In the ten years since the journal’s inception, Religion and Gender’s articles have covered much ground. They have examined many of the ways religion is engaged to regulate bodies and maintain power for the privileged, as well as how religion is likewise negotiated—especially by marginalized religious actors—in the pursuit of justice. The journal has also made significant contributions in analyzing the power of gendered elements of religious visual culture; exploring the embodied elements of religious practice; and highlighting the way public discourse on gender (and sexuality), often thought of as “secular,” is shaped by religious thought. While essential texts, like Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen’s book Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance have made invaluable contributions in this last area, there is much still to be written (Pellegrini and Jakobsen 2003). For example, regarding recent anti-transgender (trans) rhetoric and legislation in the U.S., which has primarily been aimed at prohibiting pediatric trans healthcare and trans girls and women from participating on girl’s and women’s sports teams. In revisiting articles from Religion and Gender in preparation for writing this piece, it was disturbing to see that we have been here before. In Volume 6, Issue 2 of the journal, released in 2016, a series of articles address “gender ideology” within the Catholic church. In that issue Mary Hunt warns that the history of ‘feminism’ in the church provides an indication of what is to come for trans inclusion. Hunt says of feminism, Catholic officials first rejected it, then vilified it, and then co-opted it, “with careful caveats against feminists who are lesbians and those who support reproductive justice” (Hunt 2016, 274). Hunt writes, presciently, that “we are a short step away from [the Catholic church’s] take on ‘Christian gender’ rhetoric that will affirm the gender binaries as eternally given, reject trans everything, and reaffirm heterosexual [and cisgender] hegemony” (Hunt 2016, 274). Mary Anne Case’s investigation of “the doc-
trine of complementarity” within the Catholic church is likewise essential to understanding contemporary anti-trans rhetoric. This doctrine states that “the sexes are essentially different though not unequal” and has been used to justify benevolent sexism as well as anti-LGBTIQ positions (Case 2016, 155). Case argues that despite attempts by those within the church to present complementarity as God-given and immutable, research demonstrates it is “an invention of the twentieth century untraceable in earlier centuries” (Case 2016, 155). Unsurprisingly, Catholic-dominant countries have been especially influenced by this rhetoric of complementarity. However, in the U.S. context, the rhetorical and political power of complementarity is also linked to Protestantism. As Susan M. Shaw writes for *The Conversation*, “complementarianism became central to evangelical belief, starting in the late 1970s, in response to the feminist influence within Christianity.”1 Complementarianism was proposed as an alternative to gender egalitarianism, the latter of which focused on the sameness of men and women while the former emphasized their supposedly God-given and immutable differences. Likewise, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood was established in the late 1980s with the intention of influencing “evangelicals to adopt the principles of complementarianism in their homes, churches, schools and other religious agencies”.2 Views of complementarianism continue to inform anti-trans legislation today.

One of the major players in the present legal attacks on transgender rights is a conservative Christian non-profit called Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). ADF, as well as other groups targeting trans rights, frame their goals as the “protection” of children from abuse (in the case of legislation regarding pediatric trans health) and ensuring “fairness” for non-trans girls and women (in the case of legislation regarding sports). The “Who We Are” page of ADF’s website explains that while past religious freedom cases mostly focused on minority religious practices, “today, the government has begun legislating in areas that violate core tenets of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faiths. Consistent with all Abrahamic faiths, ADF believes that marriage is the union of one man and one woman. Our faith also instructs us that God created man and woman as complementary equals and that sex is binary and biologically determined.”3 This statement problematically lumps Judaism, Christianity, and Islam together, erasing their differences. It also elides the statuses of Judaism, Islam, and some branches of Christianity, as marginalized religions that have

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2 Ibid.
3 See https://adflegal.org/about-us/who-we-are.
had to be protected. Additionally, in claiming that all Abrahamic faiths believe that marriage is the union of one man and one woman, ADF also denies the reality that individuals and institutions within these faith traditions have diverse views regarding gender, sexuality, and marriage, and that these views include LGBTQI affirmation.

Anti-transgender movements in the U.S. today are primarily supported by conservative Christian organizations like ADF, but these organizations have also worked alongside so-called “radical feminists” on bills related to girls and women’s sports. Despite ideological differences these groups claim to work together in the name of “protecting” (non-trans) women and girls. In coming together these groups have joined forces to keep trans girls and women out of girl’s and women’s sports. Their strategy has been to frame the issue as about fairness for (non-trans) women and girls presumably because they assume a difference in “biology” that favors trans girls and women. This argument blends “secular” scientific claims and theological ones, weaponizing “biology” via the rhetoric of “gender ideology.” From a conservative Christian perspective “biology” is used to deny that gender is a social construct, instead asserting the divine creation of two sexes which are distinct and immutable. From the supposedly secular “radical feminist” perspective “biology” is used to refer to debunked hetero- and cissexist science that likewise affirms the view that there are two immutable sexes/genders. Framing trans rights as about fairness for non-trans girls and women in the face of “biological” difference relies on a legacy of racist, sexist, heterosexist, and cissexist science and ignores the history of trans athletes who have competed without incident. As Jeremy W. Peters writes in the *New York Times*, this stance also ignores that organizations like the NCAA already impose regulations, requiring trans girls and women “to be on testosterone suppression treatment for a year before they can compete on a women’s team”.

Regardless of whether the conservative framing of trans rights as a violation of fairness is genuine or cynical, the pursuit of anti-trans legislation fits into an ongoing strategy of the Christian right to attempt to establish conservative Christian norms within the U.S. legal system.

Pursing anti-trans legislation is also strategic for the right because it galvanizes political support, especially among white evangelicals who comprise a powerful voting bloc, by fueling the narrative that there is an ongoing cultural war over the preservation of “American” (i.e., white, conservative, Christian) values. A segment of the right, Christian or not, is also influenced by conspiracy thinking. Just as a new version of the anti-Jewish blood libel trope (in which

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Hollywood elites torture or kill children to harvest their blood for its anti-aging properties) has spread amongst conspiracists on the right, anti-trans conspiracy rhetoric also relies on anti-Jewish stereotypes. In this rhetoric the powerful “trans lobby,” who is supposedly targeting children in order to make money from gender affirming hormones and surgeries, is funded by “global elites.” The language of “global elites” functions as a dog whistle for Jews, but the accusations are sometimes even more explicit—naming Jews (including frequent scapegoats like George Soros) as the supposed funders of the trans movement. The appearance of Jews in this conspiracy as the assumed actors orchestrating trans rights and the undermining of “American values” is not surprising if one reads anti-trans bills as part of the legacy of gender regulation in the U.S., which is rooted in white supremacy.

As mentioned above, attacks on trans rights rely on conceptions of complementarity and “biology,” employed to make normative claims about what kinds of bodies and relationships between bodies are permissible. Some anti-trans advocates have even used the slogan, “biology isn’t bigotry.” Of course, this slogan ignores the legacy of racist (and gendered) science and eugenics that has always weaponized biology in the name of bigotry. There are abundant horrific examples, including “scientific” experiments on enslaved peoples, arguments about the “nature” of Black men as threatening to white women and therefore to the future of the white race, as well as the 20th century sterilization programs in the U.S. all of which demonstrate how “biology,” and accompanying ideas regarding gender and sexuality, have been used to target and regulate “undesirable” groups, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. So, when arguments are made in the name of “protecting” women and children, one must ask which women and children? Certainly not trans or queer women and children; not women and children who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color; not poor women and children; not disabled women and children; and not women and children who do not conform to a narrow conservative Christian worldview. While it is clear that attacks on trans rights are dangerous for trans people, it is imperative that we also name the broader threat contained within anti-trans legislation. That is, that these legislative efforts—like those waged in the name of ‘gender ideology’ before—provide only a thin cover for an enduring goal of the Christian right: to enshrine the norms (and bigotry) of white conservative Christianity within the U.S. government. I look forward to seeing how Religion and Gender will continue to provide a platform for this important conversation.
References

