# Trans and queer identities 'not sinful' according to the Bible argues PhD candidate



PhD candidate Mattie Mae Motl has become a strikingly effective public scholar by taking on one of the sticky battlegrounds between religion and LGBTQ+ life: the claim that the Bible plainly brands transgender and queer identities as sinful. According to a recent profile, Motl uses short videos on TikTok and Instagram to explain how careful reading of scripture — not literalist shorthand or modern moral panic — offers a very different picture. She reframes familiar verses and argues that much of the anti‑trans rhetoric built on those texts rests on misunderstanding, mistranslation and, crucially, context.

Motl’s own story helps explain the urgency behind her work. Raised in a Southern Baptist family and now a doctoral candidate at the University of St Andrews, she describes her scholarship as both academic labour and pastoral outreach: translating technical hermeneutics into plain language for people harmed by exclusionary theology. The New Feminist reported that Motl treats her social‑media output as a form of public scholarship — a bridge between the academy and congregations who desperately need clearer, less punitive readings of scripture.

One of Motl’s central points concerns literary form. Many lines people quote as proof texts for a strict gender binary are poetic or rhetorical, not forensic statements of ontological categories. Motl draws attention to the device of merism — a Hebraic rhetorical technique that pairs opposites (like 'heaven and earth') to indicate totality rather than to catalogue every literal possibility — and uses it to contest claims that Genesis’ 'male and female' passage excludes other gender realities. 'At first this verse seems to be enforcing a strict gender binary,' she says on TikTok; later she adds that 'this verse does not limit humanity to two fixed categories,' arguing that the language celebrates the fullness of human diversity. An appendix on biblical interpretation in a modern American Standard revision explains merism in the same terms, urging readers to weigh genre and rhetorical purpose when interpreting allegedly literal passages.

The oft‑cited Deuteronomy prohibition against wearing 'the clothes of the opposite sex' likewise falters under historical scrutiny. Study notes and modern translations point to concerns far removed from contemporary debates about gender identity — issues such as cultic practices, ritual propriety and, in one reading, military deception. The NET Bible’s commentary on Deuteronomy 22 suggests a range of original intents: boundary maintenance, anti‑pagan measures or preventing disguises that could facilitate espionage. Seen this way, the verse reads as a narrow social or ritual rule rather than an eternal verdict on gender variance.

Translation history also reshaped modern discourse. The English word 'homosexual' does not appear in ancient texts; it was introduced into certain translations in the mid‑twentieth century. Scholars have long debated how Greek terms in texts such as 1 Corinthians — malakoi and arsenokoitai — were rendered and reinterpreted in that period. A documentary explored in The Guardian traces how a 1946 translation choice helped consolidate a modern identity label that earlier readers would not have recognised, and argues that the shift coloured post‑war religious rhetoric and public perceptions. Motl and other contemporary exegetes point out that conflating ancient terminology for particular acts with a blanket category of sexual identity is historically and linguistically dubious.

Beyond hermeneutics and philology, a wider anthropological record undercuts any claim that gender diversity is a modern aberration. Case studies from South Asia, for example, document recognised third‑gender communities such as hijras with long religious and ritual roles, illustrating that non‑binary social genders have deep historical roots. Motl frames this evidence as part of a larger theological claim: that trans and non‑binary people are not outside creation’s order but, in her words on social media, 'evidence of its divine depth.' Such observations contest the notion that modern queer existence is incompatible with religious life.

That said, the field is not uniform and public debate remains contested. Translation choices, hermeneutical methods and theological commitments all produce different readings, and some conservative interpreters still maintain that scripture endorses traditional gender norms. The documentary and subsequent scholarly conversations make clear that translation and editorial decisions carried real cultural weight; Motl’s intervention is important precisely because those decisions continue to shape policy and pulpit alike. Her critics argue from different methodological premises, and the conversation about scripture and gender continues to be a site of genuine scholarly disagreement.

What Motl’s work most clearly contributes is practice as well as persuasion: clearer tools for congregants, pastors and lay readers to interrogate claims that scripture automatically condemns transgender or queer lives. As the Queerty profile notes, this is not merely academic correction but a pastoral and political endeavour — one aimed at ensuring that theological interpretation does not become fuel for exclusionary laws, anti‑drag measures or spiritual marginalisation. If nothing else, her social‑media ministry models how specialists can make technical exegesis available to those who need it most. Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.queerty.com/is-there-any-basis-for-saying-transness-is-a-sin-this-bible-scholar-has-the-answer-20250814/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.queerty.com/is-there-any-basis-for-saying-transness-is-a-sin-this-bible-scholar-has-the-answer-20250814/> - Queerty’s article profiles PhD candidate Mattie Mae Motl and her accessible social‑media work arguing that the Bible does not straightforwardly condemn transgender or queer people. It highlights Motl’s explanations about literary devices such as merism—for example “man and woman” meaning a totality rather than a strict binary—and emphasises the importance of reading passages in historical and cultural context. The piece discusses Deuteronomy 22:5’s original concerns (ritual, cultic or military contexts) and notes that the English term “homosexual” only appears in mid‑twentieth‑century translations. Ultimately the article advocates inclusive, scholarly reinterpretation that affirms trans and non‑binary people seeking compassionate theological understanding today.
3. <https://thenewfeminist.co.uk/2025/07/mattie-mae-motl-on-being-a-progressive-bible-scholar-in-the-manosphere/> - The New Feminist interview presents Mattie Mae Motl as a progressive Bible scholar and PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews who creates accessible content bridging academic biblical study and queer theology. Motl discusses her Southern Baptist background, healing from religious trauma, and the urgency of offering affirming interpretations to LGBTQ+ people harmed by exclusionary theology. She explains how scholarly methods reveal readings of scripture that do not inherently condemn queer identities, and stresses the need for academics to communicate findings clearly to lay communities. The piece celebrates Motl’s social‑media ministry as both pastoral outreach and public scholarship today.
4. <https://uasvbible.org/2021/10/08/appendix-5-how-to-interpret-the-bible/> - The Updated American Standard Version appendix on interpreting the Bible explains merism as a common rhetorical device in Biblical Hebrew where paired opposites express totality or completeness. It offers Genesis 1:1 (“heavens and earth”) and Genesis 1:5 (“evening and morning”) as examples and emphasises that such phrases should not be read literally as narrow binaries. The appendix situates merism within broader hermeneutical principles—context, historical‑grammatical method, exegesis versus eisegesis—and encourages readers to consider literary genre and cultural setting when interpreting texts. It advocates careful analysis to avoid anachronistic or overly literal readings that distort original meaning and to respect the text's rhetorical purpose.
5. <https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/107/DEU.22.net> - The NET Bible page for Deuteronomy 22 provides the translation of the chapter alongside explanatory study notes. Its annotation on verse 5 discusses the Hebrew terms and offers several interpretive possibilities—boundary maintenance of gender roles, avoidance of pagan cultic practices, or prohibition of deceptive disguises—rather than a modern categoric denunciation of transgender identity. The notes caution against imposing contemporary concepts on ancient law and stress evaluating linguistic nuance, parallel statutes, and cultural context. Overall the NET resources encourage historically informed exegesis when considering the verse’s original intent and how it might be applied today.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/dec/01/christian-homophobia-bible-mistranslation-1946-documentary> - The Guardian article examines a documentary that traces the influence of a 1946 translation choice in the Revised Standard Version that introduced the English word “homosexual” into certain biblical passages. It outlines scholarly debate about whether two Greek words in 1 Corinthians (malakoi and arsenokoitai) were conflated into a modern identity term, thereby shifting interpretation from exploitative acts to labelling persons. The piece situates that translation within mid‑twentieth‑century medical and cultural attitudes, recounts subsequent disputes and revisions, and explores the film’s claim that this linguistic change affected religious rhetoric and public perceptions in the post‑war period.