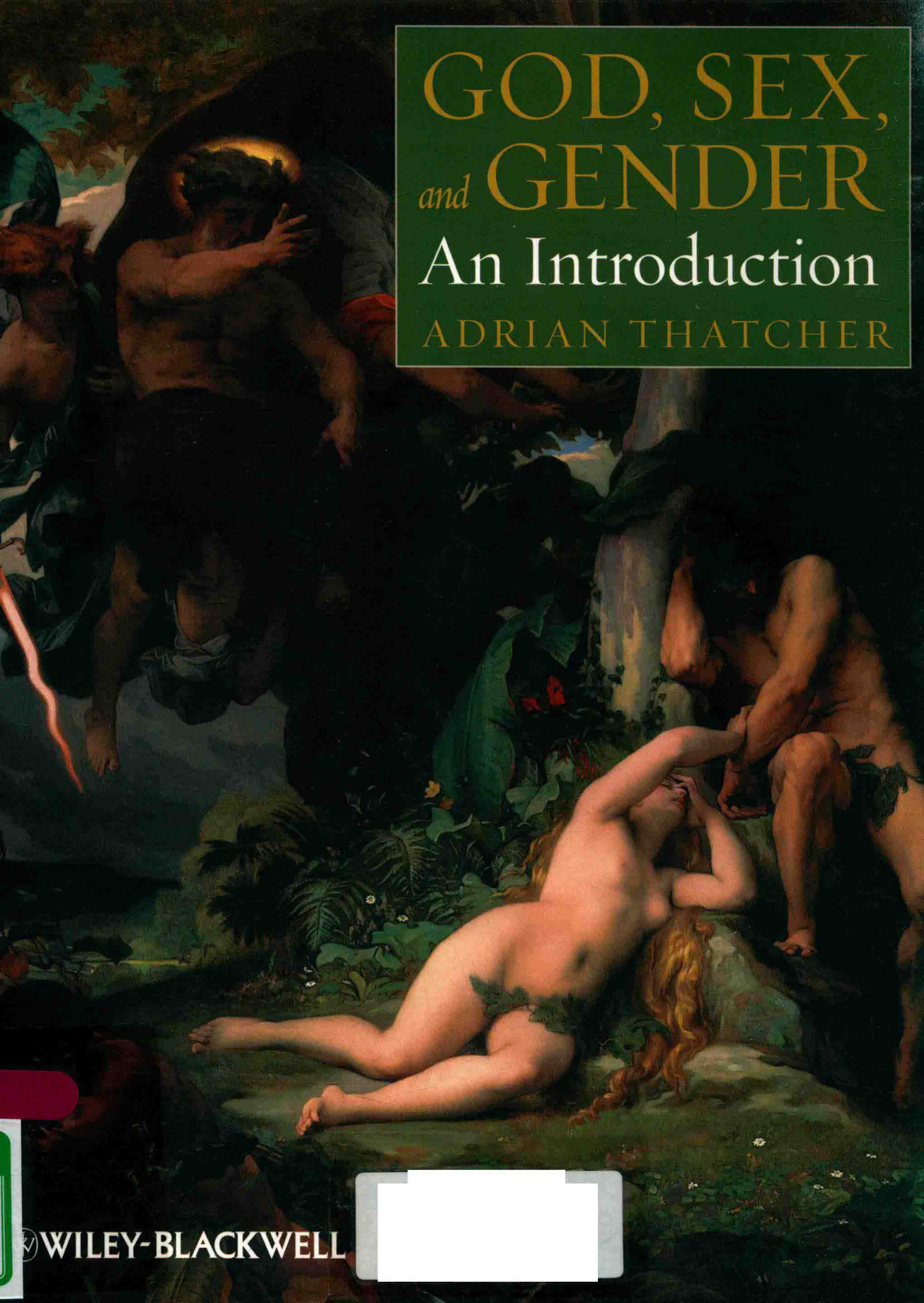

GOD, SEX, *and* GENDER

An Introduction

ADRIAN THATCHER

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Introduction – Or, a Welcome to My Readers

Who Are You?

"Hello." When I write books, I like to envisage who will read them. Writing and reading form a powerful means of communication, but with one defect. A dialogue between the speaker and the reader can never become an audible or spoken exchange. Readers cannot complain to an author's face if he or she is unclear (as we Theology authors often are). Nor can they interrupt if they disagree. And authors miss all those looks of surprise, bewilderment, discovery, or rejection that accompany class discussion. So it helps this author, at least, to imagine who his readers are, why they are reading this book, what they hope to get from it, how much they already know, even the countries where they live and the religious backgrounds (if any) which may already be shaping them.

It is a safe bet that many of you will be students, studying sexuality and gender as part of a larger degree or diploma program which might be in Theology, or Religious Studies, or Ethics, or subjects closely related to these. You may be studying in a Church or denominational seminary, or in a Theology department in a secular or Christian university, or in a secular Religious Studies department in a secular University, or some other institution. Often these places are mixed up anyway (in more senses than one). There is a huge range of approaches out there to questions of belief and practice: some institutions would not permit you to study this book at all. If you have a Church allegiance, your Church will already have firm teaching about sex and gender, but there will be arguments raging, overtly or covertly, about its adequacy or its ability to remain relevant to the sex lives and "gender performances" of Christians (see Section 2.1.2 for more on this). Students of Philosophy of Religion and/or Ethics will be interested in the arguments offered here. The strange theological territory we will pass through may provide unusual features not found among the more familiar landscapes of Ancient, or Enlightenment or Modern Philosophy.

Women students in Theology and Religious Studies now outnumber men (at least in the United Kingdom, by 40%) (HESA, 2007–2008). That fact has not only enriched the study of these subjects: it is a revealing indicator of the breathtaking changes to sex and gender roles

in the past 50 years, not only in higher education but nearly everywhere else. Basic theological reflections on these remarkable changes, in down to earth language, are attempted here. Not all readers will be students. That category "general reader," loved by publishers, includes clergy, ministers, and Church leaders; Christians concerned with sex and gender issues because of pastoral concerns or perplexity about their own sexualities and what their Christian commitment may require of them as sexual persons; or "Church leavers," who according to some accounts outnumber actual Church attenders, whose membership of Churches has collapsed while their interest in Theology has remained constant or intensified. We are all unavoidably sexual beings. Many of us want to make sense of our sexuality by listening to what religious traditions have to say, or could yet say, about sexuality. Many are curious why there is still such an enormous fuss among Christians about sex.

You can read this book with little or no knowledge of Theology or Religion. Ideally you might have studied either subject for a year or two years as an undergraduate. If you are already in your twenties you will almost certainly have had some sexual experience (whatever that means! – see Section 1.3) and this book will help you reflect on it, however ecstatic, or traumatic, or just boring, it might have been. I worry a lot about potential readers who will never see the book because they, and their countries and colleges cannot afford books. Yet problems to do with sexuality and gender are rife in those countries too. Inevitably the book will be read only by readers who can afford to buy it. We will need to be sensitive to this problem throughout.

Who am I?

I am curious about my readers. They may be curious about me. I have been teaching Theology and Philosophy to students, and they have been teaching me, since 1974, and I am still learning much from them at the University of Exeter, in the United Kingdom. This is not my first book, and several of the earlier ones have been about sexuality, marriage, families, living together, relationships, and how to read the Bible in a very different world from the one in which it was written. I am a Christian, an Anglican (or Episcopalian, depending on where you live). What biases, hidden agendas, can you expect?

Well, no one can set aside who they are, especially if they are writing about sex and gender! Feminist theologians, lesbian and gay theologians, evangelical theologians, Catholic theologians (traditional and revisionist), queer theologians, and others are all writing in part out of their experiences. I am no exception. It is often overlooked though, that the Christian tradition about these matters is already profoundly shaped by partisan experience, that of single, powerful, European males who were (in the main) celibate, many of whom were profoundly troubled by their desires and what to do about them. Their often tortuous utterances say as much about their unhappy troubles as they do about the tradition that "informs" them.

This author will not disguise that he is male, straight, and a grandparent. It will become clear his sympathies generally lie with progressive or revisionist themes, as long as these are deeply rooted in traditional theological sources and doctrines. A whole range of issues, perspectives, ideas are presented, as fairly as I can, yet without attempting to hide my

own beliefs and practices between the lines or behind the text. I will never claim to be right – only to offer arguments and compare one argument with another. What matters most is that clear reasons and arguments are offered in support of any and every position adopted. Not all of them will convince, but at least they will be open to inspection, criticism, and eventually amendment. Some, of course, will be found wanting.

I hope it will be possible for readers to be intrigued and exhilarated by the strange yet lively material that makes up theologies of sexuality and gender. That is why I have written this book. I am intrigued and exhilarated myself by its themes and their relevance to readers and writer alike.

My Aims?

There are three main aims:

1. To introduce students and general readers to the exhilaration of thinking theologically about sex, sexuality, sexual relationships, and gender roles.
2. To introduce students and general readers to a comprehensive and consistent theological understanding of sexuality and gender, which is broad, contemporary, undogmatic, questioning, inclusive, and relevant to readers' interests, needs, and experience.
3. To offer to university and college lecturers a comprehensive core text that will provide them with an indispensable basis for undergraduate and postgraduate courses and modules in and around the topics of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender.

What's in the Book?

There are five parts. Part I, "Sex, Gender, and Theology", contains a separate chapter on each of the three topics, Sex, Gender, and Theology. Part I is introductory. An attempt is made to understand the construction of sex, sexuality, and gender in biblical times and in late-modern Western societies (Chapters 1 and 2), and to discover how some of the churches and some theologians identify and use theological sources for thinking about them (Chapter 3).

Part II, "Being Theological about Sex," contains chapters on Desire, and on Marriage. Chapter 4 analyses desire, distinguishes between different forms of desire, and links sexual desire with desire for God. Chapter 5 raises the question whether marriage must remain the framework within Christian thought for thinking about and having sex. Chapter 6 taps into the rich resources of meaning with which theological thought is able to invest marriage, at least in its egalitarian form.

Part III, "Being Theological about Gender," occupies Chapters 7 and 8. A crucial issue is whether the God of Christian faith is to be thought of as masculine, and if so, whether the male sex images God in a way the female sex does not. Can Mary, Mother of God help to restore the self-respect of women in a male-dominated Church? Chapter 8 finds the core doctrine of the "Body of Christ" crucial to thinking theologically about gender, and depicting it in such a way that "in Christ there is neither male nor female."

Part IV, "Being Theological about Same-Sex Love," closely examines passages in the Bible which have been used to condemn all same-sex contact, and concludes, perhaps controversially, that these passages can no longer be used in this way (Chapter 9). Chapter 10 examines the use of Tradition, Reason, and Natural Law in condemning homosexual practice, and concludes, again perhaps controversially, that these uses are unjustified, and that the public arguments put forward by the churches in support of these uses are frankly poor ones.

Part V, "Learning to Love," has four chapters, and develops an inclusive theology of sexual love informed by the gender awareness that a contemporary faith can provide. Chapter 11 develops theological understandings of virginity, chastity, and celibacy that may be embraced in the twenty-first century. Chapter 12 handles the practices of contraception inside and outside marriage, and in the time of HIV/AIDS. Chapter 13 shows that marriages do not begin with the ceremony of a wedding, and sketches out how couples who are having "pre-ceremonial" sex may nonetheless behave chastely. The final chapter draws together the theology of the previous chapters and briefly applies it to sexual minorities, and to the further transformation of relations of gender.

How to Use the Book

Because I am writing both for students and general readers I have tried to incorporate features that both readerships expect. The five parts are arranged in a sequence that can be easily followed. But the book need not be read from the beginning. Each of the chapters is self-contained. There are many cross-references so moving forwards and backwards through the book should be easy.

There are plenty of subheadings to identify themes and arguments. The definitions of key terms are clearly set out in the margins. Key quotations are also clearly displayed. There are also questions for discussion or an activity, sometimes followed by a comment. There are several ways of using these. They can be ignored. If the book is used in a class they can be used to generate class or group discussion. If the book is used for pre-reading prior to lectures, responses to the questions may be written down beforehand. Some of the questions may make good essay questions. If you want to use the questions as a prompt for your own thinking, you might like to use a masking card initially in order to prevent the comments being seen.

Reference

HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) (2007–2008) www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com_datatables/Itemid,121/task,show_category/catdex,3/#subject (accessed November 12, 2010).

Contents

Part I

Sex, Gender, and Theology

1

Sex

Sexuality, the Sexes, Having Sex

This chapter is about sex. It asks how the terms "sex" and "sexuality" are used (Section 1.1). It shows that until recently men and women thought of themselves as united in a single sex, even with the same sex organs, but disunited by belonging to two different genders (Section 1.2). Since there are many sexual activities in which people engage, it asks what "having sex" amounts to (Section 1.3). These topics prepare the way for a similar analysis of gender in Chapter 2.

1.1 Sexuality

Nothing can be taken for granted in the theology of sex and gender. Take for example the truism (something that looks obvious) that we are either women or men. There are at least three reasons for doubting even this.

First, if we are adults, we have *become* either men or women, as a result of a comprehensive process. It may take half a lifetime to discover the pervasive influences on us that helped to make us the men and women we now are. We are more than our biology.

Second, there are many adults who are unable to identify with either label. There are *intersex*, and *transsexual* or *transgender*, people who cannot easily say they identify with this *binary* (twofold) division of humanity into separate biological sexes (see Section 1.2).

God, Sex, and Gender: An Introduction, First Edition. Adrian Thatcher.

Third, for most of Christian history, people were inclined to believe that there was a single sex, "man," which existed on a continuum between greater (male) and lesser (female) degrees of perfection (see Sections 1.2 and 2.3). That is something quite different from the now common assumption that there are two, and only two, sexes. If we are to understand the biblical and traditional sources for thinking about sex and gender, we will be well advised not to smother them with our modern assumptions.

Defining terms In a moment I will be suggesting a definition of sexuality, but first it may be helpful to say something about what we are doing when we define something. Throughout the book we will notice that experts sometimes disagree even over the meaning of basic terms. When coming to define sexuality, it is important to tackle the problem of definition head-on. Experts disagree about what sexuality is. Within psychology and psychoanalysis, there is a large diversity of influences and schools, and new sub-disciplines such as evolutionary psychology and sociobiology have become popular. Philosophers of language have something to teach us about how to manage this problem. They might advise us not to worry too much about definitions, that is, to look not for the fixed meaning or meanings of a word but for its *use* within its "language-game" or context where it is employed. That is what I shall be doing with definitions. I shall follow the philosopher Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in his dictum "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1972, p. 20, para. 43; emphasis in original).

Sex: Sex is the division of a species into either male or female, especially in relation to the reproductive functions. Whatever else sex is, it is about the ability of species to reproduce.

Sometimes it is helpful to offer a *stipulative* definition, that is, a description of the meaning of a general term combined with the author's stipulation of its meaning or use. Some of the definitions in the book, found in the margins, are stipulative.

However, even the link between sex and reproduction can be sensibly doubted, can't it? For most people most of the time, having children is the last thing on their minds when they are "having sex" (see Section 1.3). There is much more to sex than biology. It is OK to *begin* discussing sex from a biological or reproductive point of view, provided it does not end there. *Sex*, or being sexed, is a condition we share with fish, insects, birds, and other animals. Sometimes the term refers to the biological drive within species to reproduce. Since that drive can be overwhelming it requires regulation. That regulation is sexual morality.

Sexuality: "Sexuality refers to a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God" (USCCB, 1991, p. 9).

"Sexuality especially involves the powers or capacities to form deep and lasting bonds, to give and receive pleasure, and to conceive and bear children. Sexuality can be integral to the desire to commit oneself to life with another, to touch and be touched, and to love and be loved. Such powers are complex and ambiguous. They can be used well or badly. They can bring astonishing joy and delight. Such powers can serve God and serve the neighbor. They also can hurt self or hurt the neighbor. Sexuality finds expression at the extreme ends of human experience: in love, care, and security; or lust, cold indifference, and exploitation.

Sexuality consists of a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical interactions and possibilities. It surely does not consist solely of erotic desire" (ELCA, 2009, section 3).

Our *sexuality* is more interesting. In the margin, there are two stipulative definitions of sexuality provided by churches, one Roman Catholic, the other Lutheran, both of them American.

Question: Were there any particular emphases in these descriptions with which you particularly agreed?

Comment: Both descriptions mention that we discover our sexuality in *relationship* to others. I liked the emphases on the complexity and ambiguity of sexuality. These emphases need to be placed alongside the more obvious ones about pleasure, joy, and having children, don't they?

An alternative take on sexuality The term "sexuality" is very recent, and should not be read back into pre-modern times. It began to be used in the 1860s, as part of a "discourse" of sex which was invented by the medical profession. By now it is deeply embedded in the English language and has attracted many meanings. The British Christian writer Jo Ind provides a more erotic, personal definition of sexuality. I have included it in order to discuss the issues it raises. She says:

> When I am talking about sexuality I am talking about the glorious, wide-ranging, intriguing, predictable and surprising business of being aroused. I am talking about the way we are moved by breasts, by kindness, by red toenails peeping through open-toed sandals, by wind skimming across water, by kindred spirits, by kissing down between the breasts, down around the belly button, down, down towards the groin. I am talking about the way our bodies are changed through memories, fantasies, yearnings, sweet nothings, the biting of buttocks, the word understood, the semen smelt, the integrity cherished. When I am talking about sexuality I am talking about the multi-dimensional, richly textured, embarrassingly sublime, muscle-tighteningly delicious capacity to be turned on. (Ind, 2003, p. 33)

Questions: How did you react to this understanding of sexuality? What particular features of it, if any, struck you as unusual?

Comment: It was written by a woman who makes no attempt to conceal her own sexuality and separate it from her writing about sex. It is *gynocentric* (woman-centered) not *androcentric* (man-centered).

It links sexuality to arousal. The author holds that women are likely to be aroused in more diffuse and complex ways than men, and they are better able than men to integrate the erotic dimension of their lives with all the other dimensions.

Ind links the discussion of sexuality to her experience of desiring, of being aroused, of giving and receiving pleasure. The Lutherans would agree with her about this. It is an important emphasis since much writing about sexuality is detached from the experience of sex. Whether Theology should incorporate our experience into a theology of sexuality and gender remains a contested issue (for the arguments, see Section 3.2.3).

What did you make of the metaphor of being "turned on"? The quotation was part of a chapter entitled "Whatever Turns You On." That phrase sounds too much like a glib 1960s colloquialism (in use when I was a teenager) that appeared to sanction debauchery. The suggestion that we are like taps or machines which can be turned on and off is also unfortunate but the phrase has been deliberately chosen. There is recognition that our sexualities are formed by complex and still little-known processes,

which the successors of Freud and Jung are still busily researching. Ind notes "our childhood experiences have a key role in the sexual adults we become" (2003, p. 60). We have had no control over these processes, and so we are importantly not responsible for them. What arouses us, the "trigger-mechanisms" that get us thinking about and wanting sex, vary considerably from person to person and we cannot help being endowed with the sexualities we have. Ind's fine insight is that we should resist any temptation to feel guilty about what turns us on because we did not choose to be this, or any other, way. (This is a point that can be convincingly linked to the theological teaching both that God loves sinners however sinful they are, and that to love ourselves, as well as God and our neighbors, is a Gospel requirement.)

Do you have any reservations about the quotation? I have two. I thought it was a pity she did not say more about how we like turning others on. The enormous effort and expense that some people (generally women) put into their social appearance might indicate that they are just as concerned about arousing others as they are with becoming aroused themselves.

Did you feel a bit nervous about accepting as good *all* sexualities? The Lutherans were right to stress the ambiguity and hurt that attaches itself to sexuality, weren't they? There are some kinds of eroticism, for example those involving bondage or sado-masochism which many Christians will find problematic. Other kinds are unequivocally pathological, such as pedophilia. If I had been abused as a child, and now desired to abuse children in my adult life, that compulsion would be understandable, but it could never be actionable or acceptable. It would be a distortion of my sexuality that required compassionate treatment.

1.2 How Many Sexes are There?

It may come as a big surprise to learn how different are our contemporary ways of thinking about sex and gender, from the ways of the ancient world and of the Christian tradition down to at least the end of the seventeenth century. The differences are so great that it takes a concerted effort to set aside what we now take for granted about biological sex and gender in order to try to understand how earlier generations understood them. Some beliefs we would probably never think to question are very recent. For example, what we now call the process of ovulation remained undiscovered until the early 1930s (see Section 1.2.3). It took another 30 years for a pill that suppressed ovulation to become available.

Why should we want to re-enter this pre-modern and pre-scientific intellectual universe and actively "un-learn" some of our modern assumptions? Here are three reasons.

First, the strangeness of earlier beliefs about sex and gender, and the discontinuity between those beliefs and many of our own, should help us to see the fragility of our own assumptions and constructions. Our knowledge may be more sound and more broadly based, but we should not assume that we have arrived at the complete truth about sex or anything else.

Second, a better understanding of the history and tradition concerning sex and gender aids contemporary believers in developing it and fashioning it into something believable for ensuing generations.

Third, even in the past 20 years there have been major contributions to the study of gender from the academic disciplines of Classics and Medical History. Theologians would be daft not to take advantage of these, even if the findings appear to make theological trouble for them.

1.2.1 Have there always been two sexes?

The standard view is that there are two sexes, male and female. This view is so securely lodged in Western religion and culture that it may appear devious even to question it. The two sexes are "opposite." Through the rise of the Women's Movement and successive waves of feminism, the "second" or "weaker" sex has successfully challenged the first or stronger sex in its claim to be first and stronger, but it has not until recently sought to challenge the basic premise that there are two and only two, human sexes. The campaigning issue has not been the *number* of sexes, but whether the two sexes received equal treatment, equal rights, and equal respect.

The churches too appear confident that there are two sexes. In the twentieth century, a verse from the opening chapter of the Bible was pressed into service to confirm the cultural truth of two sexes and to proclaim that that is how God intended the human race to be. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). The greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) led the way (Barth, 1961, pp. 153–154). It was but a short step to give the two sex doctrine an official title – the doctrine of the "complementarity" of the sexes (see Sections 3.2.1, 10.2.2 and 10.3). A second short step introduces the assumption that each member of the different sexes should desire only members of the other one.

In the face of apparently sealed and settled views, religious and secular, that there are two sexes, it may come as a great shock to learn that for the greater part of Christian history, *it did not occur to anyone even to think that there were two distinct sexes.* There is now a strong challenge to the two-sex theory that is gaining ground in classics, medical history, histories of sexuality and gender, and at last in theology. The idea that there is only *one* sex is of course an incredible suggestion, one to raise the collective eyebrow of any student class. So what lies behind it?

1.2.2 Is one sex enough?

It is probable that Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians actually held that there was one sex, not two. That sex was called "man." Christians may actually be more familiar with this than they realize. An instructive way into the one-sex theory can be found in the easy, unexamined sexism of thousands of Christian hymns, still not finally shredded, which provide primary, lingering evidence of the single, male sex. Liturgies proclaim it. Creeds announce it ("We have sinned against you and against our fellow *men*": "For us *men* and for our salvation he came down from heaven." "He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made *man.*"). Vatican texts still require it. We will linger a little in

Sexism: Sexism is the privileging of one sex and its interests over the other sex and interests. Any assumption that one sex is more perfect, or more valuable, or more representative than the other, or is to be included within the other, is sexist.