



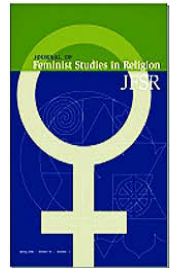
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In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology

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Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring 2018,
pp. 53-58 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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deeply impoverished discipline and collude with the same logics that govern the regulation of trans bodies; the creation of publics as white, able-bodied, and sex-segregated spaces; and cosmologies that write trans people out of existence. We collude with the logics of transmisogyny that render transwomen monsters, or jokes, and always something less than human. If trans/religion is an oxymoron, we recapitulate religion as anachronistic, hostile to women, and solely misogynistic, thus preserving secularism as the realm of neoliberal choice and “progress.” In short, if we do not trans religion, we remain complicit in a logic that diminishes the possibilities of how we understand both trans and religion.

I close with a quote from the end of Stryker’s essay, which offers those of us who are at war with nature a blessing: “If this is your path, as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world.”³⁹ Stryker’s closing passage is both benediction and prophecy, illuminating a pathway for those of us who are pushed into the category of not-quite-human. She understands trans monstrousness and rage as powerful transformative forces in the world. May we trans religious studies to engage the depths of trans religiosity. May her words sow the seeds of transfeminist religion. How much richer will all our study of religion be, when we fully take up these critical questions.

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IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, GOD CREATED THEM: TOWARD TRANS THEOLOGY
Joy Ladin

Keywords: theology, transgender, trans theology

Toward the end of Max Strassfeld’s groundbreaking “Transing Religious Studies,” he refers to the approach to trans theology I am developing in

³⁹ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 257. I hoped to write about the use of religious language in Stryker’s writing, but space precluded a closer analysis of the larger function of religion in her essay.

my manuscript “The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective.”¹ In this essay, I flesh out the glimpse he offers of my efforts to “[rehearse] classical theological questions from a different vantage point” (52).

My approach to trans theology grows out of my childhood experience of how being trans fostered a sense of intimacy with God. Both my gender identity and my relationship with God were beyond the pale of the middle-class, assimilated, largely secular Jewish world I grew up in. Neither could be spoken of without calling my sanity into question.

To me, God was not an abstraction or a mystical experience but someone who was there, invisible but as real and palpable as cold or warmth or humidity, as much a fact of life as my parents. But I felt closer to God than to my parents. My parents identified me with my male body and social role; unlike them, God knew who and what I was.

Being trans gave me a sense of kinship with God. I had a body that concealed who I was; God had no body at all. Both of us were stranded in the wilderness beyond human categories, invisible and incomprehensible to human beings who mistook bodies for selves.

We were an odd couple, God and I, God existing beyond all that is, will be, and was, I struggling to feel I existed at all. But when it came to relating to human beings, God and I had something in common: neither of us could be seen or understood by those we dwelt among and loved.

It may seem paradoxical to claim that being trans brought me closer to God. Although in some cultures, spiritual roles or powers are ascribed to those who don't fit binary gender categories, in Western industrialized societies, both religious and nonreligious people tend to think of trans identities as expressions of a secular, individualistic modernity which is opposed to premodern religious traditions. As more religious communities accept openly transgender members, however, questions about the relationships among trans identities and experiences and religious traditions become more urgent. Do religious traditions speak to trans experiences as they do to other human experiences? Can trans experiences illuminate religious texts and traditions, or does including trans perspectives in religious life require “transing” traditions, changing them in ways that represent fundamental breaks with tradition?

For me, those questions are answered every Yom Kippur afternoon, when Jews read the Book of Jonah, which tells a story every transgender person knows: the story of someone desperate to avoid living as the person (in Jonah's case, as the prophet) they know themselves to be.

¹ Forthcoming from Brandeis University Press in 2018. An early version of some of this material appeared in Joy Ladin, “Shipwrecked with God,” *Keshet Blog*, September 11, 2013, www.myjewishlearning.com/blog/keshet/2013/09/11/shipwrecked-with-god/.

It is clear from the opening words of the book—when God orders him to “go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me” (1:2)—that Jonah knows he is a prophet. But Jonah is so determined to avoid living as a prophet that he abandons his home and boards a ship to Tarshish, sinking into a sleep so deep that he slumbers through a God-sent storm that threatens to sink the ship. When the captain wakes him and orders him to “call upon your God” for deliverance, Jonah responds not with prayer but by telling the sailors “cast me into the sea” (1:12).

Jonah’s suicidal response resembles a pattern all too familiar among transgender people: flee from who you are as long as you can, and when you can no longer endure the internal and external storms, kill yourself for others’ sake. Trans people often tell ourselves that suicide will resolve the crises caused by our conflicting needs to be, and not be, who we are. Our families, our communities, our world, will be better off without us, we think, and we will finally be at peace. In Jonah’s case, this suicidal fantasy seems to come true: when Jonah is thrown overboard, “the sea cease[s] from its raging” (1:15). Jonah sinks peacefully “into the depths” (2:3) and is “swallowed” by a “great fish.”

But Jonah doesn’t die. In the depths of the sea, in the belly of the whale, Jonah finds himself alone with the God he fled. God literally surrounds him, sustaining his life amid death.

This spiritual paradox—that Jonah’s flight from himself leads him both toward death and intimacy with God—is at the heart of his story, but because his suicide attempt is unsuccessful, it is not the end. By the time the fish vomits him out on shore, he has overcome his reluctance to live as a prophet and heads to Nineveh.

Jonah still isn’t thrilled about presenting himself as a prophet, which in his case means walking through the city proclaiming, “In forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown,” disrupting the community, drawing attention to himself and his difference from others, and challenging social norms and values.

I was even more reluctant to live my trans identity than Jonah was to live as a prophet. Like Jonah, I knew I couldn’t live as who I was without being stared at, treated as an embarrassment or public menace, and risking violence and ridicule; and like Jonah, I couldn’t imagine what good could come of living a truth that would mark me, publicly and permanently, as other.

Jonah never does understand why God needs him to live as a prophet, since, as he points out at the end of the book, he knew from the first that God would end up being merciful. But unlike Jonah, the people of Nineveh couldn’t hear God summoning them to change their lives. They needed to hear that message from a human throat, from a body they could see, from a person who not only saw things differently than they did but was also willing to stand up, and stand out, as different.

Most trans people aren’t leaders, visionaries, or prophets. We aren’t summoned by God to save a city or a world. But trans people daily face the kinds of choices Jonah faced: will we run away, sink into despair, throw ourselves

into the sea, or will we live as who we are, even when that means being seen as disrupters, threats, targets?

I am not reading the Book of Jonah through the lens of transgender experience in order to “trans” the text or to suggest that the story is “really” about the problems of being transgender; the Book of Jonah is about the problems of being human. But transgender experience is human experience, and the questions trans people face are questions that face us all. Everyone, transgender or not, must decide what aspects of ourselves we will and won’t express, when we can’t and when we must subordinate our individuality in order to fulfill our roles in relationships, families, and communities. When we read the Book of Jonah through the lens of transgender experience, we are reminded that the crisis it dramatizes is one that many of us will face at one time or another: the crisis of realizing that either we live what makes us different or we cannot live at all.

This reading, I hope, suggests how religious traditions can speak to, and be enriched by, transgender perspectives. But as Judith Plaskow and other feminist theologians have argued, expanding our definitions of humanity to be more gender inclusive, “demands a new understanding of God that reflects and supports [that] redefinition.”² Just as feminist theologies grew out of the recognition that humanity includes women as well as men, the recognition that human beings are not only created male and female but other ways as well demands that we develop trans theologies, “new understandings of God that reflect and support” inclusion of transgender perspectives.

My childhood sense of kinship with God was based on my intuition that when it came to human relationships, God and I shared, and suffered from, similar social problems. My approach to trans theology—the use of transgender perspectives to develop “a new understanding of God”—is based on the sense that the difficulties transgender people face in being visible and intelligible in a world based on binary gender offer useful analogies for understanding God’s difficulties in being visible and intelligible in a world based on human categories that God does not, and cannot, fit.

But for me, the most exciting aspects of trans theology are the new perspectives it offers on the question of what it means to say that human beings are created in God’s image—to see God and humanity not as mutually exclusive categories but as overlapping, interpenetrating, enmeshed in and akin to one another in ways that far exceed binary terms.

The proof text for the claim that human beings are created in the image of God is Genesis 1:27, a verse that is also the basis for many religious arguments that binary gender is an inherent, immutable, God-given feature of humanity: “God created humanity in God’s own image, in the image of God God created [them]; male and female God created them.” Like many gender-binary

² Judith Plaskow, “The Right Question Is Theological,” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken, 1995), 223–33.

traditionalists, I read this verse as linking God and humanity, as saying that despite the unbridgeable difference between the disembodied Creator of the universe and male- and female-bodied human beings, we can glimpse something of God in humanity. Like them, I see this verse as implying that to change our understanding of gender changes our understanding of “the image of God,” and thus our understanding of God, and our relation to God.

But gender-binary traditionalists tend to focus more on the idea that God created human beings “male and female” than on the assertion that God created human beings “in God’s own image.”³ That is not surprising. “*Male*” and “*female*” are readily accessible human terms, much easier to understand than the idea that the image of the invisible, disembodied Creator of the universe might somehow be reflected in humanity. But the first chapter of Genesis emphasizes the creation of humanity in the image of God, which is mentioned four times, while creation of human beings “male and female” is mentioned only once, in passing.

When it comes to understanding the kinship between humanity and God, the gender binary is like the snake in the Garden of Eden: an archetypal, damning temptation to understand God in terms that, as Judith Butler argues are inadequate even for understanding humanity.⁴

From the time I first read Genesis as a child, I could see that the “image of God” had nothing to do with sex, gender, human differences, or human bodies—but what, exactly, did it mean? That question—what aspects of humanity reflect our kinship with our bodiless Creator?²—is at the heart of what I now recognize as my personal version of trans theology, not because it is a question specific to transgender people, but because being trans forced me to search for aspects of my own humanity that weren’t dependent on my body or the meanings others gave it. Whether or not we are transgender, we engage in trans theology whenever we try to look past sex and gender, bodies and binaries, to understand what in humanity reflects the image of God.

Trans theology holds that if our goal is to recognize our kinship with God, we need to look to the aspects of our humanity that, like God, exceed, confound, or defy gender and other human categories. None of us perfectly fits human categories, but for people who have grown up in a binary world that has no place for us, those aspects are at the heart of our sense of ourselves. We are accustomed to living in the wilderness, to being human in ways that other

³ Jewish tradition also includes nonbinary readings of this passage. As Phyllis Trible, following rabbinic commentaries, notes, the Hebrew can be read as saying that *adam*, singular, was created “male and female,” so that the first human was “basically androgynous: one creature incorporating two sexes” (“Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread,” In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1979], 74).

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

human beings may not comprehend. It can be lonely there, and hard, but as many stories in the Torah suggest, it is in the wilderness that humanity comes closest to God.

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TRANSING THE STUDY OF RELIGION: A (CHRISTIAN) THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Ellen T. Armour

Keywords: Christianity, Deleuze, queer, theology

I'm intrigued and persuaded by Max Strassfeld's call for "transing" the study of religion, a prospect and project I want to think through in a bit more detail here. Recall, per Susan Stryker, that transing is "a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for reassembly. Transing can function as a disciplinary tool when the stigma associated with lack or loss of gender status threatens social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination. It can also function as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway towards liberation."¹

Some readers will recognize in the language of assemblages and lines of flight allusions (however brief) to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, apt choices given the issues under discussion here. (A shout-out to my fellow roundtable participant, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, a *real* expert in Deleuzian thought who has done some of the best work I know of on trans

¹ Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 11–22, quotation on 13.