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Title: Ritual and the Trans Body in the Church of England[1]

Abstract

According to Victor Turner (2008 [1969]), rituals can shift people from one identity to another, often resolving liminal states and dispelling ambiguities. Ritualised words and actions may also generate ontologies (Bell, 1992) that fit into regulatory systems of taboo and sanctification (Rappaport, 1999). In this article, we argue that ritual in the Church of England is used to both affirm and police trans identities. The Church's recent guidance accompanying renewal of baptismal vows as a liturgy of welcome for trans people, and the accompanying backlash, highlights the role of liturgy and ritual for trans belonging in the Church and the ways power over liturgical words and praxis is overtly wielded. The marriage rite has established ontological meaning for trans bodies on condition they support heterosexuality. Yet there is a subversive access to meaning-making in both these ritual contexts. As part of a research project exploring chaplaincy support of trans and non-binary people, we interviewed several trans people of faith, including two prominent priests in the Church of England. The lived experiences shared with us reveal the ways in which trans bodies have become sites onto which anxieties about gender are projected. Church-sanctioned ritual can provide an unambiguous ontological gendered identity, but, in a critical discussion on feminist ameliorative inclusion, Katharine Jenkins (2016) raises questions about the expansiveness of gender categories. The Church's ritual life seeks to underpin heteronormative binaries, ensuring that trans bodies are used to reproduce fixed meanings around sexuality, sex and gender. We explore the extent to which, whilst ritual might support inclusion, the Church's ritualised meaning-making lands heavily on the bodies of trans people placing abstract theological and doctrinal objections onto individual embodiment. We argue that the focus on trans bodies operates within the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004) requiring emotional labour from trans people negotiating the meaning-making of rituals and the opprobrium this attracts from opposing groups within the Church.

Keywords: trans, gender, Church of England, ritual, pronouns, marriage, liturgy

Introduction

For over twenty years, the Church of England has openly recognised trans priests: Carol Stone became the first trans priest in 2000 having transitioned with the support of her bishop, followed by the 2005 ordination of trans priest Sarah Jones. Nevertheless, the experience of trans folk, both priests and lay persons, within the Church of England is a checkered one. In its 2003 document,

[1] The research on which this article draws was supported by the Church Universities Fund; ethical approval was granted by the York St John University Cross-School Research Ethics Committee.

Some Issues in Human Sexuality, the Church affirms binary notions of 'male' and 'female' (based primarily on English translations of the biblical passage 'Male and female he created them' (Gen. 5:2, NRSV). Moreover, the document was critiqued by trans priest Christina Beardsley for discussing what it terms 'transsexualism' without consulting any trans folk (Dowd and Beardsley, 2018). Furthermore, the Church later rejected requests to draw up official prayers and liturgies to welcome transitioned people (Sarmiento, 2018), instead providing guidance on the use of The Affirmation of Baptismal Faith to celebrate and affirm gender transition (Church of England, 2019).

This ambiguity regarding the full inclusion and acceptance of trans identities is intertwined with the Church's negative perception of same-sex relationships. Despite the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay, supporting the decriminalisation of sex between consenting men in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, Church doctrine and Canon law continued to assert that sex was only permissible within marriage between 'one man with one woman' (Church of England, 2000 [1969], Canon B30, p. 51). Cognisant of growing criticism of its exclusionary attitude towards diverse sexualities, the 1991 House of Bishops document, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, attempted to maintain a position of valuing gay Christians whilst simultaneously refusing to endorse same-sex marriage. Numerous reports and documents have ensued in the intervening years, alongside societal changes on the UK, including the creation of civil partnerships in 2005 and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2014. Yet, the Church has continued to promote celibacy for gay priests (and bisexual people, unless in an opposite-sex marriage) and to refuse to marry same-sex couples (retaining an exemption in law that protects the Church from claims of discrimination). In 2020, a much-anticipated resource, *Living in Love and Faith*, based on several years of conversations with priests and lay persons, including many LGBTQ+ folk, was released by the Church. It quickly transpired, however, that despite the considerable input of LGBTQ+ folk the Church was reaffirming its doctrine that marriage is only between 'one man and one woman' (Church of England, 2020, p. 25), although blessings for same-sex unions might be permissible. The continuing ban on same-sex marriage within the Church was further reasserted by the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, at the 2022 Lambeth conference.[2] While marriage is not the holy grail for all same-sex couples, and may, in fact, be seen as conforming to heteronormative standards and, therefore, constituting a loss of queer identity, the underlying discrimination is still a source of deep pain for LBGTQ+ Christians. For trans folk the implication is that they can have their gender identity affirmed in the sacrament of marriage in the Church, if (and only if) they are perceived to be in a heterosexual relationship: gender is still understood by the Church in binary terms and opposite-sex attraction alone is the fully

[2] A ten-yearly meeting for Anglican bishops around the world.

permitted sexuality. Yet, as Susannah Cornwall (2022) writes of the marriage sacrament: 'If something is a human good then it makes sense that it should be a good for as many as want it (always recognizing that not everyone does)' (p. 317).

Against this backdrop, our research set out to hear the voices of trans and non-binary people[3] and to explore their relationship with university chaplains, and, more generally, with the Church of England, given the Church's ambivalent messages about LGBTQ+ identities. We engaged in a two-year mixed-methods study involving three stages of data collection at Anglican Foundation Universities in England. Anglican Foundation Universities started out as teacher training colleges and have developed into universities over time. Consequently, these institutions no longer require staff or students to hold Christian beliefs; students and staff may even be unaware of the Anglican foundation. As with all other UK universities, these institutions are bound by the UK's 2010 Equality Act, which includes protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment. Our 2018-2020 project consisted of: a twelve-month Qualtrics survey receiving 70 responses from LGBTQIA+ students and staff; displays inviting comments from trans and non-binary students at three of the twelve participating universities; and a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with three trans and non-binary students and staff, fourteen university chaplaincy staff, and two trans priests. In spite of some delays and challenges owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, our project culminated in a 2021 written report with recommendations for university chaplaincies and others working in education to enhance inclusion of trans and non-binary folk. Prior to the completion of the report, we invited interviewees to a working group to engage in co-production of the final narrative, and to ensure the practicality and efficacy of the recommendations.

Our interviews with trans people, including two prominent trans priests, revealed the importance of ritual in the lives of trans people of faith, particularly the formal rites of the Church of England. Rituals, in various forms, are ubiquitous social processes. For trans people, formalised religious ritual, even where it is part of a regulatory symbolic system, can offer a method of being heard and seen. Rituals, where there is room for subverting meaning, can also be part of the process of social change, of expression of identity and of formally acting out resistance to binary heteronormativity and transphobia. This article focuses on two Church of England rituals: the marriage rite, and a notional liturgy of welcome for trans folk who wish to confirm a gendered identity within their worshipping communities and in a context that confers formal acknowledgement of relation to the

[3] We use 'trans' and non-binary as an adjective rather than a noun – trans folk, trans community etc. We use the two-word form of trans women and trans men rather than the one-word forms that for many have associations with trans-exclusion. We use 'trans' to denote and include a spectrum of identities outside of the gender binary – genderqueer, genderfluid, bigender etc – rather than the more specific 'transgender', with the exception of quotations and explicit reference to, for example, laws or statistics that use 'transgender'.

divine. The marriage ceremony allows us to unpack the ontologies at stake in the Christian context, while the debate in the Church around a proposed liturgy of welcome offers an insight into the socio-cultural processes trans people of faith navigate and highlights the potency of ritual for individual and collective identities. In different ways, these rituals can be used to play a part in challenging the notion of a naturalised and static sex/gender binary. Our aim is to explore how these rituals, especially in the religious context, show agential negotiation of regulatory forces and dispersal of power over meaning-making, even where hierarchical power is exercised.

Ritual as a theoretical tool

According to Victor Turner's (2008 [1969]) foundational and still persuasive work, rituals can shift people from one identity to another, often resolving liminal states and dispelling ambiguities. Ritualised words and actions may also generate ontologies (Bell, 1992) that fit into regulatory systems of taboo and sanctification (Rappaport, 1999). As Grant Potts (2012) notes:

> Turner and Rappaport both examined ritual as a way to understand human social life, and so their inquiry was guided by the presupposition that ritual is foremost a type of social action, a presupposition they inherited from Durkheim and his students. This presupposition continues to guide much of ritual studies today (p. 285).

This social action is an embodied action. Anne-Christine Hornborg's (2005) exploration of healing and ritual emphasises the significance of embodiment for insider socialisation. Reflecting on socially accepted behaviours, her account resonates with the stories of trans folk in the Church: 'It was their bodies that made them feel like outsiders and they became aware of how the construction of new identities in order to be accepted and affirmed is not only a mental affair, it is very much a matter of body' (p. 361).

We argue that ritual in the Church of England is used to both affirm and police trans identities. The Church's recent process to approve the guidance accompanying renewal of baptismal vows as a liturgy of welcome for trans people, and the accompanying backlash, highlights the role of liturgy and ritual for trans belonging in the Church and the ways power over liturgical words and praxis is overtly wielded. The marriage rite has established ontological meaning for trans bodies on condition they support heterosexuality. Yet there is a subversive access to meaning-making in both these ritual contexts. The lived experiences shared with us reveal the ways in which trans bodies have become sites onto which anxieties about gender are projected. Church-sanctioned ritual can provide an unambiguous ontological gendered identity, but, in a critical discussion on feminist ameliorative inclusion, Katherine Jenkins (2016) raises questions about the expansiveness of gender categories. That is, where the concept of 'woman' relies on being perceived to be a woman and, thus, being

subordinated on that basis, it may still lead to the exclusion of some trans women. Likewise, the Church's ritual life seeks to underpin heteronormative binaries, ensuring that trans bodies, where included, are used to reproduce fixed meanings around sexuality, sex and gender. We explore the extent to which, whilst ritual might support inclusion, the Church's ritualised meaning-making lands heavily on the bodies of trans people, through a process that places abstract theological and doctrinal objections onto individual embodiment. We argue that the focus on trans bodies operates within the affective economy (Ahmed, 2004), and requires emotional labour from trans people in negotiating the meaning-making of rituals and the opprobrium this attracts from opposing groups within the Church.

The study of ritual brings together multiple academic disciplines, united in the understanding that ritual offers a 'window' into cultural and social processes (Bell, 1992, p. 3). The wide variations in approaches can be understood as offering different ways of resolving the bifurcation of action and thought. Catherine Bell's (1992) critique of the scholarly landscape of ritual studies offers insight into how ritual differentiates and privileges a set of activities, often within purposed space and time, which create and reproduce meaning. There are, states Bell, several 'structures' created by different theoretical positions: ritual and belief are separated (homologous to the separation of thought and action); ritual acts as a mechanism to reintegrate belief and action; ritual is an antidote to the less-than-ideal real world; ritual generates meaning (and not necessarily the same meaning) for the participant and the observer - the observer might be the community (the congregation witnessing a baptism for example), or God. This latter point rises to the surface in our interviews and our understanding of the purpose of a specialised liturgy of welcome for trans people: a welcome that is legitimated before an observing God, in a ritual that is oriented towards a community that welcomes. As Bell (1992) explains, theoretical discussions frame ritual as a form of social control, but also as an instrument of social change (p. 169). Bell is less convinced by the former, instead theorising that there is a more complex relationship with power. She disarticulates belief and ritual, such that we can see ritual as a socially cohesive activity, but not necessarily as a conduit for standardising and inculcating beliefs or ideologies. In other words, interpretations of meaning may vary even where ritual actions are shared. In fact, interpretative variation, circulating around common symbols, is, according to Bell (1992), the key to the efficacy of ritual (p. 184). We see this loosening of power over meaning-making in our research, which we detail below. However, we need also to consider how rituals promote and regulate beliefs and ideologies. Bell highlights two schools of thought: ritual supports a set of fundamental cultural beliefs/values generally shared across society, on the one hand; on the other hand, ritual solidifies values that favour the interests of the dominant group. The example of the religious ritual of marriage in the Church allows us to consider

what happens when ritual shifts from supporting (more or less) traditional universal values (heterosexuality and binary gender) to shoring up values that are no longer generally shared, excluding minority groups and stabilising the position of the dominant group.

Bell's critique notwithstanding, other theoretical proposals are useful in exploring the complex relationship we have with rituals, particularly in religious settings. Roy Rappaport, (1999) for instance, proposes that ritual is a static and repeated set of actions and speech that reproduce authorised meaning. For Rappaport (1999), rituals that revolve around the notion of sanctity enhance the separation between what is considered natural and what is formulated as orthodox belief (without the ritualisation of this separation, it might only be a minor difference). People with identities and actions, apart from those supported by religious ritual, are given an outsider status, made other than and even 'less than human' (Rappaport, 1999, p. 439). Ritual, therefore, plays a crucial role in sanctifying and vilifying, in providing belonging and in creating the outsider. Furthermore, Rappaport (1999) suggests that the ritualising of what he terms 'Ultimate Sacred Postulates' generates barriers to communication and empathy towards those placed outside these parameters: enmities are created by static ritual. We can see this dynamic played out in the Church of England and the wider Anglican community, whereby those acting outside of, for example, heterosexual ideals are framed as sinful and excluded from portions of the Church's ritual life, such as the marriage rite. Additionally, those who claim orthodoxy sometimes exclude *themselves* from the ritual of the Eucharist believing its integrity is threatened by bodies that are not considered sanctified (such as women celebrants) or identities considered part of an outsider group. The 2022 Lambeth Conference was marked by deep division around the issue of sexuality: conservative bishops refused to attend the Eucharistic ritual alongside bishops who support same-sex relationships; the former insisted that the Lambeth conference reaffirm the Church's position on marriage as between a man and a woman (Lambeth Conference, 2022; Anglican Ink, 2022). This refusal reveals how ritual can be leveraged in conflict over orthodoxy, even where the ritual is designed ostensibly for cohesion. Thus, use of the Eucharistic rite as a site for highlighting what is considered sanctified, and what is not, exemplifies the role of ritual in generating authority, legitimacy, and credentials for belonging. As Siobhán Garrigan's (2004) study of the Eucharistic ritual through the lens of Habermasian 'communicative action' reveals, the theological hermeneutics underpinning its practice are far from agreed. There is, she (Garrigan, 2004) argues, 'a discrepancy between academic theology's writing about what Eucharist ought to be and a liturgical community's own practice of it' (p. 97). Both access to the ritual and the way in which it is experienced remain opaque. Garrigan's (2004) empirical observation of a traditional Eucharistic ritual is that it meets the criteria of 'systematically distorted communication' (p. 136). When boundaries to such rituals are

constructed around sexuality the impacts spread widely: targeted rejection of one group under the LGBTQ+ umbrella leads to feelings of ostracization and alienation of the whole LGBTQ+ community and its allies (see Wakefield, 2022).

Reminiscent of Turner's discussion on 'communitas' (Turner, 2008 [1969]), ritual is designed to suffuse belief with emotion in a shared context, thereby generating a sense of 'grace' (personal and social harmony). Similarly, for Rappaport (1999), grace is defined as the unifying of parts of the self that have been constituted as separate. For a trans person of faith, therefore, a liturgy marking and celebrating a journey of personal gender alignment and confirmation, working via the concepts of grace and communitas, presents a vibrant opportunity for expressing belonging, both for the individual and for the worshipping community. Hence, religious ritual operates as an antidote to alienation, both individual and social. Rappaport (1999) states: 'To perform a liturgical order is to effect a union with others, and the ritual acts that make the reasons of the heart one with the reasons of reason may also join radically separate individuals to their fellows' (p. 384). This perception of ritual underpins what might be 'inclusive' in church contexts and helps to make the case for a specialised liturgical rite for trans people.

Contrary to the above, ritual also works against personal and social harmony, Rappaport (1999) argues, when ideas or behaviours are overly sanctified. In this sense, the heteronormative marriage rite can be seen as the hyper-sanctification of cisgendered heterosexuality creating conflict and alienation as wider social attitudes shift. Such over-sanctification can diminish engagement amongst a religious cohort who begin to reject or ignore doctrine, weakening authority. Rappaport (1999) writes: 'oversanctification is . . . a more common and probably more serious problem in literate state-organised societies where ordained clergy, particularly those in possession of powerful means for enforcing their interpretations . . . are in a position to adjudicate what is orthodox' (p. 440). Ultimately, he (1999) critiques religious ritual that alleviates anxiety without addressing the social causes of that anxiety; ritual as ameliorative is part of a deceit that promises salvation (p. 447), but without delivering cohesion or inclusion. Likewise, Bell (1992) suggests that the efficacy of the power accessed by those who control ritual can be measured by the extent to which social problems are present. Thus, the power that the ritual of the Church of England marriage ceremony generates is significantly diminished, because it no longer commands consensus in terms of social attitudes towards sexuality and marriage. Bell (1992) states: 'A breakdown in the cycle of rites that create ritualised power, or a breakdown in the semblance of conformity to traditional models, can quickly fragment the illusion of social cohesion' (p. 213). Moreover, the notion that ritual distances the individual from their personal identities (Bell, 1992, p. 216) undermines the original purpose of ritual as a beneficial shared experience and, instead, creates alienation and disaffection. Sexuality is a

prime example of how ritual is used by the Church to support orthodoxy in the face of diminishing authority on the issue, also creating alienation and disaffection as understanding and acceptance of gender variance outstrips the Church's ability to reorganise what is sanctified. Contrastingly, as we discuss below, whilst there is conflict about liturgy specifically designed to celebrate trans identities, the marriage rite may be a boon to trans identities, albeit as a direct result of anxiety about sexuality. The challenge then is to develop ritual as a tool of anti-oppression.

Admittedly, there is a tension here: a non-orthodox ritual might be deemed invalid by mainstream practitioners and organisations, and yet it might have efficacy for excluded persons. Garrigan's (2004) analysis of Eucharistic ritual practice amongst marginal communities - those who would not be admitted to a Roman Catholic mass on the grounds of, for example, sexuality, gender, martial or denominational status – finds, despite variations in actual practice, an extensive degree of critical participant engagement (p. 192). Hence, while the traditional Roman Catholic Eucharist communicated 'the hierarchical power relations of a human institution' (Garrigan, 2004, p.195), the ritual practices of the marginal communities shared:

> a depiction of a God who is welcoming, who embraces diversity in creation and in human politics, who is known primarily through listening (listening to the stories of others), who expects critique and dissent, who is remembered in a great variety of ways, and who is known through awkward moments and spontaneous gestures as much as through prescribed texts, movements and sounds (Garrigan, 2004, p. 195).

Ritualistic practice, even in its traditional elements, can be liberative, therefore, if its performance is free from hierarchies of dominance and rejection.

Common to rituals which focus on the body is a two-way process whereby the body is defined by ritual as much as the body constitutes the ritual practices. As Bell (1992) states: 'By virtue of movement and stillness, sound and silence, through which the body produces and reabsorbs these oppositional schemes, an orchestration is effected in which some schemes come to dominate and interpret others' (pp. 220-221). The physical acting out of ritual creates a bodily reality that is entwined with power and hierarchy. Hence, how a body is given access to, or is constituted by, a ritual is a matter of foundational inclusion or exclusion. Bell (1992) draws on Foucault's notion that power operates as a network that focuses on the body, in this case encompassing the physical actions within ritual and its discursive practices. Foucauldian approaches to power tend to take us away from structural explorations, but the focus, as Bell suggests, on the two-way process of power helps us to understand the impact of ritual on the individual. Bell (1992) integrates various forms of power into her work, whereas we are interested in the way symbolic power both constitutes and is

constituted by religious ritual. In this respect, Bell (1992) establishes that rituals are a method of negotiating the power to define (and, therefore, can be a way of resisting hegemony), as well as being a method of differentiation. Relatedly, the flow between negotiating meaning and reifying differentiation is central to our discussion as we explore how Church of England rituals both affirm and exclude trans identities.

Ritual, then, promotes both social cohesion and resistance, and for Bell 'ritual practices themselves can generate the culturally effective schemes that yield the categories with which to differentiate self and society, thought and action' (p. 218). Ritual helps to define subjectivity and identity. For this reason, we argue, scrutinising the way ritual is leveraged in the context of trans people's belonging is critical, particularly for trans folk who wish to exercise their faith within Christian communities. Ultimately, in Bell's framework, rituals reflect social issues, and, while there is a degree of latitude for resistance and interpretation of meaning, this presents a challenge to those with power who seek to reify ritual to the exclusion of others. Our research underlines that ritual matters for social inclusion and bodily affirmation, as is amply illustrated by Hornborg's (2005) juxtapositioning of the 'bodily reprogramming' (p. 365) colonisers forced on indigenous people and the 'bodily resurrection' (p. 370) experienced through the agential reclaiming of rituals to effect spiritual healing. Such rituals, she (Hornborg, 2005) states: 'are more than social acts employed to negotiate a new identity within a hegemonic discourse; they are a means of letting the bodily embedded memories be reworked and of making the individual body correspond with the new self-esteem' (p. 375). Though there are several theoretical approaches available when considering the potency and efficacy of rituals, if we understand ritual as not merely representative of power, belief and ontology but as power and ontology-forming, we can see the transformative potential as well as the constricting character of ritual, and this makes what is permitted in ritual fundamentally important.

Ritual in trans people's lives

There is a small but growing body of theological work examining the relationship trans people have with the institution of the Church of England summarised in our research report (McIntosh and Jagger, 2021). In this article, we draw out the lived experience of the ritualistic elements of belonging to a faith community. Teresa Berger (2015) writes that gender has become the 'liturgical troublemaker' in recent years, as traditional views of gender are deconstructed in ways that challenge liturgical worship (p. 36). Some churches, she notes (2015, p. 37), are increasing congregations by developing liturgical celebrations specifically for trans people. Neither growth nor inclusion are apparent for the Church of England; an institution facing criticism for its compromised

response to the liturgical requirements of trans people. Despite recognising[4] the existence of trans people in the priesthood, the Church differentiates trans identities problematically as sitting between biological intersex and 'state of mind' transgender, as Cornwall reveals (2009). She (2017) highlights the Church's tendency to entangle gender variance with sexuality, underpinned by essentialist views on the sexed body and naturalised gender binary. In turn, these essentialist norms lead to microaggressions faced by trans folk in the Church, which, Rob Clucas (2017, 2018) explains, are bound up with the Church's misunderstandings around the purpose of specialised ritual for trans people. While Ellen Clark-King (2016) explores the ways trans women in the Anglican Church relate to prayer as a ritual and personal practice, personal accounts and research have been published by Rachel Mann (2020 [2012]) and Christina Beardsley (Beardsley and O'Brien, 2016); some of their insights are explored below.

Methodology

Our project involved three stages of data collection at Anglican Foundation universities:[5] a survey of LGBTQIA+ students and staff; displays at universities to gather trans and non-binary experiences, comments and stories; a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with trans and non-binary students and staff, with university chaplains, and with two high profile trans priests: Rachel Mann and Christina Beardsley.[6] The survey was advertised via social media and via student representatives at Anglican Foundation universities: 43 students and 27 staff responded and self-identified in a variety of ways in terms of gender and sexuality; 12 identified as trans and 10 as non-binary. A thematic analysis of survey comments and interview transcripts is discussed fully in our report (see McIntosh and Jagger, 2021). The resistance to the use of display boards to amplify trans and non-binary voices alerted us to hidden dynamics within well-meaning practices, such as ownership of space and reputational concerns, which we discuss in detail elsewhere (see McIntosh and Jagger, 2023). In this article, we focus on the interviews with Rachel and Christina who offered significant insight into the role of religious ritual in supporting or undermining the status of trans people in the Church.

Rituals in religious contexts

[4] This is not to suggest the Church of England is being unambiguously supportive, since the term 'recognise' is painful for trans folk given that the corollary is having their existence denied.

[5] Anglican foundation universities are educational institutions originally founded by the Anglican Church to increase access to education; initially operating as teacher training colleges, they have developed over time into universities.

[6] Both priests are publicly active and vocal about being trans in the Church of England and gave consent to be named.

Clucas (2018) argues that the lack of official rituals within the Church for celebrating a trans person's journey is part of a wider problem of exclusion for trans people that includes barriers within ordained priesthood, and the permission the Church gives to individual clergy to refuse to marry trans people (p. 3). For Clucas, such discrimination occurs against a backdrop of a cisgendered worldview that naturalises closed gender binary categories resulting in the invisibility of trans people in the ritual life of the Church. He writes: 'To not have a ritual, a service, to celebrate an important life event, keeps trans people in a position of disadvantage and disempowerment in the Church' (p. 4). Likewise, Mann writes of the sense of erasure that occurs where language and praxis are fixed and exclusive (Mann, 2020 [2012]). Hence, the significance of ritual activity as part of an inclusive agenda is underlined; however, rituals that accrue and reproduce meaning that reifies gender and cisgendered heterosexuality are not promising as sites of inclusion.

The Church of England marriage rite

A recent article in the *Church Times* (Ashworth, 2022) summarises the current position of the Church: trans and non-binary people can put themselves forward for ordination, and trans people with legal gender recognition are able to marry in church. This latter point reveals that the Church is linking ontological affirmation of gender to a secular legal understanding of trans identity. Nevertheless, the caveat remains that cis and trans same-sex couples are excluded from the marriage rite in church (Church of England, 2014). As Rachel Mann noted in our interview, the inclusion of trans people in the ritual of marriage means that their ontology is assured, but only as a mechanism to support the Church's insistence that marriage is exclusively heterosexual. She explains, in the Church of England:

> it's really important to know who can marry whom, and that's going to be based on fixed ideas of gender . . . either what you're saying is that trans people exist, in which case when they get married of course that's a heterosexual marriage, or – and this is the killer point – . . . or what you've said is you've allowed same-sex marriage.

Consequently, the religious marriage ritual is given potency in supporting a trans person's identity via the privileging of heterosexuality. The logic around ontology is precarious, however, and risks collapse should the Church allow same-sex marriage based on gender assigned at birth.[7] In the interim, there is an existential significance, Rachel maintains, for trans folk within the marriage rite.

[7] The precarity of the definitions of 'a man' and 'a woman' for marriage in the Church of England and its need to preserve heterosexuality is accompanied, of course, by the patriarchal foundations of the marriage rite itself, which remain intact (see for example Robinson, 2007).

Similarly, Christina raised the significance of the marriage rite and of being married in church as a trans woman. In our interview she described the relationship between ritual and gender as having the potential to radically deconstruct. She explains:

> I think that gender is the subversive thing anyway. And while we're getting the push back, because, what struck me, when the House of Bishops dug in around same sex marriage, you know, marriage is between a man and a woman, without asking the question: what is a man or a woman? And trans people, whether we do or not, we appear to throw that up in the air, don't we?

On the one hand, the ritual of marriage, whilst providing an ontological basis for supporting the gender identity of trans people, appears to reaffirm binary notions of gender by (overly) sanctifying heterosexuality; yet, on the other hand, there is potential for perceiving of trans inclusion in the ritual as a way of collapsing rigid definitions of, and meanings accrued to, gender. At first glance, this widening of the categories of 'man' and 'woman' appears to be unambiguous acceptance of trans identity. On deeper inspection, it is a limited affirmation only available via a legal route and within heterosexual relationships; this raises some deeper questions for the Church regarding its expectations of trans folk within a heterosexual paradigm. There are, writes Jenkins (2016), multiple ways a person might identify as trans and not all identities map onto how the body is categorised.

If marriage is a 'ritual of legitimation' (Bell, 1992, p. 195), the Church's marriage rite is part of the symbol system that naturalises the arbitrariness (in Bourdieusian language) of heterosexuality, but for the heterosexual trans person, it offers legitimation that stretches the intent of the ritual to align sex and gender. In other words, the doxa of sex/gender (as a naturalised and assumed order) is exposed via the marriage ceremony in which ontologies of the sexed body and its relationship to gender are potentially deconstructed. Whilst this might be seen as radical, the deconstruction is built on the persistent social injustice presented by heteronormativity; furthermore, the Church undermines any claims to be a welcoming and inclusive institution by allowing clergy to refuse - on the basis of (disputed) theological reasons - to conduct the marriage of trans people.

Liturgy of welcome

Attempts to establish a liturgical welcome for those who wished to affirm and celebrate the transitioning journey in the context of faith provide further evidence of the Church's ambivalent attitude to trans folk. In July 2017, a motion was passed by Synod (aka the 'Blackburn motion', presented by the Diocese of Blackburn) calling for specific liturgy to be developed to celebrate a

person's transition.[8] In our interview, Rachel describes the overwhelming support for the motion amongst both laity and clergy. However, the House of Bishops declined to develop new, distinct liturgy and decided that existing liturgy for the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith should be used, with 'pastoral guidance' (Church of England, 2018). Rachel describes this decision as 'unacceptable' given the clear signal from Synod that a new ritual for trans people was required.

Thus, the refusal by the Church hierarchy to develop specific liturgy was received with disappointment and hurt by trans people and those who supported the original motion (Sarmiento, 2018). As Clucas (2018) argues, requiring trans people to use the baptismal liturgy and not having specialised rituals, the bishops are ignoring the need for a ritualised recognition of the status of trans people. The erasure of this need, Clucas (2018) states, accompanies a general marginalisation of trans voices in the decision-making of the Church; whereas, as Beardsley (2018) writes, the commissioning of a special rite of welcome for trans people would indicate a serious desire to create an environment of belonging. In other words, ritual, made up of words and actions, has social and spiritual significance to the extent that its absence presents a barrier to the aims of inclusion and social justice. To borrow from an existing rite feels like an imposition for Clucas (2018), who also argues that the notion lacks pastoral validity. Moreover, he (Clucas, 2018) contends that, whilst a baptismal ritual might be beneficial for an unbaptised trans person, it does not provide an unambiguous ritualised event that allows a trans person to publicly declare their trans identity. While a public trans identity is not desired by all trans people, the point remains: a specialised rite of passage is a potent symbolic event that can be part of expressing gender identity for trans folk, and, moreover, would be an opportunity for the Church to institutionally recognise their identity. Part of the power of ritual is in its impact on social cohesion, its ability to provide legitimacy, and its ability to move a person from one status to another. Both Christina and Rachel were invited to contribute to the development of the aforementioned pastoral guidance with the proviso that a new liturgy would not be developed at this time. Consequently, they sought to ensure that the guidance would allow and require the acceptance of trans people within the permitted framework of liturgy, as Rachel told us: "I'm a bit of a liturgical geek and I made it very clear, for me, we would only put in creative suggestions where the rubrics, the rules of the liturgy permitted". Liturgical words, given legitimacy by the Church, are considered set apart.

Even the development of pastoral guidance to use with existing liturgy faced 'pushback'. In the words of Christina:

[8] Clucas (2018) details the chronology of events and explores the discourse within the communications from the House of Bishops.

> It's like the red line for Church of England evangelical council, this guidance. They seem not to like the fact that we were involved in advising on it . . . the pushback was thousands of signatures and a letter which was basically fake science and scaremongering.

Indicative of the ambivalence of the Church in its treatment of trans people, it is not just a new liturgy, but the repurposing of existing liturgy that has been rejected by some, and this is damaging to the prospect of inclusion. Poignantly, Christina described feeling more 'understood' and 'safer' in secular circles than in the Church, and, hence, withdrew from the Church's formal discussions around sexuality and gender variance. She describes the Church's position thus: "I thought it was just self-contradictory. 'We offer this unconditional welcome but you're not having a liturgy'". Ambivalence contributes to a perceived lack of understanding and potential risk in the Church for trans folk.

Mirroring arguments relating to the marriage rite, the debate over a liturgy of welcome reveals a prism of meaning-making. Rachel finds something liberatory (though unintentional) in the way the liturgical praxis has been 'queered':

> Despite the fact that I and lots of others were a little bit disappointed, in some cases very disappointed about the House of Bishops refusing to offer a new liturgy, on reflection what the House of Bishops offered was quite clever. Now I think it was accidentally clever . . . But on some deep level, let's call it God, or whatever, just grace, they did something quite brilliant . . . The liturgy is untouched. All that's changed is a very modest thing, which is guidance about how that's used. Now I believe that guidance is in some respects a watershed because it's a powerful signal to the wider world about the status of trans people in Church. But theologically it doesn't actually add up to a hill of beans . . . the House of Bishops can put their hand on their hearts and say, 'we've not changed doctrine because we've not changed liturgy'.

Bishops are in a position to resist objections to liturgical guidance, and they have provided a mechanism of liturgical welcome for trans people in the face of opposition from a conservative faction. Nevertheless, there are fault lines: anxieties about whether and how the inclusion of trans folk in liturgical settings implies doctrinal change are set against the requirement that trans folk be liturgically visible. Rachel interprets this complexity in a radical way; she states: "in offering the guidance about liturgy, they've entered this kind of middle space . . . I'd call it interstitial or liminal, or queer space actually, which queers the liturgy, but doesn't in one sense change it". At the heart of

the debate around liturgy, which Rachel claims as 'queer space', is a liminality that complicates Turner's (2008 [1969]) notion of ritual as ensuring a passing through liminality to resolution. For Rachel, the compromise preventing new liturgy is turned into a space where ostensibly unchanged liturgy can be stretched and can take on new meaning (which is in keeping with Garrigan's (2004) findings regarding the Eucharistic ritual in marginalised communities).

At the nexus of the debate, however, are trans people themselves, often required to do much of the emotional labour and absorb much of the opprobrium that the liturgical debate has generated. Rachel explains:

> I had been asked along with Tina and Sarah to handle some of the press stuff. And very much treat it as a good news story. We all agreed, and I was very clear I wanted to be very limited about what I did, but I have to say I was expecting that the bishops would be the lead people in terms of supporting, affirming and defending the guidance. Because it's a House of Bishops document, it's not a Rachel Mann, Tina Beardsley and Sarah Jones document. And they weren't anywhere to be seen . . . It felt like we were hung out to dry. It felt like it was our job to defend this guidance that wasn't our guidance but which we'd advised on. And of course, that means that then you can become a target. And I think, I think the sense of disappointment was difficult to deal with . . . That's costly, and it's actually that costly silence.

For Rachel, being visible and at the forefront of defending a flawed liturgical arrangement meant being required to manage events within the affective economy (see Ahmed, 2004). Debate is not abstract, but experienced bodily, emotionally, and psychologically by trans people in the Church. The fallout on social media and the discussions in Synod – even when allies are vocal and supportive – shows how the trans person becomes the site on which a struggle over meaning-making takes place (see Mann 2020 [2012]). The 'confusing narrative', in Rachel's words, has a physical, psychological and social impact for trans folk. Summing up her experience of the Church's machinations and the overspill into social and news media, she states: "when you come into public space and actually in your head you're dying, which I generally am. And then just to read stuff like that, it's like . . . it's so corrosive for your mental health". Hence, the connections between liturgical praxis and wider social messages are revealed. Clifford Geertz's (2013) much quoted framework of 'moods and motivations' (ethos and worldview) being played out in a symbiotic way helps make sense of Rachel's words. In short, what happens in ritual, what is represented and what is repelled, is a mirror of wider social processes and vice versa.

Conclusion

Our intention in the above discussion is to show how power over meaning-making in a ritualised context is connected to the regulating of bodies and sexuality but is not static. Indeed, we have shown how Rappaport's notion of over-sanctification loosens the authority over definitions and categories. Whilst overt power is exercised by the Church hierarchy over participation in liturgy and ritual, we have suggested there are ways in which meaning-making is subverted and re-oriented to be useful for inclusion. In the case of the liturgy of welcome for trans folk, the process may have left existing liturgy ostensibly unchanged, but there is now a queer space, in Rachel's words, created around the official words and praxis: there is space for the liturgy to be infused with new meaning. Furthermore, whilst we are not uncritical of the privileging of heterosexuality in the Church's marriage rite, we have argued that heterosexual trans identities are ontologically supported, albeit because heterosexuality is over-sanctified, thereby leaving room for a widening of gender categories. In addition, the Church is aligned to secular legal definitions of gender identity, which whilst unsatisfactory, creates a conduit between the sacred and state-approved affirmation. These examples reveal the competing uses of ritual both to exclude and to include, to regulate bodies in heterosexuality at the same time as allowing heterosexual trans folk the same marital expression as cis folk. In other words, the regulatory role of ritual is allowing a widening of gender categories. Nevertheless, the controversy in the Church surrounding the introduction of a liturgy of welcome for trans folk (transmuted into a re-purposing of the existing liturgy for the renewal of baptismal vows) has highlighted how ritual can create a hierarchy of belonging. On the one hand, the power over meaning-making is contextual, in a Foucauldian sense, in that bishops are the gatekeepers to official liturgical changes; on the other hand, access to symbolic meaning is disseminated *because* of the need to regulate and sacralise words and praxis.

Thus, Christina's insights show us that gender in the context of ritual has found a way of subverting the regulatory powers therein. Gender, she argues, disrupts ritualised meaning and praxis. Nevertheless, the ambivalent messages from the Church hierarchy regarding the bodies of trans folk remain unresolved. In fact, the waters have recently been muddied with the announcement that the House of Bishops is proposing more working group discussions on trans identities, spotlighting trans folk and inviting further debate: a move of which Christina, amongst others, is highly critical (see Ashworth, 2022). Clearly, religious ritual, whilst complex and contentious, is a visible context in which to excavate 'moods and motivations' (Geertz, 2013). We argue that religious rituals sometimes stymie inclusive praxis; yet, there are intricacies around meaning-making that can subvert official access to power and derail attempts to regulate bodies. The key to the efficacy of ritual as a tool for inclusivity and belonging for trans folk (Rappaport's notion of 'grace'), rather than

as a mechanism for discipline and regulation, is to actively challenge hierarchies of power, to resist exclusionary over-sanctification and to continuously forefront the voices of trans people. To this end, in the wider context of inclusivity, the Church of England should resolve the confusion and ambivalence around its treatment of trans folk and reconsider the role of a new liturgical rite in its landscape of unambiguous welcome (as promoted, for example, by TransEpiscopal).[9]

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[9] TransEpiscopal was formed in 2004 to advocate for trans inclusion in the Episcopal and wider Anglican church. In 2018, they passed a resolution to 'Authorize Trial Liturgies for Same-Sex Marriage' and in 2022 called for the 'Development of Resources and Training for Welcoming and Supporting Trans and Non-Binary People'. Since 2018, and the Church of England's refusal to write a liturgy of welcome for trans people, TransEpiscopal has included in its resources a 'Renaming Ceremony' liturgy from Dowd and Beardsley (2018) (see https://www.transepiscopal.org/).

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