IAPT. CS
INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
CONFERENCE SERIES

Reforming pastoral care: masculinity, male pathologies and gender-specific pastoral care

Armin Kummer

Despite a heightened awareness of gender in practical theology, little attention has been paid to men-specific perspectives so far. This article contrasts the claims of the so-called mythopoetic movement about masculinity and male pathologies with findings from sociology and recent publications in practical theology. This allows me to discuss a number of observations on contemporary masculinities, men's pathologies and spiritual needs, and how the church can integrate such insights into its practical ministry. I will argue that misguided notions of masculinity are at the root of many male pathologies. Greater engagement with spirituality is key to male flourishing, and church can be a place for men to explore and develop authentic forms of spirituality. This article makes the case for reforming church practices and pastoral care so that greater pastoral attention to gender allows men to embark on a therapeutic spiritual path that ultimately transcends gender.

Introduction

Armin Kummer holds social-sciences degrees from Cambridge and Harvard and theology degrees from KU Leuven. There, he is currently conducting research into gender-specific spirituality and the pastoral care of men at the Research Unit of Pastoral and Empirical Theology.

Over the past three decades, gender-specific perspectives have been introduced into many academic disciplines, including practical theology. Yet despite this heightened awareness of gender, much less attention has been paid so far to men-specific perspectives. Denying men's perspectives and experiences their specificity amounts to identifying them with "the human being" or common sense. In post-patriarchal discourse, such generalization can no longer be upheld. Not only would it maintain an unjustifiable notion of a discursive dominance of men over women, it would also erroneously homogenize the plurality of men's perspectives.

A certain *genre* of men's literature has played a very influential role in the definition of men-specific perspectives in Western Europe and the U.S. since the 1980s. Robert Bly, Stephen Biddulph, Richard Rohr, and Anselm Grün are popular writers, grounding their talk about masculinity, manhood, and men's spirituality in myth, poetry and Jungian psychoanalysis, which is why this genre is often referred to as the *mythopoetic movement*. It is important to critically confront these texts, as they keep exercising significant influence in church-based activities with men across Christian denominations. I will submit these texts to a close and critical reading in order to identify what these authors write regarding the meaning of manhood, the apparent problems of men today, and their proposed solutions to these problems.

I will complement and contrast the claims of the mythopoetic authors with findings from sociology (the work of Connell) and recent publications in practical theology (notably the pioneering work of Kuratle and Morgenthaler). This allows me to discuss a number of observations on contemporary masculinities, men's pathologies and spiritual needs, and how the church can constructively integrate such insights into its practical ministry. I will

Auli Vähäkangas, Sivert Angel and Kirstine Helboe Johansen, eds. 2019. Reforming Practical Theology: The Politics of Body and Space. IAPT.CS 1: 29–36
DOI: 10.25785/iapt.cs.v1i0.50
ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-1398-6801

argue that misguided notions of masculinity are at the root of many male pathologies.[1] The mythopoetic paradigm, therefore, cannot offer valid solutions. Instead, greater engagement with spirituality is key to male flourishing, and the Church can be a place for men to explore and develop authentic forms of spirituality. On the basis of these observations, this article makes a case for reforms in church practices and pastoral care so that greater pastoral attention to gender allows men to embark on a therapeutic spiritual path that ultimately transcends gender.

The mythopoetic approach: archetypes of masculinity

Triggered by feminist discourse and policy change, the 1990s saw the emergence of a literary genre addressing a male identity crisis. These texts often take as a point of departure Carl Gustav Jung's speculative theory of universal archetypes (Jung 1968), Joseph Campbell's writings about mythology (Campbell 1964) and Mircea Eliade's history-of-religion work on initiation (Eliade 1998). The most popular and influential text of this genre remains Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990). Due to this genre's frequent recourse to mythology, fairy tales and poetry, this genre came to be known as *mythopoetic*.

Bly's text also inspired numerous publications from authors outside the mythopoetic movement. This includes Australian family psychologist Steve Biddulph, US Franciscan writer Richard Rohr, and the German Benedictine writer Anselm Grün. The choice of these authors is not random. The titles of Biddulph, Bly, and Rohr, are recommended reading of many church-based initiatives addressing men's spirituality. Anselm Grün is Germany's most successful contemporary writer on spiritual matters and, therefore, certainly representative of popular spirituality. All these authors can be shown to be genealogically related to Bly and sometimes to each other.

In a close, critical reading of these texts, I submitted each text to the same set of questions. I asked what kind of masculinity the texts are constructing, what they diagnose as contemporary men's problems or pathologies and their root causes, and what they propose as solutions or therapies.

The masculinities offered in all these works share conventional features, including physical strength and energy, fierceness and wildness. Each author pays homage to the "warrior", even if they differ about which concrete attributes or practices this involves. Arguably, Grün goes the farthest in his celebration of aggressiveness (Grün 2003, 7), which Rohr expresses more moderately as agency (Rohr 2012, 342). While all authors pay tribute to the Jungian idea that it is important for men to integrate the opposite "anima", attributes of toughness and combativeness are presented as more originally male than an interest in cooking or the arts.

The authors show more diversity in their analysis of what causes the malaise for contemporary men. Bly and Grün describe men's predicament as an identity crisis that is directly related to the rise of feminism (Grün 2003, 7). Biddulph locates men's problems—loneliness, compulsive competition, and lifelong emotional timidity—within a destructive self-image they have brought upon themselves (Biddulph 1998, 81). Rohr sees men's problems as rooted in false external motivators—money, sex and power—that are ingrained in the dominant ideologies of contemporary U.S. society, rather than in a loss of relative power vis-a-vis women (Rohr 2005, 87 ff.). For Bly and Grün the nature of the problem is a matter of gender conflict, while for Biddulph and Rohr it is a matter of broader social ills. All agree that contemporary men suffer from absent fathers and thus miss an opportunity to get "initiated" into their own manhood. Contemporary men, according to Rohr, have lost a sense of purpose in their lives and thus ultimately suffer from a spiritual deficiency.

The prescribed solutions or therapies differ: Bly offers an eight-step initiation program, but remains ambivalent as to whether his readers actually need to leave their armchairs. Getting in touch with archetypical images by reading poetry, myth and folklore appears to cover most of the interior spiritual journey he is prescribing. In a similar vein, Grün's therapy consists in the encounter with biblical figures that

1 Although at the aggregate level, there are empirically measurable indicators like e. g. suicide rates, cardiovascular diseases and life expectancy, I am not using the term "pathologies" in the clinical sense analogous to the WHO's International Classifications of Diseases. Instead, I am using the term broadly for all kinds of experiences, problems and behaviours that cause individuals to seek help in pastoral care and psychotherapy. As the different "schools" discussed in this article show, these male pathologies can be theorized as social, psychological, or spiritual phenomena. What ultimately matters in pastoral care, I would argue, is the care seeker's subjective perception of a need for change.

move the reader towards his own spiritual centre. *Selbstwerdung* (Jung's individuation) occurs within the self, and the reader's journey is an interior one. On the other extreme, we have Biddulph. His "action plan" calls for initiative and interaction: Reconciliation with the father, good and active parenting, mutually gratifying sex, healthy friendships and meaningful work all require proactive, transformative behaviours that bring the individual in touch with others (Biddulph op.cit., 13 ff.). For Rohr, initiation is a metaphor for spiritual growth, but it contains a strong relational element. His vision of the spiritual life is expressed and nurtured in community life and social activism (Rohr and Martos 2005, 91).

One of the problematic aspects identified in Bly's text is his narrative celebration of violence and killing as a source of male identity. The reactionary essentialism underlying Bly's notions of gender and his broader ideological message did not by accident chime with a belligerent right-wing conservatism in the U.S., that culminated in the two invasions of Iraq (Doubiago 1992, 82). Bly's anti-modernism and romanticism were also shown to resonate with authoritarianism and orientalism (Parker 1995). Jack Zipes quite correctly criticizes Bly's use of Jung and Campbell, whose theories about myths, archetypes, and the collective unconscious fail to take account of the socio-historical specificities of real men and encourage nostalgic longings for a fabricated past (Zipes 1992). This criticism must of course be extended to all the other writers to the extent to which they follow Bly's archetypical speculations.

The mythopoetic authors base their views on masculinity on a concoction of myths, fairy tales, poetry and the odd ethnographic anecdote. None of these writers provide detailed reflections on how they arrive at knowledge about their subject. In the following section, I will turn to more scholarly and empirical research.

The sociological approach: masculinities as configurations of practice

The Australian sociologist Raywen Connell must be credited with having framed the scholarly discourse about men and masculinities over the past three decades. Connell defines masculinities as "configurations of practice" within the social conflict inherent in the patriarchal gender order (Connell 2005, 44). I will give a concise overview of Connell's theory, highlight the major achievements of her work and offer my critical assessment of some aspects of her[2] work. I will show the tension in Connell's work between modern and postmodern sensibilities and finally highlight some methodological weaknesses in her theorizing.

In her attempt to constitute a science of masculinity, Connell addresses the shortcomings of previous projects to do so. The psychoanalytical project failed because it neglected the sociological dimension. The sociological project's focus on "sex roles" throughout most of the 20th century accepted gender simply as a functional differentiation of society but was oblivious to inherent issues of power and social dynamics. The third line of scholarship, namely attempts in history and ethnography to research masculinity diachronically or across cultures, were doomed due to the lack of a stable subject. These failures have left sociology without a unifying paradigm. For Connell, the real object of study must be gender relations, within which different masculinities can be dissected. Thus, Connell defines masculinity as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (ibid., 71).

Gender, for Connell, "is a way in which social practice is ordered … Gender exists precisely to the extent that biology does not determine the social" (ibid, 71–72). Connell sees gender ordering practice in three kinds of social relations – political or "power relations," economic or "production relations," and affective relations (ibid., 74). At the individual level, such configurations of practice are called personality, character or identity, all of which are unstable or fluid because multiple discourses, including class and race, intersect. Depending on such intersections, individual masculinities can be hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, or marginalized. "Hegemonic masculinity", the term most famously associated with Connell, "can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (ibid., 77). In other words, hege-

2 On her website (http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/about-raewyn_20.html,), Connell describes herself as a transsexual woman. In this article, I am therefore using feminine pronouns throughout, even if the research and publications may date from a time before this transition.

monic masculinity is malleable over time, but always in the service of defending patriarchy.

For Connell, gender is both a product and a producer of history, and thus of social agency. In her Marx-inspired view of history, any social order marked by significant inequalities inexorably generates social conflict. The contemporary gender order therefore shows crisis tendencies. The crisis currently manifests itself at the level of power relations in the historic collapse of the legitimacy of patriarchal power and a global movement for the emancipation of women. At the level of production relations, the changes are manifest in the postwar growth in married women's employment in rich countries, and the even vaster incorporation of women's labor into the money economy in poor countries. At the level of affective relations, Connell refers to "the stabilization of lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual order" (ibid., 81–85).

It has been noted that Connell's thinking is marked by a tension between modern and postmodern sensibilities, leading to "a certain inconsistency or even incoherence" (Beasley 2012, 747). Two of Connell's important presuppositions, one of them modern, the other thoroughly postmodern, invite critical scrutiny.

Connell locates her analysis of masculinities within a model of social conflict. This model looks very much like a projection of Marxist class conflict onto the gender order, where men dominate women. While Connell may weaken the (biological) binary by allowing some men (notably gay men) to fight alongside feminists against the trans-historical forces of patriarchy, this struggle remains a fairly dualist affair. Connell's masculinities are always projects within historically located gender orders that create social conflict. Such broad-brush picture of the human condition, with its borrowings from Marx, might be redolent of Lyotard's *grands récits*, the totalizing meta-narratives typical of the ideological Enlightenment-projects of European modernity (Lyotard 1984). Connell shows a similar debt to another author of grand modern narratives, Freud, in her frequent recourse to Oedipus. Given Connell's personal and scholarly commitments to political advocacy, I am afraid the lure of modernism may have been irresistible. Historically, it can be argued that the meta-narratives of modernism have proven to be far more effective to mobilize political mass movements than post-modern micro-narratives and epistemological humility. Connell's contribution to highlight the power dimension in the construction and performance of masculinities must be acknowledged. But she does so within a dualist, reductionist, and finally deterministic master narrative of gender struggle. Her disappointment with homosexual men and her lived practice and argued advocacy of the sex-change option reveal just how little room such social determinism leaves for plural, fluid and performative gender identities (see Butler 1990).

Connell shows a more post-modern sensibility when she seeks to replace sex role theory with her notion of masculinities as configurations of practice, thus emphasizing individual experience, micro-narratives, and sensitivity to differences (see Bourdieu 1977 and Lyotard 1984). Yet the focus on practices also makes the subject matter more elusive. In lightly structured, tape-recorded interviews, she solicited life histories from four groups of Australian men. In her re-telling of these life histories, Connell fails to acknowledge and inure herself against the dangers of reflexivity (see Merton 1948, Hoel 2013, Dreyer 2016). Thereby, she appears to maintain a semblance of scientific neutrality, a modern notion thoroughly discredited among postmodern and feminist scholars long ago (e. g. Harding 1986, Bordo 1987; more recently Bass et. al. 2016 and Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016).

Life histories do not capture practice; at best they capture narratives about practice. If masculinities *as practices* are difficult to capture, I would argue that one should show some willingness to redefine the subject so that it becomes more manageable for the researcher and yields better results. Contrary to Connell, I believe that there is justification for examining masculinity codes at the level of ideological discourse. For Connell, this may be too close to sex role theory. The problem with role theory for Connell is "the blurring of behavior and norm, the homogenizing effect of the role concept, and its difficulties in accounting for power." (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, 831). I believe that all three concerns can be addressed.

I would start with her second point. Arguably Connell's greatest achievement was to establish the plural in "masculinities." Once the plurality of roles or norms has been established, the danger of homogenization is much reduced. There is not a single norm of masculinity, but competing ones.

On the first point, Connell explains that the "distinction between behavior and expectation is basic to the role metaphor. But the male sex role literature

fails to document them separately, and takes one as evidence of the other" (Connell op. cit., 26). A useful approach for theorizing the relationship between norm and behavior is Foucault's concept of the subject's moral self-constitution as a deliberate "subjecting" of oneself to a specific moral code (Foucault 1990, 25–32). Foucault captures all three elements relevant to Connell's observation – socially operant norms (codes), the possibility of choice (plurality), and a moral subject, positioning itself through practice in relation to these codes. This triangular construct, presupposing practice and plurality, provides an adequate model that allows the researcher to focus on the codes without losing sight of practices.

Connell's third point urges us not to be oblivious of the power dimension. Indeed, any examination of ideological codes of masculinity would be futile without due attention to power issues. Connell recognized in 2005 that her original formulations relied on "a too-simple model of the social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinities." (Connell and Messerschmidt, op. cit., 831). I would indeed argue in favor of a more multidimensional understanding of power dynamics. There may be many different powers and different socioeconomic interests behind masculinity codes other than the self-interested defenders of patriarchy. In recent history, ideological masculinities motivated not only the submission of women, but also—to take a case of truly embodied practice—the pointless self-sacrifice of millions of young men in military adventures. In Western Europe, such militarized masculinity is currently no longer dominant, but masculinity codes are ceaselessly produced and reproduced in public discourse and the media. In today's pacified, affluent societies, gender codes serve to influence productive and consumptive choices. Consumptive choices are choices about what to spend money on. The need for money feeds back into productive choices: what kind of work and how much of it am I willing to perform to fund my consumptive choices? Ideological gender codes are constructed and performed in movies and talk shows, in sports events and pop concerts, in children's books and videogames. The facts that the resulting masculinities are heterogeneous rather than uniform, and that the interests behind them are pluriform rather than monolithic, make these codes no less *power*-ful.

The pastoral approach: masculinity as a man's life project

In *Männer und Kirche*, Reiner Knieling describes and laments the wide gap between men and church, and seeks practical ways how the church could bridge them (Knieling 2010). Knieling is less concerned with what men should do than how the church should change. He offers a comprehensive reform package to make the church more relevant to men. As part of the church's reorientation towards men, Knieling urges the church to rethink and reform its practice of pastoral care.

David Kuratle and Christoph Morgenthaler's pioneer textbook is an ambitious attempt to do exactly that (Kuratle and Morgenthaler 2016). They confirm that men are neglected in pastoral care, and offer their model of gender-sensitive *Männerseelsorge*. They explain compellingly why men should take an active and critical interest in masculinities: Socially constructed codes of masculinity can have a double impact: In the first place, they are at the root of many psychological and social pathologies. In the second place, they prevent men from seeking a cure. Therefore, there is huge liberating and therapeutic potential in "undoing gender", in deconstructing normative gender stereotypes. This primarily therapeutic project shares political objectives with the feminist project—as far as the latter is committed to liberation, justice and human flourishing, and not just to turning the tables and grabbing power. Both aim at overcoming gender stereotypes and dismantling patriarchy. In church practice, *Männerseelsorge* will be a mixture of "doing gender" in order to reach men, and "undoing gender" in order to heal men from disordered affections and affective disorders.

The authors emphasize that masculine identity is not only shaped in early development, but over the life cycle, especially at critical transitions. Thereby, Kuratle and Morgenthaler achieve a magisterial synthesis of the state-of-the art of theorizing gender. The most important aspect of their definition is its openness to change and its disavowal of determinism and essentialisms. Their definition of masculinity leaves room for molecular and biological factors, for sociology, psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. While recognizing the important role of society and culture, gender is seen as contingent, performative, and plural, and emphasis is put on in-

dividual agency. Masculinity is a project of self-development, and *Männerseelsorge* means to accompany and strengthen men as they pursue this project.

Kuratle and Morgenthaler identify contemporary men's central pathology as "the dilemma of male socialisation" – "having to be a man, and yet not really being able to, since a man's concrete life always shamefully falls behind the demands of masculinity" (op. cit., 30). Thus, the deconstruction of ideological masculinity codes, including the ones embraced by the mythopoetic movement, becomes the focal point of gender-sensitive pastoral care, although these very same codes constitute major impediments for men's entry into therapy and for the therapeutic process itself.

Kuratle and Morgenthaler have intelligently built on insights from the social-sciences debate inaugurated by Connell. Their definition of masculinity as a lifelong project retains much of Connell's concerns, especially a disavowal of any essentialism, but makes it more operative by replacing Connell's social determinism of class conflict with individual voluntarism. Biology, historical situatedness, social location, material endowment and quotidian life experience all play important roles, but ultimately, masculinity is the open, performative, and transformative ethical self-project of the individual person. The fluidity and performativity of Kuratle and Morgenthaler's masculinities rest on a sound theological basis. The Christian notion of repentance as a right to personal transformation informs both their anthropology when talking about men, and their pastoral approach when talking to men.

Discussion: Men, gender, and pastoral care

A certain *genre* of men's literature has played a foundational role since the 1980s. Robert Bly, Stephen Biddulph, Richard Rohr, and Anselm Grün ground their talk about masculinity, manhood and men's spirituality in myth, poetry and Jungian psychoanalysis. Their texts keep exercising significant influence in church-based activities with men across Christian denominations. Through a close and critical reading I interrogated these texts about the meaning of manhood, the apparent problems of men today, and the proposed solutions. I have both complemented and contrasted the findings of these non-academic writers with scholarly research from sociology and practical theology. This helped me to refine my understanding of contemporary masculinity codes, men's spiritual needs, and how the church can constructively integrate such insights into its practical ministry.

The writers I have reviewed agree that contemporary men have a problem, gender-specific pathologies that require some form of therapy. Biddulph uses sociological statistics to highlight that there is "something badly wrong with large numbers of men." (Biddulph op.cit., 2) Statistics of life expectancy, of violence (with men both as perpetrators and victims), incarceration rates, and suicide rates provide an alarming picture that there are serious pathologies attached to contemporary manhood. Bly, Grün, and Connell locate the cause of male pathologies in recent changes to the gender order: men suffer an identity crisis because their traditional dominance has eroded in the course of the later part of the 20th century. Biddulph, Rohr, Kuratle and Morgenthaler, however, have convincingly shown the insufficiency of this interpretation. Men's problems cannot be reduced to an identity crisis induced by feminism. Biddulph describes the pathologies in psychological terms: "loneliness, compulsive competition, and lifelong emotional timidity" (ibid., 4). Rohr describes them in spiritual terms: emptiness, disconnection and alienation. I consider Biddulph's psychological and Rohr's spiritual terms as complementary and even mutually corroborating.

It is clear that Bly's mythopoetic paradigm does not provide a valid therapeutic solution for the pathologies of contemporary men. In its angry, backward-looking defensiveness and dualist essentialism, it appears to aggravate rather than solve the problems of contemporary men. Defending male privileges, legitimized by myths and fairytales, contributes little to the liberation of men or to human flourishing. Men won't solve their social, psychological and ultimately spiritual problems by trying to deny or reverse the collapse of an unjust gender order.

Biddulph, Rohr, and Kuratle and Morgenthaler agree that men have brought their problems upon themselves. Most male pathologies are rooted in the "dilemma of male socialisation: Having to be a man, and yet not really being able to, since a man's concrete life always shamefully falls behind the demands of masculinity." (Kuratle and Morgenthaler, op.cit., 30). If such misguided demands inherent in the operant normative codes of masculinity are at the root of the problem, "undoing gender" becomes a key element of the pastoral agenda for men. Rather than getting in touch with masculine archetypes as

suggested by Bly and Grün, gender stereotypes need to be deconstructed.

All authors, with the possible exception of Bly and Connell, would agree that spirituality is part of the solution. Biddulph intuits that it is important, but he has difficulty explaining what it is. For Grün, it is about Jungian *Selbstwerdung*. For Rohr, spirituality is about finding meaning and purpose beyond sex, money and power. What role, then, does gender play in spirituality? Kuratle and Morgenthaler emphasize the importance of "doing gender" as a gate to "undoing gender" in pastoral care. Gendered discourse, they show in their case studies, is often needed to join men where they are. Similarly, Rohr speaks of gendered "entrance points" and "fascination points" (Rohr 2012, 339). Gender-specific spirituality, I would conclude, is never an end in itself. Gender-specific spirituality is merely a viable form of discourse to invite, introduce, and, if you will, *initiate* men into a spirituality that ultimately transcends gender.

For Rohr, the venue of such program should be "healthy communities." (Rohr and Martos, op.cit., 91). He is skeptical whether "organized religion" is good at doing gender (Rohr 2012, 342). Knieling would agree that there is plenty of room for improvement. Still, the church has traditionally been accepted as a purveyor of spirituality and can be expected to remain so for many people, even if any single institutional church may no longer enjoy a discursive monopoly over spirituality.

Kuratle and Morgenthaler demonstrate in detail how gender-sensitive pastoral care can have a liberating and transformative impact on men's concrete lives. Knieling's analysis of the other aspects of contemporary church practice reveals a current lack of gender-sensitivity. The church could do a lot more to create men-specific opportunities for joining. His reform proposals could help to make the church a place where men can explore and develop authentic forms of spirituality. Biddulph's commonsensical list of men's issues (Biddulph op.cit., 15–17) could also serve as a guide towards the topics and life situations where the church might want to join men in their daily lives.

Conclusion: Reforming pastoral care

The discussion above shows that a logical link can be established between men, masculinities, spirituality, pastoral care, and church: Contemporary men suffer from pathologies that are often rooted in what they perceive as the demands of masculinity. A liberating spiritual therapy therefore entails the deconstruction or "undoing" of such gender codes. Yet in order to engage men effectively in such therapy, it often requires gendered access points. Pastoral care and church practice more broadly need to become more gender-sensitive and gender-specific in order to offer such access points for men.

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