "after more than fifty years, the time had come when my 'eternal gender identity' could no longer tolerate living the falsehood of my male presentation."⁴⁹ She includes copies of correspondence with her bishop, General Authorities, and First Presidency that offer extensive discussions of Latter-day Saint doctrines.⁵⁰

Katherine Hermann's memoir similarly recounts a decades-long coming out process as well as individual activism in Latter-day Saint contexts.⁵¹ She reports her positive and negative encounters with Church leaders and her quest to find an accepting congregation. In an answer to her prayers, she felt led to various church services and felt compelled to bear her testimony, having several loving and impactful encounters with people she met there. Hermann describes these as divinely guided "missions" to be out and present. "That was real inspiration and I followed it," she reported after one particularly meaningful episode: "I'm really on the Lord's errand. . . . His mission was accomplished."⁵² Among those who remain committed, they reconcile their personal truths and experiences as more authoritative than the church teachings which exclude them.

49. Hall, *Dictates of Conscience*, 4.

50. Hall, *Dictates of Conscience*, 315–24.

51. Katherine Hermann, *TransLucent: How I Put Off My Natural Man and Found a Spiritual Woman* (pub. by author, 2023).

52. Hermann, *TransLucent*, 82.

These personal narratives often present the conflicts and struggles trans Latter-day Saints face with leaders, family members, and employers. They contain stories of rejection, financial insecurity, divorce, and more. However, these narratives are also structured as redemption stories. The struggles they encounter during their transition are seen as part of a rebirth to a happier, more fulfilling life. The collected essays in *The Book of Queer Mormon Joy* challenge the narrative of victimhood and despair by emphasizing the “joy” in LGBTQ experiences. Several trans and nonbinary contributors share their life-giving accounts of living authentically.⁵³ Personal experience, especially those connected to happiness and fulfillment after transitioning, are more important than theological constructs.

Other trans thinkers have taken a step back from personal experience in and out of the Church to reflect on how trans experience itself resists authoritative discourses. Kit Hermanson describes the Church’s documentation of its members from birth until death and how the archive of these documents fails to “encompass narratives of the human experiences it claims.”⁵⁴ In particular, Hermanson analyzes how non-binary trans identity challenges the authority of specific documents: the birth certificate, the temple recommend, the marriage certificate, and the death certificate. They note the “problem of the limitation of the archive’s ability to encapsulate the full range of gender and sexual experience.”⁵⁵ This account of the conflict between the individual’s lived experience and the documents that supposedly define them raises deep questions of identity. “I, as a non-binary person, can never have my felt gendered experience reflected on paper. . . . And, to be honest, I would not want the state to know, or attempt to approximate, my internal and

53. Kerry Spencer Pray, ed. *The Book of Queer Mormon Joy* (Signature Books, 2024).

54. Kit Hermanson, “Archive of the Covenant: Reflections on Mormon Interactions with State and Body,” *Dialogue* 53, no. 4 (2020): 79.

55. Hermanson, “Archive of the Covenant,” 87.

external conceptualization of my soul and body.”⁵⁶ The inability of these documents to actually produce the normative outcomes expected by the Church (and the state) exposes their insufficiency as constraints on experience and on “God-granted agency.”

Transing Latter-day Saint Theologies

Trans and nonbinary Latter-day Saints and others have sought to address their structural exclusion by working through the theological justifications and precedents of these claims. While the Church holds the authority to provide “official” interpretations, the interpretive process itself is open to development. Indeed, Church members engage in everyday theological reasoning that often includes dissenting views.⁵⁷ Some of this theologizing has appeared in popular and scholarly print sources. Others have appeared in interviews with trans and nonbinary Latter-day Saints who express their theological perspectives. Trans theologizing has thus occurred on both lay and scholarly registers. Further, the diversity of trans perspectives, including different views of binary gender, competing approaches to medical diagnoses and treatments, and varying degrees of acceptance of biological essentialist accounts of trans identity, reveals a rich and robust conversation about potential solutions.

When reading against the grain, I have described these methods of interpretation as “queering” the Latter-day Saint tradition in order to connect them to broader academic approaches that seek space for nonnormative sexualities, gender practices, and kinship structures.⁵⁸ The emphasis on “queering” as a verb, something which a reader does, also serves to denaturalize the cisgender-heterosexist methods of

56. Hermanson, “Archive of the Covenant,” 83.

57. Joanna Brooks, “Soul Matters,” *PMLA* 128, no. 4 (2013): 947–52.

58. Taylor G. Petrey, *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos* (University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

interpretation that apply their own limiting paradigms and frameworks as lenses of interpretation. Both as a subset of this approach as well as a method that offers distinct emphases, “transing” might more accurately describe the theological innovations in emerging trans Latter-day Saint thought. Such approaches represent what Jo Henderson-Merrygold calls a hermeneutics of “cis-picion.”⁵⁹ That is, trans approaches express skepticism toward interpretations that exclude particular ways of being human from reality and cosmos.

While related to queer approaches that discuss sexuality, trans hermeneutics often share critical approaches to gender roles and performances that emerged in Latter-day Saint straight and lesbian feminist thought. Feminist theologians engaged Latter-day Saint teachings about gender critically and constructively, providing a blueprint for later LGBTQ thinkers and their allies who wanted to reassess their exclusion from their religious tradition.⁶⁰ In some cases, feminist theologians from the 1980s to the early 2000s, inspired by Continental feminist thought, premised their theologies on notions of gender difference that did not explicitly include transgender individuals. In other cases, these same thinkers provided some gender-bending antecedents of transing. For instance, in the essay “Jesus Our Mother,” Janice Allred argues that the embrace of both male and female modeled in the single person of Jesus, portraying him with breasts, a uterus, and vagina, provides a universal ideal of blending genders.⁶¹

Despite some noteworthy differences in approach, trans Latter-day Saints and critical scholars have tended to focus their theology on three main areas of concern. First, trans and nonbinary thinkers have

59. Jo Henderson-Merrygold, “Gendering Sarai: Reading beyond Cisnormativity in Genesis 11:29–12:20 and 20:1–18,” *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020): 496–509.

60. Classic examples include Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Signature Books, 1990).

61. Janice Allred, *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Signature Books, 1997), 34.

responded to how Church leaders interpret the 1995 document “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which declares that “gender is an essential characteristic of premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and roles.” Second, transing theology has reflected and theorized on the place of trans and nonbinary identity in the created order and divine providence. Third, they have looked to other divine archetypes as a basis for trans and nonbinary identity. While these overlap in some ways with broader trans theological approaches, the engagement with distinctive Latter-day Saint texts, histories, and concerns warrants special consideration.

Eternal Gender and the Spirit

Some trans Latter-day Saints have found the idea of an essential, immutable set of preexistent constraints, conditions, or characteristics of gender as a useful way to articulate their identities. In this view, gender is defined by propensities, identity, and characteristics that act as a determinative influence on behavior. Gender is not determined by bodies at birth nor the will but preexists both because it is rooted in the soul. Such a subject is not without agency, but the agency consists of shaping and conforming the body to align with the “true self” in order to live authentically in line with those determinative dispositions. Reshaping the body and performance conforms what is mutable (the body) to what is essential (the spirit or soul).

While not all trans Latter-day Saints have adopted this gender essentialist view, it has emerged as a popular one. One of the first significant public discussions of a trans Latter-day Saint experience was in Torben Berhard’s 2014 short film *TransMormon*, which centered on Eri Hayward, a trans woman preparing for sex-transition surgery. Eri describes her experience as having a female “spirit” with a male body. Through medical intervention, she was seeking to bring her body in line with her spirit. Eri’s devout Latter-day Saint father offered an interpretation of her experience within the framework of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” He explained that since gender is eternal,

it must refer to the gender of the spirit, not the mortal body. The mortal experience is contingent, but he fully expects that Eri will be female in the next life just as she was in the preexistence and may become in the present life.

Other trans people have also adapted LDS teachings on “eternal gender” to describe their own experiences. For them, it is not “biological sex at birth” that reveals the eternal gender of the individual but rather the interior experience of gender identity. The soul’s gender is prior to birth both temporally and ontologically and cannot and should not be changed. Blaire Ostler explains: “Trans people do have a fixed, eternal gender which simply does not align with their body and/or gender assignment. . . . A transgender person can claim to have an unchanged, eternal gender that is not in line with their assignment and still be consistent with the idea that ‘gender is eternal.’”⁶² Trans Latter-day Saints have frequently reported this view: “The statement that gender is an eternal part of our being has been something that the trans community thinks is a great statement.” However, they continue, “It’s the part that says it’s immutable and strictly binary that’s the problem!”⁶³

Others are more skeptical of the doctrines in the family proclamation. Trans Latter-day Saints often express the idea that the gender roles described there are cultural stereotypes rather than immutable divine dictates. One interview respondent explained: “The gender roles taught in the Family Proclamation and perpetrated through our manuals and general conference talks tell us who God says we should be. . . . I think the gender roles that have been taught to us are age-old cultural traditions. I think men in the Church have been closed off by their own beliefs to see that.”⁶⁴ Another concurred: “The LDS Church seems to

62. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 53.

63. Quoted in Monet, “It’s Like Being Pulled in Two Directions” 26–27.

64. Quoted in Sumerau and Cragun, “Trans-forming Mormonism,” 129.

still be caught up in the eras before feminism. I think that it would be much more beneficial to the LDS Church if the leaders rewrote ‘The Family: A Proclamation to the World’ to remove all of the parts that describe gender stereotypes.”⁶⁵

Still others have expressed agnosticism on the question of the gender of the eternal spirit, while reaffirming traditional Church doctrines. One reported in an interview: “I know that everything will be sorted out, that it’s the times, that the gender dysphoria is just an earthly type of thing. My spirit could be female, it could not be, I don’t really know . . . but that will get sorted out, and I know that gender is in fact eternal, but I don’t believe my dysphoria will be.”⁶⁶ Such views support Church teachings while acknowledging that “earthly type of things” might not always reflect the ideal. In this view, divine providence will prevail though proponents of this perspective do not insist on any one particular outcome of how that might occur. The framework of disability as a mortal exception in Latter-day Saint theology informs such perspectives.⁶⁷

Creation and the Body

Trans Latter-day Saints have also appealed to creation to ground themselves theologically. When Church leaders have historically referred to intersex and trans people as “accidents of nature,” they imply a theology of a divine design which may be “accidentally” thwarted—resisting divine providence. By contrast, many trans Latter-day Saints have embraced their created status not as an accidental deviation from divine intention, as if such a thing were possible, but an expression of it. One survey respondent explained, “I personally believe that nature makes no mistakes and that individuals who may not fit a specific

65. Quoted in Sumerau and Cragun, “Trans-forming Mormonism,” 130

66. Quoted in Monet, “It’s Like Being Pulled in Two Directions,” 23.

67. Crip studies have also helped to articulate this connection. See for instance, Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013).

gender mold should be given the liberty to experiment and decide who they want to be, or how they want to be identified.”⁶⁸ Another reported: “God doesn’t make mistakes, and I’m not a mistake. . . . I think I needed to go through all that [pain] so I could learn, and that’s what we’re all here to do.”⁶⁹ Ostler has argued, “We are all made in the image of God, which includes queer, intersex, trans, and nonbinary bodies.”⁷⁰ Trans Latter-day Saints emphasize the universality of being a child of God and reject the idea that they are not a part of God’s creation, and thus may also be found among the divine. Such a defense of divine providence challenges normative Latter-day Saint theology which must posit the insufficiency and imperfection of creation in order to exclude trans and nonbinary people from full humanity.

In more recent years, one of the architects of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” has sought to clarify its meaning with respect to sexual difference. As noted above, Dallin H. Oaks has asserted that the key to determining the “gender” of a person is by looking to “biological sex at birth.” This provides a supposedly fixed foundation that should then determine the context of a person’s life thereafter. Presumably, this diagnosis of “biological sex” might include a medical evaluation at birth by examination of the genitals. It might also include chromosomal evaluation undertaken at a later stage through a DNA test. But no single method is given.

There are two problems with this attempt to define “gender” in the proclamation as “biological sex at birth.” The first is that the methods used to fix sexual difference in this way do not lead to binary outcomes between male and female. Medical examinations of the genitals (phenotype) and chromosome testing (karyotype) still allow for ambiguous, indeterminate, or mixed cases. These two methods of morphology and

68. Quoted in Sumerau and Cragun, “Trans-forming Mormonism,” 129.

69. Monet, “It’s Like Being Pulled in Two Directions,” 20.

70. Blaire Ostler, “I Am a Child of Gods,” *Dialogue* 55, no. 1 (2022): 117.

chromosomes, among other medicalized ways of assigning sex like gonads and hormones, are not always consistent, and in fact, result only a pluralist theory of “biological sex.” There are conditions—such as in androgen insensitivity syndrome, congenital adrenal hyperplasia, or gonadal dysgenesis—that may not be apparent at birth and often manifest later in life or remain undetected. The binary between male and female is one that is forced by cultural expectations, not scientific ones. Further, such biological determinism of the relationship between “sex” and “gender” are cultural norms that vary across time and place.

Second, despite the idea of an “eternal gender,” the notion that the conditions set at mortal birth are the expression of a premortal set of characteristics introduces several problems to Latter-day Saint theology besides its account of providence. Are all bodily characteristics that appear at birth representative of an eternal identity, or only some? Do eye color, skin tones, or genetic predispositions to addiction also reflect an eternal identity? How does one decide whether the conditions set at birth contain ranges of possibilities and epigenetic outcomes, including things like height or hair color, resemblance to a genetic relative, or to more consequential things, such as disease, life span, weight, race, and more? Which are fixed expressions of an “eternal identity,” and which are contingent or even changeable features? Is medical intervention to address some conditions set at birth an interference with divine design in some circumstances, but in others within the realm of human agency? For instance, is wearing a hairpiece or having hair replacement surgery to treat male pattern balding (a form of gender-affirming surgery) a violation of one’s eternal identity as set at birth, or only certain changes of appearance are prohibited? The appeal to mortal birth as providing an unambiguous standard for resolving something like a fixed eternal identity raises more problems than it resolves.

Still, material conditions are not completely irrelevant. Trans philosopher Kelli Potter has made a case for attention to the material body in Mormon theology as a crucial topic. She argues that “various

Mormon theologies of gender fail to do justice to a transgender point of view” but that “an interpretation of Mormon theology that is friendly to trans folk is not hard to find.”⁷¹ Potter points to a variety of options for reconciling the trans experience with the idea that gender is eternal, emphasizing the ambiguity of the claim itself. It is possible, for instance, that one is eternally gendered but open to being gendered differently at different stages. Or it may mean that there exists an eternal Platonic masculinity and femininity that is distinct from any one individual.

Potter does acknowledge one potential problem with this effort to make trans identity compatible with Latter-day Saint teachings. If gender is eternal, how is it that the material body does not reflect the gender of the spirit? She gives two major answers. First, the biological and the material are neither binary nor fixed. “The dynamic picture of living organisms . . . seems to suggest that we might consider sex and gender to be subject to constant change due to the impermanent nature of embodiment.”⁷² That is, we should not see the “eternal” reflected in embodiment since such embodiment and its iterations over one’s life-span are by its very nature a transitory feature of existence. But this does not become a basis to discount the importance of the body. Theorizing from the experience of dysphoria, she emphasizes how “gender is tethered to our experience of our bodies.”⁷³

For Potter, the Latter-day Saint emphasis on the material body should not be an obstacle to a trans-friendly theology. She looks to the positive evaluation of the body in the Latter-day Saint theological tradition dating back to Joseph Smith. She argues for a nondeterministic view of

71. Kelli D. Potter, “A Transfeminist Critique of Mormon Theologies of Gender,” in *The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion: New Perspectives on Disability, Gender, Race, and Animals*, ed. Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe (Routledge, 2019), 312–13.

72. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 322.

73. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 324.

matter in Mormonism that allows for it to continue to develop.⁷⁴ Potter points to numerous examples of the Latter-day Saint theological tradition affirming the idea that the body itself undergoes dynamic change, including its transition from mortality to exaltation. She explains, “The idea that the body is fundamentally dynamic is friendly to the idea that sexual features could themselves change.”⁷⁵ A trans-friendly Mormon theology then builds on notions of an “open” materiality that allows for change. In my prior evaluation of Potter’s position on trans materiality, I argued that she accepted a dynamic and open concept of the body while holding onto a deterministic view of gender rooted in the brain.⁷⁶ However, I believe that I have over-read her in this regard and that her view is that gender is also open and dynamic.

Neither the role of materiality nor the concept of “eternal gender” stand as necessary barriers keeping trans individuals on the outside of the Church and its concepts of the human. “It is quite clear,” Potter argues, “that extant Mormon theology, including the Proclamation, could be interpreted to be consistent with someone’s being transgender and yet it is also clear that this is not how it is being interpreted in practice.” Policy, not doctrine, is the basis for denying trans testimonies of their experiences. “Orthodox Mormons are not *forced* by their theology to reject queer and trans folk,” she explains, “instead, they are *forcing* their theology to reject queer and trans folk.”⁷⁷ Potter suggests that decision to exclude trans folks by interpreting the proclamation in one way rather than another requires greater scrutiny.⁷⁸ By appealing to the reality of trans and nonbinary persons and insisting they are part

74. Kelli D. Potter, “Trans and Mutable Bodies,” *Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, ed. Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (Routledge, 2019), 542.

75. Potter, “Trans and Mutable Bodies,” 549.

76. Petrey, *Queering Kinship of the Mormon Cosmos*, 125–26.

77. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 320.

78. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 325.

of the created order, transing Latter-day Saint theology points out the interpretive choices to render them outside of a divine plan.

Divine Archetypes

Latter-day Saint teachings about a Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother emphasize not only binary gender and heteronormative sexuality but also cisnormativity.⁷⁹ To trans Latter-day Saint theology is to search for archetypes that would include trans identities in the Mormon cosmos. Such archetypes help ground the existence of trans folks in the idealized theological imaginary and in the scriptural record. The theologian Charlotte Scholl Shurtz has argued for “gender inclusivity” rather than eliminating gender expression and bodies from the divine realm. Such a redescription calls into question the stability of the traditional narrative.

Recognizing that the contemporary Latter-day Saint tradition is not capacious enough to include trans folks, Shurtz offers the Jewish tradition of midrash as a way to expand the stories that Latter-day Saints might have available in a more inclusive theology. She explains, “If we are to develop and practice a theology truly broad and expansive enough to include all of God’s diverse children, the story of God as a cisgender, heterosexual couple must be accompanied by additional stories—stories of gay and loving gods, of joyful transgender gods, of radical queer acceptance by other members of the heavenly family.”⁸⁰ She unfolds a story of a “queer heavenly family” as an expansion of the cisgender heterosexual Heavenly Father and Mother at the heart of the tradition today. The challenge that such a midrashic project faces is the limited tools from which to build such stories in the existing tradition.

Other scholars have concurred with the need for a more expansive theology of embodiment and divine representation. Ostler has made

79. Taylor G. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 315–41.

80. Charlotte Scholl Shurtz, “A Queer Heavenly Family: Expanding Godhood Beyond a Heterosexual, Cisgender Couple,” *Dialogue* 55 no. 1 (2022): 93.

the point that “God is significantly larger than a fertile, cisgender, heterosexual female and male coupling.”⁸¹ In a 2016 article, I noted that a great deal of Latter-day Saint discussion of Jesus’s atonement emphasizes his universal access to the human experience. In his suffering, Latter-day Saint thinkers across the ideological spectrum have made clear that Jesus understands fully, in his very body, what it means to be a woman. It is precisely in this act of atonement that Jesus becomes something other than a man. By this logic, Christ is then a trans or non-binary figure whose soul and body cannot be reduced to male alone.⁸² Ostler has extended this analysis in her work as well.⁸³

Further, I have pointed to the Holy Spirit as another figure who performs gender in nonbinary ways and whose gender changes over time and place. In Greek, the “Spirit” or *pneuma* is a neuter noun, while in Semitic languages it is feminine and in Latin it is masculine. Further the metaphors to describe the Spirit range from masculine penetration to feminine imagery of being “born” in the Spirit. These linguistic factors are not incidental. Latter-day Saint leaders and theologians have identified the Spirit as both a male and a female in the history of interpretation.⁸⁴ This figure, frequently described as “fluid,” challenges cisgender norms and thus provides an archetype for locating trans identities in the divine realm.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The field of trans and nonbinary Latter-day Saint theology is still in its infancy, as are the Church’s evolving teachings on this topic. While the

81. Ostler, “I Am a Child of Gods,” 99.

82. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother.”

83. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 37–39.

84. See, for example, Charles Penrose, “Women In Heaven,” *Millennial Star*, June 26, 1902, 410.

85. Petrey, *Queering Kinship*, 34–40.

Church has long opposed transgender identity, its teachings and policies on the issue have undergone significant changes in the past fifty years. Initially, Church leaders conflated trans identity with homosexuality, only recently and partially disentangling sexuality from gender identities. Furthermore, they have recently reinterpreted teachings in the family proclamation on “eternal gender” to refer to “biological sex at birth.” Additionally, they have experimented with various policies and disciplinary practices, sometimes softening and sometimes hardening their stance on inclusivity for trans individuals.

Trans Latter-day Saint thinkers and others have navigated this evolving landscape by transing the unique teachings of the Church, particularly those outlined in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” They have attempted to explain their identities using the concept of “eternal gender” while expanding its potential interpretations regarding the spirit and the body. Furthermore, they have sought to find examples of non-normative gender identities in scripture and theology as archetypes of their own identities. Above all, they have appealed to their existence and experience as neither an accident nor mistake of divine providence, but an expression of it.

This dynamic of social and intellectual change is likely to continue, partly due to the politicization of the topic between those who seek to expand and include a wide range of individuals into society and the church and those who do not. The interdisciplinary treatment of the issue comprising science, psychology, theology, and church authority will continue to play a crucial role in addressing these issues with utmost care and consideration.

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