

BOOK REVIEWS



Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 210 pp.

What is trans? If you think you know, think again! Justin Tanis offers testimonies from interviews, personal experience, and written reflections that point to the complex and wonderfully creative identities included under the term trans. Trans is often used as shorthand for transgender, which Tanis describes as “a broad term to encompass a whole range of people who transgress the commonly understood definitions of gender all or part of the time” (p. 19).

Included in this beginning definition is an expansive exploration of people who engage in a journey of nonbinary ways of understanding life, gender, identity, and the reality of a nonbinary God. Instead of creating a theory of trans identity and gender performance, Tanis relies on stories of people who have traveled this territory as well as his own personal experience of transitioning from female to male. The tone and method of this work are that of narrative. The first two chapters deal mainly with descriptions of trans issues and trans people’s search for an authentic identity.

To orient his study, Tanis engages Scripture, faith communities, and theology as central areas for discussion. He identifies various Scripture passages that have been used in ways harmful toward trans people and then shifts the focus on some of these same passages to show how many of them can actually be interpreted in positive and supportive ways for trans believers and communities of faith. His exploration of the eunuch as the closest biblical analogy to transgendered people today is a helpful reminder of gender inclusivity in Scripture.

Following a discussion of Scripture, additional chapters address transgendered people and faith communities; transgendered people and God; gender as a calling; and transgendered body theology. A constant theme throughout these reflections is that of spirituality. For many trans people, their powerful experience of God in private prayer is a source of comfort and courage. This experience of spiritual encounter with the divine, in a way that affirms who they are and their journey to wholeness, is a powerful source of stability and confirmation.

The author addresses the relationship between trans believers and faith communities. The reader might be surprised to learn that not all conservative settings are trans averse, whereas many progressive communities struggle with what it means to welcome trans people into their services and programs. What is most needed is education about the needs and realities of people who live a trans life. Education and genuine hospitality are key building blocks for any community that wants to be truly open and inclusive.

Education and hospitality also hold true for all who would supervise, teach, or advise trans ministry students. This volume that offers an introduction to the world of transgendered people begs for a posture of humility on the part of those of us who do not know this world intimately. We cannot presume to know what we do not know. Our analytical approaches would be better served through narrative and the willingness to believe our students and supervisees first, allowing their voices to lead.

Tanis includes an appendix with some very helpful liturgical examples that can hold and address people dealing with trans issues. As a marker on their journey, baptism as a sign of God's grace and acceptance can have a particularly powerful meaning. Renaming ceremonies can also be a way to acknowledge a new beginning in a community of faith. Sample prayers and litanies are included in this section.

I find it hard to point to any limitations of this text at this time. It is an excellent introduction to those who identify with a trans experience. It offers wisdom and valuable insights for communities of faith seeking to offer hospitality to their trans seekers and members. It is an invaluable source of wisdom and knowledge for anyone who is in a position to supervise, teach, or direct trans people in their vocational callings. It is also a creative invitation to any of us intrigued with exploring a way of thinking and envisioning the world, and our places in it, in nondualistic and nonoppositional

ways. This has implications for new ways of conceiving theology, for a theology that can move away from the Newtonian views that still underpin much of our thinking to new conversations with emerging scientific studies on quantum physics and entanglement theory—theories open to more fluid and nondualistic understandings of our world.

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