At first glance, official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and the Islamic Republic of Iran have much in common on the issues of gender and sex. Both prohibit female leadership in the clerical forms of priests or mullahs, respectively. Both understand a gender complementarity among men and women—in contrast to a radical equality—and base moral duties on this ontological distinction. Both consider the act of homosexual coitus as a sin, discourage divorce, and teach that sexual union is permissible only within the context of marriage. Taken together, these facts might lead the scholar of religious ethics to assume that sex and gender act as bridge concepts between the two traditions, providing an opportunity to study cross-cultural patriarchy or sexual conservativism as universal phenomena.

But on at least one practical issue the two traditions, as represented by clerical teachings, are radically diverse: transsexuality. The Vatican understands sex as fixed from birth and rejects that sexual reassignment operations are proper treatments for transsexuality, since these procedures are interpreted as merely superficial and external and not able to change the sex or gender of the individual. Transsexuality is categorized by the Vatican as a psychic disorder in which an individual of one sex mistakenly thinks he or she is a member of the other. The Vatican’s doctrinal congregation explicitly instructs bishops to never allow the altering of the sex listed in
parish baptismal records. Postoperative trans-Catholics are not eligible to marry, to be ordained, or to enter religious life because of “mental instability.”

In contrast, not only is transsexuality permissible in Iran, but also sexual reassignment operations are financially subsidized by the Islamic Republic, supported by a clerical interpretation of Shari‘a that understands these operations to be necessary in some cases for uncovering a person’s true jins or gender. Postoperative trans-men and women follow the moral codes of their “new sex”; they are allowed to marry; postoperative trans-men can become mullahs; and postoperative trans-women have a duty to veil.

My guess is that the reader of this chapter might be aware of the official Catholic position on transsexuality, but be just as surprised as I was to learn that the Islamic Republic is fast becoming the “sex-change capital of the world.” And it is this moment of surprise that points to the relationship between body, sex, and gender as holding potential for new work in comparative ethics. Was my assumption of the necessary link between a “conservative religious” stance on homosexuality and transsexuality based on a prior distinctively Christian understanding about what was theologically “natural,” “normal,” or “good” about gendered bodies? Has a Christian anthropology become dominant in ethical discourse about the body in the West? If so, in what ways?

This chapter explores the comparative ethics of sex and gender through the case of teachings on transsexuality among the Vatican and leading Iranian Shi’a clerics. This case study has great potential for analysis of both the meanings and relationships of sex and gender, as well as contributing to debates over the designations of essentialism and constructionism in contemporary sexual ethics. Transsexuality is a particularly interesting contemporary case study because it forces us to think about how sex “changes” through history. Advancements in the field of endocrinology mean that we can now grow breasts or facial hair. Cosmetic surgery can remove or construct other physical markers of a male or female person, such as an Adam’s apple, a penis, or a vagina. We can now, quite literally, embody a different sex. These possibilities present a distinct set of challenges and opportunities for comparative religious ethics. What attributes of embodiment do religious traditions count as part of an authentic person or as relevant to the moral life? What happens when these attributes are transformed? How is a person’s sex or gender determined? Why is such determinism necessary? Is God gender blind? Are we?

To explore these questions and yet others, this chapter is organized into two sections. In Section 1, I describe the practical justification