

# Ministry to Transgender Teenagers (Part One): Pursuing Awareness and Understanding about Trans Youth

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## Abstract

Several significant aspects are addressed in this article to gain clarity and to pursue awareness regarding transgender teenagers. It begins by offering a brief introduction and then moves towards a common understanding of the language and landscape surrounding transgender teenagers. Next the paper centers on maligned, marginalized, and misunderstood transgender teenagers and the experiences they encounter. Hopefully, the information gleaned in this article will empower pastoral care givers to minister directly to this particular underserved sexual minority group.

## Keywords

Transgender, teenagers, pastoral care, youth ministry

## Introduction

*“Why can’t you just love me the way I am?”*

~Countless transgender youth

*“You are the biggest disappointment of my life, and I never want to see you again!”*

~Countless parents of transgender youth

The above quotes are sad reminders that young people need love and acceptance from adults, and that not all parents understand the intricacies and delicacies of transgender issues. This article attempts to pursue awareness about transgender teenagers and the issues they face daily. Transgendered teenagers (or *trans*, as used colloquially and for abbreviation purposes), are considered sexual minorities<sup>1</sup> and unfortunately feel the sting of prejudice from family, society, and church on many levels. It is my hope that this article provides a glimmer of hope for this particular sexual and gender minority subgroup to feel more supported and appreciated.

This article is concerned with the “T” of the LGBTQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer) youth<sup>2</sup> acronym. The “T” represents transgender persons, and the scope of this article is to dialogue with and address the pastoral issues surrounding transgender teenagers. I work with transgender young people through my work

as a college pastoral theology professor and pastoral carer and counselor. As a pastoral theologian, I must admit that I am deeply troubled by the disrespect and lack of attention this sexual minority group receives in ministry settings.

## Transgender

Traditionally, assigning someone’s sex was a matter of biology, a person’s anatomy and chromosomes, and it typically takes place at the hospital, by the obstetrician stating: “it’s a girl” or “it’s a boy!” Psychologically and medically, *transgender* “describes a person whose gender identity does not match their natal sex or does not align with traditional notions of masculinity or femininity” (Gridley et al., 2016, p. 255). There are different considerations of gender identity: transgender; cisgender;<sup>3</sup> and intersex.<sup>4</sup> *Transgender* is an umbrella and inclusive word that covers a wide-range of expressions and experiences, but it is certainly bound by culture and context. Those who self-identify as transgender may consider themselves homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. It is possible that some might consider themselves pansexual,<sup>5</sup> polysexual (the sexual attraction to some, but not all multiple genders), or asexual (non-attraction to

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any gender) (Roberts, 2016, p. 15). As one male-to-female (MtF is a person who is in the process of transitioning from male to female) student told me regarding dress and attire, “Doc, I just consider myself fluid; I go with the way I feel each morning.” There is a great deal of gender flux and fluidity in being transgender (e.g., movement between specific genders such as when a person moves from school to home or moves from work to the gym). Living as a transgender teenager is complicated for young people. Some trans youth tend to not experience their gender as something static, but rather as a dynamic involvement and evolvment within themselves (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 82). Some trans adolescents might have an array of diverse sides of their gender, and often their gender appearance swings accordingly.

On the other hand, trans is used for anyone who identifies, resonates, or expresses with a gender that differs from their sex assigned at birth. Therefore, a teenager whose self-identification is transgender would include transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens/kings, and other variations in the transgender world (Leone, 2013, p. 13).

Catholic pastoral theologian Arthur D. Canales notes, “Young people who describe themselves as transgender are those persons who exhibit ‘gender-non-conforming’ characteristics and actions—that is, those individuals who transcend their typical gender paradigms” (Canales, 2016, p. 62). That is to say, those youth who are non-binary in gender or those who are not exclusively male or female in their gender expression do not always self-identify as transgender. Non-binary gender expression is often captured by the terms “non-binary,” “gender non-conforming,” “genderqueer,”<sup>6</sup> and “genderfluid.”<sup>7</sup> Again, the label “transgender” is a broad term that covers an array of gender expressions and possibilities: from cross-dressers (an aspect of one’s genuine gender identity) to people who are intersex. Most importantly, in contrast to many common assumptions, if a teenager expresses themselves as transgender, it is *not* always a reflection of a young person’s sexual identity or orientation because gender identity and sexual/affectional orientation are two aspects of a young person’s embodiment.

## Transgender Teenagers

Transgender teenagers comprise 0.7% of the total population of adolescents (13–17 years old) in the USA (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson, & Conron, 2017, pp. 2–3). This means that approximately 150,000 youth in the USA self-identify as transgender, which is a significant population and is likely to grow steadily. The period of adolescence brings struggle and a search for identity as youth look to define themselves as individuals amidst their peers, siblings, and parents. According to transgender expert and advocate Justin E. Tanis, for transgender teenagers, the period of adolescence is particularly difficult because “physical

changes heighten the sense of being betrayed by a body that is developing the *wrong* way for what the teen feels inside” (Tanis, 2003, p. 34). Such feelings of betrayal may cause a low self-image in a trans young person.

The road for a transgender teenager is long and arduous. The experience of being “different” as a trans youth is real because being trans *does* subvert the theoretical coherence between traditional gender expression and sex. Trans disturbs. Being a transgender teenager disrupts the conventional imagination of young people; it unhinges traditional expectations, and it sometimes prompts hatred and violence from self and others (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 92).

Psychologist Christian Burgess notes that, “Because of the internalization of negative attitudes toward gender non-conformity, transgender youth are at an increased risk for low self-esteem, which may manifest itself through depression, substance abuse, self-mutilation, and/or suicide” (Burgess, 2009, p. 41). Transgender teenagers, like all adolescents, are on a journey of self-discovery, but trans youth experience even more gender identity struggles than their assumed gender peers.

From a pastoral care and ministry perspective, the feelings that transgender teenagers experience regarding their own gender dysphoria (the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female) looms large (Yarhouse, 2015, p. 19). As one colleague told me, “I do not think a person chooses to experience gender dysphoria.” There are a number of feelings that trans youth might experience (anger, fear, guilt, loss, shame, and worry) as a direct result of their gender identity search and struggles. Renowned evangelical Christian psychologist Mark A. Yarhouse recommends four strategies that may be beneficial for adolescents struggling with gender dysphoria: (a) teaching healthy coping and self-care strategies; (b) treating both anxiety and depression; (c) family therapy to improve the relationships that are strained; and (d) helping navigate gender identity questions (who am I?, who loves me?, why do I feel this way?) in life (Yarhouse, 2015, pp. 110–111).

There are a number of issues that threaten the health and well-being of transgender teenagers as a result of their gender nonconformity: homelessness; harassment; bullying; higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse; violence; victimization; and suicide (Tanis, 2003, p. 35). The movies *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and *Transamerica* (2005) crystalize many of the tragedies that trans youth face. Therefore, in the midst of turbulent adolescence, transgender teenagers must encounter difficulties that “typical” young people do not face.

## Maligned, Marginalized, and Misunderstood

Transgender teenagers are the most maligned, misunderstood, and marginalized group of adolescent and LGBTQ

subcultures (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013, pp. 52–53). While there has been some research on transgender teenagers in recent years, it is an emerging body of work – there is still much needed research on young people who identify as transgender. Unfortunately, many parents, school officials, and *especially* Christian ministers, do not know the proper way to respond to lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents once confronted with their coming-out,<sup>8</sup> much less to teenagers who move through the complexities of gender identity.

One question that some may ask is: what is it that makes transgender teenagers misunderstood, marginalized, and maligned in the eyes of others, or even sometimes themselves? The reality is that transgender teenagers are misunderstood because transitioning from MtF or FtM (a person who is in the process of transitioning from female to male) is subversive of normative assumptions (Hornsby & Guest, 2016, p. 56). The pressure is so great to avoid feelings of unease and unwanted-ness from people in society, and any affiliated danger with being trans leads transgender teenagers to expedite their transitioning phase to complete womanhood or manhood. Transgender advocates and biblical scholars Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest note, “The problem is *not* with [transgender]; the problem is with the limitations of cultural norms, employers, and personal relations, which compel [transgender teenagers] to comply with *their* needs” (Hornsby & Guest, 2016, p. 58). Therefore, it is *not* uncommon for a trans youth to experience feelings of unwelcome-ness or hostility from school administrators, church figures, coaches, and an array of other authority figures.

Psychologist Gabrielle Owen maintains that

Adolescence is constructed as the moment that gendered *becoming* occurs... Transgender phenomena suggest a much more varied and complex range of possibilities for bodily experience and gendered subjectivity, drawing our attention to the contingency of any subjective arrival whether it be normative or trans-identified. (Owen, 2014, p. 23)

Today, a teenager in US society has the potential to develop as a trans person who might reject the typical developmental sequence of adolescent maturation. Owen also notes, “Trans embodiment disrupts and denaturalizes the development narrative of adolescence, revealing it for what it is – sometimes a story we have been told and sometimes a story of our own making” (Owen, 2014, p. 23). For transgender teenagers, today’s gender identity and sexuality are not the gender identity of the 1950s and the “golly gee” world of June and Ward Cleaver in the sitcom series *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963).

Another problematic and dangerous arena for the transgender teenager is *coming-out* as trans. Coming-out may be the first dose of reality accompanied by feeling maligned

and the sting of discrimination. Sometimes when a transgender teenager comes-out it is not the warm, fuzzy reception she/he anticipated (if this process works positively, it is akin to a “coming home” party, but for most adolescents it is not).<sup>9</sup> Some trans youth are told that “you are just confused right now” or “you are too young to know for sure,” or “it is a phase, you will grow out of it” (Huegel, 2011, p. 168). Furthermore, some trans adolescents are naively (or rudely) told “gender is a choice.” Arguing that trans people have a choice in their sexual identity and gender is extremely contentious and foolish within the trans community. Still, even more distressing, are the horror stories that some confront in telling their parents they are transgender. One male trans student told me: “When I told my parents I was trans and no longer wanted to be called Tracey, but Travis, my parents said, ‘you will never be a male. God created you female! We do not accept you right now!’” This is often the sad reality of many teenagers who self-identify as transgender, a truth that smacks of transphobia and abjection.

### *Transphobia and Abjection*

The word “transphobia” means the dislike *of*, or fear *of*, and prejudice *against* transgender people. French linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva coins the term *abjection*, in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Kristeva describes *abjection* as “[That which] disturbs identity, system, and order. What does not respect boundaries, positions, and rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite, push transgender people into the domain of the abject” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Transgender people seem to throw-off the traditional understanding of the two-sex, binary-gender system. Abjection refers to the unclear sense of repulsion that permeates the periphery between the self and other.

Psychologist Robert Phillips states that, the term *abjection* literally means “to cast out” (Phillips, 2014, p. 20). Abjection refers to the instability of gendered ambiguous bodies – especially those occupied by transgender individuals – which historically has received negative connotations and harsh statements, all of which contribute to transphobia (Phillips, 2014, pp. 20–21). Transphobia and abjection are linked together because they both offer methodological exclusion, repression, and the silence of transgender people. Christians exhibit transphobia when they are spiteful, use intimidation, or violence, both interpersonal and systemic toward transgender people because they seem different. Likewise, Christians express genderism when they postulate that heterosexuality and cisgender are superior and are more desirable than transgender. Conservative Christians engage in abjection when they maintain the argument that “to live transsexually [one] cannot live compatibly with ‘orthodox’ Christianity” (Hornsby & Guest, 2016, p. 36). The traditional Christian

argument is that female and male humans are the final products of God's imposition of cosmic order on the primordial elements of creation (Hornsby & Guest, 2016, p. 36). Transgender folks simply see this as another form of transphobia and abjection that continually keeps trans people living on the margins of the dominate culture and their societal rules. Today, Christianity would be wise to seek a new basis for discussion and a new theology for trans people that moves away from narrow-mindedness; otherwise, trans people will continue to suffer rejection from the religious Right (Hornsby & Guest, 2016, p. 38).

There is incredible cultural opposition to recognizing people with non-binary genders. Therefore, a new understanding of sex, gender, and the issues surrounding binary (male/female) will help to enhance a new theology of transgender that truly believes and maintains the principle of *imago Dei*.<sup>10</sup> I use the principle of *imago Dei* to state that all persons are created in the image and likeness of God no matter if they are: Black or White; female or male; poor or rich; born below the equator or above the equator; homosexual or heterosexual; or transgender or cisgender. All transgender teenagers within any Christian community are to be welcomed, affirmed, valued, and cared for as people created in God's image. Catholic moral theologian Stephen J. Pope maintains, anything that is "stigmatizing and dehumanizing" with regards to a person's sexuality and gender, "stands in tension with its affirmation that each [homosexual or transgender] person is created in *imago Dei*" (Pope, 2004, pp. 549–550). To not treat trans youth with equality, dignity, and respect is an act of discrimination – plain and simple.

Transgender teenagers may feel abject for various reasons. Transgender teenagers feel abjection when they experience gender-based rejection. Moreover, trans youth experience both internal and external stressors for their gender and sexual minority status. According to gender diversity experts Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenny, there are four external stressors, which cause great misery for trans youth: (a) victimization; (b) rejection; (c) discrimination; and (d) non-affirmation (Brill & Kenny, 2016, pp. 192–194). As a result of the external stressors, Brill and Kenny also maintain that there are three internal stressors: (a) negative expectations for future events; (b) internalized transphobia and personal stigma; and (c) concealment or nondisclosure of one's true gender identity (Brill & Kenny, 2016, pp. 195–199). These external and internal stressors produce a sense of abjection within trans adolescents.

### *Marginalized Trans Youth*

Transphobia contributes to the marginalization of transgender teenagers. Since gender expression is so visible and obvious, transgender teenagers are often the brunt of cruel jokes and discrimination. Some trans youth face

sexual harassment and gender discrimination on a daily basis (Huegel, 2011, p. 187). Due to cultural, medical, familial, social, and religious misunderstandings about transgenderism in general, transgender teenagers are particularly marginalized. "Transgender adolescents are at higher risk for depression, low self-image, substance abuse, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, and suicide attempts than their non-transgender identified peers" (Reicherzer, Garland-Forshee, & Patton, 2014, p. 184). These risk factors are partly the result of trans and non-binary youth being "invisible" to the mainline public (Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 78).

Transgender teenagers receive more stigmatization, prejudice, harassment, and violence by mainstream culture than any other sexual minority group. "Almost nine in ten [90%] transgender youth have been victimized at school, including more than one-quarter that had been physically assaulted because of the [way] they express their genders" (Greytak et al., 2013, p. 46). It is important that Christian parents, pastors, and youth ministers understand that trans youth feel invisible and vulnerable. Transgender teenagers also feel inaudible when they try to express their inner feelings and thoughts to heterosexuals who have no cognitive comprehension of or insights about their internal turmoil and struggles (Higa, et al., 2014, pp. 10–11). Two main types of struggles that keep trans youth in the margins of adolescent culture are victimization and suicide.

*Victimization.* Victimization looms large for transgender teenagers. Victimization typically correlates with three severity levels: 1. verbal harassment; 2. physical harassment; and 3. physical assault. Victimization towards transgender teenagers takes place most often in high school for trans youth (McGuine, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010, p. 1176). Safety from any type of bullying or harassment is of paramount concern for transgender teenagers in school.

The most common form of victimization for transgender teenagers is verbal harassment. It is estimated that approximately 70% of all transgender youth experience some type of physical assault (Greytak, et al., 2013, p. 52). Verbal harassment includes people making fun of their difference in appearance, but there are more extreme examples. One FtM college student reported, "Men keep saying to me, 'I can turn you straight honey'" (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 124). It is common for transgender teenagers to experience this type of verbal harassment at their school. Unfortunately, even if LGB policies exist in a school, those policies do not always protect transgender teenagers because of their physical demeanor or dress (McGuine, et al., 2010, 1176). Schools with no support strategies or professional resources for sexual minorities usually results in a greater number of absenteeism from trans youth (Greytak, et al., 2013, p. 52).

Finally, another type of victimization that transgender teenagers experience is rejection and isolation. The isolation that transgender teenagers experience can be deep and painful as a direct result of keeping the secret of their non-conforming gender identity from those they love (Tanis, 2003, p. 27). The negative effects of isolation put trans youth at a high risk for abuse from others and from themselves, which has the propensity to drain their inner resources from developmental tasks and forces many young people to retreat inward (Tanis, 2003, p. 33). Experiencing isolation and rejection as well as, incompetent and/or inconsistent caring from most of their parents, pastors, teachers, youth ministers, and schoolmates, has led transgender teenagers to have a high degree of feelings of unworthiness, shame, and embarrassment (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 124). Transgender teenagers who experience rejection often leads to them having feelings of social isolation: distancing themselves from their parents; doing poorly in school; dabbling with substance abuses; dropping out of school; being disowned by their parents; and sometimes suicide (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, p. 125).

*Suicide.* The ultimate form of victimization, rejection, and isolation which transgender teenagers experience, is suicide. Suicide is the third largest cause of death among American adolescents and emerging adults between the ages of 15 and 25 (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007, p. 527). Since transgender teenagers are so ostracized and misunderstood by the general public they are at greater risk for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and committing suicide (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007, p. 530). A joint study in 2014, by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Williams Institute, the nation's preeminent LGBTQ think-tank out of the University of California, Los Angeles, found that "suicide attempts among trans males (46%) and trans females (42%) were slightly higher than the full sample (41%). Cross-dressers assigned male at birth have the lowest reported prevalence of suicide attempts among gender identity groups (21%)" (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014, p. 2). Suicide attempts are higher (50%) for those who disclose to everyone that they are transgender or gender non-conforming (Haas et al., 2014, p. 3). Suicide is a real and present danger for transgender teenagers. One survey of over 900 adolescents and young adults in Alberta, Canada, reported that approximately 65% of trans young people between the ages of 14 and 25 have had suicidal ideation. Such a shocking statistic reveals the need for care and concern from church leaders and ministers (Wells, Frohard-Dourlent, Saewyc, Ferguson, & Veale, 2017, pp. 37–38).

Another study for the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center reports that 30% of transgender teenagers report a history of at least one suicide attempt, and nearly 42% report a history of self-injury, such as cutting or burning. The same study also discovered a higher frequency of

suicide attempts among trans youth who are dissatisfied with their weight (Peterson, Matthews, Coppins-Smith, & Conard, 2017, pp. 476–477). Alarming, one-quarter (25%) of all transgender teenagers report suicidal ideation and have attempted suicide, and one-third (33%) have engaged in self-injurious behaviors; males are more likely to burn themselves and females more likely to cut themselves, both of which point to the specific vulnerabilities that trans youth encounter (Dickey, Reisner, & Juntunen, 2015, pp. 3–4).

Familial rejection, low body esteem, and childhood abuse all play a part in a transgender teenager's feelings of estrangement and such feelings of hostility toward one's self can lead from suicidal ideation to suicide (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007, p. 532). Resiliency and self-determination play a crucial role in a transgender teenager's worldview of fighting against discrimination and low self-image (Reicherzer et al., 2014, p. 184).

In sum, all of these areas—transphobia, abjection, marginalization, victimization, and suicide—are harmful to transgender teenagers. Public discourse and exposure might be the only way to increase sensitivity to and empathy for transgender teenagers.

## Conclusion

While there is much more research going on about transgender teenagers in recent years, there still needs to be more. Unfortunately, there are way too many pastoral care providers, youth ministers, and pastors who remain ignorant about the subject or simply ignore the feelings and experiences of transgender teenagers (Huegel, 2011, p. 168). The importance of transgender teenagers for pastoral care professionals and ministers is enormous.

This article has tried to further open the discussion about transgender teenagers in Christian congregations by pursuing awareness of and understanding about issues facing trans youth. Transgender teenagers are often alienated and misunderstood, but that does not mean that Christianity should be indifferent to their importance. Transgender teenagers matter. Trans lives matter because trans youth are created in the image and likeness of God; trans lives matter because trans youth are fellow sojourners on the earth; and trans lives matter because trans lives are gender minorities in a world where they still need liberation.

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## Notes

1. I began researching and writing about sexual minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning

- (LGBTQQ) youth and LGBTQQ issues about five years ago. It was only after my first article got published and I began speaking publicly around the country on LGBTQQ youth and young adult issues, did I discover that I was an LGBTQ-ally. This is a distinction that I proudly claim today.
2. I will use the terms *teenagers*, *youth*, *adolescents*, and *young people* as synonymous terms whose age-range is that of middle adolescents or the typical American high school student experience ranging in age from 14–18 years.
  3. *Cisgender* is a term used today to distinguish from transgender and to signify that a person's psychological and emotional experience of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex (Yarhouse, 2015, p. 20). Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear someone from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community state "I am a female, bi, who is cisgender" or an LGBTQ-ally or advocate say, "I am a male, straight, and cisgender."
  4. *Intersex* describes people whose physical anatomy, chromosomal, or hormonal characteristics assigned at birth do not fit neatly into the categories of either male or female but are ambiguous at birth (see Huegel, 2011, p. 206).
  5. *Pansexual* is someone who experiences sexual attraction or affection to any and all genders; typically, people who self-resonate with this term reject the notion of a binary gender division between male and female and view gender as a more complex or fluid experience.
  6. *Genderqueer* refers to someone who has combined gender identity, gender expressions, and sexual orientation. A genderqueer person can also include elements that challenge the construction of gender, and who lives counter-culturally with regard to female/male gender binary (see Brill & Kenny, 2016, p. 310).
  7. *Genderfluid* is a person whose gender and/or gender experiences fluctuate and is not fixed on either female or male, but changes along a continuum, which encompasses qualities from both gender identities. The fluctuation may happen in ways that present themselves publicly in dress or appearance or in the manner in which the person identifies with personal gender; a shifting occurs (see Yarhouse, 2015, p. 20).
  8. *Coming-out* is a transition period; the time that one decides to disclose one's sexual orientation and/or identity (Huegel, 2011, p. 201). Coming-out is not a one-step action, it is a process. The coming-out process is a discovering of a person's authentic self and it involves honesty and introspection. The coming-out process is one of self-discovery and it can be long and arduous, requiring great effort and courage for some young people; it does not come overnight (Riggle & Rostosky, 2013, p. 19). Coming-out is part of the transgender maturation process and a positive step in cultivating personal growth, gaining self-esteem, and becoming self-actualized.
  9. *Coming home* refers to an experience of the transgender teenagers fully embracing their identity: it is a coming home to themselves; a coming home to their family, perhaps for the very first time; and a coming home to God too. When done successfully, most transgender young people state that coming-out is more akin to a coming home party. One young person noted, "My coming out was more a coming home to God: You made me this way, you love me this way. I am lovable. And I will find love in my life" (Graham, 2009, p. 115). There are several resources which parents can avail themselves of to help the

- process of "coming home" and help to alleviate some of the common instinctive reactions that they might experience (see endnote no. 3 in part-two of this article).
10. The principle of *imago Dei* can be a slippery slope because no matter which way someone or some group interprets the principle, the other person or group can profess the opposite interpretation. In other words, someone might state quite emphatically, "God made me this way," as the immensely popular internationally 2011 smash hit song by Lady Gaga proclaims, "Born This Way." The opposite side will argue, "No, God made girls this way and boys that way." The reality is that *imago Dei* is about liberation and calls for doing theology outside the dominate culture and apart from the hegemonic mainstream Christianity. Argentinian feminist liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid calls for doing theology with one's panties off in order to subvert the status quo of theology (Althaus-Reid, 2001, p. 3).

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