

Beyond the Binary: Worshipping a Non-Binary, GenderQueer God

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Introduction

God is GenderQueer, thus humanity is GenderQueer! God is Non-Binary, thus humanity is Non-Binary! Such powerful, prophetic proclamations of who God is, has always been, and will always be, especially for the hundreds of thousands of individuals who understand and locate themselves outside of the current societal and Christian understanding of humanity and the Divine. These statements are shocking, confusing, and offensive to many. Excluding small, growing, committed branches of the Church that promote a wide array of expansive language and imagery to describe and experience God, the Church as a whole, over the course of its life, has overwhelmingly and continues to teach and see God as a white, European, heterosexual man. Of course my original statement brings about strong opposition and confusion; if the Church cannot easily accept diverse images of God that reside within its own constructed gender binary (God as female, God as homosexual, etc.) that it has established to understand humanity and God, what else would the response be to a proclamation that God is also beyond that very binary that has been used to understand ourselves and our God for most of human history?

Growing up within a heteronormative, cisgender, binary Church culture, I have witnessed the struggle that so many of my cisgender family members have to understand God outside of this masculine driven, binary established viewpoint, let alone outside of the very binary that they struggle to reside in. For the majority of my Church family, understanding God outside of the one side of this gender binary is foreign and alien, deemed “unnatural”. Arguments such as, “the Bible talks of God as a man, so God is a

man”, “Jesus was a man, so Christ can’t be a woman”, “Man, as a linguistic term, speaks of and includes all of humanity and God,” rain down throughout the Church, defending and reinforcing a power system that inherently favors the masculine understanding of God and humanity. Throughout the historical course of the Church, this particular way of understanding humanity and God has been established, propagated, and promoted, to the demonization and dehumanization of the vast majority of humankind and to the exclusion of the infinite number of ways God reveals Herself to the world and interacts with Their creation. Within this particular understanding of humanity and of God, there is little room for God to be seen and understood within the fullness of the gender binary established by society and the Church, let alone beyond it!

I remember the first time I had a conversation with my spouse and my mother about understanding God, and thus myself, as genderqueer. Throughout the conversation, I shared my understanding of God as beyond all human systems and concepts of thinking, and, as made in God’s image, that we too are also made to understand ourselves as free from these human made systems. While they could grasp the theoretical notion that God is beyond gender and binaries, they could not translate that theoretical belief into a praxis belief; they couldn’t sever the ties they have to thinking about God and themselves within a binary system, nor could they grasp the embodied notion of the theoretical claim. I observed that the practical implications of understanding God as beyond gender and sex binaries- humanity reflecting this through tearing down binary systems of gender and sex, the expansiveness of language used about God, the introduction of genderqueer and non binary individuals into common social life, redefining “traditional” gender and sex roles, etc.- went too far for them, made them uncomfortable and confused, unable to bear forth

the physical fruits of a theoretical understanding of God. That's the thing- is it truly a belief that carries weight and meaning if it isn't practiced and embodied?

Yet, this is exactly what this work seeks to present and argue for: God is beyond our human concepts of gender, and, in consequence, humanity is also able to cross over this binary, because we too are created in the image of God. While the Church continues to struggle with seeing and understanding God, and itself, within the binary system of gender and sex, it continued to inflict harm on its own body, perpetuating and degrading its genderqueer, transgender, and non binary members. It remains blinded to this harm and fails to see how the Church itself is trapped within this sinful, binary system, one that our very nature, by reflecting God's image, rejects. Our faith in God, our understanding of God's nature, and of our own nature, made in God's image, demands that we, the Church, examine this artificial binary, break down its false teaching about God's nature, and live into the truth of who we really are, a creation that is beyond human made concepts and binary systems of ordering.

To explore this understanding of God, humanity, and the gender binary requires examining works and writings from across multiple disciplines- specifically Queer theory and theology, Feminist theory and theology, and Systematic theology. Distinctively, this exploratory work is connecting these disciplines in ways that has rarely been done before, especially Queer theory and Systematic theology, and is inviting them to talk with one another in a new, creative way. Very little is written on the topic of exploring God beyond the gender binary, thus much of this writing will be focused on bringing together three distinct thinkers and theologians- St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sarah Coakley, and Michel Foucault. We shall explore their thinking in relation to one another, focusing on the

distinct gifts of knowledge they bring into the conversation, specifically around the development of the gender binary within the Church and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Once exploration of these areas has begun and developed, we will begin to wrap these seemingly disconnected threads together, providing an entry point into the conversation about God and the gender binary, one that draws together these three disciplines, with an emphasis on the connection of this thesis with the historic understanding of God by the early Church.

Before diving into the works and connections of these three great thinkers, we must first ground our study and exploration in Holy Scripture. As Christians, it is to Scripture that we turn to understand God, ourselves, and our relationship together. All the great thinkers in the Church begin from this point of entry, rooting their discoveries and revelations of God and humanity in the knowledge and wisdom that is found within its pages. Specifically, we will turn to the first creation story in Genesis 1:26-31 and to Paul's exploration of the resurrection in Galatians 3:28; these two moments are important to our own exploration and study, as they are liminal spaces where we can discern and touch the image of God, explore some of the mystery that is God, and then use the historical and recent discoveries in these passages to ground our own exploration around the personhood of God and humanity's relationship to the Divine being. For each of these Scripture passages, we will briefly explore their importance, how they have been interpreted over time, and begin to queer these texts. By queering these moments in Scripture, we seek to examine them with a critical lens that questions the accepted "norms" within them- heterosexual centrality, male dominance and patriarchy, binaryism, etc- in order to reveal a different understanding of the text and how that deeper

experience guides our exploration into the transcendent nature of God over binaries of sex and gender.

Our exploration will then continue with Gregory of Nyssa. The decision to invite Gregory of Nyssa into this conversation is twofold: 1) his writings on the Holy Trinity reflect an understanding of God that is fluid, always changing, and crosses boundaries constantly, all while maintaining the unity and centrality of God in all things and 2) he is a recognized, highly valued, and cherished theologian of the early Church, whose works have been revered and taught throughout the history of the Church. In this first chapter, I will explore two selections of his work, *Ad Ablabium* and his homilies on the Song of Songs. Specifically, I will explore his language about God in each work, which reveals his fluid understanding of God, expressed through his expansive imagery and his examples describing the relationship of the Trinity. From here, we will turn to examine more closely the theology of the Holy Trinity that he expresses in his defense of the doctrine and begin to connect it with the historical understanding of God throughout the history of the Church. We will also explore more fully his understanding of the Church's relationship with Christ, particularly how the death and resurrection of Jesus, and our baptism into said death and resurrection, transforms humanity in our nature. I will close out the chapter by drawing upon several theologians and feminists, all of who have been in conversation with Gregory around this topic, in order to aid us as we dive deeper into the mind of Gregory, his faith, and how his understanding of the Trinity and Christ connect with other disciplines.

Chapter three will dive into and explore the writings of Sarah Coakley, an Anglican theologian from the United Kingdom, whose main body of work centers around

theologizing our understanding of gender, sex, and power. I have chosen to engage her writings in this thesis precisely for this focus in her writings. Her works *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* and *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* begin to develop a study of our faith tradition in relationship to gender and creates a body of work that explores this expanded understanding of God, while connecting the fields of feminist theology, systematic theology, and, though not named explicitly, lays the groundwork to connect Queer theory and theology to this conversation. We will explore her own conversation with Gregory of Nyssa on the Holy Trinity, analyze how she understands Gregory's usage of expansive language and diverse imagery for God, and connect this analysis with her own take on the Holy Trinity, in relation to sex and the gender binary. Coakley's work will be the connecting piece that we use to draw together the study of God and the study of Queer theory.

In chapter four, I will introduce the philosophical and critical historical work of French philosopher Michel Foucault into our conversation, primarily because his writings and analysis of human history around the construction of gender and sex binaries have been foundational materials in feminist and queer academics. Though all have not always welcomed his presence in these two fields, his critical study of human history began a deep dive into understanding the concepts of gender and sex, leading to a wide field of writing on the subject, within both feminist and queer circles. Utilizing Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, I will explore his arguments around the development of gender and sex as human made constructs throughout history, particularly in how the Church played and continues to play a major role in those binaries' development and sustainment. This will include an exploration of how the Church understands the sacrament of confession

historically and currently, connecting this understanding of confession with the Christian understanding of self, and how that understanding has and has not driven the development of current gender and sex binaries. I will close the chapter by briefly exploring what this critical analysis of human history and gender/sex binaries means in relation to the argument of this writing- that humanity, in its natural state, does not reflect these human made constructs, but instead reflects the queerness of God, in which humanity is made in the image of.

In chapter five, we will step back and take in all three of these thinkers and their writings collectively, examining them for their connections and commonalities. These threads will form our conversation around the development of gender and sex binaries within human society, the Christian understanding of self in relation to God, and how the Church has historically thought about and professed God to be. All of these threads, from Gregory's exploration of God's Trinitarian nature, to Coakley's understanding of gender and sex in relation to the faith tradition, along with her work in relationship with Gregory of Nyssa, to Foucault's critical analysis of human constructions of gender and sex, converge to reveal and proclaim God's genderqueerness and non-binary nature. It is the works of these three thinkers that I will condense, synthesize, analyze, and develop in relation to one another, in order to create an entry point into this fairly new conversation around God as beyond the sexual and gender binaries of human society, and, through extension, humanity as well. By examining these distinct works together, my goal will be to begin the conversational work between the disciplines of systematic theology, queer theology and theory, and feminist theology and theory, so that this form of exploration and study of God can be done and taken on seriously in these fields. However, the

ultimate goals in this art of weaving is to aid the Church in understanding more fully God and God's nature, what that means for our own nature, and to create a space within the faith tradition where individuals who find and identify themselves within, throughout, and beyond these binaries can finally see themselves reflected in the image of God and see God reflected in their understanding of self.

The conversations that begin here in this thesis are meant to inspire and elicit more conversation and study, to provide a space for other genderqueer, non-binary, and/or transgender Christians to engage in intentional discernment and theologizing of their lived experiences of God and their faith in the world, whether that be to affirm or disavow the work I have set out to present here in this thesis. It is to provide an invitational space for the Church to listen and learn from its most disenfranchised and dismissed members of the Body of Christ. It is a space for the Church to live into its Christ commanded responsibility to love all as God loves all, to become one with the outcast, to become the queerest of the queer, and to tear down the barriers and constructs that inhibit the Body of Christ from living into the fullness of its own nature. This is a space cultivated for innovative and creative exploration of who God is and connecting that exploration and its findings to the historic teachings of the faith, all the way back to the very beginning of creation. It is here, in this space that we, as the Church, will come face to face with our God, in the fullness of who God is. Here, we will meet the God that our faith has always proclaimed, yet has always struggled to understand and comprehend. Here, we will begin to meet our God that is beyond all human knowing and comprehension. Here, we will begin to learn what it might mean to worship a non-binary, gender queer God.

Chapter 1: The Scriptural Witness

As Christians, we believe that Scripture is vitally important to our faith in and relationship with God. It is through Scripture that we first meet God, first begin to hear about and live into a relationship with God, first embrace the troublesome question of “Who am I?”, and first explore how we are made in and reflect God’s image. It is here, in the pages inspired by God and written down by God’s people, that we must begin our journey into exploring God’s nature as a being that reflects a sexually and gendered fluidity, one that denies binaries and dwells in a state of ever changing androgyny. It is here that we start to explore how our own nature, made in God’s image, holds this same reality, and how the broken and imperfect nature of this world distorts our true reality and relationship with God and ourselves. In this brief survey and exploration of Genesis 1:26-31 and Galatians 3:27-28, I will turn to some of the great theologians of the Church, with particular focus on those who argue that humanity’s nature reflects the Triune nature of God, alongside those whose focus is more on the Christ centered nature of our being, in order to achieve three goals.

The first goal is to provide a foundation for our exploration, of which is intrinsically tied to Scripture and how believers have interpreted it across time. This will prepare us to better understand the works of Gregory of Nyssa, Sarah Coakley, and my interpretation and conversation with their writings. The second goal is to underscore and highlight the long-standing nature of this conversation. While we may use new vernacular to describe our conversation and utilize different approaches and lenses to interpret Scripture, much of our work is being built upon conversations that have taken

place over centuries. Conversations focused on the nature of God, the creation of humanity, the entrance of sexuality and gender into creation, the transformed body of humanity through the resurrection, the imperfect nature of the world and yet God's Kingdom's presence in this reality: all of these conversations enter into our brief exploration of Scripture and impact our overall search for a truer reality of self and God. The third goal is to engage some of these fundamental questions that arise in these Scripture passages and begin to queer them through our own lenses of interpretation. This includes examining what past theologians have thought about these texts and entering into conversation with them- molding their own understandings to enter into conversation with our own exploration, embracing the tension that comes with conversing with those whose own works develops our own, but may differ in conclusion. With these goals in mind, let us turn to Genesis 1:26-31 and Galatians 3:27-28.

Genesis 1: 26-31

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he

had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

- Genesis 1: 26-31

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? What does the image of God look like? Is God male, female, or a combination of the two? Maybe neither and something else? What about sexuality-is God straight, gay, or asexual? Does God even have a body? What does our own experience of humanity tell us of God and what does our interactions with God tell us about God and humanity? All these important questions arise for us in this section of Genesis. In the first creation story, we are told that we are made in God's image, and that God views us as very good. Great! We are made in God's image, yet we struggle daily to understand what this fully means. This is no small question, one that we will not come to a conclusion to in this work, but merely add to the conversation already taking place. Yet, the importance of tackling this conversation is overwhelming. The threads developed and the conclusions reached have lasting implications throughout the Church, impacting how we view and understand God and, in consequence, what our humanity is like and how it is molded. To gain some knowledge and clarity around this struggle, let us dive into this passage and explore how it might apply to our study today.

The first element of the text to tackle is verse 26, where God refers to Godself in plurality. Here, we are given a glimpse that the sacred nature of the Trinity is present when God begins creation. This revelation is valuable, as it emphasizes the Trinitarian being of God from the very beginning, not something that is formed later on in time. Rather, God's full being has, is, and will always be of a Trinitarian nature, reflecting the

unity of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the beginning with the Creator. Marius Victorinus's writings on Genesis affirm this view, as well as emphasize the unity in image shared between God the Creator and God the Christ.¹ This analysis is important to note as it underscores Jesus' full likeness and unity with God, from whom we, humanity, are made in the image of. Fulgentius of Ruspe continues this affirmation and delves deeper into its meaning. He writes, "When, using the singular number, he says 'image,' he shows that the nature is one, in whose image the human being was made. But when he says 'our' in the plural, he shows that the very same God in whose image the human being was made is not one in person."² Here, Fulgentius highlights the Trinity of God's unity reflected in the text and also connects it with the creation of humanity. Humanity, made in the likeness of God, in some way reflects this Trinitarian unity that defines God's nature. This is an argument that holds commonality with Gregory of Nyssa's own interpretation of this verse, which highlights that the Trinitarian presence is not made known until humanity's creation, emphasizing humanity's creation in the likeness of said Trinity, with the full affirmation of the Trinity itself.³ This will be an important point to remember in our own further exploration of God's nature crossing boundaries and binaries.

In verse 27, we find God in the act of creating humanity. Interestingly enough, the plurality of God is reverted back to the singular, unified voice of God, which may emphasize the unity of being amongst the Trinity, even as it moves and dwells in interconnected relationship in the one. Yet, the main curiosity for us in this verse is the creation of humanity itself, which appears to apply sex to the body after humanity's

¹ Andrew Louth, Marco Conti, and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Genesis 1-11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 29.

² Louth, Conti, and Oden, 30.

³ Louth, Conti, and Oden, 28.

initial creation in the line above. The distinctions of “male” and “female” are not distributed until the second half of the verse, with the first half of the verse utilizing the Hebrew term *‘adam*, which is used to underscore humanity as a whole, without distinction.⁴ The use of this inclusive term reflects the creation of humanity in the second creation story, which uses the term *‘adamah*, translated “earthling”, as a means to describe humanity until the designation of sex later on, once the second *‘adamah* is created.⁵ This depiction of humanity’s initial creation as sexless and androgynous, fully embracing the fluid nature of sex and gender, is upheld in both Christian and Jewish interpretations of this passage, particularly in Jewish Kabbalah, which specifically presents an argument of a Tree of Life, which embraces the mixing and fluidity of sex, gender, and androgyny in human creation, as well as in the nature of God.⁶ This two-tiered creation, which reflects humanity’s creation in sexual and gender freedom, followed by humanity’s binding into a narrower sense of each does not inherently present sex and gender as “bad” or “sinful”, as Origen argues in his works⁷; rather, it underscores the multilayered reality of our creation in God’s image, an initial creation that reflects most closely God’s trinitarian image, followed by a second creation which, while a lesser

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis =: [Be-Reshit]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

⁵ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 16.

⁶ Deryn Guest, ed., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006), 26–27.

⁷ Here, I am speaking of Origen’s notion that sex and gender are formed in humanity as a consequence of “The Fall”, explicitly connecting sex and gender to evil and sinfulness. It is my argument here that, while sex and gender binaries are not initially given to humanity in our creation, these are given before the concept of evil and sin enter into creation, as a way for humanity to grasp some small part of how we reflect God, not as a punishment for our sin. This being said, sex and gender binaries have been misinterpreted throughout human history and are linked with many evils and atrocities upon creation, highlighting the imperfect and broken nature of these artificial creations.

state of our natural being, better enabled humanity to grasp some sort of concept of God's nature.

To this point, Gregory of Nyssa provides an interesting interpretation of this verse in relationship to Galatians 3:28, which we will explore together next. Gregory writes of the designation of sex in the second half of human creation,

Everyone knows, I think, that this aspect is excluded from the archetype: 'In Christ Jesus,' as the apostle says, 'there is neither male nor female.' And yet Scripture affirms that man has been divided sexually. Thus the creation of our nature must in some way have been double; that which renders us like God and that which establishes the division of the sexes.⁸

Here, Gregory presents the fundamental struggle many theologians grapple with—humanity is created as sexless in the beginning, with the distinctions of sex coming soon afterwards, only to be erased again in Jesus later on. So, in some way, sex is connected to humanity's understanding of self, but also limits and distorts our truer nature, which is made in the image of God and, in the beginning, sexless and genderless. These worldly concepts of sex over human bodies struggle to bind themselves to the human body, even as the human world clings to these artificial distinctions. It's important to note here that in Scripture, sex beyond the male/female binary is already being affirmed, in its acknowledgment of intermediate and intersex individuals.⁹

Pulling these threads together, we begin to develop a picture of the importance of Genesis 1 for the argument that God in Trinity is beyond sex, gender, and binaries, and, in consequence, so is humanity in its purest form. Genesis 1 aids us to see the presence of the Trinitarian God in the very beginning of creation and the Trinity's connection to the creation of humanity. This is an important aspect of this text, as it enables us to explore

⁸ Louth, Conti, and Oden, *Genesis 1-11*, 35.

⁹ Guest, *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 27.

the human ability to transgress and queer binaries of sex and gender, all due to humanity's creation in the image of the Triune God. This Scripture passage also presents a glimpse into the original nature of humanity in the beginning, soon dimmed by the presentation of sex and gendered binaries, then lost and distorted by brokenness and the artificial vices of this world. This true nature, which reflects our wholeness in sexless and genderless beauty, underscores the development of sex and gender after our initial creation. This important time line distinction aids us in developing a robust understanding of not only human nature, but more importantly, offers us a glimpse into the very nature of God, in whose image we are made. If humanity reflected androgyny, sexlessness, and full sexual and gender fluidity in the beginning, perhaps this is a part of God's very nature itself. This is an element to hold throughout our exploration and one to hold in relationship with our next passage, Galatians 3:27-28.

Galatians 3:27-28

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

-Galatians 3:27-28

Often quoted to provide scriptural evidence that all barriers are erased by Christ in Baptism, this text is utilized by many biblical scholars and theologians to explore the meaning of becoming one with Jesus and the community that Jesus gathers as his Body in the world. Yet, while this scripture clearly points to an erasure of old ways of thinking and being, the Church still finds itself caught in the web of old, artificial divisions,

especially around sex, gender, and binaries. What accounts for this disparity between the two? How has this text been understood by the Church over time? What is important here for our own study of sexuality and gender? How does this text connect to the first creation story in Genesis, and why should they be examined with the other in mind? Let's explore this portion of Scripture and find out.

Throughout the history of the Church, this text has been interpreted various ways. Jerome spoke of being baptized into Christ as a fiery garment: "When one has once put on Christ and, having been sent into the flame, glows with the ardor of the Holy Spirit, it is not apparent whether he is gold or silver. As long as the heat takes over the mass in this way there is one fiery color, and all diversity of race, condition and body is taken away by such a garment."¹⁰ This interpretation of Galatians, that all become one in Christ completely is affirmed and critiqued simultaneously by Augustine. He writes on Galatians that, "Difference of race or condition or sex is indeed taken away by the unity of faith, but it remains embedded in our mortal interactions, and in the journey of this life the apostles themselves teach that it is to be respected...For we observe in the unity of faith that there are no such distinctions. Yet within the orders of this life they persist."¹¹ Here we see, from the beginning of our faith tradition, a conflict of interpretation- one speaking to the unifying nature of Jesus in this life, one that erases all artificial boundaries and ideas, versus another which agrees that this occurs in Christ, but only in our resurrected form, not in this life.

¹⁰ M. J. Edwards, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 8 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 51.

¹¹ Edwards, 51.

It is in this space that our own argument takes form, primarily embracing the interpretation that in Jesus, who reflects the unified Triune nature of God as we named in our exploration of Genesis 1, all of these boundaries are erased and we are put on the path of return to our most true and natural created state, also explored in the section on Genesis. I argue that, while Augustine's interpretation of Galatians does reflect some idea of sex and gender entering into creation, his account does not acknowledge our initial created state, in which we are first created most like God-sexually and gender fluid, androgynous. Instead, his argument confuses the double creation that Gregory notes as one, confusing the moments of creation as one moment of creation, from which he sees sex and gender binaries as an essential part of our, and God's, nature. In his understanding, humanity is beholden to these binaries and sees our freedom from them only through the resurrected Christ, not in this life, but in the life to come. His stance presents the Kingdom of God as not fully realized in this reality, and only possible in the reality after death. In this way, he relies on and remains prisoner to human made boundaries and ideas to guide his understanding of the world, not realizing that our very nature was created outside of these norms in the beginning. His focus falls on the transformation of humanity into God's image in the future, rather than seeing that we are freed and able to live into the transformed Kingdom of God now, in this reality, not only just in the future of Christ's resurrection. I propose that this reality, living into our full, binary free nature now, flows out of our initial creation in the image of the Triune God, of which the person of Jesus is in full unity with.

Martin Luther argues an interpretation of the text between these two theologians, presenting a path that acknowledges our unified nature in Christ, yet the division still

found in the world. He writes, “Just as in Christ there is not special status for Jewish customs, so there is no other kind of special status either...You are one in faith in Christ, and if the needs of the body and of this life dictate that there shall be a distinction of different persons, still you are one body under one head.”¹² Here we see how Luther presents an understanding that interprets the text through the eyes of a Trinitarian God, where there is unity in one being, yet the body distinctly needs different portions in which to act and be. This is an interesting interpretation between Jerome and Augustine, one that highlights the unified nature of all, but attempts to define why distinctions still exist in the world. This interpretation is one to note and hold in our minds as we seek to understand our own nature, and the nature of God, as we explore the realm of sex and gender binaries.

What about the text itself? What is there to learn from it and what can that learning tell us about these different interpretations that have appeared over time? One important aspect of the text to note is how the divisions are described. In verse 28, the first two divisions are presented as a neither/or- no longer Jew *or* Gentile, no longer slave *or* free; yet, the third, which is vitally important to our own study, presents the divisions as a neither/and- no longer male *and* female. Why this difference in presentation? This is sometimes understood as Paul’s way to mirror the text of Genesis 1:27, the creation of humanity, in his interpretation of Galatians.¹³ If this is true, then this passage affirms the sexless, genderless, binariless nature of God and humanity that we laid out in our exploration of Genesis. Others have interpreted this textual element in other ways: as an

¹² Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture. New Testament 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 129.

¹³ Frank J. Matera and Daniel J. Harrington, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina Series 9, Galatians (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 142–43.

idealistic declaration to end sexism and discrimination, an early formula for a baptismal prayer, as a futuristic glimpse of the kingdom of God in relationship to divisions, and, most importantly for our study, as a way of salvation for the present, meaning that freedom from these binaries is possible now because we are baptized into the future and ever present Kingdom of God through the grace of Jesus.¹⁴

Several of these interpretations and understandings of Galatians connect well with Gregory of Nyssa's own understanding of the text. Referring back to his quote connecting the Genesis passage with Galatians, he notes the commonality of these two parts of Scripture, noting the conflicted nature of humanity's creation and what that implies of God. This parallels other scholars' interpretation of Paul and the connection between these two portions of Scripture. He also speaks of a double creation, the first being our perfected state and the second, the lesser form that reflects binaries and sex.¹⁵ This take in some ways connects to Luther's own understanding of creation- a unity as God holds, one, but distinct in persons as well. Gregory's own take on this text implies two states of being in humanity, our original created state and the lesser state from which sex and gender enter into creation. If this interpretation is followed through in relationship with Genesis, it shows that through Christ, humanity's original sexless, genderless, binariless nature is reaffirmed and revealed. Through Christ, humanity is free to enter back into our natural state, which reflects the nature of God. This is where Gregory and Augustine disagree on interpretation. Augustine would argue that this transformation does occur, but not in this world. Gregory, on the other hand, holds a more grace filled understanding, one that holds space of the possibility that these

¹⁴ Newsom and Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary*, 425.

¹⁵ Louth, Conti, and Oden, *Genesis 1-11*, 35.

boundaries can be erased in the present form of the Kingdom of God. It is this interpretation that we latch onto for our argument and take forward in our study.

It is clear from this brief exploration that this text has brought about various and diverse ways of interpretation, all that hold weight and lean into the conversation around sex and gender. Some support the interpretive view we are taking and exploring, while others seek to undermine this view of Scripture and would critique certain interpretive elements of Scripture interpretation. This is important to note as we continue, as these critiques will come, due to the seemingly radical nature of this study. Yet, as we see in this very brief study, there is a vast array of interpretation on these two texts, in which our interpretation is not alone and, in many ways, is supported and argued by key theologians and scholars throughout the Church's history. The presence of these interpretations over time should embolden us on our journey, to continue the work that has already been undertaken (even if this path is not exactly what they might have had in mind), to stand strong in our exploration, knowing that this pathway is not new for the Church and has existed from the beginning. With this brief Scripture overview in our pocket, let us begin to explore the work of Gregory of Nyssa and see where his own thoughts on Trinity and human nature will take us.

Chapter 2: Gregory of Nyssa

...the youngest of all the so-called Cappadocians, and simultaneously the most elusive and compelling...a writer of astonishing spiritual insight, philosophical sharpness, and theological complexity, an ascetic guide to the exigencies of ‘desire’ who had no fear of the sexual act, and whose musings on the goals of ‘contemplation’ are shot through with reflections on gender transformation and fluidity.¹⁶

–Sarah Coakley

Throughout the course of history, Gregory of Nyssa has been seen as a complex figure within many parts of the Church. His expansive writings on major doctrines of the faith, such as the Trinity and the understanding of Christ, his in-depth biblical exegesis in his letters and sermons, along with his exploration of language and monasticism, have left behind an enduring, confusing, legacy in which the Church has sought to engage and grapple with. Within the last century, Gregory has received a renewed interest among Church theologians and biblical scholars, spurred on by his unique and biblically grounded understanding of God’s fluid nature and his exploration around the use of language in discussing God.¹⁷ It is this renewed interest in Gregory’s work that has inspired many critical examinations of how language is used in describing human and God experiences, in connection to our understanding of God’s very nature. Let us now dive briefly into two of his works- *Ad Ablabium* and his homilies on the Song of Songs- and explore this use of language and imagery in relationship to God and human self.

Ad Ablabium is a response letter that was written to a correspondent of Gregory’s, Ablabius, to provide a defense of the unified, yet Trinitarian form, of God. During the

¹⁶ Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* (Oxford ; New York: University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁷ Ludlow, 2–3.

time period in which this letter was written, 375 A.D., the Church found itself engulfed in many different variations and interpretations of who God is and how the unity of God is affirmed, with the knowledge of God's Triune state of being. Some portions of the community came to the conclusion that God is not unified, but consists entirely of three separate gods—a heresy that Gregory sought to snuff out by this letter to Ablabius. In his writing, he presents the example of three men and their nature to underscore the unity, yet distinctiveness of the Godhead nature. Gregory argues that “man” has one nature that all who are human share. This nature does not change when we begin to talk about specific humans (Luke, Stephen, John, Mary, Sarah, Elizabeth, etc.); rather, the nature between them remains the same, but human language requires us to name them as individuals, as there would be confusion to refer to each of them as “man” when brought together in a group. Yet, by naming them separately, we are not saying that they each have a different fundamental nature— they still maintain a unified nature as “man”, or as we would say today, “humanity.”¹⁸ Simply, Gregory's argument states that the nature of "man" is not tied to the multiplicity of it, meaning that it doesn't matter how many different “men” gather, their nature as "man" never changes. This example provides an image to understand the unified, yet Triune nature of God, in which God's nature is affirmed as unified and still presents the reality of three persons within that unity.

Understanding the limitations of human language when describing God, Gregory explores two linguistic characteristics that impact his example: the term "Godhead", and the singular use of the term “God” over the plural use of the term “gods.” In his

¹⁸ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1952), 332–33.

explanation of the term “Godhead”, he explores how the term encompasses the full operation and nature of God, while, at the same time, does not actually define what that nature is, reflecting accurately our human incapacity to fully grasp God’s true nature.¹⁹ Thus, he argues that the term Godhead is appropriate to use to describe God, as any other way we seek to describe God is limited and only narrowly focuses on one or two specific elements of God’s full nature. Continuing his exploration of language around God, he presents a defense of using the singular term “God” for God, over the plural. In his defense, he utilizes the example of gold, which is always described in the singular, but can refer to one piece of gold or many pieces of gold. It is Gregory’s assertion that this is how God is, because God’s nature, like gold, never changes, and yet, there can be much of it, and used in diverse ways.²⁰

In this way, Gregory continues his exploration on the limitations of human language to accurately embody the full being we refer to as God. In discussing the difference between “man” and “men” in his original example, he writes of the linguistic confusion between an individual “man” and a group of “men” (a confusion that continues into the idea of Godhead and singular vs. plural usage of “God”); both have the same nature (both are “man”), yet are distinct at the same time (the “man” Luke is different from the “man” Stephen).²¹ This ambiguousness in human language, according to

¹⁹ Schaff and Wace, 5:332–33.

²⁰ Schaff and Wace, 5:335. Here, the analogy of gold highlights the particularity of God, within the universality of God. Simply stated, the nature of gold does not change, nor does the language around gold change, no matter the amount, number, or shape of gold that is present. Yet, the shape and form that gold can take on expresses particularity-diversity in the wholeness (gold as bracelets, rings, necklaces, gold leaf, etc.). Thus, gold shows how the singular term “Gold” can be use to express the unity of gold’s nature, all while affirming its diversity, its particularity, as well.

²¹ Schaff and Wace, 5:332.

Gregory, leads to confusion and misunderstanding when human language is used to describe God, Her nature, and said language is understood as fully capable of grasping the fullness of said nature. He writes:

We...following the example of Scripture, have learnt that that nature [God's nature] is unnamable and unspeakable, and we say that every term either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed explanatory of our conceptions of the Divine Nature, but does not include the signification of that nature itself.²²

The point that Gregory is presenting here is that human language, while it holds space and ability to describe the nature of God, such as the example of “man” and “men” he provides, lacks in its fundamental state the ability to name the full essence of God's nature. Human language is incapable of fully embodying God.

Here we begin to gain a sense of how Gregory thinks and relates to God. While he utilizes language in his writings about God, his understanding that language is limiting frees him to explore diverse ways to discuss and depict God. This explains his fluidity in language to discuss and present God in his writings, which we begin to see here, and see more fully in his commentaries on the Song of Songs. His writings on the Song of Songs highlight his embracing of diverse and fluid imagery to describe and depict God's presence in the world. In his fourth homily, he describes God's presence in the world as an archer and arrows:

...the bride praises the bowman for his good marksmanship because it hits her with his arrow. The bride says ‘I am wounded with love’. These words indicate that the bridegroom's arrows have penetrated the depths of her heart. The archer of these arrows is love who sends his own ‘chosen arrow’, the only-begotten Son, to those who are saved, dipping the triple-

²² Schaff and Wace, 5:332.

pointed tip of the arrow in the Spirit of life. The tip of the arrow is faith, and by God introduced the archer into the heart along with the arrow.²³

This example of describing God, while gendered in presentation, does present a different way to envision God, mainly in a loving, sexualized way-i.e. penetrating the depths of her heart, archer as love, the bride's proclamation of love. This imagery also adapts the traditional idea of bride and bridegroom for God and the Church, reshaping its presentation into a more sexualized, fluid description of God.

This sexualized way of depicting God is also seen in Gregory's first homily, where he imagines God as a fountain:

The fountain is the bridegroom's mouth from which the words of eternal life well forth. It fills the mouth drawn to it...Since it is necessary for the person drawing water from a fountain to apply his mouth to his mouth, and since the Lord himself is a fountain...the thirsty soul wishes to bring its mouth to the mouth that springs up with life and says: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.'²⁴

As in the imagery of the archer, God is understood here in a loving, sexualized way, particularly in how the fountain is described as a mouth that needs to be kissed. What differs is that, while gendered, this imagery of God queers how most of the world thinks of God- as a heterosexual being. Gregory writes of God in the masculine gender here, but also refers to humankind in masculine gender as well, thus presenting a homoerotic image of God with humanity.

Queering things further, Gregory writes of God in his second homily as "a teacher [who] should correctly begin his presentation of the good with an explanation for his pupils...They prefer to see it as grace flowing from the bridegroom's spiritual breasts.

²³ Gregory and Casimir McCambley, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, Mass: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 103.

²⁴ Gregory and McCambley, 51.

Thus they say, ‘We will love your breasts more than wine, because righteousness has loved you.’”²⁵ In this depiction of God, the queering extends to include transgender imagery. The teacher, God, is presented in a masculine gender, yet is physically described as possessing spiritual breasts, a strong image of transgender identity and a bending of the sex binary, not at all following the traditional cisgendered idea of understanding God. Put together with the other examples of Gregory’s imagery of God, we begin to see how he bends, molds, and diversifies his language when describing God, creating space beyond the accepted language about God at that time, exploring understandings of the Holy that lays outside of the binaries set up by human understanding.

Gregory in his third homily writes, “Jesus... is not the same in every person... Christ is never seen with the same form upon the vine, but he changes his form with time—now budding, now blossoming, now mature, now ripe and finally as wine.”²⁶ This imagery of God as an ever changing vine embodies what, I believe, Gregory is presenting in his other images of God. His concept that language limits our understanding of God freed him in his writing to expand the language that is used in relationship to God. Referring to God as actions, inanimate objects, in heterosexual, in homosexual, and in transgender identities (though Gregory himself would not have this particular language to describe these images in this way), he presents a fluid understanding of God to his readers, one that is constantly changing, appearing different to each person, just as his imagery of God as the vine is constantly changing and developing.

²⁵ Gregory and McCambley, 60.

²⁶ Gregory and McCambley, 87.

This limitation of human language is also important to note, as it underscores our inability, as humans, to use human made language and symbols to fully express and understand God's full nature. This is something Gregory understood and strived to open up in his writings on God, as evidenced by his diverse ways of depicting God. These fluid images of God open the conversation to explore how our language has limited our constructs of God and of ourselves. Rather than accepting them as absolutes, Gregory's diverse language about God pushes the Church to embrace a more fluid, expansive understanding of God, one that is not as limited by our concepts of language and imagery. He presents this well when describing the relationship between the Trinity. He writes:

But in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origins from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.²⁷

In this description of the Trinity and its function, Gregory inherently notes the permanent relationship and co-workings of the Godhead. Not one part of the Godhead can move and be without the other two moving and being with it. This explanation of divine relationship, traditionally founded and based in centuries of Church teaching on the Trinity, inherently challenges the idea of natural binary, which the Church and humanity has come to believe exists, specifically in relation to sex, sexuality, and gender. This is something that Sarah Coakley picks up and explores in her own writings about the Trinity, a connection we will explore later on.

²⁷ Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 5:334.

This expansion and fluidity in Gregory's language for God reflects this deeply held theology of the Holy Trinity. Gregory's theology of the Holy Trinity is squarely centered on the unified, co-dependent nature of God. He presents the Trinity in a way that names the three portions of the Trinity, without dividing the very nature of God's being.²⁸ There is dependence among the three: one cannot act, exist, or be without the other two, the nature is unified. This way of describing the Trinity is orthodox teaching in the Church and appears in the teachings of major theologians, such as Augustine. Augustine writes, "all the Catholic interpreters of the divine books...who wrote about the Trinity, which is God, had this purpose in view...the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit constitute a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality."²⁹ While there are differences in approach and argument about how to describe and obtain knowledge of this unified, triune nature-some starting with the one nature and go to the three, others from the three to the one- the goal remains the same. God is understood as one God, distinct in personhood within that unity.

Yet, within this understanding that Gregory presents, he provides an opening to see the genderqueer and non-binary aspects of God's nature. Gregory understood that human made concepts and constructs, such as language, are incapable of fully reflecting God's nature. While other early Church theologians such as Augustine may agree theoretically with this claim, Gregory's imagery and writing about God fully embodies this understanding and expresses the binary crossing nature of God. The idea of natural binary presumes what it means: there are only two sides of the spectrum. Yet, as a

²⁸ Schaff and Wace, 5:334.

²⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, Fathers of the Church, v. 45 (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of American Press, 1963), 10.

Christian, to accept the Trinitarian understanding of God is to automatically deny this binary way of thinking, because in God's nature, there is always one action occurring, but occurring and being done through the work of three parts. No matter what the action or state of being, there is always a second to parallel the movement, and a third to cross that parallel- basically, crossing over a binary.

Brian Daley explores this binary crossing briefly when he describes Gregory's approach to understanding the Incarnation. Focusing in on the personhood of Jesus, Daley names something that is implicit in Gregory's understanding of God becoming flesh: it is a form of transformation, which reflects our unity and being in union with the Godhead, the Holy Trinity. He writes, "the point of the Incarnation...is that the human nature of Jesus, as the 'first fruits' of a redeemed humanity, should gradually lose the distinguishing characteristics of our fallen race-corruptibility, mortality, the capacity to change for the worse- and take on the characteristics of the divine nature."³⁰ Innate in the personhood of Jesus is a God that crosses binaries; in this case, the binary of heaven and earth, human and divine. As Daley highlights above through Gregory's understanding of Jesus, this binary crossing power of God flows directly from the nature of the Holy Trinity, alongside the understanding that humanity is called and made to be a part of that same nature, being enabled to reflect God's image in our own being. Essentially, Jesus, being a reflection of both the divine and humanity, highlights the binary crossing work that God is enabled to do through the Trinity; we, humanity, made in God's image, are also enabled and called to this binary crossing nature.³¹

³⁰ Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 69.

³¹ This theological claim comes from Genesis 1, where humanity is presented as being made in the image of God. This particular Scripture passage provides context and

It is this calling that David Hart highlights in Gregory's writings. By examining Gregory's idea of humanity being one of the same nature as God, he underscores the mirroring power of humankind. He writes:

Human nature, says Gregory, is a mirror that takes on any appearance, bears the impression of any form, and is moulded solely by the determinations of free will...the lower creation, able to reflect what only humanity reflects, was subjected to the deformity that human nature conceived in itself when it turned towards sin...Now, when our nature draws near to Christ, it becomes beautiful with the reflection of his beauty.³²

Here, Hart aids us in understanding Gregory's understanding of the Holy Trinity in relationship to humanity. He proposes that humanity, made in God's image, is able to reflect what we are turned towards, whether that is sin, holiness, or somewhere in-between. Yet, this ability in humanity comes from the binary crossing reality of the Trinity, which enables us, made in God's image, to progress over these binaries as well. This reflects a genderqueer approach to our understanding of self- a being that is not one part of a binary over the other, but a culmination and fluid gathering of both ends, constantly changing and sliding between the two poles. Just as the nature and actions of God are always a culmination of the Trinity, fluctuating between the three, so does the nature of humanity also include this fluctuation in self-understanding and presentation. Thus, we begin to see how the Triune nature of God, as Gregory presents, displays the ability of God to fluidly move along binaries, as well as cross over and thoroughly disrupt binaries- both genderqueer and non-binary.

grounding for the argument I am developing in this thesis. Though not explicitly named in the text above, Genesis 1 is the foundation for my argument that humanity is made in God's image and reflects the Triune nature of God.

³² Coakley, *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, 119–20.

Throughout this section, we have dived briefly, but deeply, into the mind and writings of Gregory of Nyssa. Through his writings, we have explored his understanding of language limitation in relationship with God, which informed his particular choice of language and imagery in reflecting on God's nature. We also used these images to explore Gregory's concept of the Holy Trinity, how he believes that unified relationship functions, and how that understanding of God presents an inherent queerness when it comes to binaries, specifically, for the sake of our study, gender and sex binaries. We then grounded his work by turning to other theologians who have engaged his writing and theology of the Holy Trinity. By exploring their understanding of Gregory, we gained a broader and deeper sense of Gregory's understanding of God, specifically in relationship to humanity and the binary queering nature of God. With these explorations in mind, we now turn to the theological work of Sarah Coakley, who deeply explores the mind of Gregory and lays out a foundation for the queering nature of God, which she also finds, displayed in his works.

Chapter 3: Sarah Coakley

But what *is* gender, in any case, and why does it matter?...gender ‘matters’ primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship*- first and foremost to God, but also to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human’s role as made in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1.26-7).³³

–Sarah Coakley

Described as a bridge builder “between the naïve prephilosophical version of crucial beliefs and current work on feminist theology”³⁴, Sarah Coakley, professor at the University of Cambridge, has contributed substantially to the theological conversations around the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, its relationship to gender and sex, and to humanity’s understanding of relationship with God within gendered and sexualized binaries. Her works, *Powers and Submissions* and *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, both provide deep insight into her unique understanding of the Holy Trinity and the relationship between God and human sexuality. Her edited work *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* also reflects this contribution, while reexamining the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. Here, she explores the themes and strands we ourselves explored in the previous chapter, offering her own unique take on Gregory’s work and connecting it with her own writing, creating a continuing discourse about the Holy Trinity and its connection to sex, gender, and binaries. Let us begin by exploring her understanding of Gregory and dive into how this understanding contributes and drives her own theological work.

³³ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay “on the Trinity”* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 52–53.

³⁴ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), Back Cover.

Throughout her work on Gregory, Coakley's main focus has remained on reimagining his contributions to the world of gender/sexuality studies and Trinitarian studies.³⁵ Particularly, she turns to his writings in *Ad Ablabium* and his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* to explore his usage of expansive imagery for God and his study of humanity in relationship to the Holy Trinity. She argues that, while his Trinitarian defense in *Ad Ablabium* was and is an important contribution to the study of God, it has "achieved a false dominance, both in certain English patristic textbooks and in important ecumenical debates,"³⁶ in explaining and expounding upon his understanding of the Trinity and the language used to discuss God. Coakley counters that this text, seen in relationship with his other works, such as his homilies on the Song of Songs, reveals a more fluid and expansive understanding of God than what is solely presented in *Ad Ablabium*. To defend this assertion she writes,

As Gregory puts it...in the seventh *Homily* [on the Song of Songs], 'Both terms [mother and father] mean the same, because the divine is neither male or female.' If we return to the 'three men' analogy with these deeper thoughts in mind, it will become abundantly clear...that we need a broader base from which to assess the full significance of Gregory's trinitarianism, and its fascinating...connections to gender issues...³⁷

She begins to present this evidence of a fuller understanding of the Trinitarian God by weaving together Gregory's multiple works, highlighting the fullness of his understanding of God and revealing new insights about how he understood God's Trinitarian nature. She begins this work by refuting the argument that Gregory was/is a "social" Trinitarian.

³⁵ Coakley, *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, 10.

³⁶ Coakley, 10.

³⁷ Coakley, 10–11.

Unlike many theologians, who categorize Gregory as a “social” Trinitarian, Coakley argues the opposite, that Gregory’s theology expresses more of a unified understanding of God. She explains that, once looking at his full body of work, it becomes clear that he naturally starts from the unified one and then moves to the three, not from the three and moving to the one, as he presents in *Ad Ablabium*, which was a particular response against heresies of his time.³⁸ To defend her claim, Coakley explores how his “favored analogies for the Trinity stress the indivisibility of the ‘persons’ and even a certain fluidity in their boundaries,”³⁹ including his imagery of God as a spring of water and, as an example, the rainbow.

Here the ‘light from light’ of the Creeds is given the more colourful, and also directionally reflexive, imagery of the ‘bow’: ‘When the sunbeam...then causes its own circle to impinge in a straight line upon a particular cloud, there occurs a sort of bending of the light and its returns upon itself...when the rays of all the colours are seen together, they are both distinct and yet at the same time filch from our view the points of their juncture with one another.’⁴⁰

Here, Coakley highlights Gregory’s starting point with the unity of God, a stream of light, then working outwards towards the distinct nature of the Trinity, the rainbow affect of colors, the opposite approach of what he presents in *Ad Ablabium*.

From this and other later descriptions of God, Coakley then identifies how Gregory, rather than displaying complete equality within the three persons, actually expresses, orders, and presents a hierarchical understanding of the Trinity, one that begins with God the “Father” (the Creator), then flows down to the “Son”, finally ending with the Holy Spirit. Quoting Gregory from his writing *Life of Moses*, Coakley writes,

³⁸ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 117–24.

³⁹ Coakley, 121.

⁴⁰ Coakley, 121.

“One must *first* be enlightened by the Spirit, in order to ascend to the Son and thence to the Father.”⁴¹ This sudden departure from Gregory’s more ordered understanding of God conflicts with much of his writings on the Trinity, thus causing Coakley to question how one handles these apparent conflicting statements. Her way of ferreting out his foundational understanding of God is to turn towards his “wilder Trinitarian analogies of those later writings [where]...archers and arrows, winds and billowing sails, and human erotic lovers become the new analogies for the freedom of inner-trinitarian relations.”⁴² It is here that Coakley begins to explore the importance of Gregory’s understanding of the Trinity to gender and sexual understandings of humanity.

Coakley writes,

The perplexing fluidity of gender reference which characterizes Gregory’s trinitarian discussions as a whole...demonstrates how unwise it is to dislocate trinitarian debates from the matrix of human transformation that is that Trinity’s very point of intersection with our lives. If Gregory is right...such transformation is unthinkable without profound, even alarming shifts in our gender perceptions, shifts which have a bearing as much on our own thinking about God as on our own understanding of ourselves.⁴³

In this statement, Coakley seeks to illuminate for other theologians the importance of reading Gregory’s works within the confines of human interaction with God. In fact, what she discovers and argues from Gregory’s writings and imagery is that the Trinity is inherently connected to human gender and sexuality, constantly reflects human interactions with the Divine, and is able to illuminate the deeper nature of humanity, in relation to gender and sex.

⁴¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 287–88.

⁴² Coakley, 288.

⁴³ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 112.

Coakley begins to present her defense of this stance by exploring Gregory's language for God in relationship with Scripture, specifically Genesis 1 and Galatians 3:28. Coakley writes,

Taking Galatians 3.28 as a text to play off *against* this...Gregory argues that Genesis 1.27 should be taken in two parts, as the Hebrew text itself suggests: first a non-physical, non-sexed, angelic creation; and only then, with the Fall becoming imminent, sexual differentiation. (Thus on this view, note, gender differentiation into two is implicitly connected with moving towards the fallen state.)⁴⁴

By focusing in on the first creation story, Coakley reveals in Gregory's works that humanity's original nature, which is made to reflect God, the Holy Trinity, presents no giving of gender or sex. Those designations do not come until later on in the creation of humanity. Coakley continues, "For in prioritizing Genesis 1 over Genesis 2 in this way, Gregory seems to be implying that the binary gender difference does not play the *defining* role in our true spiritual-or even bodily-identity at all."⁴⁵ Here, she begins to highlight Gregory's focus on humanity's first nature, the God image bearing nature we were first given at creation. In it, she underscores the genderless and sexless nature of humanity when first created, an image of God and humanity that is rarely recognized, but is clearly presented in the works of foundational Church theologians and Scripture. This is an important development to note for our discussion around gender and sex binaries. If these binary concepts were not given to humanity in the beginning of our creation, where might they come from? This idea is to be explored later.

Expanding her argument, Coakley explores how this genderless and sexless nature is displayed in Gregory's writings on the Trinity, particularly in how he uses

⁴⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 281.

⁴⁵ Coakley, 282.

diverse language to disrupt normative narratives around referring to God with one sex or gender. In studying his imagery of God as Wisdom and as Bridegroom, Coakley emphasizes the role reversals that are played within the imagery- Christ first being Sophia and humanity being the Bridegroom, only to have the roles reversed within the imagery. She writes,

...Gregory charts a symbolic gender reversal...the gender fluidity that Gregory charts at the *human* level of transformation finds also its metaphysical counterpart, secondly in God. Whilst Sophia (Christ) is being actively courted by the soul, she is described as a 'manly woman'; but when the soul adopts the darkened epistemological state of active receptivity, Christ becomes the bridegroom seeking *her*.⁴⁶

Here we see the presentation of God as fluid in nature, a Holy Trinity in full relationship with humanity, that is not tied down to gendered or sexed roles. The language that Gregory utilizes and Coakley analyzes shows the freedom of God from these concepts and, through the understanding that humanity is made in God's image, the freedom humanity itself has from the same concepts and binaries.

This freedom from binaries and constraints continues in Gregory's writings when we begin to describe the person of the Creator in relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Coakley writes, "In the seventh Homily the bridegroom's *mother* is aligned with God the Father: Gregory explains that the names 'father' and 'mother' are effectively the same in meaning...In the fifteenth Homily the Holy Spirit is perceived as a dove who is also mother of the bride."⁴⁷ Here, following the logic of Galatians 3:28⁴⁸, where humanity

⁴⁶ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 127–28.

⁴⁷ Coakley, 128.

⁴⁸ As this particular Scripture passage alludes to the falling away of boundaries and concepts in Christ, it is important to note here the ever present work of the Trinity in this falling away as well. Using the trinitarian logic presented by Gregory, the work of one part of the Trinity implicitly engages and involves the other two parts of the Trinity, thus

in Christ is made “neither male nor female”, Coakley lays out the fluidity of language and imagery that Gregory uses for the different persons of the Trinity. In this ever changing language, Coakley presents the idea that Gregory is intentionally challenging and disrupting gender stereotypes, of humanity and God, in order to highlight the deeper spiritual journey that leads to oneness with God.⁴⁹ Whatever this journey looks like for the individual is not the question here, but the result is particularly pertinent to our discussion. If, as Coakley argues, Gregory is presenting this way of thinking in terms of gender and sex, then it truly revolutionizes our way of thinking about humanity and God. Taking this radical, challenging notion about gender, God, and humanity and viewing it with the Scriptural witness in Genesis and Galatians, Gregory and Coakley both present a strong argument for the initial absence of gender and sex in humanity in the beginning, as well as God’s freedom from these same binary concepts. Thus, God appears to present Godself as very genderqueer-not ascribing to one over the other, but a constantly changing culmination of both.

This revelation and exploration of Gregory’s work has deeply impacted Coakley’s own exploration of the Trinity, in which she continues to tackle the challenge of freeing humanity and our ideas of God from the grip of an inflexible gender binary. She develops her own theology of the Trinity by exploring the natural presence of the Trinity, three persons in one being, and utilizes this reality to explore what is natural and what is unnatural in our worldviews of sex and gender. She also explores the boundary

making it a full action of the unified Godhead. Thus, the assertion can be made, and is made, that in God, all of these concepts and boundaries fall away when we are unified in our nature with God.

⁴⁹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, 128.

crossing nature of Christ within the relational being of the Godhead, highlighting what this action means for our understanding of God and self. She writes,

So this irreducible threeness in God cannot be insignificant for the matter of gendered twoness, since the human is precisely made ‘in God’s (Trinitarian) image’, and destined to be restored to that image...in Christ, I meet the human One who, precisely in the Spirit, has effected that interruptive transfiguration of twoness...In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not re-establish the boundary as before, but nor...does he destroy it; rather, we might say he ‘transgresses’ it in the Spirit...I now suggest...the interruptive work of the trinitarian God does not obliterate the twoness of gender, either, but precisely renders it subject to the labile transformation of divine desire...whatever this redeemed twoness is...it cannot be the stuck, fixed, repressive twoness of the *fallen* ‘gender binary’.⁵⁰

As Coakley presents here in her understanding of the Trinity, the inherent threeness of God is reflected in our natural state of being, not the artificial state of twoness that humanity has chosen to ascribe to. This has earthshattering ramifications for our human understanding of gender, sex, and their relationship to God and humanity. Where Gregory’s work above points to a genderqueer view of God, Coakley’s work continues and points us to a deepening of that understanding, specifically to a boundary crossing God, in the personhood of Jesus: a non-binary God.

Yet, within Coakley’s own work on freeing ourselves from these binaries, I argue that she has fallen prey to them still in her final interpretation of the boundary crossing nature of God and humanity. While I fundamentally agree with her conclusion that God renders gender and sex to God’s notions and reality of relationship, I disagree that that conclusion means that the binary system of sex and gender are not destroyed in Christ. Not only does this conclusion refute the witness of Scripture in Genesis 1 and Galatians 3:28, it refutes the work of God in disrupting the false narrative of binaries existing in the

⁵⁰ Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self*, 56–57.

first place. Coakley's own work points to the understanding that gender and sex always have been vital and connected to the Trinitarian nature of God. To say that Christ transfigures our binaries, but does not destroy them fundamentally denies this relationship with God at its core. For these binaries to still exist, even transformed, is to still live in a false, incomplete narrative about God and about ourselves, humanity, made in God's image. Until we embrace this socially radical way of understanding gender and sex in relationship to God, which Gregory and Coakley both present- our queerness of gender and sex, to see beyond the male/female binary, the masculine/feminine binary- then humanity and God will still be limited and held hostage to a broken way of being.

In this section, we have explored with Coakley her innovative work with Gregory of Nyssa. This has included exploring how the Church has understood Gregory's trinitarian theology, refuting the claim of social trinitarianism, exploring Coakley's interpretation of this theology, and illuminating how this theology plays out in his description and language of God. Coakley's writing reveals a deeper sense of Gregory's theology in relationship to gender and sex, highlights intentionality of this in his writing, and leads her to explore these revelations in her own theology of the Holy Trinity. In her own exploration, she takes Gregory's thinking and expands it to explore the naturalness of the Trinity in humankind, the power behind Christ's boundary crossing nature, and the implications of this threeness and boundary crossing on human understanding of self and God. We concluded this section by engaging Coakley's own theology of God, applauding the innovative work she presents, while highlighting her conclusions attachment still to the binary system way of thinking about God, humanity, sex, and gender. It is at this crux of attachment, even after it being refuted in God's nature, that we begin to turn away

from systematic theology and turn towards the foundations of Queer theory, in the writings of Michel Foucault, to explore the origins of the binary systems we find ourselves imprisoned to.

Chapter 4: Michael Foucault

“It seems that Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical interweaving of the discourse of religion and sexuality has opened a Pandora’s box few wish to explore; it appears to threaten both those inside and outside religious worldviews...Foucault [has] exposed the ‘queer’ world of Christianity and sex.”⁵¹

–Jeremy Carrette

Michael Foucault, a French philosopher of the 20th century, is key to uncovering the full extent of the artificial binaries of sex and gender that we find enmeshed in the Church and in Western societies influenced by the Church throughout past centuries. His writings, which focus on power and knowledge in society, particularly around sex and gender, have deeply influenced the conversation around these concepts and have propelled the study of them in feminist and queer theorist circles. While not all feminists and queer theorists would agree with the conclusions of his writings, myself included, his work has become fundamental to both of these fields, propelling them to explore more deeply the human understanding of sex and gender throughout time and how we, as human beings, reflect our own sex and gender in the world today. In his 3 volume work *The History of Sexuality*, he seeks to disprove the repressive hypothesis⁵², arguing for the

⁵¹ James William Bernauer and Jeremy R. Carrette, eds., *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 217.

⁵² According to Foucault, the repressive hypothesis states that sexual repression began to occur in the 17th century, under a growing bourgeoisie, limiting “deviant” sexual expression to confession and other contained acts. This containment led to an intake of power by certain institutions, which was/is used against the populous, in order to control and dominate them, alongside redefining sexual norms and behaviors to ensure power remains in the hands of these institutions/few individuals. Other scholars and thinkers

idea that power is held, expressed, and enforced in a dispersed state among many populations and societies, not through top down institutions and organizations. While I hold some issues with his conclusion and premise in this work (which I will not explore here), I do find his research and thoughts on human history compelling and useful in our own exploration of sex and gender in the world. Utilizing his writings in *The History of Sexuality*, we will explore his argument that sex and gender, as society now understands them, are artificial constructs that have been developed and upheld by many human institutions that seek/sought to hold societal power; specific to our study, we will focus on his exploration of the role of the Church in this power play, exploring the concept of confession in the Church and how it has been understood and used throughout time to develop such a power system. This brief exploration of Foucault's work, which we will ground in our theological conversation by exploring how other theologians have engaged his work, is extremely important for our study of God and humanity, as it provides us a vantage point in which to see how the Church has lived into and not lived into the very queer nature God has made us in. With these points of the journey in our minds, let us explore Foucault's understanding of sex and gender.

Foucault grounds his exploration of sexuality in the concepts of power and knowledge, arguing that sex and sexuality have been dominated and used to enforce power over peoples and communities, which has led to artificial ideas around sex to make this power enforceable. This domination and use of sexuality has led to its formation as a

would extend this definition beyond the timeline provided by Foucault, to include most, if not all, of human history. This more expansive definition would also claim that this hypothesis could include any form of the body that is being oppressed and dominated by power and institutions.

binary system, with those who conform to its understanding being rewarded and those who fall outside of it being subjected to punishment and societal distancing. This drive to control and guide humanity through sex has taken place in many institutions, but within the Western-influenced world, it has most fully played out through the Church, at least until the 18th and 19th centuries. While Foucault began this exploration further back in history, we pick up his journey in Europe from the Middle Ages onward, when the Church sought to define and control human sexuality through vocalizing and creating a discourse around it. Their goal, according to Foucault, was to define sex in such a way that all human sexual desires were channeled through the Church, their particular understanding of sex, and redirecting those desires to conform to the binaries defined by a patriarchal Church. The Church enforced such a moral sexual code through the sacramental practice of confession. He writes, “The seventeenth century made it into a rule for everyone...An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse...The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech.”⁵³ It is through this act of confession, in which a power relationship was established between the one who hears the confessions (the Church) and the confessor (laity), Foucault argues that the identity of the self was/is defined in relation to that power relationship. The Church held the ability to control and wield self-defining power over the individuals confessing their natures. By creating discourse around sexuality, by requiring individuals to confess their sexual natures, attitudes, and practices, the Church was enabled to define what the norm

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 20–21.

of sex was and, through that defining, what was and wasn't a part of God's original creation. The question that now arises for continued exploration in our study then becomes what caused the shift in the Christian understanding of our sex and gender natures in the first place? This question we will leave for another time.

Foucault's work continues by arguing that this defining discourse imbued the Church with considerable power over the sexual lives of people all across Europe. The sacramental act of confession not only created a defining of sexuality, it also provided the Church with a means in which to guide and reorient desires and sexual natures that they found threatening to the power they had established. Foucault writes,

...the Christian pastoral also sought to produce specific effects on desire, by the mere fact of transforming it...into discourse: effects of mastery and detachment...effect of spiritual reconversion, of turning back to God, a physical effect of blissful suffering from feeling in one's body the pangs of temptation and the love that resists it. This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn from three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself.⁵⁴

This reconversion and reorientation of human sexuality that Foucault writes of refers specifically to a herto-normative, cis-gender worldview, one where the male and female binary is the norm, where the masculine and feminine binary is stationary, no fluidity and very organized, thus easy to control and enforce. These desired norms, as set by the Church, do not reflect the created nature of humanity as found in scripture (see chapter one), but reflects the norms that a religious institution sought to create and use to maintain a power relationship over the communities which it served. The act of

⁵⁴ Foucault, 1:23.

confession, as Foucault has noted, worked within this power play and aided the Church in defining for the world around them what was good and what was evil in human sexuality and gender, putting the communities under the thumb of the Church and its power.

Yet, this unitary hold on power, the authority to define what self and sex was, did not remain completely with the Church. As the Middle Ages moved into the age of Enlightenment, this power to control and dominate the human narrative began to splinter into the hands of others, which in many ways maintained the same status quo around sex binaries, all while deepening the regulation of licit and illicit sexual behaviors of humanity in Western society. According to Foucault,

The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism. More precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified...⁵⁵

No longer did the Church have a universal hold on the human narrative of sexuality, but found itself sharing this role with other secular institutions—medicine, science, secular law, etc. This diversification led to a spreading of cultural power that established “Up to the end of the eighteenth century, three major explicit codes... [that] governed sexual practices: canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law. They determined, each in its own way, the division between licit and illicit.”⁵⁶ This division between “right” and “wrong” behaviors and natures took on new meaning in a world where power was shared between Church and State.

⁵⁵ Foucault, 1:33.

⁵⁶ Foucault, 1:37.

Before the power grab of the State, sexual practices and identities confessed to the Church were not legally punished or attacked. Rather, the goal was a reorientation of behavior and desire towards God.⁵⁷ One could have such desires, as long as one did not act on them. As Foucault mentioned above, it was seen by the Church as a spiritual practice to curb such desires for God. Yet, with power now being wielded by medicine and law, “An entire sub-race race was born, different...from the libertines of the past. From the end of the eighteenth century to our own, they circulated through the pores of society...”⁵⁸ Individuals who had been marginally accepted by the Church if they confessed and reoriented their desires to the set sexual norms, now found themselves ostracized by all of society, legislated against, hunted out, marked as ill or diseased—something to be studied. Punishment for sexual deviancy became a regular phenomenon, pushing many facets of human sexual and gender nature underground and defining it no longer as an act, but as a person. “This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts...The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case study...”⁵⁹ From this point forward, human sexuality and gender have been in constant struggle with the realignment of sexual norms from acts to personhood, from a penitent to a deviant. Likewise, as the Church’s authority and power around identity formation has shrunk and that power has been transferred to the State, the sex and gender binaries developed by the one are now being played out differently by the other, leading again to a changing

⁵⁷ Foucault, 1:18–19.

⁵⁸ Foucault, 1:40.

⁵⁹ Foucault, 1:42–43.

societal notion of sex and gender, based in these binaries, but utilized differently to exert more power and control over the populous.

As noted at the beginning of the chapter by Jeremy Carrette, most theologians and scholars dread addressing Foucault's works because they do inherently undermine and queer the dominant Christian understanding of self that has been developed over the centuries by this power dominating Church. Yet, engagement with this history is vital if we, as the Church of today, are to untangle sex and gender from power and return to our natural created being, as we have begun to explore in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Sarah Coakley. As humanity struggles with the shift in power noted above, theologians have begun to explore Foucault's contributions to our understanding the sexual self and how those sexual developments now impact the theology of the Church as we seek to unbind the binary norms that have been upheld for centuries.

Carrette's own theological exploration of Foucault's writings, which focus on unraveling the power-driven relationship between the Church's practices and the sexual body, lead him to affirm that "Foucault's genealogical methods prove[] effective in transforming and transgressing the hegemonic structures and destabilizing the essentialism of heterosexuality."⁶⁰ His direct engagement with Foucault's writings transforms how he approaches the act of theologizing and how he connects God with the human body, specifically on sex. In his exploration, Foucault's research guides his own study in modern sexual identity politics and leads Carrette to suggest that those who seek to critique the very sex binary system that dominates them, actually uphold the system as they seek to critique it. He writes,

⁶⁰ Bernauer and Carrette, *Michel Foucault and Theology*, 221.

What I am suggesting is that the discourse of sexuality is part of a Western Christian epistemology and that the complex cultural sites of sexual practices, including gay and lesbian identity, fetish culture, the power relations of sadomasochism and the leather scene, continue and perpetuate, despite being simultaneously points of internal resistance, the dualistic ideology of Christianity.⁶¹

It is from this point of contention in his research, brought about by Foucault's exploration of sex and power in history, that leads him to think theologically about an unsexed body, an ungendered body, as reflected in Gregory's own theological writings of humanity. Carrette argues that "Foucault...had begun to show that sexual identity was not liberating but a means of control... It was, as Foucault has indicated, not enough to liberate sexuality, what was required was to 'liberate ourselves...from the very notion of sexuality.'"⁶²

Here, Carrette's engagement with Foucault's philosophical work shows how influential the power systems that have been developed throughout history by the Church have influenced the way we understand and think about humanity and God in relation to sex and gender. Once we begin to examine our understanding of God and self with these power relationship and systems in mind, the truth about our created nature becomes easier to see. The control of the sexual body is revealed, its domination by the Church and State are drawn into the light, and the faithful begin to see how their identity of self and understanding of sex and gender are falsified, created only to bolster the power and control held by those who created the false narratives. Marcella Althaus-Reid picks up this theme in Foucault's work and utilizes his innovative exploration of sex in history to

⁶¹ Bernauer and Carrette, 220.

⁶² Bernauer and Carrette, 221.

present her own argument- that the Church's goal in exerting its power on the body has been to create a docile body, one that is easy to control. She writes,

Foucault has already unveiled, in his hermeneutics of desire, issues related to the sexual ethical embodiment of confession in relation to docility and other mechanisms of oppression internalized by the act of repressing the story and the identity of the Other in historical Christian confession. That unveils for us a crucial point, related to what Butler calls the localization of the heterosexual matrix, localized in our understanding of confession and in the role of the theologian as confessor. This matters because Christian ethics is a discourse concerned with the positioning of bodies dealing with bodies, and with the body of the sacred itself.⁶³

As Althaus-Reid points to in her exploration of Foucault's work, the act of confession has been a central location for the Church to exert power and control over the sexual Other, and over the human body. She prominently notes the connection of the human body with Christian ethics, drawing attention to the enmeshed relationship that human bodies have with our understanding of the Christian faith, our concepts of God, and how we ethically act in this world. In this way, she uses Foucault's work to underscore the damage that has been caused to the human self and body by the power grab of the Church. Althaus-Reid argues here that the damage done is far worse than a docile body, that

...Foucault's theory of the effects of dominant moral codes goes far beyond the effects of creating docility amongst bodies. Dominant moral codes are far more subtle and dangerous because they constitute the embodied ethos (and ethics) of the people who follow them. This is an ethics that is a hermeneutics, because its goal and objectives move around the re-interpretation of bodies.⁶⁴

The true danger in this power grab is not the docile human body, but in the reinterpretation of the body, in the redirection and reorientation of human desire, as

⁶³ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 14.

⁶⁴ Althaus-Reid, 18.

Foucault clearly claims in his writing. Using this portion of his work, Althaus-Reid states “The hermeneutics which are responsible for the self-induced formation of the body come, according to Foucault, from a dialectics of punishment and confession. Punishment is the violence to which bodies are subjected when contravening orders.”⁶⁵ The body is not just made docile, it is violently attacked and subjugated to the binaries and norms set by the power broker in the relationship- in this case, the Church and, later on, the State. Here, we begin to see how Althaus-Reid’s writings reveal the fundamental contributions of Foucault’s work in Christian theology, particularly in how it reveals the human body as being dominated and controlled by systems seeking power. The Church, utilizing the act of confession and its theological connections with the body, rather than affirm humanity’s created nature, chose to enforce its own interpretation of what the sexed and gender body should be, creating domination and violence against the body as God made it. This provocative work of Althaus-Reid would not have the impact it has if Foucault’s thoughts were not engaged in its writing.

In this brief overview of Foucault’s writing, we see how power has shaped and guided sex and gender norms throughout Western history and how the act of confession has been used by the institutional Church to shape and guide the understanding of the human body for centuries. In his work, Foucault presents a compelling argument for the current understanding of sex and gender in relation to the human body, how it has formed, and how it continues to be molded by other institutions that seek to exert power and control over people. The engagement of his work by other theologians, such as Jeremy Carrette and Marcella Althaus-Reid, highlight the important influences his

⁶⁵ Althaus-Reid, 18.

thoughts have on Christian theology and how his critical approach to examining power in relation to the human body is vital to our understanding of God and our created selves. Their own explorations of his work directly impact our study of human bodies and God's nature, deepening the need to engage his writing when exploring sex and gender in the Christian context. The human body, made in the Triune image of God, has been attacked, controlled, and misidentified by the Church itself as it sought power and control; this has led us to the place we now find ourselves-struggling to understand God and self because the original created self has become distorted and compromised by the binaries created in the throws of power domination and control. With this important history of sex and power in mind, let us begin to weave these three strands-Gregory of Nyssa, Sarah Coakley, and Michael Foucault- together and explore how they reveal to the Church today the genderqueer, non-binary nature of the Holy Trinity and of the human body.

Chapter 5: Weaving the Threads As One

God is GenderQueer, thus humanity is GenderQueer. God is Non-Binary, thus humanity is Non-Binary. These are the prophetic statements that launched this exploration into understanding God's triune nature and how humanity reflects that nature in itself. This exploration has led to some interesting areas of study: Scriptural witness, the writings of Gregory of Nyssa on the Trinity, the writings of Sarah Coakley on Gregory's work and her own understanding of the Trinity, and Michael Foucault's writings on the relationship between sex and power within the history of the Christian world. These areas of exploration, while different in how they approach the topic at hand, all relate to one another and, when pulled together into one conversation, begin to weave together an understanding of God's genderqueer, non-binary nature and delivers a strong argument to support humanity's understanding of self as mirroring this nature of the Triune God. Now that we have studied these foundational thoughts and materials, we now turn to weaving them together to present the argument for God's radical nature and our own radical nature, made in the image of God.

Scripture stands as a witness to the sexless/fluid, genderless/fluid, binary-crossing nature of God, as well as humanity's nature being made to reflect said nature of God. Genesis 1:26-31 provides knowledge of God's triune nature at the beginning of creation, which is of particular importance for this argument, as it provides evidence for two things: 1) God's triune nature has always existed and 2) humanity, created at this moment in history, is made in the image of this unified, yet triune nature of God. Exploring the passage deeper reveals the plurality and singularity of God's voice in the moments of

creation, speaking as a unified whole, yet still reflecting the triune nature within that voice. It is here that Scripture witnesses to the entrance of humanity into the world as a sexless/fluid, genderless/fluid, non-binary being, with sex and gender defining occurring after the initial creation. This two step creation reveals three things: 1) humanity's original nature at the moment of creation did not include defined sex and gender in the body, 2) this understanding of humanity's original nature affirms and reveals more clearly God's triune nature as beyond these concepts, and 3) that the binary concepts of sex and gender that are now used to define human nature are, in fact, artificial, not a part of our initial creation in God's image.

Galatians 3:27-28 picks up these threads in the New Testament and connect them with the personhood of Jesus. Here, Scripture testifies that, once baptized into the Body of Christ, all divisions cease and that we return to our natural, whole state given at the moment of creation. This implies returning to a human understanding of self that is not sex or gender defined, that is not trapped in a binary way of thinking, but reflects the genderqueer, non-binary nature we were given in the beginning. This implication is affirmed in Galatians when it specifically refers to the breaking down of division between male and female, as we explored earlier. Jesus is understood here as the Redeemer of the world, a person of the Holy Trinity providing us a return path back to our natural state of being, in returning to God and who God made us to be, as is witnessed in Genesis. This redemption became and becomes necessary because the world of humanity has not understood themselves and whom they are created in the image of. Instead, they are trapped within the artificial sex and gender binary that controls this world, as we explored with Foucault. This is seen in the complex conversations around human nature and in the

disagreement of great theologians across the history of the Church. Yet, this concept of the triune God being genderqueer and non-binary is not new; in fact, it is an understanding that has been present in the Church from the beginning, as evidenced in Gregory of Nyssa's own writings.

Gregory of Nyssa's writings express this understanding in the early Church that God is genderqueer- that God's nature cannot be defined by a human notion of binary around sex/gender/reality, but exists on a fluid continuum, which includes all the human expressions we have devised and the infinite expressions that are not understood or definable by human concepts and language. His depictions of God in his writings and how he explores examples of God named in Scripture underscore his argument that human language is finite, unable to express and name the full nature of the triune God; this finitude freed him to write about God in diverse ways, beyond the male-female binary, the masculine-feminine binary, beyond seeing and understanding God as a heterosexual, cis-gendered male. In the examples we explored, we see how Gregory spoke of and described God as male *and* female, heterosexual *and* homosexual, *as* non-binary (not expressing a gender or sex), *as* transgender, *as* cisgender, *as* inanimate objects, *as* actions, *as* erotic and sexual. Here Gregory, understanding the limited nature of human language and concepts in relationship to God, embraced the fullness of what those concepts can express, highlighting the fluid nature of God, of God's ability to flow from the feminine to masculine, from the heterosexual to the homosexual and all that is in between, to step out beyond these fluid binaries and be objects, actions, desires, emotions, and more. In this way, our argument for God's genderqueer nature becomes realized, shown and expressed in the examples offered by Scripture and in the writings of

Gregory of Nyssa, for if a finite human concept such as language can encompass God in this radical way, imagine what else about God's nature lies outside of that finitude. From these expressions in his writings and thoughts on God's nature, we then see the logical argument that humanity, made in the image of such a God, as named in Genesis, also expresses a genderqueer nature in our own being. Yet, Gregory's work does not just provide an avenue to explore God's genderqueer nature, but also provides an avenue to explore and name God's non-binary nature, through his understanding and theology of the Holy Trinity.

Gregory of Nyssa's theology around the triune nature of God is important for our case, as it provides an in-depth analysis of how the triune God interacts and supersedes human made constructs around sex and gender, all while disproving the claim put forth by some modern theologians that feminist and queer theologians are leaving behind the orthodoxy of the Church's thoughts about God and the human body. In his writings, Gregory emphasizes the interconnected nature of the Trinity, of how when one person of the Trinity acts, it inherently involves and connects to the other two persons in the Godhead. This emphasis makes clear that God, the unified whole, always acts as one, with all three members of this Holy Trinity involved in such action. This understanding of unified action highlights God's non-binary being, as there is never a binary that is being acted from. There are always the three persons present and working within the action of the one, emphasizing God's nature and presence in the world in a non-binary way. Connect this understanding from Gregory with the witness presented in Genesis around human creation being tied to the image of the triune God and our argument that humanity is also made to express non-binary nature becomes realized and embodied. As

Gregory makes his case for this understanding of the triune God, which is quite orthodox and well represented in many other theologians from the early Church, he also emphasizes again the inability of human language to describe, name, and capture the fullness of the Trinity, of the unified God. This work on the limitation of human language and his works on the Holy Trinity connects explicitly to the writings of Sarah Coakley, which have centered on exploring the contributions of Gregory of Nyssa's work to systematic theology and feminist and queer theology, specifically on the relationship between sexuality and gender to God's nature and being.

Sarah Coakley utilizes Gregory's works in her own writing on the Holy Trinity, connecting the theology and understanding of God in the early Church to the modern day believer. This connection from the early Church theologians to feminist and queer theologians today underscore the continuation of orthodox teaching that has occurred around this topic, though never lived into by the Church as we explored with Foucault, and highlights the importance of contributions by theologians such as Gregory and Coakley in teaching the Church a new, yet old, way of being in our bodies. In our exploration of Coakley, we studied her argument that Gregory presents and displays a more fluid and fuller understanding of God beyond a cis-gendered male image, within the finite concept of human language, a premise that I have affirmed in my own study of his work. Coakley then takes this exploration further by asserting that Gregory actively sought to dismantle and challenge the idea of an exclusively cis-gendered, heterosexual God through the use of his imagery of the Holy Trinity and pulling on Scriptural witness to back his assertions and writings. Making her own argument around sex and gender in relationship to human nature and God, she uses Gregory's thoughts on the falling away of

distinctions within the Trinity, as noted in his imagery in the Song of Songs and in the Scriptural witness in Galatians, to argue for and defend the center of our argument around human nature- that humanity was initially born without sex or gender distinction, born as androgynous, a sexual and gender fluid nature, yet not bound to any form of distinction or definement. Through her study, she asserts and provides support for the creation of humanity in the image of the Holy Trinity, which reflects a being beyond classification, yet can embrace fluidity in its own presence and being.

From this assertion and study, Coakley then expresses the argument that Gregory understands the Holy Trinity as a hierarchal being, with the Holy Spirit on the bottom, Christ in the middle, and our Father/Mother at the top. This is where I argue against Coakley's study of Gregory's work and assert that, rather than presenting a hierarchal Trinity, Gregory presents a Holy Trinity that is mutually balanced, always sharing and dispersing creative energy between the three persons in a fluid way, a way that reflects the fluid and non-binary nature of God, as evidenced in Scripture. This is an important distinction between Coakley and I, as we agree on many aspects of Gregory's writings and their contributions to the study of the Trinity and human nature. Yet, on this point, I contest that to present a hierarchal Trinity within Gregory's work would begin to dismantle and argue against the nature of God that Gregory sought to display within his writings and the presentation of the Holy Trinity she seeks to make in her own writings.

Even in this moment of disagreement, in her theologizing on the Holy Trinity she names an important aspect of the Trinity that provides strength to our argument- that there is no twoness (binary) in God's nature, but a holy threeness. Coakley asserts, as Gregory does in his writing, that the Holy Trinity requires the presence and work of all

three persons in any form of action or being. When the Creator acts, the Son and Spirit are presently at work as well. When the Son was crucified, so were the Creator and the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit breathed over the disciples at Pentecost, so did the Father/Mother and the Christ. Coakley and Gregory assert that in God's own being, there is no binary that exists because for that to exist, it would deny the equitable power and presence held within the Trinity. Thus, for our own argument, this strengthens our claim that humanity reflects a nature that is non-binary, which never had a true binary within our creation because it never existed within God's own nature. This is affirmed yet again in the Scriptural witness in Genesis and Galatians, in how distinction of human bodies did not occur at our initial creation and that, through the ministry of Jesus, those distinctions given to us by the world fall away and we return to our natural state of creation and being, the one that holds no distinction and reflects the genderfluid, non-binary nature of God, the Holy Trinity.

Yet, in this theologizing Coakley expresses the idea that the melting away of distinction, as named in Galatians, doesn't really happen in this world, but that, through the person of Jesus, are transformed into binaries that express a holy presence within the world. She argues this view of reality by exploring the transgressive power of Jesus, coming from heaven to earth and back again. She argues that this reflects God transforming binaries, breaking them and changing them, yet enabling them to continue to exist for God's own purpose. This in many ways harkens back to the assertions that Augustine makes in order to make sense of the continued presence of distinctions on earth, even after Christ's powerful presence. While I agree with her that the power of the Trinity breaking binaries and boundaries is reflected in the binary breaking act of Jesus

coming to earth, crossing the line of heaven and earth, mortal and divine, I do not agree that this means that binaries are then meant to remain in creation after such an act is done. I assert that the very act of Jesus crossing that binary reflects God's desire to break down the artificial binaries and distinctions humanity has placed upon itself, to call us home to our created being, where these distinctions do not exist. These binaries and distinctions remain in this reality, not because God wills them to be, but because of a broken world that seeks to continue dominating and holding power over creation, rather than be healed and return back to God. This is the pitfall that I believe that Coakley falls into at the end of her writing, the pitfall of believing that sex and gender binaries, while fluid and movable, are in some way a part of the original creation that God seeks to transform in the person of Jesus. She becomes trapped in the artificial mindset of sex and gender binaries that has dominated society for centuries. Here, she falls prey to the powers, named by Foucault, that have sought throughout the centuries to define and create discourse around sex and gender to assert control over bodies.

Coakley's and Augustine's assertions around the remaining of distinctions after one's baptism into Christ plays into the power domination that Foucault names in his research on the connection between power, knowledge, and sex. In his works, Foucault sought to disprove the repressive hypothesis by exploring the connection between the development of sex and gender discourse throughout human history. As previously named, I am not in agreement with Foucault in his analysis of the repressive hypothesis; yet I find his research, specifically around the power of the Church and the act of confession in formulating and creating false sex and gender binaries, compelling and important in grounding our conversation and exploration into God's nature and humanity's expression

of that nature in our own lived experiences. As is abundantly clear in the world around, sex and gender binaries have become a foundational part of the fabric of human society. This is due to the creation of discourse around sex and gender in order to create power dynamics, in which the few individuals/institutions, such as priests and the Church, hold the power to dominate, define, and control the conversation around sex and gender, thus able to control the bodies of others. Foucault's research reveals this development in action, particularly in the practice of Christian confession, in which sexual and/or gender acts that did not conform to norms set and controlled by the Church were deemed as sodomy, and thus needed to be confessed and reoriented to "proper" norms and behaviors. This act of confession perpetuated itself and the power that the Church held in defining sex and gender for so long in Western history; through confession, the priest and the Church were able to create binaries, define the human body, control the human body and, when the community members failed to follow those boundaries, they then had to confess them back to the Church, thus creating a power loop in which the ones hearing the confession held the power to dominate the one confessing their nature out loud.

This is an important aspect of Foucault's research to note, as it explains why human nature, as we have seen reflected in Genesis and Galatians, has not been seen reflected in the history of humanity. To fully live into our God ordained nature, made in the image of a genderqueer, non-binary Trinity, would mean being beyond the power and control of the Church and, later on in history, other societal institutions. Thus, those who seek to hold and maintain power never could allow such a true nature to be revealed and lived into. Foucault correctly notes that binaries and distinctions on the human body were developed in order to maintain a level of control and power over creation, to be a god in

this world and hold the power that humanity and the Church wished it could actually yield. Through the creation of a discourse around sex and gender, these power-wielding institutions broke down the wholeness of the human body, creating a binary centered on “right” and “wrong” behavior, “whole” and “broken” sexual nature, the artificial binaries of “straight” and “gay”, “male” and “female”. Power created the artificial binaries in which the world finds itself enslaved to, that are captured by, and that God is constantly seeking to break down and cast aside. This is the trap that Coakley’s own work falls into, that Augustine’s thoughts are controlled by, that the vast majority of the Church and broader society are entrenched in.

As we have seen in our exploration, the genderqueer, non-binary nature of God, and thus humanity, have been present and understood in Scripture and in the theology of early Church leaders, even if the Church itself has not lived into this reality of its own nature. The sinful desire to wield power as God does created a world in which the true nature of humanity and God struggle to be seen and lived into. This does not mean that the truth has not been present since the beginning, as some theologians against feminist and queer theology would argue, but that the powers found within the Church and society have prevented and intentionally pushed aside the truth of who we are and the truth of who God is, preventing the faithful to truly live into who God has called them to be. That is the purpose of this work, to tear down the artificial thoughts and boundaries that have been raised up on human bodies, on God’s body, and remind the Church of whose we are, whom we have been made in the image of, and what that image truly reflects.

The truth is that our God, a Triune being, reflects a nature that is beyond boundary and human concept. Our God expresses all genders and no genders at the same

time, is sexually fluid and not sexual at all. Our God is beyond the cisgendered, masculine image that has been dominating the Church for centuries. The truth is that God's triune nature is genderqueer and non-binary. This truth is a radical proclamation, not only of our God's nature, but also of our very own. Made in the Triune image of God, this proclamation affirms the beauty and wholeness of all of God's children- those who are masculine, feminine, or find themselves fluctuating throughout the spectrum; those who identify as cisgender, transgender, or non-binary; those who understand their sexuality as homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or somewhere along the scale and beyond. This truth affirms that the distinctions of this world, which have been used to dominate and control the body, bind us down and tear us away from God and from our true nature. Through this truth, the radical work of the resurrection begins- transforming the world from a place of division to a place of wholeness, erasing the binaries and boundaries that have controlled our bodies and lied to us about who we are and our true nature.

The consequences of this truth will be real and will take time to live into, generations of time. For a world that has become accustomed to defining its bodies and living into those binaries, to be offered its freedom will be scary, precisely because that freedom will cost them what has become a reality for so long- their understanding of self. To truly live into this understanding of God's being and our own, we must throw off the shackles of binaries and distinctions, not conforming our bodies to set standards, but living into the fluid nature that is intrinsically God's and in whose image we are made in. Many will fear what the world will look like without distinctions such as male and female, masculine and feminine, gay and straight, etc. How will we understand

ourselves? How would we refer to and understand others? These are real fears, as this change, this return to our natural created being, will turn the world right-side up after being upside down for far too long. Yet, is that not what Jesus of Nazareth already did when God died on the cross and rose again, conquering death and disrupting the binary that was established as law in nature?! The only difference now is that we, the Body of Christ, are seeking to live into that new reality, rather than hold on desperately to the old, broken order.

For the Church, this is a clarion call to justice- to reach out to all bodies, those it has raised up and supported and, more importantly, to the bodies it has disrupted, oppressed, dominated, and demonized. It will be upon the Church, both institution and Body, to change how we teach the world about God, ourselves, our nature, and how we are to be in the world. No longer can we be a power broker that dominates and defines what a body is and isn't, claiming to be able to define and accurately name God in Their fullness. Instead, we must teach of God's fluid and androgynous nature, a nature in which all are reflected and yet never defined. The Church is called upon to rewrite its liturgies and sacraments, its prayers and orders, its catechisms and its canons, its ethics and its theology, its witness and mission, all to reflect God's fluid and boundary crossing nature and humanity's reflection of that nature. To live into this truth about God and ourselves, the Church must be willing to question and strip away all that it has become, challenge all it has built up in this world, and critically examine ourselves against the truth that is revealed in the Scriptural account of creation. This truth will mean that the Church will truly be on the outskirts of society, living in the margins because the world around us will resist this change with all its might. It will resist, society will resist, because its power

will be threatened, its control will be vulnerable, and its false security will disappear. Yet, to be on the margins is exactly where the Church is called to be; it is where God is always calling the Body to serve and dwell. To live into this truth will mean that the Body of Christ and all those who dwell in it will truly be free in this world, free to be who God desires and created us to be.

The call begins now, the journey begins in this moment, with each small step building and leading to the promise of redemption that our Triune God offers the world. It is the voice in the wilderness that calls out to the Church of today and the Church of tomorrow, proclaiming

God is GenderQueer, thus humanity is GenderQueer!

God is Non-Binary, thus humanity is Non-Binary!

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

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Appendix: What's genderqueer? A Quick Guide to Terminology

In preparation for reading this manuscript, the reader must have a certain familiarity with some terminology that will be used throughout the text, in relation to talking about sex, gender, and queerness. This terminology, while ubiquitous throughout the scholarship of Queer theory, Feminist Studies, and, to a limited extent, Queer and Feminist theology, is largely unknown within the confines of systematic theology and within the general population of the Church. This depravity of understanding around this terminology and what they mean for the people who use them underscores the importance of the study, analysis, and argument being presented in this work. As the Church continues to step into and understands its prophetic and pastoral role within the LGBTQ+ community, embracing this terminology is a next step in understanding the gifts and offerings with which the LGBTQ+ community blesses the Church. With this goal in mind throughout this work, let's now define some of this critical terminology.

Queer

The term *Queer* holds a particular place within the LGBTQ+ community, as a term of denigration, as a term of empowerment, and recently, as a term of self-understanding. Possessing multiple meanings depending on its usage, this term is often misunderstood, leading to the reality of confusion around the role of this term within the community and the vernacular of the people. Historically, the term *queer* has been understood as an insult towards and an attack on an individual who identifies as homosexual. This usage appeared around the end of the 19th century and continues to be

used today to denigrate the LGBTQ+ community, though this meaning is not as prevalent as it once was. As such, this particular usage of the term has created a negative connotation towards the term *queer* within certain pockets of the community it has attacked.

Starting in the 1980s, LGBTQ+ leaders, scholars, and activists began to reclaim *queer*, using it as an affirmation of who they are (as homosexuals), a term of endearment and celebration of the LGBTQ+ community. This reclaiming of the term sought to relinquish the word from its abusive and condemning power over the community and transform it into a word that affirmed the community, not tear it down. This claimed meaning amongst those it was used to denigrate is not universal, thus leading to two distinct understandings of the term *queer* within and outside of the community it relates to, one that denigrates, and one that affirms. Yet, the complexity of the term continues to evolve. Within the past 20 years or so, a new meaning has emerged for the term *queer*, which is used to self-identify a person who “denot[es] or relat[es] to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.”⁶⁶ This particular definition of *queer* is important in the conversations, analysis, and arguments of this work, as it is this definition of the term that I will refer to.

Fleshing out this understanding a bit will be helpful for readers who are unfamiliar with this understanding of *queer*. To not correspond to “heterosexual norms” of sexuality and gender means that the individual who identifies as *queer* does not conform to the societal expectation of identifying as only male or female, embracing only

⁶⁶ “Queer | Definition of Queer in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/queer>.

masculine or feminine traits, dwelling in a binary of male---female, a binary of heterosexual---homosexual. Rather, the *queer* person holds a more fluid understanding of self, one that moves throughout and beyond the binaries that are normalized by heterosexual society (i.e. most cultures of the world). Subsets of this term and community refer to themselves also as *genderqueer* and *non-binary*, with each sub-term relating to the parent term, while expressing a more precise understanding of one's *queerness*. A *genderqueer* individual "does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders"⁶⁷, while a *non-binary* individual "denot[es] or relat[es] to a gender or sexual identity that is not defined in terms of traditional binary oppositions such as male and female or homosexual and heterosexual."⁶⁸ While these differences are minute in relation to the overall term and to one another, the distinctions are important, as the terms embraced and chosen by an individual reflect their own understanding of self and how that self journeys in the world around them.

Sex

While *sex* is a term that we all are familiar with, its understanding can be misunderstood in relation to conversations around queerness and gender. One main understanding of this term refers to certain bodily interactions between two or more individuals, a physical event that may or may not produce children, but in all aspects, is a

⁶⁷ "Genderqueer | Definition of Genderqueer in English by Oxford Dictionaries," accessed November 15, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/genderqueer>.

⁶⁸ "Non-Binary | Definition of Non-Binary in English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/non-binary>.

natural, biological function. This is not the definition of the word that is applicable to this work. The second understanding of the term refers to “either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.”⁶⁹ It is this understanding of *sex* that is essential to this writing. It is important to underscore this definition of *sex*, as it refers explicitly to biological factors alone in determining *sex*. Far too often, the terms *sex* and *gender* become merged and conflated with one another, which leads to a misunderstanding of the conversations that occur around queerness, the LGBTQ+ community, and gender; this conflation has created a false social dichotomy that states that to be either “male” or “female”, one must display certain personal or expressed characteristics, which in actuality have nothing to do with the physical, biological makeup of a male or female. This merging of the two terms to bear the second definition of *sex* causes great strain and confusion in conversations that address matters surrounding *sex* and *gender*, thus the importance of understanding how the term has been used and its actual application.

Gender

As with the term *sex*, *gender* often reflects several meanings, all of which are related in some way. Yet, the variances between the definitions are important to note, as utilizing a different understanding within this work focused on *gender* and *sex* can create confusion around and dilute the power of the arguments being made. *Gender*, in its main societal usage means “either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when

⁶⁹ “Sex | Definition of Sex in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sex>.

considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.”⁷⁰ The key understanding here is that *gender* is focused on the sociality and culturally formed understandings and expressions of self, which are then connected to the physical, sexual body. What is not being stated here is that the sex of a person determines the *gender* of the individual- that connection comes from the cultural, societal, and personal understanding of the person.

Gender, defined further, is also “used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female.”⁷¹ It is this portion of the definition that is often lost on the majority of people, who are accustomed to and have been raised within a community that upholds the understanding of two sexes and two *genders*. While *gender* can include these accustomed understandings, it is also far more fluid and expansive, not attached to the idea that only two sexes exist, or that *gender* can only be expressed within the confines of this male/female binary. Within this work, this binary assumption will be challenged and critiqued. As this further understanding of *gender* expresses, we will look beyond the established ideas of this binary and focus on the fluidity of *gender* and its expressions, as noted here in the defining of the term.

This leads us to explore two other terms that are important and locate themselves within this umbrella understanding of *gender*: *cisgender* and *transgender*. When individuals understand themselves to be *cisgender*, what they are stating is that their self

⁷⁰ “Gender | Definition of Gender in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 16, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/gender>.

⁷¹ “Gender | Definition of Gender in English by Oxford Dictionaries.”

understanding of *gender* correlates to their biological sex at birth.⁷² This term can be used to refer to the vast majority of the human population whom, whether through nurture or actual self understanding, identify with their birth sex and the gender expression that has been culturally attached to that sex. For example, an individual who was born biologically female, who agrees that the sex at birth is appropriate for themselves, and follows/accepts the societal gender expressions of what a female “should” display, is understood as *cisgender*. In contrast, *transgender* individuals hold a “sense of personal identity and gender [that] does not correspond with their birth sex.”⁷³ For example, if the same individual who was born biologically female did not feel that their physical body at birth presented their gender and personal identity accurately, then they are considered *transgender*.

For both of these terms, they exist within the male/female sexual and gender binary, relying on the binary in developing the meaning of each term. They do not seek to challenge or tear down the binary thoughts around sex and gender, but embrace its development within human society. Genderqueer or gender non-binary individuals, defined above, would fall outside of this terminology and directly challenge the status quo of this binary, boldly embraced by cisgendered individuals and, to a limited-but not encompassing- extent, transgender individuals. Genderqueer and gender non-binary individuals, which also encompasses some transgender individuals, understand themselves differently than how the binary would define them. Some embrace

⁷² “Cisgender | Definition of Cisgender in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 16, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cisgender>.

⁷³ “Transgender | Definition of Transgender in English by Oxford Dictionaries,” Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed November 16, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/transgender>.

characteristics of both ends of the binary, some none at all. Others find their gender fluid along this binary, while others struggle to see where their sex and gender are represented on the binary at all, thus falling outside of it.

In this brief explanation and relationship study between these terms and subterms, it becomes clear why these terms are often misunderstood when used, due to the complexity of each meaning and their relationship to one another. Thus, the importance of exploring these terms, in preparation for the work below, is underscored. With this reference guide to assist on the journey, we now turn to the work at hand.

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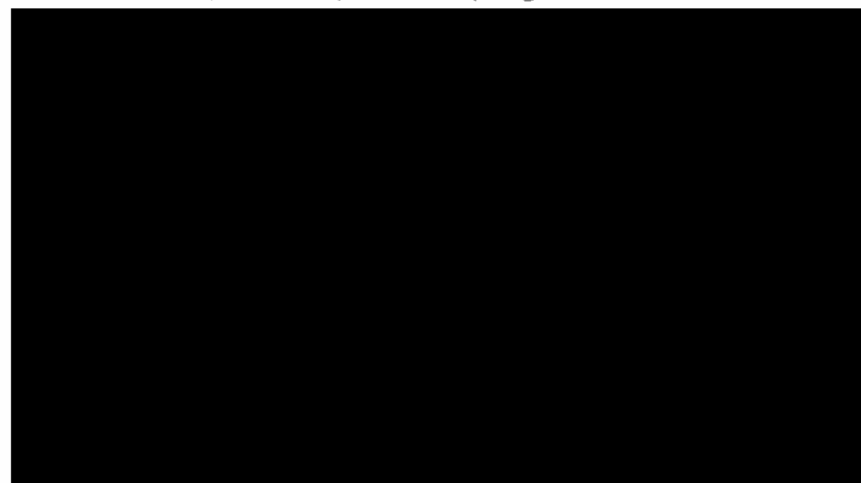
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