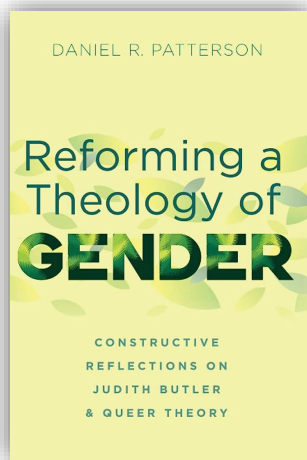


BOOK REVIEW

Reforming a Theology of Gender: Constructive Reflections on Judith Butler and Queer Theory

By Daniel R. Patterson

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If you are a social scientist, anthropologist, social philosopher, theologian or ethicist working on a Christian anthropology, you have most likely encountered Judith Butler's corpus of work.¹ Or—at the very least—been disquieted by some of her vastly influential, yet controversial ideas. These range in myriad directions but coalesce in her being an early catalyst for queer theory, gender theory in general, and the ensuing turbulence of our newly gender-fluid age.

As Patterson early on admits, to encounter Butler is at once “to have wonder and fear provoked” (7). Wonder, because her work is not only intelligent, brilliantly multilayered and multifocal; but because it

also questions the unquestionable, thus flirting with danger, which provokes fear that one may be climbing up a tree which one cannot descend without falling; “Some fear reading Butler because they worry that it might render a conservative position vulnerable to views that are hostile to Christianity and its foundational claims” (8). Butler becomes, then, an agent provocateur “who rouses Christians to snap out of their idolatrous obsession with the bygone days of Edenic beauty” (3). Hmm.

In this volume Patterson takes on nearly the entirety of Butler's work, not for critique but as a tool; a resource for theological reflection and exploration of one's ideas *about* gender. This is a tough undertaking by Patterson, but also for his readers. Any framing of Butler's theory of gender as a ‘resource’ for theological discourse will invariably lead to many lengthy incursions, contentious moments, conclusions that will stretch one or the other—*theology or queer theory*.

So, from the outset, what *is* the utility of this work by Patterson, aside from suffering the stretching?² And why review this book in the *On Knowing Humanity Journal*?

Patterson suggests knowing Butler is an essential for those of us who work with cultures and want to understand more deeply what constructs personhood, the self, sex, gender, and the edifices of culture as rendered today. For Christians, “Butler's theory provokes the Christian to account for the two-pronged confession that humanity no longer lives in Eden, *and* this matters for what it means to fulfill the scriptural exhortation to glorify God in our body. Moreover,

¹ Please see the accompanying bibliography. Butler is a philosopher-cultural theorist whose work on the “performative” nature of gender and sex have been widely influential since the late 20th century. Having written the landmark *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler's ideas became foundational to queer theory, contributed much to the debate *between* cultural theorists; all, not without significant praise or criticism. She remains focal to understanding novel gender ideology, the role culture and social norms play, as well as revisionist theories of what constitutes a gendered self in the 21st century.

Butler prompts us to see that Eden is a problematic haven to which many of us return to negotiate gender trouble . . ." (2). *OKHJ*'s purpose is to give voice and opportunity for those of us whose lines of inquiry and research explore the nature of personhood, attempt "the reincorporation of teleology," "scientific understandings" and "insights from theology into our accounts of people and cultures" (*OKHJ*, Focus and Scope).

For Patterson, ". . . this book fills the lacuna [of understanding Butler's theories of self and gender] and how these operate teleologically and theologically" (1). Personally, I had *no idea* that Butler's thinking was *operating theologically* (and I still have my doubts after reading Patterson, but I will reserve personal commentary for later). The utility of this book remains as a treasure-trove exploration of both Butler's gender theories as well as one Christian's endeavor to further rouse theological reflection on God's human creation. We should all strive to do so well.

The Gist of Butler, and We Move On

To appreciate Patterson's work, one must have a rudimentary understanding of Butler's work and gender theory. Here is Patterson's reduction:

Butler develops a theory in which gender is performative, which means that gender is not what one *is* by virtue of one's morphology or chromosomal make-up, but something [*sic*] one has *become* and *is becoming* by repeatedly acting out what they have come to understand is the meaning of their given gender. It is . . . a way of (re)reading

history to show how language, and our participation as the vehicles that transport and implement that language, determine what gender is in history and now.²

For clarity, let me add that gender, as defined here, is a product of culture and learning and not at all influenced by the body proper—irrespective of how that body may have somatoviscerally and over the life-course communicated its properties to our brain and influenced our self-understanding of "living and being in a body."³ This is an important element to note, as I explain in the footnote and cited work.

Several other comments are necessary to understanding Butler's theoretical trajectory. One is to show how each person is dependent on social prescriptions to be fully recognized, therefore rendering each of us vulnerable to prevailing social gender norms. "The claim is that one cannot be gendered without being recognized, and one cannot be recognized without others *and* their norms" (36). Problems arise when social norms constrain individuals to their requisites, and the requisites are (most universally) a binary. Thus, some are not allowed to be recognized as gendered (or sexual) in the way they desire to be recognized. "Society decides what it will recognize . . ." (36).

If performing gender results in who we are, then to Butler "troubling" the definition of gender, challenging the status quo, would indeed re-write the performance and thus free the person to become whom they desire to be.⁴ The physical materiality of the body is, in

² Patterson, 9. The term *gender* is being rendered to mean one's inner sense of self that is inexorably tied to *learning* and *performance*, and both to *lexical definitions* understood and socialized into the individual's psyche over time. Butler as well as other queer theorists do not link gender formation to any biological substrate, or for that matter, any physical form or body-brain communication. "Butler believes a person is not a particular sex and therefore gender[ed] by nature but is constantly receiving and becoming what it was created to be in the beginning. ['Created' alludes here to how a person was lexically and socially identified and then 'constructed' by sociality in their history.] The question of how this original and subsequent foundation happens is crucial" (17). (Bracketed comment mine for clarity). Thus the imperative, that understanding "gender history" is critical to Butler's eventual deconstruction of the binary (male and female)—a significant goal of her work—since binarism becomes the "oppressive duo" she seeks to alter (Butler, 2014, chapter 4) .

³ See Gil 2022b. A significant omission in all discussions of Butler, and for that matter, theologies of the body, is the incorporation of scientific facts and knowledges. As I've argued in this cited piece and elsewhere, leaving anatomy, biology, neuropsychology out of our resources and explanations creates only further problems, given that explanations without science readily manifest themselves as incomplete teleological understandings of the person. This is also the case with Butler, and as we'll see eventually, with Patterson's contributions.

⁴ See Gil 2022b, 54, for a fuller discussion on this Butler position.

Butler's terms, a "mute facticity"⁵ (i.e., a fact of existence but of no consequence to gender). It is then the performance of gender which genderizes the body. The genesis of gender is not, therefore, corporeal, but performative (9): Change the norms, and the performance will change, rendering new gender options, these renewed, revised, freed from "the one or two." But to do that, we must understand 'the beginning.'

Patterson, Acting Upon the Disquieting Butler

Patterson writes,

The fundamental problem that Butler diagnoses is not the causal relation between the beginning and the present [i.e., an originary heterosexual binary form and its maintenance through social norms and ascriptions], but the unquestioned *privilege* of the heterosexual couple, which Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix,' [Butler 2007, 7] that assumes [this binarism] resides from the beginning. With this heterosexual foundation determining what is recognizably legitimate in the present . . . her desire is much more radical: to change society's understanding about the beginning so that the beginning is *always open to reform*. Butler desires to depart from the traditional concept of the beginning, which means departing from the beginning as an immovable, static, or incontestable truth that the *binary* is the sole, legitimate, originary form. (16)

That 'beginning' invariably leads to the questions, "What *is* a man or a woman?" and, "Is gender a natural, and God-given identity?" To answer these through a theology of the body that is not reformed is to Patterson to "send us down the same well-worn

tracks that operate like autopilots, ending up in the same place each time, Eden, which is ironic because we cannot enter Eden" (3). Moreover, "returning to Eden to find answers to abstract questions about gender usually works but only because lifeless questions (in the sense that they do not pertain to our lives) fail to broach the complexity of embodiment that we find *outside* of Eden, where we all live" (3).

A good portion of Patterson's focus thus centers around how this prevailing aim of Butler's, to disquiet gender and its beginnings to free it, circles back to reflect how theologically inept we Christians have been in our understanding of human life *after Eden*—and most importantly, how our traditional responses "curtail what questions can be asked, what possibilities can be discussed" (3, and footnote 7). All this, inclusive of "non-Edenic bodies in the present" (3).⁶ Patterson thus maintains, "I exercise the God-given right of wonder to rupture the mastery of the body that too often characterizes traditional Christian views on gender" (4), if only because such "wondering about the body has the potential to animate new theological and ethical possibilities for receiving our own and others' bodies" (4).

Eden. To Patterson, we have disordered our theological anthropology by returning to Eden and the images of Adam and Eve (as DeFranza puts it) "as paradigms for human beings rather than as progenitors" (De Franza 2015, 153-185). To him, our constant reference to Adam and Eve becomes "a seductive site of pilgrimage" (116) which leads only to "misconstrued self-justification and a means by which to condemn the troubled bodies of others" (177). Adam and Eve do not bring life, but death. Their fall, tossed aside in many instances to then reflect on Adam and Eve's binarism, mutuality, reproduction, and "marriage," becomes a conservative vision of gender

⁵ For Butler, sex is not a "bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but . . . a *cultural norm* which covers the materialization of bodies" (Butler 2011, 2-3).

⁶ It would be well here to quote portions of Patterson's Footnote 7 from his Introduction: "*In the short term, the full force of her [Butler's] theory is evaded, which precipitates the longer-term situation (which has already arrived), where the church is ill-equipped to respond to the questioning of gender in a society that has been soaking in Butler's gender theory for three decades.*" In agreeing with Patterson, I offer the reader my own work, *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution: Gender, Cisgender, Transgender, and Intersex*, (Cascade, 2022), where in Chapters 4 and 7, I address in detail and animate the discussion of ethical and theological possibilities for receiving our own and others' bodies. Central to "non-Edenic bodies" is a discussion of how the church has historically refused to acknowledge *procreated bodies* that differ from the binary: those born intersex; which, while small in numbers, nevertheless remain outside the church's binarism. To counter that absence, theological and teleological understandings of intersex persons have been well discussed by Megan DeFranza (2015) and Susannah Cornwall (2010), to name a few besides myself.

and sexuality *for the present*, and for “narrating the sexual revolution as an ostensible fall of sex from innocence that characterized the age before the fall” (117). This leads to pressing the worth of heterosexual marital sex and nuclear families for undoing the effects of the fall (on sex) and returning to a state of societal purity (117). It becomes “a monopinciple that demands compliance” (169).

The beginning is inexorably troubled when applying it to gender and sexuality in the present. We are not grounded in one moment in time, and Eden is not our home. Siding here with Patterson, and as I have noted with significance elsewhere,⁷ the human race is *procreated*, not *created* in the same sense that Adam and Eve were. With procreation comes significant human variation, God be thanked for an adaptive (and I refrain here from saying evolutionary) genome.

Butler has forced us, then, to reckon with ‘the beginning’—how we fixate and narrate Eden into our present. Yet, “Edenic images of *created* bodies do not save me or society. When I find myself ‘worshipping’ these created images by conforming myself to their perfect bodies to become like them, I have [then] fallen into a futile life of body-works righteousness” (118). (Butler, of course provides no salvation for our fallenness, only a move toward self-re-creation through reformation of the social imaginary.)

Reforming the subject? Patterson then rightly turns his explorations to how we ought to understand a theology of the body in light of our need for salvation, devoting the whole of chapters 5 and 6 to a response. Maneuvering through a half-dozen other luminaries that either touch on Butler’s ideas or which magnetically enlarge what Patterson is trying to tell us,⁸ he eventually takes the reader to the focal point: A life that honors God with our bodies is “indexed to the life of Christ that is worked into our bodies by the Spirit of God” (14).

And yes, it is a risky union because it immediately questions ownership; and beyond, opens up the conflicts which inevitably arise between one’s own desires and that of Christ’s desires for us. (Butler, of course, does not ask about ownership, rather *tells us* that ownership is a moot point when we are guided—indeed constrained—by social norms and molded by our requisite performances. To Butler, we are actually not our own, certainly not of our own making; that is, until we change sociality to then become who we wish to be; which is of course one of her main goals. Still, it is a reformulation of self with social risks, given that we live within a social matrix.)

Pauline verses enter Patterson’s discussion at several levels here, and much like Paul, Patterson does not dismiss ‘the beginning’ (emphasis is on not reifying it as a salvo); does not entrench in the present; but does place emphasis on the ending (the eschaton) to answer questions of both bodies and transformation. It is Paul who narrates who will save us from these bodies of death (Rom 7:24–25), in the now with forbearance, and with transformation in the eschaton to come.

In the meantime, between the now and the eschaton, Patterson asks the very question which Schaeffer early on intoned, *How then should I live?* (Schaeffer 2022)—only with a different ending: *How then should I live in this body of death?*

His response is not reformational, rather, a well-worn theological exposition, one that calls for one’s convictions and confessions, submissions, and death-of-self rather than the imposition of mastering bodies (179). In following such a course, our will ought be transformed into the will of God. Through faith, one becomes readied as a new creation and for ultimate liberation. It is that, God-in-us—the abiding of the Holy Spirit making us God’s temple—which signifies this presenting our members as ‘slaves’ to righteousness and justification (Rom 6:14–19).⁹

⁷ See Gil 2022a, Chapter 4, “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made.”

⁸ Patterson’s work is based on his PhD dissertation, which understandably ‘requires’ one to prove they are embedded in the necessary literature and understand the geometry of the arguments. For this current book, however, such depth detailing seems unnecessary if not an overdo. Patterson would doggedly disagree, and he makes that point early on in his Introduction: he will cut no corners. However, moving through Espinoza’s *Ethics*, Trueman’s *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, arguments by Hegel, Foucault, Freud, and Bonhoeffer, is to certainly take the high road to a point which could have been reached without moving through such wooded thickets.

⁹ “Being rescued from one’s body of death *is not* into a life of sovereign agency where the mind exceeds the world it seeks to overcome.” [The body] “. . . is the contested site where the vocation to image God is waged daily by the power of the Spirit, which

I find there's nothing new here, Patterson falling back on what theologians and Christian anthropology have already understood and doctrinally believe about body-life-in-Christ, transformations, and eschatonic liberation. Such do not address questions that concern queer theologians or transgender persons of faith.

As a matter of note, Patterson fails here to address much of Butler's critique of how society deals with transgressive bodies and bodies not normalized according to norms and traditions, aside from making references to her works on the issues surrounding transgressive violence (of which, again, he goes into detail). By 'going into the woods' of philosophical arguments, Patterson misses the opportunity to directly engage the church in its treatment of both intersex and transgender bodies. I feel these are significant omissions, both theological and for application, given where Patterson has taken us in detail and where he is going next, in detail.

Patterson does signal out Paul's admonition that "for in Christ you are *all* children of God, through faith" (Gal 3:26). In so doing he stresses Galatians 3:29, the Abrahamic promise of inheriting the kingdom, adding that "no gender marker" (meaning whether one is a man, or a woman—but we wonder whether he also means intersex, transgender, or nonbinary) inhibits one's participation in Christ and the accompanying blessings (187-88). Despite its indirectness, this is as close to making a statement about inclusion as Patterson gets.

Ah, the eunuchs. Any salvo at this juncture comes in his treatment of eunuchs, and "the eunuch's hope" (188-ff), which Patterson does take to new understandings by implying Jesus is aligning himself with the "transgressive" body in terms of the types of eunuchs in the passage: not sexual, not married to a woman, by acknowledging "those whose good yet troubled bodies have been impeded on by others; or those whose good yet troubled bodies were present at birth; or [like Jesus himself] those who for the sake of the kingdom of God have made themselves eunuchs" (193). It is the eunuch who transgresses the originary couple and the originary body which Patterson compares Jesus to, not the man in Eden.

In this sense, Patterson feels Jesus also aligns with Butler when he "undermines" what is traditionally understood to be a man in Jewish society (189). In other words, to Patterson, Jesus does not discredit the

transgressive body represented in any of the three eunuch categories; rather he acknowledges them and their reality, even underscores the difficulty inhered in working out the last eunuch type stated in the verse (i.e., those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God). In doing so, Jesus *normalizes* their entities in the context of a society and religious tradition that often marginalized them—because they did not marry, procreate, had altered genitals, and were thus excluded from many Jewish rites. However, what is left unsaid begs the question which Patterson *does not* ask: *What ought our current Christian view of the transgressive body be?*

Imago Dei. Patterson reiterates Jesus Christ as the means through which we become the image of God we cannot be by ourselves due to sin. The lens is focused on Christ alone as mediator of salvation, in the now, and in our transformation in the eschaton—Christ is means and ends to this body of death. The view reasserts that "Christ alone" ought be the sightline of the human vocation, and should therefore permeate every aspect of being human, inclusive of what it means to be sexed and what it means to be gendered as a man, woman, (and I add, or intersex?) (201).

Imago Dei is thus best engaged by the type of agency which propels "our living in our bodies as God desires; [it] is a work of God *and ourselves*, which only ramps up the complex nature of embodiment and a theology of gender" (208-9). In stating such, Patterson infers obtaining *imago Dei* is a give-and-take between our need for sovereign agency, "and therefore self-construction" (209), and utter subjection to God, given that the latter would "render gender as something given and not susceptible to reform" (209).

Patterson further clarifies: "Without God at work in us, the patterns of the world would flourish untouched, and without our own work [of submission to God], any form of one-sided formation would look like yet another moment of gender violence" (209). Moreover, "In a time when society is trying to claw back the right to do as we please with our bodies, Scripture continues to exhort me to hand over my body to be subject to another's desires, namely Christ's" (210). Ultimately, "By offering my body to Christ, I deny myself the illusion that I know myself fully and reject the myth of self-mastery. Instead, I move into a union of wonder to learn to be who I am in relation to Christ." Thus, "... I confess that 'it is no

Paul points out when he says that 'the mind controlled by the Spirit is *life and peace*'" (206). Thus, "embracing one's freedom in Christ to discern how to image God with our subject-bodies reveals the contingent nature of human agency" (208).

longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. In other words, 'I live,' but this 'I' is not mine, as Butler has sensitized us to see" (210-11).

No room for transgender bodies. Without stating it directly, Patterson has in this refracted theology of the body made no room for a person who has struggled with gender dysphoria all their lives and *is Christian*; who has pleaded with God to encounter the dysphoria and exorcise it—yet to no avail, lives in constant alienation with their body of death. Some, to the degree that mental health is compromised and so is the significance of their lives. (Is this, then, the result of not trying hard enough to surrender to Christ? Patterson insinuates all *could be remedied*, but does not clarify . . .)

There are myriad testimonials of Christians who have found redeeming grace in the now by undergoing gender transition, transitions which have then opened up their flourishing in Christ.¹⁰ What is the church to do with these testimonies? Could it be that being “not your own” in some of these instances means foregoing natal gender for the sake of spiritual peace and rebirth (i.e., the ultimate *kenosis* in the here and now)? Could this be understood as an utter surrender to Christ, given that the “eunuch is not despised” when opting such “for the sake of the kingdom”? Isaiah prophesied in chapter 56:4-5, “To the eunuch who chooses what pleases me and holds fast to my covenant . . . to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name, better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name” (NIV).

To Patterson, it is “not a question about ontological transformation, but spiritual transformation” (213). God, however, does not always and every time answer prayers for miracles; nor does God always and every time provide the injection of divine power that engenders a transformative impact which erases gender dysphoria, any more than it erases diseases for which we (and Paul) have prayed relief. The answer is often “sufficient is my grace” (2 Cor 12:9), grace that allows boasting about our weakness “so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

Ultimately, any “reforming” of a theology of gender should address these questions. It should also revisit how Israel proper, “God’s chosen people” actually accounted for the transgressive body *outside of Eden*—the *saris*, the *tîmtîm*, the *andrôgînôs*, and the *ay’lonit*.¹¹ Patterson makes no effort here to include such discussions, if only to realize and acknowledge what he himself states: “. . . gender is a human vocation of becoming what I am not yet” (215).

Concluding Remarks

This is a work worthy of our sweat. My wish for Patterson pairing down more of the material from his PhD dissertation remains, given that his many pauses to insert, compare, try to clarify with philosophical acumen the myriad arguments Butler brings to the proverbial table to reform our theology can be exhausting. Nevertheless, Patterson does more than do reconnaissance on Butler’s theories; he extrapolates in a steady effort to help us think about the implications for a revised theology of the body and gender. In doing so, I still do not see Butler “acting theologically,” unless Patterson means that Butler deals with the originary and the what-can-be in the same critical manner religionists expound hermeneutics and exegetics.

While he brings much to the table to think about, especially on how Eden is our well-worn path to reifying Adam and Eve vs *our procreated selves outside of Eden*, I find Patterson himself falling back on “well worn” theological conclusions and—despite so many words—still avoiding the pregnant questions of today that a reformed theology of gender ought to fully address.

Ultimately, “the question is not what is a male or female, but *whether what enslaves our subject-bodies leads to death or righteousness*” (207). A fair ending question, if we don’t turn it into a judgment of the other, male, female, intersex, *or transgender*¹²—for who determines what *is* our righteousness but our God and Savior?

¹⁰ Let’s start with Austen Hartke’s *TransForming* (2018), Father Shannon Kearns’s *In the Margins* (2022), Lisa Salazar’s *Transparently: Behind the Scenes of a Good Life* (2011), and the life course stories of transgender Christians in Gil’s *A Christian’s Guide through the Gender Revolution* (2022). Many more histories in print could be added here.

¹¹ See Gil 2022a, 78ff and Chapter 4.

¹² See my earlier work (Gil, 2022) where I present significant biblical evidence on admonitions against judging the other (cf., Matt 7:1-5; all of Romans 14), particularly when it comes to those with gender/transgender issues.

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