

SPIRITUAL ESSAY

Sissy, Strong-Man, Saviour: The Masculinity of Jesus Christ in Men's Movement Literature

GARRISON KEILLOR BEGINS HIS newest collection of short stories, *The book of guys*, with an essay about men. Along with other commentators at the present time, he feels that men are in crisis:

It is hard to put your finger on, but guys are in trouble. Guys are gloomy . . . Years ago, manhood was an opportunity for achievement, and now it is a problem to be overcome. Plato, St Francis, Michelangelo, Mozart, Leonardo da Vinci, Vince Lombardi, Van Gogh – you don't find guys of that calibre today, and if there are any, they are not painting the Sistine Chapel or composing *Don Giovanni*. They are trying to be Mr O.K. All-Rite . . . A guy who women consider Acceptable.¹

In talking of men Keillor turns to women. Indeed, he sees women as embodying the best in human values in contemporary American society; in comparison with women, men seem to be inept, immature, somewhat failed human beings: 'Spectacular dumbness is a guy type of gift'.² Women know who they are and where they are going, whilst men are lost.

The women's movement of the 1960s and 70s gave women an opportunity to examine the fabric of their lives. The feminist politics which developed from this movement has sought to expose, challenge and change the power relations between women and men in society. In the feminist analysis, the whole social order is patriarchal: men have power over women in every area of life – social, cultural, religious, personal, sexual. Women have worked to correct this imbalance through personal and social transformation. These changes in the identity and role of women imply changes for men. The women's movement has been a spur for men's own self-examination, personally and collectively; it has inspired – or, as some would say, provoked – a men's movement: conferences, academic studies, literature, men's groups and organizations which consciously focus on issues around men and masculinity. Of course, there is nothing new in men talking about themselves amongst themselves, but it is this specifically masculine consciousness, this reflexivity, which characterizes the men's movement. For patriarchy has not only excluded women (and marginalized gay men and black men); it has blinded most men to the reality of their own experience as men:

Treating dominant males as generically and normatively 'human' has made men largely invisible to themselves. It has prevented men from

exploring self-consciously and self-critically their own distinctively masculine experience. Now, for a variety of reasons, we are motivated as never before to inquire what our masculinity really means, what it means to have a male body, and what the particular hungers, joys, pains, and satisfactions of a man's life are.³

This 'variety of reasons' suggests a spectrum of responses among men to all that feminism implies for their relations with women, one another and themselves. The Men's Rights movement in the United States represents a reaction among some against 'pro-women' social developments such as equal opportunity policies or certain legal judgements concerning child-care and alimony. Neil Lyndon's *No more sex war* picks up some of these issues from a British perspective, arguing against much of feminist theory and calling for a cessation of the 'genderal blame game', into which, he asserts, men and women have been forced by feminism.

Other men welcome feminism as the starting point for their own liberation. In his book *Being a man*, David Cohen describes the anger, bewilderment and fear he has experienced in his encounter with feminism through his wife and through the women's movement generally. In accepting much of the feminist critique of patriarchal society, Cohen gives voice to the ways in which he feels damaged, limited and encumbered by the social norms and expectations of being a man. Cohen argues that it is not just women who are oppressed under patriarchy: men suffer under the social conventions, deeply embedded in the psyche, of the masculine 'norm', of what Anthony Easthope has called 'the masculine myth'.⁴ A whole range of British writers, informed by Freudian psychoanalytical theory and the social sciences, have explored what they regard as the tyranny of ideal masculinity, seeking to expose the 'internal conflicts and fragile sexual identities which trouble and torment the minds of men'⁵ struggling to hold together a false identity: that of a fixed, essential masculine self. From this perspective there is no single and consistent 'masculinity', but only 'masculinities' which are 'neither biologically determined nor a simple product of social stereotypes and expectations'. They take shape through a 'complex and difficult process of psychic construction, ineluctably marked by tension, anxiety and contradiction'.⁶ From this perspective men will only be transformed personally and socially through social reconstruction.

Yet the approach within the men's movement which has received most public attention is influenced by Jungian ideas, and values terms such as 'myth' and 'essence' – indeed, it might be called 'essentialist', though its proponents are as critical of contemporary masculinities as writers taking the 'constructivist' approach outlined above. Robert Bly's *Iron John* is the classic text of the mythopoeic search for authentic and appropriate ways of being a man in late twentieth-century Western culture. Along with other writers, lecturers and analysts such as James Hillman, Sam Keen and Robert Johnson, Bly understands masculinity as an essential quality which is diverse, multi-faceted and present in all men. In his interpretation of the Iron John story Bly perceives an

'initiatory path' for men whereby they may attain the full dignity and maturity of the 'deep masculine'. For in Bly's experience, men in the West are grieving: they have lost touch with the masculine unconscious as men in an industrial culture which no longer conveys true manhood to its boys. Women are fully in touch with their feminine energies, but today's man is the 'soft male', the man who can relate to women, but who is alienated from his true self. He is uninitiated, unfathered. He is longing for the Wild-man of the masculine unconscious where the treasures of maleness lie buried: a 'spontaneity preserved from childhood', a 'genuine friendliness to the wildness in nature', a 'willingness to leave the busy life', to rediscover the fulness of male sexuality and engage with the emotions, needs, desires and darkness of the inner or psychological self.

Whilst Bly's vision of healed manhood brings spirituality to the fore, his suspicion is that religion can serve to keep men away from this 'nourishing dark' within. Whilst he freely draws from most of the religious traditions Bly aligns himself with none of them. He regards Christianity as problematical, and makes a distinction between the man Jesus in the Gospels and the Church which has promoted him. The Church preaches niceness and docility for men. It provides a vision of Jesus meek and mild, but gives no initiation into 'male spirit':

It is good that the divine is associated with the Virgin Mary and a blissful Jesus, but we can sense how different it would be for a young man if we lived in a culture where the divine also was associated with mad dancers, fierce fanged men and a being entirely underwater, covered with hair.⁷

For Bly, Christianity presents a wifeless, childless and effectively sexless Saviour. Jesus was initiated by a 'wild man', John the Baptist, and he was a strong man as he cleansed the temple, but his followers have banished the sense of the divine in male sexuality and repressed sexual desire as inhibiting to spiritual growth. Such dualism, Bly suggests, colludes with the anti-spiritual society in which the physical and sexual are no longer sacred, where the deep masculine and feminine values in each man and woman have no place for expression or emergence. The celebration of male sexual energy which Pan or Shiva represent in other religious systems is absent from Christianity. Bly echoes the conviction of the analyst Marie-Louise von Franz that the male psyche, and that of women too, is longing for a new Saviour figure, one whom she finds recurring in the dreams of her clients: 'a religious figure but a hairy one, in touch with God and sexuality, with spirit and earth'.⁸ The Jesus of Christian cult may be bearded and wet, but he is not the hairy man from an underwater world! Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is interpreted as predominantly anti-erotic, and as such is damaging to men and women alike.

Yet Jesus has not been dismissed from the men's movement. Sam Keen holds him as a fundamental and fruitful paradigm for men in search of a renewed masculinity. The conventional images of Jesus are in need of some adjustment however; Keen urges his readers to abandon the 'pious Sunday school pictures'

and the 'torturous' theological tradition of the Church which misrepresent Jesus to the contemporary Western man. Mindful of Schweitzer, he encourages men to find a new understanding of Jesus as they journey towards mature manhood:

The figure of Jesus . . . is the most frequently used mirror in which generations of Western men . . . have seen their own faces reflected . . . Every generation discovers a different Jesus – the magical saviour, the wonder worker, the mystic, the political rebel, the labor organizer, the capitalist, the communist, the greatest salesman who ever lived, the protofeminist, the ecologist.⁹

For Keen, Jesus the obedient, compassionate man of prayer who lays down his life offers to men who are eager to 'discover themselves' the crucial spiritual insight that selfhood can only be fully gained in self-surrender: that 'virility involves life in communion'.¹⁰

Writers who take an explicitly Christian perspective have set about representing Jesus as model man, in response to the varying agendas of the men's movement. In an exploration of masculine spirituality and the Bible, Patrick Arnold takes up Bly's theme of 'contemporary male distress' and attempts to recover the dignity and value of the masculine in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which, he asserts, has been devalued in the 'misandry' of the present time. In Arnold's scheme, the Jesus of the Gospels is reappropriated as the ideal, the true, the essential male human being, for in Jesus we may 'glimpse the ultimate archetype of what a man can be, the deepest expression what living a human life means'.¹¹

Whilst Arnold is careful to stress that in Jesus all that is truly *human* is revealed most perfectly, yet his emphasis on the masculinity of Jesus strays into dangerous ground. For Arnold's enthusiasm in pursuing an archetypal celebration of Jesus as Wildman, Patriarch, Trickster, Warrior, King and so on, in true mythopoeic style, presents Jesus in terms which many women and men would find repugnant. Arnold's aim is not to exclude women or to bolster sexism, but to correct the 'Bearded Lady' and 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' images which he believes are a stumbling block for many men. Yet the interpretation of Jesus as Warrior and Wild Man he pursues – 'a man of electric power and masculine energy, a figure of great personal charm whom any man would be excited to follow'¹² – is an image easily associated with male violence and the abuse of power.¹³ Furthermore, this style of emphasis on the masculinity of Jesus the Christ begins to switch the currency of the incarnation from God becoming human in Christ toward God becoming specifically male exclusively for men: 'The definitive epiphany of the Christ in a historical male is, if anything, an act of divine compassion and outreach to help the most vulnerable human beings – men – on their way to God'.¹⁴

Whether one accepts the feminist analysis of patriarchal power-structures or not, the view that men are 'the most vulnerable human beings' is barely

credible. Clearly men now enjoy immense power in relation to women in every sphere of life, as they did in the time of Jesus. Even if this power puts men, so to speak, further away from God than women and makes men the 'spiritually poor', those who are especially in need of salvation because of the burden of their wealth and status – and this I would deny – even if this were so, it is the whole creation which is redeemed by God in Christ, not one part of it. To focus on the gender of Christ, to emphasize the masculinity of Jesus, is to endanger the universality of salvation in Christ, which is wholeness for women and men in community.

Similarly, to present Jesus as a 'man's man', to present him as the 'supreme Action Man' of evangelistic strategy, as Derek Cook has done,¹⁵ runs the risk of making Jesus Christ the Saviour exclusively of males – a hero with whom men feel comfortable but from whom women feel alienated. In tailoring Christ to attract men to the Church it is all too easy to deify masculine stereotypes, projecting on to him the very aspects of masculinity which may be secretly oppressing men, so that Christ comes to compound men's fear of failure rather than to liberate them from it. Those seeking to image Christ in the light of the men's movement or in search of a 'masculine spirituality' or in outreach to men need to be attentive to the dangers of heroism.

Yet to ignore the maleness of Jesus would be to deny an aspect of his humanity, and in so doing to remain blind to the fulness of God's healing work in Christ. For what the men's movement is voicing, however ineptly at times, is that men are hurting – 'guys are in trouble, guys are gloomy'. Roy McCloughry sees ministry to men as a pastoral and evangelistic imperative, a ministry which is hampered in that the Church is failing to offer men a new pattern of being and relating:

If the church is to reach men, as it can and must, then it must confront the issue of masculinity. For it is this that is blighting men in our culture . . . the church is giving the impression that it is underwriting masculinity (as presently constituted), whereas what men need to see in the church is the movement from power to love.¹⁶

In McCloughry's assessment Jesus is the 'ultimate hero' because he embodies this 'movement from power to love', the kenosis of God in Christ which the Church must reflect in her liturgies, ministry and decision-making processes as the disciples of Christ seek to follow him more faithfully. It is in the God-incarnate hero that men will find the pattern and power for the renewal of their lives. Though the true nature of Jesus' heroism is diminished by the sexism of the Church, McCloughry asserts that what we have received of his dealings with women and his humility show that Jesus rejected the prevailing masculinities of his day, and thus he is a model for men now. Indeed, this Jesus is so free of sexist distortion that he is 'of the male sex but not the masculine gender' – he reveals perfect humanity, and so in Jesus men may find 'the hope that being a man is sufficient basis for displaying everything that is associated with human being'.¹⁷

If the masculinity of Jesus Christ is to be a model for men then that model is to be found in the love of God for women and men made uniquely present in him. It is in this sense that James Nelson finds Jesus an inspiration and guide as he grows and develops as a man, for Jesus is one who inspires change in men. This is a hero rather different from the masculine role-model who demands emulation.

Am I afraid of losing my power and control? If so, there is that paradoxical figure who counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself. He is the one who washed the disciples' feet.

Am I afraid of losing my strong, masculine, heterosexual image? Am I afraid of vulnerability and intimacy? If so, I need to look at the man who wept, who embraced the beloved disciple, who called out to others in his time of need.¹⁸

For McCloughry, Jesus is the meeting place of masculine and feminine: he embodies as a man restored humanity, he is a pointer to the healed community of men and women in the Church. Nelson's 'genital theology' has developed the masculinity of Jesus rather more, focusing on Jesus as 'a compelling picture of male sexual wholeness'.¹⁹ Yet as the paradigm for transforming male identity, Nelson emphasizes in Jesus the abandonment of male domination, an abdication of power rather than a reassertion of it. This Jesus represents for men the freedom from patriarchal patterns of control which harm not only women but also men.

It is the incarnation of God in Christ which reveals the divine nature and purpose: love and healing for all. Any emphasis on the masculinity of Jesus ought not to compromise this. Yet the maleness of Jesus Christ is an expression of the divine love, for as Angela West has shown, in the person of Jesus – a man betrayed, rejected, beaten, mocked and crucified – male power was laid aside: 'God denies the godhead as patriarchal power, and reveals Godself in humanity, in the helpless infant, in the helpless crucified being'.²⁰ Men and women do not worship male power in the crucified Jesus but a God who opens up a broader, richer reality than male supremacy offers.

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NOTES

¹ G. Keillor, *The book of guys* (Faber 1993), pp 10, 11.

² *Ibid.*, p 13.

³ J. Nelson, *The intimate connection* (SPCK 1992), p 4.

⁴ See his *What a man's gotta do* (Palladin 1986).

⁵ L. Seagal, *Slow motion* (Virago 1990), Preface.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 72.

- ⁷ R. Bly, *Iron John* (Element 1991), p 26.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p 249.
- ⁹ S. Keen, *Fire in the belly* (Bantam 1991), p 26.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 103.
- ¹¹ P. Arnold SJ, *Wildmen, warriors and kings* (Crossroad 1992), p 181.
- ¹² *Ibid.* p. 185.
- ¹³ See J. Caputi and G. MacKenzie, 'Pumping Iron John' in L. Hagan (ed), *Women respond to the men's movement* (Pandora 1992).
- ¹⁴ Arnold, p 184.
- ¹⁵ D. Cook, *Men! what's missing in today's Church?* (Marshall-Pickering 1992), p. 143.
- ¹⁶ R. McCloughry, *Men and masculinity* (Hodder & Stoughton 1992), p 156.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 141.
- ¹⁸ J. Nelson, 'On men's liberation' in *Between two gardens* (Pilgrim 1983), p 54.
- ¹⁹ *The intimate connection*, p. 108.
- ²⁰ A. West, 'A Faith for feminists' in J. Garcia and S. Maitland (eds), *Walking on the water* (Virago 1983), p. 89.