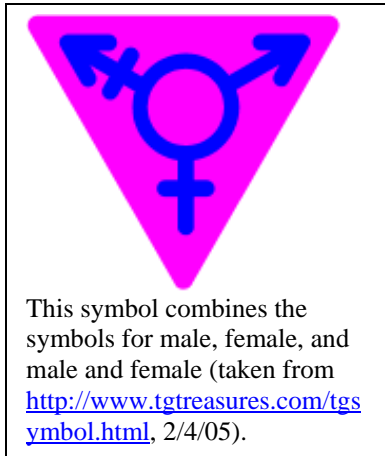


Transsexual(s and) Becoming

A Theological Analysis by Carrie Elizabeth Delmore



Harry Benjamin created the term “transsexuality” in the first half of the twentieth century to describe the phenomenon of people who believe themselves to be of the sex opposite from the one as which they were born. This description was obviously reliant upon a belief that there exists only two sexes, male and female, that are each the precise opposite of the other. Contemporary scholarship

has undermined this notion,¹ contributing along with the forces of regulation, institutionalization, feminism, and contemporary culture to the evolving definition of transsexuality. Now, “transsexual” often describes a person who alters their physical appearance and mannerisms out of a desire to change gender.

In a chapter titled “In the Image of God,” Cleaver provides an exegesis of Genesis from a gay liberation perspective. He argues that God created “In God’s image a single species with male and female varieties,” and that these images have a function of stewardship rather than procreation (63). Cleaver thus counters a biblically based critique that altering the body is a desecration of that which was made in the image of God.

While this analysis cannot respond to all Christian criticisms of transsexuality, Cleaver

¹ For example, please see Leslie Feinberg’s Transgender Warriors, published by Beacon Press in 1996, and Kate Bornstein’s Gender Outlaw, published by Vintage Books in 1995.

does argue against the tendency to apply biblical teaching to modern, medicalized understandings of identity (65).

Suchockian Becoming, Sin and Unification through God

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki's rendering of process theology, as found in God Christ Church, provides formulations of becoming, sin and unification through God that will be central to this theological analysis of transsexuality. In other words, a human being is not a static entity that travels through life from birth to death. Thus, each new becoming does not occur *ex nihilo*, but is predicated upon previous ones. The past is not proscriptive, because this ongoing process of becoming includes possibilities of growth and adaptation.

In fact, Suchocki redefines sin in terms of the disavowal of such possibility. Suchocki explains that “by denying the multiplicity of past influences and the novelty in the immediate future, one becomes imprisoned in the particularity of a past that is allowed



to swallow up all other forms of existence” (18). Thus, sin occurs when one becomes limited by the conditions surrounding singular, previous existence (attached picture taken from <http://www.creativemo.com/possibilities.gif>, 2/4/05).

This reformulation of sin does not restrict the cause of sin to the individual. In other words, human beings have created a society that now prevents many members from experiencing the fullness of reality. This limiting power of society is demonic, because it “precedes the individual and is greater than the individual” (Suchocki, 16). As such, it is

difficult for the individual to resist succumbing to the demonic. Overwhelmed by the forces of a distorted social order, the individual sins in his next becoming by not taking advantage of the full breadth of possibilities available to him. In this way, he both perpetuates that which is demonic in his society, and sins on a personal level by limiting himself. A human being integrates all of the past with future possibility to become anew; God integrates possibility with the entire present world. (These integrative functions of human beings and God are similar, but differ especially in their relation to time. Unfortunately, greater explication is beyond the scope of this paper).

It is important to remember that these dynamics are continual. From a process perspective, “the primordial vision of all possibilities held together in harmony everlastingly yields an actualization of that harmony through God’s transformation of the world in its light” (Suchocki,34). Through God’s unification of possibilities and transformation of the present world, the individual always has access to a force that can free him from sin. In more traditional Christian terms, the grace of God is always present.

Unraveling the *Pratyabhijna-hridayam*

In The Splendor of Recognition, Swami Shantananda provides an exegesis of the Kashmir Shaivite text *Pratyabhijna-hridayam*, written by the sage Kshemaraja approximately one thousand years ago. Shantananda’s explication of the third and fourth sutras of this text is considered here because it enriches the following theological analysis of transsexuality from a process perspective.

The third sutra states “That [Consciousness² becomes] diverse because of the division of reciprocally adapted objects and subjects” (Shantananda, 69). The reason for the division is not of relevance here, but the effect is. The reciprocal adaptation of objects and subjects occur with such frequency that the result echoes that of process theology. Shantananda’s simple description of this phenomenon is that “when I speak to someone for just a few moments, that person is created and destroyed millions of times right before my eyes (82).



Here, the appearance of continuity is maintained not through the individual’s incorporation of the past, but because of the power of creation. Although this distinction may seem minor, it actually points to an important theological difference between this Kashmir Shaivite text and Suchocki’s rendering of process theology. Specifically, “the reason I can identify the person who appears in one moment as the same person I was speaking with just a moment before,” Shantananda writes, “is that these abhasas [units of existence] flash forth in a given pattern, re-creating the person’s form and once again animating it” (82). Unlike in the process model, the person’s “re-creation” occurs through an act of God’s will: “objects in themselves do not have conscious, generative power” (Shantananda, 82). (Attached picture, “Duchamp descending a staircase,” by Eliot Elisofon, 1952, taken from <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/online/elisofon/elisofon19.html> 2/4/05; © Time, Inc).

² “Consciousness” here refers to Universal Consciousness. For the purposes of this paper, the term will be considered roughly synonymous with “God.”

This distinction between individual and God requires a closer reading of the wording of the third sutra; objects and subjects exist only because of the division of Consciousness. Thus, while it is only through God's will that the person is recreated, that person exists as a particular, finite manifestation of God. This view can be contrasted to the process model of God's continual reception of the world. Both conceptions will be utilized in the analysis below.

The fourth sutra of the *Pratyabhijna-hridayam* says, "Even the individual, whose nature is Consciousness in a contracted state, embodies the universe in a contracted form" (Shantananda, 69). This sutra elaborates upon the previous articulation of the relation between God and the individual. "Objects [included here are human beings] may attain concrete expression, yet they shine in full splendor as aspects of the one Reality" (Shantananda, 97). Shantananda references optical science to explain how this is possible: "this means that every particle of Consciousness contains the whole of creation in precisely the same way that every particle of a hologram can re-create the whole" (90). It is necessary to remark that, in this model, the very real limitations of human beings are not caused by sin (in any of its formulations). Rather, "the Lord holds the intention *I am separate*, and thus is cut off from his own expansive nature and freedom of will" (Shantananda, 98). This means that the finitude of human beings occurs through the will of God.

Transsexual(s and) Becoming: Applied Theological Analysis

Suchocki's conceptions of becoming, sin and unification through God provide the central framework for this theological analysis of transsexuality. Most important is the

assertion that entities do not change, but become. This becoming as transsexual does not occur only once. In fact, the continual nature of becoming described by Suchocki serves to mitigate the stigma of what is often perceived of as radical change. In this case, a transsexual's past (as embodying one sex) sets parameters that preclude becoming another sex. As transformation occurs when God receives the world and harmonizes it with all possibility, the transsexual subject routinely is unified (both internally and with the world) by God. In short, this model posits transsexuals as being part of the unified process world that is continually received and transformed by God. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.geocities.com/meridalva/Becoming-1.jpg>, 2/4/05).



The third and the fourth sutras of the *Pratyabhijna-hridayam* reveal a slightly different theological perspective of transsexuality. The relational aspect of becoming is similar to that of process theology; becoming occurs in relation to the past, the future, and the surrounding world. This is an important distinction from the process model, in which the individual chooses from amongst a range of possibilities offered by God.

The fourth sutra of the *Pratyabhijna-hridayam* argues that human beings are tiny replicas of God, containing all of creation within us. Thus, each of us has within ourselves both maleness and femaleness.

This work illustrates that process theology and Kashmir Shaivism offer complementary but distinctive interpretations of transsexuality. Process theology emphasizes that transsexual modification of the body is one of the many possibilities

offered by God, and that God's harmonizing role unifies the entire world, including transsexuals. Each of these models is individually capable of providing a comprehensive analysis of transsexuality. However, synthesis of these interpretations provides a more dynamic analysis of transsexuality; transsexuals can be understood as both a *possible* kind of "actual entity," and as one that is *intentionally* created by God.

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