

Transgender children and young people: Book review

Dr. Carys Moseley, Public Policy Researcher
First Published by *Christian Concern*: April 3rd, 2018

Carys Moseley reviews a collection of essays by various secular British critics of the normalisation of transgender identity in children and adolescents.

Transgender Children and Young People: Born in Your Own Body. ed. Heather Brunskell-Evans and Michele Moore. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018¹.

This book is a collection of essays by various secular British critics of the normalisation of transgender identity in children and adolescents. It is the first book of its kind, and as such repays careful reading. It has also recently gained an important sympathetic review² from one of the clinicians at the Gender Identity Development Service at the Tavistock and Portman Clinic in London, who revealed that her colleagues hold a variety of views on the topic.

Parents speak out

Several authors in the book are parents of children who have considered themselves transgendered. Theirs are probably the most compelling voices as their views and research reflect attempts by contemporary non-religious parents - the majority - to make sense of this whole problem and to fight back on behalf of their children's health and well-being. Stephanie Davies-Arai, head of Transgender Trend, a parents' group critical of the provisions for gender reassignment for minors, uncovers a wealth of disturbing material from mainstream media and the education system in England which shows just how far the sudden normalisation of transgender identity has gone in a few years. This ranges from anti-bullying programmes to tv shows and re-education in primary schools.

It is striking how the authors are worried about being considered anti-progressive bigots. Much of Gender-Critical Dad's chapter revolves around this, though he also recounts in depth how he and his partner deal with a daughter who wants to be male. This points to an unspoken feature of the non-religious transgender-critical movement that has sprung up on both sides of the Atlantic. Its proponents are left-liberal 'progressives' who have been shocked to find transgender dogma pushed as the apex of 'progress'.

Missing from the book, and from the wider pushback, are more moderate or socially conservative people who are not religious believers. There may be reasons for this. Are middle-of-the-road and conservative parents less likely to have children who develop a transgender problem?

Why has female transsexualism become more common?

Forty years ago Leslie Lothstein, a pioneering American psychotherapist who specialised in female transsexualism, asked whether gender-neutral anti-stereotypical parenting was not inadvertently increasing the possibility that a girl might want to become a boy. Since then very few people have risen to the challenge, and it's fair to say that there doesn't seem to be a single factor behind the steady increase in transsexualism among girls and women.

Psychoanalyst Robert Withers suggests in his chapter that the recent rise may be related to father absence, a theory that differs from that of feminist critics who pinpoint the influence transgender activists have had on their daughters by targeting them on social media.

Transsexualism and homosexuality

This brings me to the fact that some topics are hardly touched upon in this volume. One of the stranger phenomena that has emerged in female transsexualism is young women who 'identify' as gay men. Older clinical literature on female transsexualism tended to read these women as being in denial of an innate lesbianism, a perspective the book tends to share. Yet there has always been a population of women who wanted to be gay men. I believe this requires more careful probing in our internet culture. Those familiar with the explosion of female transgender identity on social media will know that some of this involves teenage girls being fascinated by male homosexual pornography.

Is there a difference between the personal background factors for these different types of female transsexualism? Another deeper question is, is this fascination part of the long-term trend for young non-religious women to be particularly fascinated by and idolising male homosexuality?

History of transgender identity in children

As the book appears to have been hastily written its forays into the history of transgender issues is not as good as it could be. Maybe this is partly because the authors were facing increased censorship from transgender activists and certainly cowardly institutions, so had less time to devote to research. For example nobody mentions the crucial role of John Money in inventing the idea that children have a 'gender identity', which is surprising given the easy availability of the evidence. Then again Money became notorious because of how he treated a boy called David Reimer, whereas the book concentrates mostly on girls as more girls than boys are now referred to the Gender Identity and Development Service. I have a chapter outlining the history of transsexualism in the United Kingdom in the forthcoming book 'The New Normal', based on the conference of the same name organised by Christian Concern in November 2016.

There is also nothing on the growing case law on this subject, either in the UK or elsewhere, nor on the radically subjectivist jurisprudence pushed by the European Parliament onto the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights, which actually led to the creation of transsexualism and gender reassignment as categories in UK law. One suspects that this is because secular and feminist critics cannot agree on an ethical standpoint about this and wish to keep a pragmatic approach. Such an approach may not succeed given that it will be interpreted as mere Nimby-ism.

A symbolic and spiritual explanation?

Perhaps the most profound chapter, and for non-religious readers the strangest, is the one by Lisa Marchiano, a Jungian therapist who works with teens suffering from confusion about transgenderism, which gives a symbolic interpretation of the rise in teenage transgender identification. I believe that she has come closest of all the authors to understanding the phenomenon on a grand scale. In a nutshell, Marchiano reads teenage transition as a subconscious and unhealthy attempt at inventing rites of initiation into adulthood. She refers to the work of anthropologists Mircea Eliade and Arnold Van Gennep on rites of initiation as experiences of death and rebirth. She argues that teenagers who transitions are avoiding a confrontation with their own mental suffering.

I have previously argued that transgender identification is a counterfeit of Christian discipleship. Baptism and confirmation are the points of entry into the Christian life, but they go deeper than requiring the disciple to face his or her own suffering, and require them to face the condition of original sin and temptation. They also mark the disciple's acceptance of the love and grace of God as creator and redeemer of human beings as male and female.

Whilst this book is not written from a Christian point of view, and focuses fairly predictably on some key issues already extensively discussed in the media and social media (thanks to the authors' activism), it repays careful reading as far as Christians who are seriously interested in this subject are concerned.

¹ <http://www.cambridgescholars.com/transgender-children-and-young-people>

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0075417X.2018.1435707>