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# Evangelicals, feminists and the ‘unlikely’ discursive alliance at the heart of British transphobia

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**Abstract**
This article reconsiders the popular conception that anti-trans feminists in the United Kingdom are acting as 'useful idiots' for the Christian Right (most visibly conservative evangelicals) in their campaign to reverse the trend towards public acceptance of trans people. It argues that the discursive similarities between the writings of these two factions can be traced back to a genuine set of shared beliefs, most of all the belief that the body and mind are best treated as a single contiguous entity, and that body/mind dualism is undesirable as a matter of principle. In demonstrating this point, the article re-examines some of the founding documents of anti-trans feminism and anti-trans evangelicalism, including Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) and Oliver O'Donovan's *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* (1982), exploring in particular the role that opposition to 'Gnosticism', a dualistic set of Christian mysticisms, played in shaping how these authors conceptualised trans identity. Drawing on evidence submitted by anti-trans feminists and conservative evangelicals to two recent UK Government consultations, it then delineates how this long-standing rhetorical overlap manifested to tangibly contribute to the stalling of key trans rights objectives in the UK.

**Keywords**
Transgender, Transphobia, Feminism, Christianity, Dualism, Evangelicalism, Gnosticism, Theology

**Introduction**

In the year 2018, four years after *Time Magazine* proclaimed that society had reached the 'Transgender Tipping Point' (Steinmetz, 2014), and at the height of a furious anti-trans backlash (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, 2020), the Evangelical Alliance, the UK's largest evangelical Christian organisation, published a resource booklet for church staff titled *Transformed: A brief biblical and pastoral introduction to understanding transgender in a changing culture* (Lynas, 2018). By and large, *Transformed* is an unmistakably evangelical document, imploring pastors to bring trans people 'to the transformative work and power of Jesus' (p. 15). However, some passages, such as the assertion that trans activism threatens freedom of speech (p. 25), or that trans identity is a 'social contagion' (p. 28), could easily be mistaken for the work of anti-trans feminists, or 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists' (TERFs), whose agitation popularized these tropes (Ahmed, 2016; Adair and Aizura, 2022). This is no coincidence. *Transformed* uncritically references Germaine Greer and the group Transgender Trend, two of Britain's highest-profile sources of anti-trans sentiment (Hines, 2019, p. 152; McLean, 2021, pp. 475-6). Meanwhile, anti-trans feminist groups in both Britain and the United States have fostered extensive financial, organisational, and strategic ties with conservative Christian organisations (Hines, 2020, p. 707), entailing overlapping personnel (Parsons, 2022) and even shared conferences (Clarke, 2022). Nor is this alliance reflected merely in a spattering of isolated incidents. The Trans Safety Network, a research collective that tracks anti-trans political activity in the UK, has noted a 'rapid increase in the rate at which practical crossovers are happening' between these two blocs (Clarke and Moore, 2021), mirroring an international trend which has seen anti-trans feminists and the Christian Right work together against what they call 'gender ideology' (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018), a deliberately vague label for systems of thought that reject 'biological sex' as a primary determinant of social classification. Anti-gender-ideology rhetoric hinges upon a refusal to conceptually separate sex from gender, and therefore a refusal to recognise trans identities as valid because they do not rest on specific sexual physiologies.

Traditionalist elements from within the Roman Catholic Church are most notorious for spreading religious transphobia in mainland Europe, and the role they play has been examined in multiple existing scholarly studies (Lavizzari and Prearo, 2019; Żuk and Żuk, 2020). However, a survey of political transphobia in the UK by Global Action for Trans Equality (GATE, 2022, p. 17) 'did not ... find a strong role for Catholic groups ... at UK Government policy level'. Instead, Britain's anti-trans feminists are joined most visibly by conservative evangelicals, co-inheritors to an expansionist, mission-focused, pan-Protestant tradition rooted in the revivalist religious passions of the eighteenth century (Bebbington, 1989, p. 20). This ideological mix certainly *looks* absurd. Conservative evangelicals preach varying degrees of complementarianism, a dimorphic gender doctrine which in its fundamentalist iterations bars women from Church leadership and envisions a happy wife as one who 'respectfully and joyfully submits to [her husband's] authority' (Allen, 2016). This hardly seems compatible with radical feminism's deconstructionist aims (Phipps, 2020, 107). Divided so profoundly, anti-trans feminists and conservative Christians were described in 1993 by law professor D. C. Bradley as occupying 'opposite end[s] of the political spectrum' (Bradley, 1993, p. 61), while researchers at Open Democracy have referred to feminists and evangelicals as 'unlikely allies' (Provost and Archer, 2018).

Representatives of both sides of this feminist divide have attempted to explain away this befuddling conjunction as accidental and insubstantial. Anti-trans journalist Helen Joyce (2021, pp. 247-52) argues that feminists of her persuasion turn to Christian Right news outlets only because they feel frozen out by mainstream media. Meanwhile, many trans-affirming writers describe a similarly shallow alliance, arguing that anti-trans feminists cynically 'align themselves with the church and the state (who are not natural allies to feminists) … to legitimize their agenda' (Olufemi, 2020, p. 60). Much has been made in trans activist circles of the 2017 Values Voters Summit in Washington, D.C., at which Meg Kilgannon, executive director of Concerned Parents and Educators of Fairfax County, advised fellow religious

traditionalists to adopt a 'divide and conquer' strategy against trans activists by joining up with trans-sceptical LGB organisations in order to 'separate the T from the alphabet soup' (Barthélemy, 2017). Kilgannon's comments lend themselves only too readily to the reductive claim that anti-trans feminists are 'unwitting tools' or 'useful idiots' who enable the Christian Right to capitalise on the 'apparent bipartisanship of hate' (ContraPoints, 2023, 1:47:55; Political Research Associates, 2020, 18:05, 21:35; Tannehill, 2020). My contention, to the contrary, is that anti-trans feminists and evangelicals are bound by a deep, genuine, and time-honoured intellectual compatibility, and that the feminists involved are full, active, equal, and self-aware participants in the alliance, not 'useful idiots'. The operative locus of this discursive accordance is an intersecting opposition to dualistic philosophies that separate body from soul.

Anti-trans expositions on the alleged dualistic tendencies present in 'gender ideology' focus on its supposed similarities with 'Gnosticism', a loose collection of heterodoxic neo-Platonic mystical theologies prevalent in early Christianity. Like any modern taxonomy imposed upon the messiness of distant antiquity, 'Gnosticism' as a category of thought is difficult to define accurately because it meshes together disparate scriptures, traditions, and communities from around the early Christian churches that did not possess a unitary identity (Pricopi, 2013). Nevertheless, we are able at least to guesstimate the philosophical axioms someone has in mind when referring to it. The Gnostics, most numerous in the Eastern Mediterranean from the late-first to late-third centuries CE, are said to have regarded their bodies as spiritual cages that they desired to escape in pursuit of transcendent esoteric knowledge of the divine (Williams, 1996). The physical world, they believed, was created by a lesser god similar to Plato's petty, malicious Demiurge, while Jesus Christ, whose literal personhood and resurrection the Gnostics denied, is said to have brought down the Word of the true highest divinity, showing his followers the way to achieve a state of transcendent extra-materiality.

Gnostic creation stories vary, but creational androgyny—the original unity of the male and female in a single being—is a recurring theme (Cahana, 2014). In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, among the library of texts found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945, the Messiah explains that when the 'self-made Father … decided to turn his likeness into a great power, at once the strength of [His] light appeared as an immortal androgynous Human' (Meyer, 2007, p. 291). The Human was then placed into a physical body, creating the mythological ancestral hominid we call Adam. Only later, under the misdirection of the Demiurge, did material sex-differentiation take place with the creation of a woman, Eve. The Gnostics wished to undo what that infernal entity had done—to become whole once again by letting go of their physical limitations as sexed beings—but since Eve is a fragment of Adam, not Adam a fragment of Eve, the barrier to the restoration of one's complete humanity tends to appear higher for women than for men. In the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus goes so far as to state (with my emphasis added) that 'every female *who makes herself male* will enter heaven's kingdom' (Meyer, 2007, p. 153).

The very inexactness of the label 'Gnosticism' has secured for it a kind of spectral survivability. Contemporary commentators like historian Giovanni Filoramo and philosopher John Gray have classified a veritable kaleidoscope of phenomena, including existentialism, Jacobinism, Marxism, and Nazism, as Gnostic 'metamorphoses' (Filoramo, 1990, pp. xiii-xviii; Gray, 2018, p. 75). Postmodernists, who reject modernist claims to absolute truth and grand historical narrative, are also burdened by some scholars, including Roger Lundin, a late professor of English at the explicitly Christian Wheaton College in Illinois, with imputed heirship to the Gnostic tradition (Lundin, 1993, pp. 76-103). Meanwhile, so-called 'gender ideology', referring to a subset of postmodernism that views gender roles as socially constructed and thus transable, is singled out, in the words of Catholic cleric Paul D. Scalia, as a 'recapitulation' of Gnosticism's 'ancient, recurring error' (Scalia, 2016).

This specific claim, called the 'Gnostic charge' by Anglican priest Duncan Dormor (2010), has been used for decades by commentators of varied religious and political

backgrounds to delegitimise trans people's identity claims. The basic thrust of the 'Gnostic charge' is that the transing of gender boundaries propagates a schism between the soul and the body whereby the latter, having no inherent value, can be surgically and chemically adjusted however the soul desires it. In this basic format, we can see that the 'Gnostic charge' extrapolates from some semblance of truth. Trans narratives of embodiment *do* often hinge on a presupposition of the body's separateness from, subordination to, and potential for misalignment with an inner sense of self; an abstraction made legible to cisgender society by the oft-maligned yet enduring maxim that trans people are 'trapped in the wrong body' (Lovelock, 2017). The anti-gender movement, perceiving body/mind dualism of this sort to be inordinately detrimental to one's well-being, gravitates to this one formulation of trans embodiment precisely because it is so legible; so addictively cognisable; and yet so easily misrepresented. Apparently disparate groups thus offer similar critiques of the 'wrong body' narrative as a short-hand for all trans existence, all while declining to engage with less easily abridged theories of trans embodiment that account for the enormous diversity of trans experience (Stone, 1991; Gill-Peterson, 2014; Smythe, 2022). Conservative evangelical purists have done most to propagate the Gnostic charge in the Anglophone Atlantic. Gripped by an 'abiding fear' of Gnosticism's return in the maelstrom of (post)modernity (Savage, 2006, pp. 211-2), conservative evangelical thinkers are primed to see trans people as neo-Gnostics. Evangelicals are not, however, wholly responsible for the Gnostic charge. A highly developed version of it also features in one of the founding documents of anti-trans feminism.

**Raymond and the Gnostics**

American radical feminist Janice G. Raymond's legendarily caustic monograph, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979), has been described by prolific trans scholars Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle as the work that 'did more to justify and perpetuate [transphobia] than perhaps any other book ever written' (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p. 131). Few overviews of the trans past have been produced without at least a passing mention of its publication, marking the point in the narrative at which transphobia became a serious political force, particularly within 'second wave' feminism (Carroll, 2018, pp. 67–72). Even now, however, the exact nature of the hatred contained in its pages remains deeply misunderstood. Commentaries on *Empire* almost always pass over its somewhat challenging and esoteric theological elements; an oversight that is irreconcilable both with Raymond's educational heritage—her PhD project was supervised by Catholic radical feminist theologian Mary Daly (O'Donnell, 2019)—and, more importantly, with the privileged place she gives her discussion of Gnostic transcendentalism in the book's final chapter, immediately foreshadowing her concluding arguments. The positioning of this discourse at the climax of Raymond's flow suggests that she saw body/mind dualism not as one coequal flaw among many, but rather as the cardinal philosophical problem with trans identity.

Transcendence to a higher plane of consciousness, the ostensible aim of Gnostic religious practice, is not itself the sticking point. In *Empire*, Raymond makes it clear that she regards the transcendence of the self over the imposed bodily confines of patriarchal society as integral to radical feminism's mission, because, as she says, 'who we are should not be defined by exclusive reference to our bodies' (1979, p. 169). However, in her idealised futurity, the soul does not transcend the body by detaching from it; rather, the soul *and* body, in constructive dialogue, should together transcend the limitations of their cultural environment. Thus, the error of the Gnostics as Raymond perceives it is not their dissatisfaction with worldly constraints, for this she shares, but rather is twofold in form: first, their assumption that full spiritual freedom can only be attained extra-corporeally, and second, their propagation of misogynistic value-judgments about the female body. Raymond's reservations hinge on the Gnostic belief that humanity once possessed an androgynous purity which, though lost, we might aspire one day to recover (Partridge, 2018). Under scrutiny, she argues, this androgyny reveals itself to be a disguised form of purified maleness and, by extension, a technology for the annihilation of female subjectivities.

Raymond's favourite proof of this reading is Jesus's purported claim in the *Gospel of Thomas*, quoted above, to the effect that females can attain wholeness by *becoming men*. These words naturally perturb the feminist reader, and it was in this moment of recoil that Raymond found an allegory for her feelings towards modern trans people. In an argument that first appeared in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (Raymond, 1977), drawing particularly on this passage from Thomas, she asserts that Gnosticism's 'salvific androgyny' is effectively a sham. 'Although the primal Adam is written about as androgynous or hermaphroditic', she posits in *Empire*, 'one is still left with the impression that the original human was more male than female' (1979, p. 157). While the woman must 'make herself male' to reach the Kingdom of Heaven, she observes, 'no comparable process is necessary for the man', who nonetheless has freedom to appropriate femininity as required in his mission for *gnosis* (p. 158). Raymond argues on the basis of this double-standard that androgyny represents a 'false foundation of liberation' from gendered oppression, because it tends to imagine femininity as the fallen aberration and masculinity as the natural default (p. 162). This logical sequence sets up Raymond's final salvo in *Empire*. Her arguments against Gnosticism and other forms of dualism and androgyny fly off the tracks with her characterisation of 'transsexuals', who, while supposedly suffering from an 'illusion of transcendence' stemming from the transformative powers of surgery and endocrinology, are said to be 'possessed' by the desire, never fully realised, to falsify the female bodily form (pp. 169-70). As Raymond puts it in her recent reprisal titled *Doublethink* (2021, p. 23), trans women are engaged in a 'masculinist attempt to colonize women in the interest of appropriating the female body for one's self'. Hence, trans people and Gnostics are, by Raymond's estimation, both trapped within a dualistic transcendental fantasy brought about by a fallacious desire to conquer the feminine.

Raymond was neither the first nor the last feminist to claim that trans people were engaged in a form of dualist mysticism. Australian-British radical feminist Germaine Greer did so five years prior in her review of Jan Morris's landmark trans autobiography, *Conundrum*, in 1974, where she castigates Morris for extending her 'belief [in the] fundamental separateness of soul and body to fairly grotesque lengths' (1986, p. 190), alluding to Morris's assertion that she had been 'born in the wrong body' (1973, p. 3). Another noteworthy anti-trans feminist author, Bernice Hausman, notes with equivalent disdain that Morris's retelling of her bodily experience 'prefers the mystical to the material' (1995, p. 164). Meanwhile, Daly characteristically carried the feminist counterattack on dualism in her own idiosyncratic direction, advocating what she called a 'Nag-Gnostic' approach to the subject. Nag-Gnostic thinkers are those who 'sense with certainty the reality of transcendental knowledge [but] never cease to Nag our Selves and others with recurrent awareness and uncertainty' (Daly, 1984, p. 12). Daly's imagined transsexual claims to have achieved transcendence by manipulating the body in accordance with spiritual whims, but the Nag-Gnostic, as mature older sibling to the over-enthused Gnostic, recognises this corrosive 'doublethink' to be among the 'Biggest Lies' invented by the patriarchy to deny women their subjective autonomy (pp. 50-2).

Contemporary anti-trans feminists seldom recycle these arguments verbatim, if for no other reason than that Gnosticism is simply too far removed from mainstream secular feminisms to provide relatable polemical hooks. Consequently, Raymond's anti-Gnostic logics have been repackaged for use in less esoteric contexts. In post-*Empire* 'TERF' literature, including Raymond's own introduction to the second edition of her book (1994), it is not Gnosticism, but rather postmodernism (and later 'gender ideology') that emerges as the imagined philosophical seed of trans dualism. This has occasioned some linguistic refurbishment—'mind' or 'brain' often replaces 'soul', and references to postmodernist texts replace references to Gnostic gospels—but there is a clear continuity in the way anti-trans feminists position themselves in cultural meta-discourses. The Enemy still offers up transcendental illusions based on the partitioning of matter and ether, and anti-trans feminists are tasked with stopping the epistemological lurch lest it collapse the whole edifice of

womanhood. So, while postmodernism has superseded Gnosticism linguistically in anti-trans feminist thought, it still plays the same role conceptually and rhetorically.

Germaine Greer's later work is typical of the secularised post-*Empire* body-holism that became predominant around the turn of the present century. In her aptly titled book, *The Whole Woman*, she blames postmodernism, rather than a mutated remnant of Christian mysticism, for the steady annihilation of the female subject. She writes:

> 'Post-modernists are proud and pleased that gender now justifies fewer suppositions about an individual than ever before, but for women still wrestling with the same physical realities this new silence about their visceral experiences is the same old rapist's hand clamped across their mouths. Real women are being phased out; the first step, persuading them to deny their own existence, is almost complete.' (Greer, 1999, p. 3)

Greer sees trans identities as constituent to this overarching assault upon the inviolability of sex, which, she insists, no amount of postmodernist pontification can change (1999, pp. 80-93). A man is always a man and a woman is always a woman. Hence, the trite commitment to biological 'fact' which superficially defines the 'TERF' approach to sex and gender (Roughgarden, 2013, p. 23) is intricately linked to a broader concern that the postmodern system of knowledge-production threatens to render *all* claims to absolute truth inoperable. This is a vital point to grasp. Political transphobia may often be expressed through the proxy of defending scientific 'fact', but the deeper issue is that the decoupling of physiology from psychology is thought to be ethically *undesirable* irrespective of its evidentiary credibility (Jeffreys, 2014, pp. 41-4; Rowling, 2020; Stock, 2021, p. 153). So, in fighting a rear-guard action against postmodernist currents, anti-trans feminists are seeking to reverse the damage purported to have been wrought by dualist forms of embodiment. A children's book by Rachel Rooney (2015), published by Transgender Trend, encapsulates this ethos with a pithy refrain: 'I am my body, my body is me, it's a wonderful thing, I'm sure you'll agree.'

**Trans as heresy in evangelical thought**

Many a conservative Christian would agree wholeheartedly with Rooney's ditty. However, they arrive at this viewpoint via a more explicitly creational-teleological pathway. God does not make mistakes, they argue, and so the very premise of transing gender (regarded in this discourse as the psychological component of sex) is contra-biblical. Additionally, Gnosticism *is* a meaningful point of reference within historically-minded Christian communities. While feminists played a significant and perhaps preeminent role in *developing* the Gnostic charge, reactionary Christians, led in Britain and America by conservative evangelicals, have served as its senior custodians. Much like the atrophied Gnosticism of Latin imagination, 'gender ideology' is thought in these circles to be, at base, an unnuanced belief that the material body is separate from the ethereal soul, and that, where conflict arises, precedent should go to the latter (Walker, 2017, pp. 14-15). The notion that one might make physical bodily adjustments on the basis of gender dysphoria therefore seems, from an orthodox perspective, eerily reminiscent of one of mainline Christianity's oldest foes. Popular evangelical theologian N. T. Wright and evangelical lobbyist Sharon James have both specifically asserted that trans identity is a new form of Gnosticism (Wright, 2017; James, 2019a, p. 76).

As is so often the case in conservative evangelical literature, everything loops back to the creation story in the first three chapters of the Bible. Whether taken literally or metaphorically, the story of Adam and Eve's creation as 'male and female' (Genesis 1:27) and their ultimate expulsion from the Garden of Eden for eating of the forbidden fruit is believed by evangelical Christians to be a timeless explanation for how humanity, having been made in God's image, became 'corrupt, defiled, and foolish' (Guthrie, 2018, p. 49). For Christian traditionalists, gender-nonconformity is a disturbance injected into our thought-stream through our collective fallenness. Christian psychologist Mark Yarhouse tells us that

Adam and Eve 'delight[ed] in their physical existence as gendered persons' in the Garden, but goes on to explain that the Fall 'corrupted all of existence, including human sexuality and experiences of our gendered selves' (Yarhouse, 2015, pp. 35-9). The so-called 'Gnostic' approach to gender must therefore be attributed, as church leader Stephen McQuoid writes, to the 'confusion' endemic to our morally degraded state (McQuoid, 2020, p. 92). On the 'orthodox' view, Gnostic cosmology mistakenly interprets the fallout from humanity's first catastrophe in the Garden of Eden, including our bodily dissociation, as stemming from the very placement of our souls in physical prison-bodies in the first place, not from human sin.

The Gnostic argument against trans identity has been passed down for four decades. The man usually credited with kickstarting the trend is evangelical Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan (Watts, 2002, p. 80; Beardsley, 2005, pp. 342-3). His intervention in the field of trans theology in the early 1980s was brief and perfunctory, but his influence was enormous. In a 1982 booklet titled *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage*, republished in 1983 in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, he wrote:

> 'Any attempt to bypass the sexuality of the body … runs counter to the close integration of the physical and the spiritual in the human person. … If I claim to have a "real sex," which may be at war with the sex of my body … I am shrinking from the glad acceptance of myself as a physical as well as a spiritual being, and seeking self-knowledge in a kind of Gnostic withdrawal from material creation.' (O'Donovan, 1983, p. 147)

Though quoted many times through the years, this is the first of only two instances of the word 'Gnostic' in O'Donovan's essay. The second, following closely on the same page, comes when O'Donovan concedes:

> '[I]t will be argued that this conception [the wrong body paradigm] never really did justice even to the self-consciousness of the believing transsexual. Transsexuals do not retreat from their bodies into a Gnostic spirituality; if anything, they are preoccupied with them. Their very insistence in pursuing the hope of surgical intervention shows with what anguish they experience the dividedness of physical sexuality from gender identity.' (O'Donovan, 1983, p. 147)

This seems a fairly definitive wrapping-up of the Gnostic issue. Having been discarded as quickly as it was raised, O'Donovan's toying with the Gnostic charge sits unjustified, ephemeral, and seemingly random, leaving curious readers wondering: Just where did he get the idea to compare trans identity and Gnosticism in the first place? He provides no citation to accompany this passage, but, tellingly, he references *The Transsexual Empire* glowingly on the preceding page (p. 146), and it seems probable that, wholly or partly, O'Donovan gleamed the trans/Gnostic idea from Raymond's book. Whatever the genealogy or seriousness of his arguments, the alluring neatness of the paradigm ensured its recurrence in subsequent evangelical expositions, being revitalised at the turn of the Millennium by an Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission report titled *Transsexuality*, wherein the 'reconciliation and peace' of Christ's gospel was contrasted with the Gnostic 'sex/gender alienation of the self' (2000, p. 82). The Alliance's report was then cited eleven times, more than any other source, in a chapter on 'Transsexualism' in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* by the Church of England's House of Bishops (2003). In this chapter, the authors explicitly describe trans identity as 'a new form of gnostic dualism' (p. 249). More recently, in the aforementioned resource for church staff, *Transformed*, the Evangelical Alliance restated its belief that:

> 'Any form of Christianity that devalues the body and the physical creation in general is deeply problematic. These ideas have more to do with Gnosticism, or ancient

> Greek Platonism, than following Jesus. While we must all wrestle with the resurgence of these ancient ideas in contemporary culture, they will raise particular issues for those seeking to live biblically with gender dysphoria.' (Lynas, 2018, p. 12)

Despite being nearly two-score years removed, the flow of reasoning in this passage is practically identical to the first half of O'Donovan's train of thought in 1982/3. Although, to an outside observer, this lack of development might be alarming, the Gnostic charge's rhetorical purpose is primarily interior to the evangelical movement. As pastors and churchgoers experience ever more frequent contact with trans people in their day-to-day lives, an appetite for doctrinal modernisation has developed in some pockets of the evangelical grassroots, ranging from quiet acceptance of trans churchgoers to open refusal to accept anti-trans teachings (Hazlehurst and Sommers, 2014; Tanis, 2018, pp. 90-1). This shift has not gone unnoticed. Sharon James, Social Policy Analyst at the Christian Institute, has warned that 'many professing evangelicals now believe that personal experience is an authority alongside Scripture', which, she says, has created 'intense pressure to "accommodate" transsexuality' (James, 2019b). The erosion of anti-LGBTQI+ values among young Christians has been a particular cause for reactionary panic (Lynch, 2019). Put simply, the homogeneity of the movement's gender doctrine is undergoing slow-motion collapse. For conservative evangelical leaders, countering that collapse has become a matter of first-order moral gravity. Gnosticism serves as a convenient touchstone, reducing a complex nexus of phenomena to a reassuringly simplistic battle between God's Word and ancient heresy.

**The alliance goes to war**

To summarise, the two factions under discussion are well-practiced in exchanging ideas and rhetoric. It has already been observed that O'Donovan cited Raymond repeatedly in his work, but she is also quoted at length in a great many subsequent evangelical tracts on the subject, including *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by British evangelical Presbyterian theologian Carl R. Trueman (2020, pp. 339-378). Moreover, the Christian Institute often references Germaine Greer and the group Transgender Trend (James, 2016), as does the Evangelical Alliance (Lynas, 2018, pp. 23-5). Years of citing feminist texts has left a perceptible imprint on the evangelical vocabulary. Evangelical groups often recant the affective portrayal of trans women as 'predators' who, if allowed into the corresponding bathrooms, prisons, sports, or other spaces, pose a 'danger to women' (Christian Medical Fellowship, 2020, p. 7). They also share in the celebrations when a prominent anti-trans feminist is seen to have struck a blow against 'gender ideology' (Editors, 2022). Nothing is necessarily new here. The Christian Right has a long-standing propensity to 'appropriate' feminist language, as Ellen Flournoy (2013) observes, and habitually uses adopted terminology to create the illusion of progressive intent (Ellison, 2017; Dhaliwal, 2017). That this same strategy should be deployed against trans rights is, on its own, nothing unusual. But this is not the whole story.

Less commonly noted, but no less real, is the transmission of argumentative material *from* conservative evangelicalism *to* anti-trans feminism. This contraflow became especially visible during a 2018 UK Government public consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act and a subsequent Women and Equalities Committee consultation on the same subject, which included under their remit consideration of the suggested removal of some of the more onerous barriers to changing one's legal gender, such as the requirement for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Most prominent among the imports into anti-trans feminist rhetoric is the 'religious freedom' trope, long used by conservative Christians to stall socially progressive legislation on the grounds that it might criminalise the practices of traditionalist religious communities (Ashley, 2022, pp. 93-100). Evangelical groups like Christian Concern believe that some of the suggested adjustments to the gender recognition process, such as the abolition of the 'spousal veto', which refers to the formal capacity of a

spouse to delay a married person's change of legal gender by formally declaring an unwillingness to continue the marriage under these circumstances, would 'violate religious freedom' (Christian Concern, 2020, p. 3). That Christian Concern would prioritise the defense of the spousal veto is no great surprise, but many feminist groups/individuals adopted the same narrative with alacrity. The Authentic Equity Alliance, for instance, argued:

> 'The ability to annul a marriage should not be taken away from women of religious communities in which divorce and homosexuality is forbidden. Indeed, it could be argued that to do so would be discriminatory toward the protected characteristic 'Religion or belief' [as established by the Equality Act 2010].' (Authentic Equity Alliance, 2020, p. 2)

Other feminists have extended their show of support for 'religious freedom' to their discussion of the principle that the holder of a gender recognition certificate should be regarded for all legal purposes as the gender legally bestowed by that certificate. In an October 2018 article, feminist legal scholars Rosa Freedman and Rosemary Auchmuty suggested that liberalising the gender recognition process might 'conflict with the rights … of religious groups that require segregation of the sexes in some contexts' (Sharpe, Freedman, and Auchmuty, 2018). Freedman elaborated on this supposed 'conflict of rights' in a Parliamentary hearing, during which she noted that some religions 'have sex-based roles, whether it is in terms of spiritual leaders or roles within a church, a synagogue or a mosque' (Women and Equalities Committee, 2020). The implication is that gender recognition reform would render these distinctions unworkable, thus broadening the apparent 'conflict' of rights. This appeal to 'religious freedom' has become an important vector through which anti-trans feminists are pursuing their own interests.

Another UK Government consultation run in 2021-2022 highlighted another convergence—a shared desire to close the cultural space in which trans people are permitted to exist. This time, the matter under consideration was the prospect of banning anti-LGBTQI+ conversion 'therapies'. Anti-trans activists continue to hope that trans people, having exploded onto the cultural mainstream, can feasibly be forced back into a state of repression and self-denial. Helen Joyce has stated that the functional objective of anti-trans feminism is 'reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition [because] every one of those people is a person who's been damaged' (Kelleher, 2022). Conservative evangelical groups, meanwhile, urge trans people to reclaim their 'God-given' identity by laying aside the serpentine deceptions of 'gender ideology' and finding true freedom in Jesus (Christian Institute, 2020, p. 6). Both projects are rooted in a desire to reverse the effects of dualism by repairing the wounds that, so the argument goes, are created by the brutal separation of the mind/soul from its body. This ambition has led many members of each faction to pin their hopes on conversion 'therapies', and to energetically oppose the idea of banning such practices. However, whereas anti-trans feminists pursue trans-to-cis conversion as a way to rescue what they see as repressed lesbian, gay, and bisexual children from the alleged coercion of gender-affirming medicine, which they insist is 'itself a form of conversion therapy' (LGB Alliance, 2021), the end-goal of most Christian conversion 'therapies' is not *cis and gay* but *cis and straight*. In theory, this should present a barrier to cooperation, but anti-trans feminist groups, perhaps seeing faith-based conversion practices as the devil they know, are conscientious to avoid breaking ranks. One such group, Sex Matters, argues in its consultation response that, because 'the UK is an increasingly secular country' and conversion practices in religious settings are now contained to 'small pockets', targeting religious conversion therapy would be 'fighting yesterday's battles' (Sex Matters, 2022, pp. 1-2).

With anti-trans feminists quite deliberately leaving the way clear, hardline religious groups have been at liberty to defend their damaging reparative activities with minimal interference. John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical

Churches, warns that a ban could pose 'a real threat to ordinary gospel ministry' (Stevens, 2021). The Evangelical Alliance, while encouraging its members to support the ban in general terms, also insists that 'common ministry practices could be caught by these proposals' and urged for the ban to be watered down (Evangelical Alliance, 2021). Prime minister Boris Johnson wrote to the Alliance in April 2021 to reassure them that, under the proposed law, adults would still be able to 'receive appropriate pastoral support (including prayer), in churches … in the exploration of their sexual orientation or gender identity' (Cowburn, 2021).

The cumulative effect has been to erode, through a series of whataboutisms, the notion that conversion 'therapy' is a recognisable phenomenon that can be made subject to law. What about 'ordinary' Bible ministry? What about prayer? What about 'successful' conversions? What about Christian or 'gender critical' parents trying to dissuade their trans children? Anti-trans feminist organisations, which ostensibly exist to protect lesbian, gay, and bisexual people from coercive abuse, elected not to undercut this uniformly queerphobic narrative. At first, this proved tactically sound. After a series of leaks and hurried public statements on 31 March and 1 April 2022, the UK Government announced that it would ban gay-to-straight, but not trans-to-cis, conversion 'therapies' (Dyer, 2022), although the promise of an all-encompassing ban was subtly reintroduced on 17 January 2023 (Donelan, 2023). This came just a few years after the same Government announced that it would not pursue reform of the Gender Recognition Act, despite the great majority of respondents to its consultation having endorsed legislative change (King et al, 2020). At the start of 2023, the UK Government also announced that it would block the Scottish Government's Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which would have introduced gender self-identification north of the border, justifying its actions using arguments that were popularised by both anti-trans feminist and conservative evangelical organisations (UK Government, 2023). And so, at the time of writing, a far-reaching intellectual pact originally premised on resisting the exaggerated evils of dualism is playing a considerable role in stalling both of these policies. An ideological eclipse that started as a steady agglutination of anti-dualist sentiments has matured into an actualised discursive cohabitation with considerable political clout.

**Conclusion**

In an effort to explain how Christian fundamentalists in Britain have managed to attract so many feminist allies to reactionary causes, including the demonisation of sex workers, scholar Sukhwant Dhaliwal suggests that some progressives are being fooled by 'the fact that [the Christian Right's] ideological commitment to creating God's law on earth is often obscured from view' (Dhaliwal, 2017, p. 141). In the case of anti-trans Christians, their theocratic tendencies have remained fairly self-evident, *and yet* significant numbers of feminists seem to regard them as apposite associates. There is more to this than a simplistic 'enemy of my enemy' calculation. These belief systems have been crossing paths for nearly half a century, and 'gender ideology' serves as the mutual receptacle for each group's gripes about contemporary society, and resistance to its dissemination acts as the 'symbolic glue' that holds a wide array of factions together (Grzebalska, Kováts, and Pető, 2017). Rather, membership of this movement is defined by an authentic (if sometimes inauthentically expressed) belief that the mind or soul cannot be—more importantly, *should not be*—'other' or 'opposite' to the biological organism of which it is a part. Mind informs body; body informs mind; mind *is* body. Transcendence over the here and now is thus achieved not by leaving the corporeal behind, for that way lies self-atomisation and/or alienation from God's plan, but by accepting the body as it is, as it was designed, and by carefully repairing any cracks that open between psyche and physiology. This is both a negative and a positive statement; a rejection of 'gender ideology' and a declaration of intent.

Understood in this way, as a body-holistic intersection at its core, the entente between anti-trans feminists and conservative evangelicals ceases to appear 'unlikely' and reveals itself instead to be entirely natural. This being the case, activists, researchers, and

journalists alike must resist the misleading, if cathartic, belief that anti-trans feminists are 'useful idiots' being directed by nondescript Christian Right puppet-masters. The feminists in question are often entirely conscious of their involvement with conservative religious groups, and in fact are frequently the ones doing the 'using'—by affecting concern for 'religious freedom' as a conduit for protecting their own legal interests, for example. The sense that body/mind dualism is damaging to one's well-being is felt passionately and sincerely by both groups. Nor can this affinity be dismantled simply by pointing to it in scandalised indignation. While some casual anti-trans feminists might be discomfited to discover that the movement's leaders have links with the Christian Right, others will conclude that there is nothing untoward about collaborating with people who substantively agree. That is why the integration of anti-trans feminism and the more unbending iterations of conservative evangelicalism will likely continue. Indeed, the task of telling them apart, already difficult in some cases, will become ever more laborious.

To conclude with a call to action, the difficulties experienced by scholars and activists when considering the feminist-evangelical conjunction in anti-trans messaging are attributable in large part to an underappreciation of theology's role in the development of transphobic ideas. Theological objections to trans identity are rarely referenced in the far more numerous studies on feminist-oriented transphobia, where conservative religious groups are too often essentialised as reactionary backwaters. The result is a bifurcation of specialisms, neither side of which is well-equipped to develop a holistic understanding of the two main biomes of anti-trans thought in the UK and much of the West. There is a dire need for more studies that aim to close the gap.

**Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest

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