

# ○ BOBBITIZING GOD

## ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DIVINE GENITALS REMAINING UNMANAGEABLE

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Eilberg-Schwartz's "seminal" book, *God's Phallus*, tapped into an unexplored anxiety about how we can call God "He" when we aren't sure whether God has male genitals, since we have no textual evidence from the Bible to support the patriarchal masculine metaphors. Eilberg-Schwartz published his work (1994) prior to the impact upon theology of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), which argued, by inference, for the disconnection between genitals (e.g., phallus) and gender (e.g., masculinity). Butler's theories offer a way through Eilberg-Schwartz's phallic anxiety, but I had to find how to ground these theories in my personal experiences before I could grasp the possibilities of simply not caring whether or not God has genitals.

After encapsulating the theories of Eilberg-Schwartz and Butler, and noticing how Freud himself disconnects desire from genitals, I track the character development of an Auckland drag queen called Ophelia Sphincta, as she learned to separate her biological sex from her performed gender. I then muse upon an article I co-authored recently with a Samoan minister, in which we explored new metaphors for speaking about God, based on the Samoan third-gender called *fa'afafine*. The underlying tone of this presentation is my continuing frustration at the church's lack of productive creativity in dealing with gender and the Divine, even after thirty years of feminist scholarship in Bible.

### INTRODUCTION

For our day we need to perceive the depatriarchalizing principle, to recover it in those texts and themes where it is present, and to accent it in our translations. Therein we shall be explorers who embrace both old and new in the pilgrimage of faith. (Trible 1973, 48)

This essay originates from a combination of teaching two new courses at the University of Auckland, one in 2006 with Mary Caygill, called 'Voices at the Margins: Disability and Queer Theologies', and one in 2007 with Elaine Wainwright, called 'The Gendered Church', as well as from the opportunity to co-author, with Tavita Maliko, a recently-published essay entitled "A G-String is Not Samoan": Exploring a Trans-gressive Third-Gender Pasifika Theology'.

This particular essay is structured in accordance with the schema developed by Ghanaian pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey (2003, 132), and known as the Liberative Pastoral Praxis (LPP) model. In much of the work that Mary Caygill and I did together in the School of Theology, we believed that the use of Lartey's model supported students in their desire to be daring in carving out new articulations of contextual theology. Because this essay is a bit of a wild ride, I hope that Lartey's model is equally supportive of me.

## LPP STEP 1: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The problem which energized my teaching in the two University courses, and that haunts this essay is, simply, that the entrenched age-old church traditions of addressing God as Father are not solved, at least for me, by languaging God as Mother. The problem is not, per se, the substitution of gynocentric metaphors for androcentric ones, but something simpler: the binary, dualistic thinking itself by which we impose the western dimorphic concepts of masculinity and femininity on a God who is beyond gender, except via human metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

With certain exceptions, God was most frequently gendered as male until the rise of second-wave feminist theology (e.g., Mary Daly, Elizabeth Johnson, Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sallie McFague, and others), when feminine gendering began to be applied to God as one way to challenge the historically-conditioned grip of androcentric and patriarchal metaphors.

If we must persist in gendering God, then new space for creative theologizing may be found by looking outside what Musa Dube (2000) calls the ‘Theology of The Empire’ – that is, looking to gendering as it is understood in the writings of cultural critics such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Carol-Anne Tyler, in gender critics such as Judith Butler and Bob Connell, and in traditional Samoan culture.

## LPP STEP 2: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

My now-ex-wife was an early second-wave feminist. I believe that I supported her completely in her frustrations with gender bias and discrimination, glass-ceilings, double-standards. Her pain affected me deeply, so that I became a strong supporter of feminism in the very early 1970s. Later in the 1970s, I became particularly close with Esther Broner, one of the writers (along with Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Chesler) of the Ms. Magazine feminist Haggadah. However, the one place I couldn’t easily find a *turangawaewae* (‘a place to stand,’ in Maori) as a strong supporter of feminism was in relation to Christian liturgy, theological language, and English translations of the Bible.

Raised in a American middle-class congregation in Oklahoma in the 1950s, I had a steady diet of theologically-brilliant sermons (our minister eventually left to become one of the leaders of the World Council of Churches). Nonetheless, God was always referred to as male. Nothing about my experience at university or in seminary (an all-male student body) challenged that. I was ordained five years before the first group of women was ‘irregularly’ ordained in the Episcopal Church. I missed out on the ruckus about that, because I was overseas writing my doctoral thesis. When I came back to the US in 1976, the first ordained woman I saw celebrating the eucharist at the altar had long flaming red hair and was eight months pregnant. I remember vividly my reaction: ‘That’s interesting, and I have no problem with it.’

But I had yet to be exposed to feminist theology and non-gendered liturgies. That didn’t happen until the 1980s, when I began to meet Jewish feminist involved in national and international Christian Dialogue, and, in the same circles, the first wave of ‘feminist’ Roman Catholic religious, many of whom were emerging Biblical scholars. Equally vividly, I remember how shocked I was the first time I heard God referred to as ‘she.’ That was much more shocking than seeing a pregnant woman celebrating the eucharist. Soon afterward, I began to understand how awash in gendered metaphors the Bible is, at first by reading Sallie McFague. Today, I can barely

stand to hear God referred to in masculine-gendered language. I genuinely wish I could say that, now in my 60s, I am the last generation to hear God referred to exclusively as male. Truthfully, given the present wave of conservative retrenchment, I think our struggle has only begun. I am also aware that if this topic is so painful for me, how much more painful must it be for so many women.

Sallie McFague writes: ‘A metaphor is a word or phrase used *inappropriately*. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another ... Metaphor always has the character of ‘is’ and ‘is not’. An assertion is made but as a likely account rather than definition’ (McFague 1988, 32). One problem with our religious metaphors is that they are so given to opposing extremes: good/bad, black/white, day/night, and male/female (which usually seems to overlap completely with western concepts of what is masculine or feminine, no matter the various ways in which these genders have been modelled in successive centuries).<sup>23</sup>

Of course, as sociolinguists have argued, grammatical gender is largely unrelated to social gender, and the presence or absence of the former says nothing about the nature of the latter. For example, about three out of every 100 infants is born with indeterminate genitals (Fausto-Sterling 2000). When this occurs:

Common [Western] medical practice imposes stringent requirements for male and female genitals at birth – a penis that is less than 2.5 centimeters long when stretched, or a clitoris that is more than one centimeter long are both commonly subject to surgery in which both are reduced to an ‘acceptable’ sized clitoris. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 11)

In other words, if a penis is not ‘big enough’ to be called a penis, it is turned into a vagina. Someone must name it, and in order to name it, it must be created. If it is not created, then the child will be assigned a grammatical gender (in the Western world, all children must be either a boy or a girl), which may or may not match that child’s social gender as it evolves over the course of childhood. Butler (1999, 10) seizes on this ‘disconnect’ between genitals and gender:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.

For McFague, gender talk about God is all just metaphor; it’s all just metaphor, and if that’s the case, why must we be limited to the repetitive perpetuation of western metaphors, or worse, of binary opposites? Is there something in-between the clichéd western concepts of masculinity as tough but unforgiving, and femininity as nurturing and domesticated? What goes on within the ‘spaces of exclusion’? (Giddens 1998)

### **LPP Step3: WHAT IS MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE?**

In 2001 and 2002, I spent a small but significant part of my time performing at night in drag, mostly in Auckland gay clubs. This is not the time or place to go into great detail about those most-memorable experiences, and indeed, I have already published some considered theological reflections on this life-phase (Culbertson 2006). Here, I want to concentrate on what I learned,

through such a unique – and frankly, self-surprising – experience, that has offered me some new ways to think about God and gender.

The very first time I appeared in make-up and a wig, in my late-50s, I discovered a theretofore-unknown ‘self’ that was quite alive and feisty in me. Ophelia, as she became known, just emerged, suddenly, ‘grewed like Topsy full-blown’. She was like Joan Rivers, at least before Joan had too many facelifts. She was the epitome of what is called in New Zealand ‘cheeky’ – a kind of playful rudeness, taking the piss both out of herself and others. She liked the way her legs looked in nylons; she loved to admire her fire-engine-red artificial fingernails. She dashed out to get both ears pierced so she could drip in diamonds. She began to design clothes to perform in, and hired a dressmaker. As Carole-Anne Tyler (2003, 61) remarked in her powerful study of drag culture, ‘If boys will be girls they had better be ladies’. Or perhaps I should cite, transgressively, de Beauvoir (1952, 249), ‘One is not born a woman, but becomes one’.

Even after all the years I’d spent on a shrink’s couch, I never knew she was there. For two years, by day, I was a respected left-wing theology professor, and by night Ophelia was such a popular performance artist in the Auckland bar scene that in the 2001 ‘Golden Stilettos’ awards, she was named first runner-up in the ‘Best Up-and-Coming New Drag Queen’ category. Ophelia was not me, or at least, not any ‘me’ that I had known in the previous five decades. Yet she was there, hiding in some space of exclusion inside of me, and once invited, she easily popped out to play. I had spent years getting comfortable with a variety of masculinities that I knew how to perform, to echo Robert Connell (2005), but until the arrival of Ophelia, was unaware that I knew how to perform at least one kind of femininity – however hilariously rude. Only afterwards did I grasp, on a deep level, Butler’s (1999, 9–10) claim that genitals (sex) do not determine gender.<sup>4</sup>

The most surprising thing about my drag life was that I ‘felt feminine’ – whatever that means. From the cultural perspective in which I was raised, this is, of course, impossible, and runs the risk of sounding painfully disrespectful of those women who have spent their lives, to quote Irigaray, struggling under phallogocentric privilege as ‘this sex which is not one, neither one nor two’ (Irigaray 1985). Yet Ophelia also was neither one nor two. She was a feminine and glamorous performance artist, both on stage and off, yet when it came time to go to the toilet, she peed like a man. And before she went to bed at the end of the evening, the dress, make-up, and fingernails all came off, and ‘she’ slept in Philip’s comfortable flannel pajamas. By way of Ophelia, I believe that, unconsciously, I was being driven to find ‘an alternative vision for overcoming the phallic economy of the one’ (Rivera 2006, 267).

## **LPP STEP 4: WHAT IS THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS?**

In *This Sex which Is Not One*, Irigaray makes the mistake common to many critical thinkers, of not taking a further step toward a re-articulation of difference along racial, ethnic, and cultural axes. Irigaray’s neglect in exploring these axes is disappointing, for as Gayle Rubin points out in her essay, ‘The Traffic in Women’, ‘Sex is sex, but what counts as sex is ... culturally determined and obtained. Every society also has a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex ... is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner’ (Rubin 1975, 165)

For about fifteen years now, I have been interested in the social structures of Samoan and Tongan societies, where there are more than two genders. Compared to the West, both cultures offer a larger repertoire of complex gender roles which may be performed. With the support of many Samoan and Tongan colleagues, I set about in 2006 to try to unravel some of the anthropological misperceptions that have been published. Because the two cultures are both similar and quite different, I will focus here on the gendered structure of Samoan culture, with advance apologies to my Tongan colleagues. My remarks and observations about Samoan culture, and particularly about gender in that culture, are informed by a series of taped interviews, friendships with traditionally- and non-traditionally-gendered Samoans, and journalistic and academic articles, often of Samoan origin.

Traditionally, Samoan culture supports the performance of at least three genders: *tamatane* (masculine), *tamafafine* (feminine), and *fa'afafine* (after the manner of the feminine).<sup>5</sup> These gender labels are attached to children around the age of puberty, for there are no gender-specific words for young 'boys' and 'girls,' as we have in English. Definitions of gender in Samoa are performative and relational, more than biological.<sup>6</sup> Those who are termed *tamatane* are socialized into masculine gender roles, as defined by Samoan culture. Those who are termed *tamafafine* are socialized into feminine gender roles, as they are generally defined by Samoan culture. *Fa'afafine* are persons with male genitals who, generally, reject the culturally normative masculine social roles, preferring the feminine. This is the case, even though they are circumcised at puberty. For the most part, these persons with male genitals and female social roles are accepted by the family, 'as they are'.

*Fa'afafine* play a number of important, but sometimes transgressive, social roles within the gender structure of traditional Samoa. Some have been known to be chosen as the *taupou*, or ritualized symbolic virgin female for the village (Farran and Su'a 2005, 7). Some wear feminine clothes, some do not. Some abandon their *fa'afafine* role fairly soon after adolescence ends, and marry and produce children; others do not. Whether or not they abandon the *fa'afafine* role, some are deemed eligible to serve the community as a *matai*, or village chief. Some choose to take on the traditional masculine Samoan tattoo, or *pe'a*. A few have considered taking on the traditional feminine tattoo, or *malu*, but cultural teaching holds that if a biological male is tattooed with a *malu*, both the wearer and the tattooist will die (Australian Associated Press 2007). Some, whether in feminine clothing or masculine clothing, grow up to be government workers, school teachers, Sunday School teachers, and police officers (Pacific Islands Trade and Investment Commission NZ 2007). Many grow up to be entertainers, casually or formally:

*Fa'afafine* are necessary to Samoan sociality precisely because they site the transgressive quality of gender and sex in everyday life ... Because gender is present in its exercise, emerging in action rather than residing in the individual as a fixed quality, it is not possible to say a Samoan has a gender except when doing it.. Because of this, penises are not male and vaginas are not female. They are instruments for engendering action, where appropriate ... Samoan gender is virtual, present only when performed. (Drozdown-St. Christian 2002, 32–33)

One thing is clear: *fa'afafine* have male genitalia, but understand themselves as straight women who are attracted to straight men (Besnier 1993, 560). If you are attracted to women, you are a

lesbian, not a fa'afafine (Farran and Su'a 2005, 8). If you are attracted to gay men, you are disgusting, from a social point of view (Vanessa 2007, 55; cf. O'Malley 2007, 2). Some western anthropologists have struggled with this concept, attempted to escape the gender dimorphism that our culture normalizes, yet have still published studies that anger fa'afafine by mis-labeling them.

Fa'afafine are not transvestites, cross-dressers, homosexual, gay, transgender, transsexual, or third-gender, nor should they be diagnosed as having 'gender identity disorder'. As Dr. Vanessa Sele writes near the end of her book, *Memoirs of a Samoan, Catholic, and Fa'afafine*:

These are all words of the English language which have very little or no meaning to the 'Faafafine' word in the Samoan language and culture. Many of these writers ... equate much of their findings to their own cultural experiences, making generalizations about fa'afafines which would only satisfy and answer their research questions or observations ... [Being a fa'afafine] is a condition that no one knows more about than the Samoans themselves. (Vanessa 2007, 67; cf. Farran 2004, 135–139).

In one sense, fa'afafine have the best of both worlds. Within the family, fa'afafine generally 'lean towards' those tasks of family-maintenance which are traditionally assigned to females, such as food preparation, weaving and cloth-making, and the care of the young and the elderly. Yet:

*fa'afafine* are viewed by their *aiga* [families] as sons or brothers, not daughters or sisters. They have the freedom to roam about and go beyond the village that males rather than females have. At the same time they may be permitted to work with their sisters and even to share the same sleeping accommodation because they are not perceived as being a sexual threat ... [S]ome village councils recognize the *fa'afafine* preferences for women's activities to those of men, and may or may not allow them to wear female clothing in the village. (Farran and Su'a 2005, 7)

This is not to say that fa'afafine today live without problems. They may face various forms of discrimination, the most hurtful often being from the church or their own families. For example, Tavita Maliko (2007, 35) recounts how painful it was to be called a fa'afafine by members of his own family, because as a young child he complained about picking up something too heavy. The presence of physical or verbal violence in Samoan culture, as in other cultures, against those who are 'different', illustrates the extent to which conservative Christianity, and the assumptions of imported western culture, have begun to undermine the traditional Samoan normalization of gender fluidity. Gender violence also confirms the analysis of Monique Wittig (1992, 14), that 'the categories 'man' and 'woman' ... are political categories and not natural givens'.

There is no stereotypical fa'afafine, any more than there is a stereotypical tamatane or tamafafine. Writes Butler (1999, 174):

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication, and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can

be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.

In Butlerian thought, ‘... gendered bodies are so many ‘styles of the flesh.’ These styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities’ (Butler 1999, 177). Ophelia was a style of the flesh, and had a history, however little I recognized that until later. Butler is right, that gender is so fluid – including both unmanly and unwomanly – that each person’s gender performances have something challenging to teach us about them, and about ourselves.

## LPP STEP 5: DOES THIS NEW INFORMATION HAVE BIBLICAL SUPPORT?

In Hebrew, Genesis 1:27 reads *beTzelem Elohim bara oto, zachar v’nikvah bara otam*, ‘in the likeness of God he created it; male and female he created them’. Does this mean that the first humans were created as one male and one female, or as one androgynous person from whom both males and females later proceeded?

Ken Stone (2006, 56), along with feminist exegetes Phyllis Trible (1973, 35, 39) and Mieke Bal (1996, 26), suggests that:

it is preferable to think not of God’s having created Eve out of Adam but rather of God’s having created Adam *and* Eve by dividing a single androgynous being, the ‘*adam*, into two creatures, ‘*ish* (‘man’) and ‘*ishah* (‘woman’) ... the ‘*adam* was an androgynous creature, containing within itself *both* male and female.<sup>7</sup>

Judith Butler (1999, 283) points out that by highlighting the androgyny of the original creation story in Genesis 1:27, ‘... a counternormativity is at work in the very story that is supposed to install the necessity of sexual difference’. Androgyny, too, is a ‘sex which is not one, neither one nor two’, to cite Irigaray again, but rather, the Genesis androgyny carries the weight of all subsequent historical possibilities.

Thirty-five years ago, Phyllis Trible drew my attention to Hosea 11:9, *ki El anokhi, v’lo ish*, for I am God, and not a (what?) ... an *ish*? A comparison of this passage from Hosea, with Genesis 2:23 and Numbers 23:19, suggests that *ish* should be read as a ‘person who is gendered male/a man’, rather than the generic ‘human being’ (cf. Stein 2008). In Genesis 2:23, an *ish* is clearly a gendered male, to be distinguished from a gendered female, and both to be distinguished from *adam*, the generic human being, or perhaps, the androgyne. Numbers 23:19 reads, *Lo ish El, v’yikazeb ...*, God is not an *ish*, that he should lie, nor a *ben-adam* that he should repent, which I believe should be translated: God is not a male-gendered person who would lie, nor a human being who needs to repent of sins. I feel ‘trapped’ by this, for it makes us males out to be potential liars. It seems to draw a sharp distinction between us and females, who apparently don’t lie, a false difference made possible only in a dimorphic gender system.

Anthropologist Morgan Holmes (2004) addresses the fluidity of Samoan, and other Polynesian, gender categories, observing that in Pacifica, gender ‘leaks at the seams’. Nothing can leak without a space to leak into, and I believe it is the concept of ‘the space between’, or in Samoan, the relational *vā*, that provides an opportunity to think differently about gender and theology in a Pacific

context.<sup>8</sup> From a Western point of view, the *vā* is a space of exclusion; from a Pasifika viewpoint, it is where the vitality of identity and relationship occurs.

The *vā*, a concept that ‘traverses many Pacific languages and indeed travels beyond Pacific nations to Pacific rim countries,’ stands in diametric opposition to Western concepts of identity and space. Anthony Giddens (1991, 53) defines Western self-identity as ‘a person’s own reflexive understanding of their [own] biography.’ Traditional Pacific identity, on the other hand, is almost exclusively relational: as Samoan writer Albert Wendt (1999) describes the *vā*, it is the relational space between two people or two communities, in which each is defined by the other, as opposed to Western relationality in which people define themselves. The *vā* is ‘Not a space that separates but space that relates’ (Wendt 1999, 405). Auckland architecture professor Albert Refiti (2004, n.p.) also emphasizes that the *vā* is the ‘in-between space, a relational opening up inhabited by deities/community/land/family.’ Tongan poet Karlo Mila-Schaaf (2006, 10) creates a helpful analogy: ‘If we can imagine that you are I are positioned on a map, *vā* is used to describe the nature of the terrain that lies within.’ The important things in a person’s or a community’s life happen in, are allowed by and defined within, the space of the *vā*. In an essay on the *vā* and Pacific architecture, Refiti illustrates: ‘... your body does not necessarily belong to you as an individual. A large part of your body, your make-up, also belongs to the ancestors; to the *fanua* (land) the place of birth; and to the community that shaped and cared for you.’ A person stands on one side of the *vā*, with another inside the *vā*, but ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ of their relationship exists (only) in the space between them, and is defined by the generations before, the land from which you draw life, the expectation of the communities in which you live, and the providence of the other-worldly. A relationship between two people or two communities is changed, not by changing the other, but by re-examining the contents of the *vā*.

One of my PhD candidates interviewed fa’afafine in Samoa earlier this year, about the way they view their fa’afafine bodies. One interviewee, Lesiva (2008, 23–24), outlined the *vā* in which she finds her identity. She speaks of her sense of self as being defined by the colonially-dictated gender symbols which inhabit the *vā* between her and others:

I don’t go out in the public wearing, say, a full-on dress, but if I do try it in my room, there is a powerful overwhelming sense that comes upon me. Even when I’m wearing a nice suit, a manly suit, there’s also an overwhelmingly powerful sense that comes along with it. But the dress and the suit both are extreme, and for me, I don’t like to go to extremes, because I find that those are not my voices – being a female or being a male.

Without more information, of course, a Western academic has to read more specific meanings into this statement. Judith Butler (1999, 174) might choose to interpret through the lens of Esther Newton’s ‘Double Inversion’:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says ‘appearance is an illusion’ Drag says [Newton’s curious personification] ‘my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine.’ At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; ‘my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.’

But Newton's hermeneutic is based on dimorphic concepts of gender as an internalized identity, rather than a fluid identity with many possible relational performances. Newton is assuming binary gender identity concepts, but Lesiva is not talking about drag, nor is she talking about the opposition of masculinity and femininity. Rather, I believe that Lesiva is talking about the Samoan *vā*, that 'in-between' space, 'ripe' with possibility, between competing dimorphic gender identities, a space within which both freedom and responsibility are found intuitively. Lesiva seems most at peace with herself when she is performing a gender that has no English name, and which 'is not one, neither one nor two', but some other number that I don't know the name of. Hers is an identity which is true-to-self only by living within the spaces of exclusion created by dualistic thinking. Lesiva is, in the words of New Zealand Member of Parliament Winnie Laban, one who serves 'functions that neither man nor woman can alone achieve' (Laban 2007)

If we are doing a culturally-constructed contextual theology, we might identify the *vā* either as God, or as the place that God lives. If Lesiva finds her truest self in that *vā*, then Lesiva lives within God. If, on the other hand, the *vā* is the space where God lives, then Lesiva lives with God inside a bounded space. In either case, the *vā* is a gift from God to humanity (Kihara 2007), an identity-place that encourages respectful and culturally sanctioned creativity. Perhaps Lesiva lives in a 'marginalized center', a category increasingly used by postcolonial theorists who are seeking to subvert the geography of the colonial heritage (Appelbaum 2002, Jones 1999).

And in either case, many Samoans would believe that Lesiva is living the way God created her to live. In 2006, in a letter to the *Samoa Observer* newspaper, the Prime Minister of Samoa asked: '... and if the blind and the fa'afafine are born that way, then did not God create them that way? And should not we all accept and respect all of God's creations as they were fashioned in His image?' (Tavita 2006). Vanessa Sele (2007, 70) writes of her own spiritual struggle: 'Fa'afafines grow up thinking that they are women... If we believe that God created life, then we should never question His creation'.

## **LPP STEP 6: REACHING A NEW THEOLOGICAL POSITION: GOD IS BOBBITTIZED AND UNMANAGEABLE**

In 1993, when Lorene Bobbitt cut off her husband's penis, she threw it out of the car window. Writing this essay has made me wonder if we can bobbitize God, by eschewing all the male-gendered language about God, throwing it out the window, and becoming much more creative about the way we use metaphor. At the very least, there must be some way to help that 73% of all British Christians surveyed recently who are convinced that God is definitely male (Pitcher 2008).

God has no sex, so God's gender is not God's sex. God's gender is our creation, a product of our human lens. Male and female, masculinity and femininity, may describe God's performance, but they do not describe God's essence or identity. Speaking metaphorically only, God is male when God performs male, and female when God performs female (cf. Drozdow-St. Christian 2002, 31). God performs gender, but has neither gender nor genitals. As Butler (1999, 178) summarizes, 'the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all'.

God is always counter-hegemonic and untameable, and in that sense, perhaps should be described with metaphors much closer to those of the Samoan fa'afafine, or at least like my drag-queen friend Ophelia – metaphors more suited to the vā, the space of both radical exclusion and radical inclusion. Where are the metaphors in English for a God who is ‘not one, neither one nor two’, who serves ‘functions that neither man nor woman can alone achieve’, who roams in the scary areas outside the village at nights like a man, and who returns in the daytime to weave tapa cloth, cook the family’s meals, and tend to the elderly and sick – and in doing all of those things, is neither just male or just female, but something else. Surely this is the same God who has said ‘My ways are not your ways’, and ‘Behold I am doing something new’.

God is unManageable because God is ‘lo *ish*’, (not a male). But God is in relationship with us, and hence we gender God, because we do not know – whether in the US or in Samoa – how to do relationship outside of gendering. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (Butler 1999, 173).

Expanding the repertoire of metaphors from dimorphism to polymorphism is like expanding from black and white to color. It may be that fa'afafine metaphors are the best/supreme/most-honest way of gendering the genderless God, because of their fluidity and playfulness, and the fact that gender is always a relational category, never an absolute. How we gender God says a great deal about our culture-bound selves, and nothing about God.

## POSTSCRIPT

Classical theology has a long tradition of struggling to balance the transcendence of God with the imminence of God. The theologies that attract me today are both process-oriented and relational, probably like my friendships with long-treasured old friends. I admit an element of defeat in this essay, in that while I believe I have argued convincingly in favour of unbinding God from the traditional male/female binary, I still cannot find language for God which is not gendered in some way, even with multiple genders to choose from. I only know how to push the unbinding by refusing to connect gender with biological sex.

Recently, a feral cat abandoned one of her kittens in my backyard. He was only about four weeks old, and only one of his eyes was open. It’s been a struggle to get him healthy, but ‘Spider,’ as my daughter named him, is now a boisterous and charming 8-week-old kitten. Abandoned so young, and taken in by me immediately, he thinks I’m his mommy. I’ve fallen madly in love with him, and call him ‘my boyfriend.’ We are Mommy and his boyfriend. That’s the sort of playful non-gendered genderedness I continue to long for within the theological talk about God.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It seems that Jews and Christians have been pointing to God-language as only metaphorical for a long time. See, for example, Joseph Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, Chapter 14, trans. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1929, Vol. 2, p. 84: ‘...as a human person writes with the finger, finger is attributed to God; as strength in man comes from the right hand, right hand is ascribed to Him; ...’ Albo wrote in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>2</sup> God is imaged in many forms and metaphors in the Bible – a rock, a wind, even a little red hen (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). God is also likened to a seamstress (Gen 3:21); as possessing a womb (Jer 31:20;

Isa 46:3-4); as a woman in labor (Deut 32:18, Isa 42:14; John 3:3-7); as a nursing mother (Isa 49:15; Num 11:11-14); as a mother with her weaned child (Pss 121:1-2); as a comforting mother (Isa 66:11-12; Hos 11:1-4,8-9); as a mother bear (Hos 13:6-8); and as a midwife (Pss 22:9), among other feminine images. One of the Biblical names of God is El Shaddai, 'the Breasted One' (Biale 1982). And woman/Life/Eve is created in God's image (Gen 1:27 and 5:1-2). Yet the majority of the referential metaphors of God in the Bible are as a male. Certainly that quickly seems to have become the norm in post-New Testament Christianity, and in our own time, the masculinity of God is being vigorously defended by Biblical literalists and right-wing Christians.

<sup>3</sup> Tribble (1973) lists the following feminine images of God: nurturer and teacher of children; healer of tender wounds; supplier of food to hungry infants; fetcher of water; clother of the needy; housekeeper; comforter of the bereaved and sorrowful; and dressmaker or seamstress. This last image is paralleled in a Pacific context by images of God as a weaver of tapa cloth (Palu 2003).

<sup>4</sup> According to Farran (2004, 126): 'The terms 'gender' or 'sex' are often used interchangeably in everyday English, but their distinct meanings gained legal significance in the English case of *Bellinger v Bellinger*, when the Court of Appeal (Family Division) accepted arguments by counsel that 'sex' and 'gender' were different. 'Gender' relates to culturally and socially specific expectations of behaviour and attitude assumed by a society and includes self-definition. 'Sex' is a narrower concept and may be limited to characteristics of medical sex in whatever way these may be defined in a particular context.'

<sup>5</sup> Allardice (1985, 214) offers six possible meanings to the common Samoan prefix 'fa'a.' Generally understood as a causative, it is most often translated into English as 'like a.' Thus, fa'afafine is commonly translated as 'like a woman,' or 'in the manner of a woman (*fafine*); similarly, fa'atagata is usually translated as 'like a man (*tagata*).' The complication for native speakers of English is that they most often register the noun more loudly than the prefix, whereas Samoans hear the prefix as determining a compound word's meaning. *Like a woman* is not the same as *a woman*. Further, the term *fa'afafine* denotes a social role – the taking on of duties and responsibilities most commonly associated with biological females – rather than a Western-style gender identity. The Samoan *fa'a* is cognate with the Tongan *faka*, and the Maori *whaka*.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan Holmes (2004, 2) summarizes: '...such symbolic organizations demonstrate that sex/gender systems have not been limited by a dichotomous binary opposition of male and female...[gender] is not simply given to us as an obvious biological fact, but...how we apprehend [gender] is shaped by other cultural, symbolic and structural features.'

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation is supported by early rabbinic texts, including BT Berakoth 61a; see Steven Greenberg's (2005) chapter entitled 'The birth of gender and desire'. 'The sexually differentiated terms *'ish* ('man') and *'ishah* ('woman') ... do not appear in the Yahwist story until Gen. 2:23, after the creation of the second creature' (Stone 2006, 56; see also Stein 2008).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the Polynesian *vā*, see Duranti (1997) and Lupe (2007).

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Lesiva. Unpublished personal interview, by Tavita Maliko, January 22, 2008, Lelata, Apia, Samoa.

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Cite this article as: Culbertson, Philip. 2009. 'Bobbittizing God: On the importance of the divine genitals remaining unManageable' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5 (1): pp. 5.1–5.14. DOI: 10.2104/bc090005.