

Nonbinary gender and the diverse beauty of creation

In Genesis, God separates the dry land from the sea. But God also makes marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs.

by [Austen Hartke](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



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“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” As a kid, I would read these first words in my children’s Bible over and over again—not because I found them particularly interesting, but because I was the kind of person who always started books from the beginning, and I could never seem to get any further into the Bible than Noah and the ark before I lost interest.

I also liked the first story in my Bible because it had some of the best illustrations. On one page was a friendly orange sun, and on the opposite page a shining yellow moon and twinkling stars. Next came an ocean with big waves, across from a page depicting mountains and forests. Even in a children’s Bible the distinctions God made when creating the universe were obvious. Each bit of the world was broken

into pairs and opposites. For a kid who liked order and organization, the story of creation in Genesis 1 was just about perfect. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its place.

This kind of structure in scripture was something that I appreciated up until my teen years, when I began to get a sense of the way life sometimes falls outside black-and-white categories. Biologically, I learned that the world isn't separated distinctly into land or sea; there are also marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs. Personally, I began to figure out more about my own sense of gender identity, and I wondered if all people were really divided into male and female, as Genesis 1 seemed to say they were.

Because the ancient Israelites tended to separate their world into binaries (take a look at the kashrut laws that govern acceptable and unacceptable foods, for instance), it's not surprising that Genesis 1:27 breaks humans into two groups as well—male and female. But I've also concluded that this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries.

United Methodist deacon M Barclay, who identifies as neither male nor female but as nonbinary, puts it this way: "This chapter talks about night and day and land and water, but we have dusk and we have marshes. These verses don't mean 'there's only land and water, and there's nowhere where these two meet.' These binaries aren't meant to speak to all of reality—they invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond."

Just as we call God the Alpha and the Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between, the author of Genesis 1 is using a poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.

For as long as there have been humans, there have been people who fall outside of the male/female binary. A creation story from Sumer, a Mesopotamian society and neighbor to what would become Israel, has references from 1600 BCE to humans who are created with sex organs that are not immediately identifiable as female or male. The Mishnah and the Talmud, the Jewish compilations of law put together between 200 CE and 500 CE, include examples of individuals who don't fit male or female categories, including those whose sex is indeterminable, those who have characteristics of more than one sex, and those whose characteristics change over

time. This tells us that even the descendants of the people who recorded Genesis 1 did not necessarily assume that the gender or sex categories seen in verse 27 were all-encompassing.

In Greek and Roman times, people born with indeterminate or ambiguous sex characteristics were called hermaphrodites, after a Greek god who exhibited both male and female traits. Today people with a combination of different sex characteristics identify themselves as intersex, and they make up between .018 percent and 1.7 percent of the world's population. Throughout history, doctors have attempted to "fix" intersex infants through surgical intervention before a child can make any decisions, and sometimes even without the knowledge or consent of the parents.

Fortunately, intersex advocates all over the world are finally seeing the results of their push for self-determination. Groups like the Intersex Society of North America are helping stop the modification of babies identified as intersex at birth. The interactions between chromosomes, hormone production, and physiology are much more complicated than we once thought. Not all people are born male or female; if we try to enforce that binary, we put ourselves in the position of claiming to know better than God and better than the individual themselves. Indeed, as theologian and specialist on intersex issues Megan DeFranza puts it, "The simplistic binary [sex] model is no longer sufficient. It is dishonest to the diversity of persons created in the image of God."

When we attempt to box God's creation in by looking to Genesis 1:27 and expecting every person on earth to fall into line, we're asking the text the wrong question. If Genesis 1 was meant to describe the world as it is, the biblical authors would have needed a scroll hundreds of feet long. Thank goodness we don't have to slog through verse after verse that reads like a biology textbook on taxonomy, naming creature after creature from the elephant down to the paramecium. Just as we wouldn't expect astronomers to cram things like comets and black holes into the categories of sun or moon, we shouldn't expect all humans to fit into the categories of male and female. Instead of asking the text to define and label all that is, we can ask God to speak into the space between the words, between biblical times and our time, and between categories we see as opposites.

When I asked Barclay if they identified with the concept of in-between places in space and time, their answer surprised me. I had always assumed that nonbinary

people identified themselves as somewhere between male and female. But Barclay said, “To say that you’re nonbinary innately suggests there is a binary, and my whole point is that there’s no such thing. We’ve created this formula and forced our understanding of gender into it.” Instead of seeing themselves as halfway between male and female, Barclay and many other nonbinary people identify as something completely different.

“I’m very convicted to speak about my own nonbinary identity not as an ‘in-between,’ but as a ‘more,’” they told me. “So, for instance, as someone who’s bisexual, I don’t think of myself as half gay and half straight. I’m something else. I know some nonbinary people think of themselves as half man and half woman, but I don’t. When we open the [gender binary] boxes, it’s much more a scattering of things than a line.”

Since noted sexologist Alfred Kinsey began publishing his reports on sexuality in 1948, people in the Western world have become more aware of sexuality as existing along a spectrum, with points all along it from A to Z—or F to M, as it were.

But charting our identities along a line in two dimensions has its limitations; namely, it doesn’t accurately reflect human diversity. We don’t see each other, or ourselves, in only two dimensions. Bisexual and nonbinary advocates are suggesting that it’s long past time to update our ideology. Perhaps, instead of insisting that each person can be charted along a line, we should be looking up and seeing that the multitude of sexualities and gender identities exist in 3-D, sprinkled through space like the stars.

This expansion in our understanding of the world also opens the door to a new reverence for God’s creation. In acknowledging when we’ve misunderstood something about the world, and changing our theories and behavior in response, we’re admitting our humanity and humbling ourselves before the Creator. In the same way, when we recognize that our language doesn’t accurately represent what is, we create new words to illustrate those concepts.

“Once I said I was not a cisgender woman, the response was, ‘Oh, you must feel really masculine.’ But masculinity is not something that I feel represents who I am either,” Barclay said. “Our language for masculinity and femininity represents our reliance on the idea of a binary. I desperately want a third word, because I don’t feel like a masculine person and I don’t feel like a feminine person. I desperately wish

there were more words for naming our different ways of being in the world.”

Genesis 1:27 doesn't give us any new words to help us understand the reality of human gender, but it does provide us with a theological concept. We are told that humans are made in the image of God—the *imago Dei*. Because the creation of male and female is mentioned almost in the same breath as the image of God, many people have wondered if the two are somehow related. Which part of us reflects the image of God? Might it have anything to do with our sex or our gender?

Scholars throughout history have come to different conclusions regarding this question. One group of thinkers believes that we reflect the image of God through a nonphysical characteristic, like our ability to reason. A second group believes that God's image is stamped on us in a bodily sense: through our gender, the shape of our bodies, or even the way we walk on two legs. A third group sees the image of God as something relational, which affects the way humans relate to God and to the rest of creation.

Some scholars who have suggested that the image of God is represented in our physical sex think that this image is most fully realized when a cisgender man and a cisgender woman join together in marriage, essentially putting back together something that had been separated. Others, like theologian James Brownson, disagree: “The fact that male and female are both created in the divine image is intended to convey the value, dominion, and relationality shared by both men and women, but not the idea that the complementarity of the genders is somehow necessary to fully express or embody the divine image.”

Near the end of his survey of the *imago Dei*, Karl Barth concluded, “The passage Gen. 1:26–31 does not seem to pay any more attention to the body of man than it does to his soul or intellectual and spiritual nature.” Indeed, it would have been strange for the ancient Hebrew people to think of a human as something broken up into mind, body, and soul, as we do today. This sort of thinking is a product of Greek philosophy and wouldn't have existed at the time Genesis 1 was written.

Hebrew Bible scholar Claus Westermann puts it this way: “The discussion whether the image and likeness of God referred to the corporeal or the spiritual aspect of the person has brought us to the conclusion that the question has been placed incorrectly.” Instead, he says, this verse “is concerned neither with the corporeal nor with the spiritual qualities of people; it is concerned only with the person as a

whole.”

For Barclay, living as a reflection of God’s image is possible only when you’re living as a whole person—authentically and without certain sections severed or hidden. When I asked Barclay if they subscribe to any specific theory about the *imago Dei*, they introduced me to the reformer John Wesley’s sermons on the subject. “I love John Wesley’s approach to the image of God. For him it’s about relational capabilities, not about a single innate characteristic.”

Wesley preached that people were made in God’s natural image (“a spiritual being, endowed with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections”); in God’s political image (“the governor of this lower world, having dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth”); and in God’s moral image (“in righteousness and true holiness” and “full of love”). He believed this was our default way of being before the fall, and people are still able to live into these characteristics with God’s help.

For Barclay, the possibility of living into the moral image of God is most striking. “Wesley uses a breath image and says that we breathe in the compassion, generosity, and the love of God, and we should be exhaling the same thing to others. So it’s all about how we orient ourselves toward each other and toward creation.”

We can’t be in right relationship to each other if we can’t see each other. We can’t be fully present in any relationship if we’re walling off part of ourselves or hiding beneath a mask.

“It’s really hard to be your best self when you’re in a cage,” Barclay said. They began to tell me about their experiences in seminary before coming out as nonbinary. “I would find myself getting mad at people for using ‘she/her/hers’ pronouns for me, which wasn’t fair at all, because they didn’t know! I was inhibiting my relationships in order to stay safe. My relationships with others were inhibited, my relationship to myself was deeply inhibited, my relationship to my community was inhibited. I was limited in my ability to live into the image of God within myself.”

After Barclay came out, things started to change. Rather than trying to conform to the current sociological expectations of men and women, Barclay began to express themselves in ways that accurately reflected who they were. They began deconstructing the walls they had built and the masks they had put on, and they

took a leap of faith. They allowed others to see what God had always seen.

So how is God's image manifested in our bodies? In the same way that it's manifested in the rest of our being. The image of God was not given to humankind in bits and pieces, with some living in your left arm and another bit in your soul and another bit in your ability to argue and reason. It is a gift that resonates throughout all that we are, like the deep tones of a bell rung far away. It awakens us and moves us forward toward God and toward each other.

As we talked, Barclay and I agreed that it would be impossible to try to live into the image of God that we bear while also trying to deny our gender identity. We have to say yes to who God created us to be before we can begin imaging God in the world. The one has to come before the other, because otherwise our own defenses get in the way.

When I asked Barclay how they explained the relationship between this big theological concept and their own gender, they thought for a minute and said: "My trans-ness is only related to the image of God in me inasmuch as it allows me to naturally, politically, and morally be in right relationship with myself, with my community, and with creation as a whole. It has nothing to do with it and everything to do with it."

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