

There is a new wave of consciousness in the United States that seeks an end to the oppression of gender variance in our culture. Children and youth who refuse or are unable to conform to the binary construct of male or female gender identity and expression risk ridicule, abuse, and rejection from peers and family members. The incumbent isolation and low self-esteem becomes intolerable to some who may sacrifice their true identity to achieve social acceptance, while others, who refuse or are unable to compromise their identity, may sacrifice their lives. Our children desperately need an alternative if they are to wholly represent themselves and participate fully in their lives.

In traditional Western European culture, gender is defined in mutually exclusive terms as female or male. This social construct was reinforced in the 19th century when certain attributes assigned to women were codified as feminine and attributes assigned to men were codified as masculine. Women were indoctrinated to uphold the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.¹ These classifications were designed to disempower women and privilege men. Any deviation from the established norm was inappropriate, undesirable, and severely discouraged by the dominant culture.

In other cultures, however, such as the Zuni Nation of Western New Mexico and Eastern Arizona the biology of a toddler is interpreted “via rituals designed to discover the gender of the infant and thus determine upbringing.”² Many First Nations groups regard individuals who identify and express themselves as members of the opposite sex

1 Barbara Welter, "[The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult_of_Domesticity)" *American Quarterly* **18**, no. 2 [1996]: 151–174. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult_of_Domesticity [accessed December 27, 2011].

2 Eliza A. Dragowski, Maria R. Scharion-del Rio, and Amy L. Sandigorsky, “Assessment and Diagnosis: Childhood Gender Identity...Disorder? Developmental, Cultural, and Diagnostic Concerns,” *Journal of Counseling & Development* **89**, [Summer 2011]: 360-366. The authors cite Herdt, 1996, cited in Newman, 2002.

as representative of a “third gender.”³ Commonly referred to as “two-spirit,”⁴ they are bestowed high social and spiritual status within their community.

To illustrate the artificial limitations imposed upon gender, Virginia R. Mollenkott, states in her book, *Omnigender*; that if we were to imagine the most “feminine” representation at one end of the human spectrum and the most “masculine” representation at the other, it would be impossible to locate where “femaleness” ends and “maleness” begins. A leader of the transgender movement and author of *The Apartheid of Sex* (New York: Crown, 1995), Martine Rothblatt, claims “The legal division of people into males and females is as wrong as the legal division of people into black and white races.”⁵ Mollenkott claims the artificial divisions of gender and race exist only in our minds, when in fact the reality and range of human experiences are far more complex.

In an *Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Sexual and Gender Diversity* the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing openly acknowledges “this work may challenge beliefs and unsettle relationships, but it goes to the heart of our mission as faith communities: to create the conditions so that each person can flourish.”⁶ How might we at UUCW begin to explore this topic?

3 Dragowski, Scharrion-del Rio, and Sandigorsky, “Assessment and Diagnosis,” 361.

4 Ibid. 361.

5 Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*. [Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001], 167.

6 "An Open Letter to Religious Leaders on Sexual and Gender Diversity." [Norwalk: The Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing 2007], 4.