CHAPTER 4

A Pastoral Theological Reading of Middlesex

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Introduction

This chapter invites pastoral theologians to begin thinking about intersex conditions, about how theology and practice might be rethought in light of intersex advocacy. Pastoral theology, with its experience-near orientation, is in a unique position to contribute to discussions of intersex advocacy in that pastoral theology offers a blending of theological inquiry and psychological sophistication. This chapter offers pastoral theological reflection on intersex conditions by focusing on a novel by Jeffrey Eugenides. Eugenides is the author of three best-selling novels: The Virgin Suicides, Middlesex, and The Marriage Plot.¹ He gained widespread acclaim after the publication of his first novel, and his second novel, Middlesex, won the Pulitzer Prize.

This chapter focuses on Eugenides’s second novel. Middlesex, set in twentieth-century America and written as a fictional memoir, is a coming-of-age story of Cal/Calliope, a man with an intersex condition caused by 5-Alph Reductase Deficiency (5-ARD). This is a condition where patients who are genetically male can sometimes present with ambiguous external genitalia because of a deficiency of the enzyme 5-alpha reductase—thus it sometimes happens that patients who are born genetically male can be believed to be, and therefore raised as, female based on the appearance of their genitals. As will be discussed below, the reception of Middlesex has focused on various aspects of the novel, such as literary concerns, the American Dream, race relations, ethnic identity,
psychosomatic trauma, sexual identity, gender identity, biopolitics, and the nature versus nurture debate. This chapter adds to the existing literature on *Middlesex* by offering a pastoral theological reading. I do so by drawing on the insights of pastoral theologian Donald Capps. I argue that such a reading enables the novel to be used in ways that are consistent with the political goals of persons with intersex conditions as articulated by, for example, the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA).

This chapter has several parts. Part one offers a brief synopsis of *Middlesex*. Part two summarizes some of the popular and critical literature on *Middlesex*. And part three offers a pastoral theological reading of *Middlesex*.

**Part One: A Brief Synopsis**

Cal Stephanides is a 41-year-old man with an intersex condition caused by 5-ARD who is living in Berlin. He was born as a girl named Calliope (“Callie”) in 1960. Cal notes that when his memoir is published he could become the most famous “hermaphrodite” that the world has ever known and that he is writing his memoir because he is unsatisfied with the autobiography of another “hermaphrodite” of historical notoriety: Alexina Barbin.

Cal begins his memoir by taking the reader back to 1922 to tell the story of his paternal grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides. Lefty and Desdemona are brother and sister, live in Bithynios, and are orphans. Their parents have been killed in the Greco-Turkish War, which, in 1922, is still ongoing. This war—specifically, the Great Fire of Smyrna—eventually forces them to emigrate to the United States of America via boat. On board, they marry each other and begin their new lives with no one knowing their true identities as siblings.

Lefty and Desdemona make their way to Detroit to live with their cousin Lina, who has married a man named Jimmy Zizmo. Lina is the only person who knows the truth about Lefty and Desdemona. Lefty eventually ends up working with Jimmy, who is running a bootlegging operation. Lefty later opens up his own bar called the Zebra Room. Lefty and Desdemona give birth to a son (Milton), and Lina and Jimmy give birth to a daughter (Tessie). Milton and Tessie—cousins—marry in 1946. They give birth to a boy (“Chapter Eleven”) and to Callie/Cal. Cal, then, has at least two immediate incestuous relationships in his ancestry: his cousin-parents and his sibling-grandparents.

About half of the novel deals with the stories of Cal’s grandparents and parents. As such, it is intergenerational. A central and recurring