



Review of Martin Fischer, *Mannermächt und Männerleid. Kritische theologische Männerforschung im Kontext genderperspektivierter Theologie als Beitrag zu einer Gleichstellung der Geschlechter* [*Men's Power and Men's Pain: A Critical Theological Investigation of Men in the Context of a Gender Perspective Theology as a Contribution to Equality of the Sexes*] (Gottingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2008), 314 pp.

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In recent decades, theological women's studies have become an established discipline in theology. However, a theology that explicitly departs from a men's perspective in order to discuss issues of gender is less developed. Systematic theologian Martin Fischer has provided a significant contribution to open up this field of studies. With the defense of this dissertation, Fischer obtained his PhD degree from the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Vienna. The book offers a critical analysis and evaluation of traditional Christian teaching concerning men. According to Fischer, this teaching has ambiguous consequences: on one hand it gives rise to male privileges, and on the other to male victimization. In his opinion, these are two sides of the same problematic coin of an ontological gender essentialism that is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and gives rise to a dualism between men and women.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to theological men's studies and to the quest of the thesis. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical positioning in the field of gender, queer and men's studies. Chapter 3 examines the issue of men's power from a systematic theological perspective, while Chapter 4 deals with the issue of men's pain, or what Fischer calls the "unprivileged" in the life of men.

According to Fischer, theological men's studies engage, just like feminist theology, in a critical examination of patriarchy. The latter is understood as the hierarchical ordering of gender relations in which power is assigned primarily to men. However, differing from feminist theology, it is a self-critical examination because it departs from the perspective of men. As a theological discipline it goes beyond religious-historical or religious-sociological studies of men, because systematic-theological questions are raised about the way patriarchy is rooted in the Christian perceptions of human beings and, ultimately, God. These questions are central in Fischer's study, with the well-known twentieth century theologian Karl Barth as his primary conversation partner.

Exploring the theological roots of patriarchy, Fischer firstly discusses the biblical creation story of Genesis 2-3 and its feminist critique. Through its

*wirkungsgeschichte* (history of impact), this text has been foundational to a hierarchical understanding of gender relations as part of God's order in creation: that man was created before woman has been (and still is) used to grant authority and superiority to men. Secondly, Fischer discusses the theological anthropology of Karl Barth, deconstructing how patriarchy is rooted in Barth's perception of Jesus Christ and the Triune God. For Barth, anthropology is part of Christology (that is, the theological understanding of Christ). Hence, he understands the relationship between man and woman as analogous to the hierarchical relationship between Christ and the church. Further, according to Fischer, the hierarchy of man over woman is rooted in—or at least legitimated silently by—Barth's perception of the Trinity as the hierarchical immanent relationship between Father, Son and the Holy Spirit within God. Here, Fischer's argument becomes somewhat delicate, because he admits that Barth himself does not mention the relationship of man and woman to be analogous to the relationships in the Triune God. However, according to Fischer this is the logical conclusion from Barth's analogy of relationships between humanity and God. In order to equalize gender relations, Fischer therefore calls for a non-hierarchical understanding of the Trinity: When God the Father is no longer associated with power and authority but with love, this will challenge both the patriarchal idea of the *pater familias* and the current phenomenon of the deadbeat dad who does not take responsibility for his children.

Having explored the theological foundation of men's power, Fischer turns to the other side of the same theological framework: the victimization of men. He points out that a patriarchal system not only brings privileges to men, but that there is also an unprivileged dimension, which cannot be ignored in critical men's studies. Fischer argues that the classic idea of men's heroic sacrifice has been incorporated yet redefined in early Christianity. Therefore he points to the New Testament epistle of Ephesians where a husband is not only mentioned to be the head over his wife, but also is called to love his wife "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (5.28). Here Fischer observes an indication of male victimization, where men because of being male are expected to sacrifice themselves. Significantly, again the argument is rooted in Christology, as the self-sacrifice of Christ is presented as exemplary for men. Fischer outlines that the idea of male victimization, when applied in a narrow sense, leads to a kind of love patriarchy in which a man is expected to take responsibility for his wife and family in an unselfish way. But when understood in a broader sense, self-sacrifice becomes a general imperative for men. Fischer mentions military service as a concrete manifestation of this, pointing out how the sacrifice of Christ has been used to motivate soldiers to give their lives for the nation.

In order to go beyond male victimization as well as men's power, Fischer argues that theologically the maleness of Christ is insignificant. Hence, the sacrifice of Christ is not exemplary for men only, and the relationship between Christ and the church cannot be an analogy for the relationship between men and women. The insignificance of the maleness of Christ is explained from a Trinitarian perspective: according to Fischer the Triune God transcends the human categories of gender, and therefore also the gender of Christ as the Son does not matter. With this argument, Fischer aims to deconstruct the theological framework in which patriarchy is rooted, and to create theological space for an understanding of gender relations in terms of

partnership. In his vision, when the ontological foundation for an essentialist and dualist understanding of gender is left behind, men and women can develop themselves as individuals with their respective talents and no longer have to live up to gendered expectations.

Although sympathizing with the project in which Fischer engages, I wonder whether his argument is convincing. Indeed he shows that patriarchy is deeply rooted in Christian theology, especially in the interconnection of anthropology with Christology. However, it is interesting to note that Fischer himself maintains a very patriarchal theological construct, being the perception of God as the *Father* and Jesus Christ as the *Son*. He does not criticize the image of God as a father, but only calls for a non-hierarchical understanding. Feminist theologians time and again denounce the androcentric nature of Christian God talk, and they argue that this in one way or another supports the position and identity of men. Fischer says that the Triune God does not fit in human gender categories, but he continues to talk about God in male language and images. Likewise, he says that the maleness of the risen Christ is insignificant: but why then is Christ mentioned as the Son? A more critical deconstruction of gendered Christian perceptions of God and Christ is needed in order to break down the theological framework of patriarchy. For such a project, a more queer conceptualization of gender would be helpful. This would offer further critical tools for a deconstruction of sex and gender than the concepts of Fischer, which balance between an essentialist and constructionist understanding.

Politically, it can be questioned whether the redefinition of doctrines about God or Christ will be an adequate strategy to transform patriarchal Christian masculinities. I can imagine that such a systematic theological enterprise might be helpful to this project. Yet one would expect Fischer to elaborate how doctrinal reformulation is to bring about change in the social construction of masculinities and is to impact upon the way men engage in gender relations.

In spite of the critical comments, Fischer's study is highly significant. In the Anglo-American world, and even more in the German world, theological men's studies is in its infancy. Indeed, there is an emerging field of men's studies in religion, but in this interdisciplinary field there is an absence of theological contributions. In view of this, the present book is recommendable to those interested in the study of gender and masculinity from the perspective of theology.

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