



Both Remedy and Poison: Religious Men and the Future of Peace

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In one of Plato's dialogues between Phaedrus and Socrates, we are faced with the paradox of the "pharmakon." The pharmakon is alternatively or simultaneously beneficent and maleficent; it is both remedy and poison; at once fascinating and abhorrent. I find Plato's pharmakon a useful tool in understanding how men and masculinities function in all religions, both in their histories and futures. Without a doubt, in the name of numerous divinities, men have wrought great turmoil on the world: on women, children, less powerful men, animals, and the earth on which we live. We tend to think in these allegedly post-feminist times that many of the ills men have performed in times past are in some way solved, but they are not. Patriarchy and its damaging effects are alive and well, even among those people who speak about masculinity in spiritual terms. I want to plot a brief course of these masculine spiritualities in recent times: via the mythopoetic men's movement, the Christian men's movement, and how what might be described as an "alternative spirituality" men's movement expresses itself today. These offer us an insight into the poison of the pharmakon. I will then conclude with a different vision for men and spirituality: the remedy.

When most people think of the men's movement, the image they conjure in their minds is usually one of the mythopoetic men's movement. It is an image of partially clothed, bearded men, smeared with mud in the woods. It is an image of men getting in touch with their feelings, weeping in the company of brothers or releasing a primal scream. It is an image of storytelling, sweat lodges, drumming and talking sticks. For many, the mythopoetic movement is synonymous with Robert Bly's *Iron John*, which recreates a Grimm Brothers' tale about a wild, hairy man, "Iron John" who becomes a mentor to a young boy. The experiences shared by Iron John and the boy are intended to reflect the stages of masculine development.

There were lots of good intentions behind the mythopoetic movement: its leaders and participants understood that there was something wrong with masculinity in society. Men appeared to be dysfunctional, and something quite rightly needed to be done about it. However, the movement made a crucial mistake. They assumed that there was some better way of doing masculinity that could be recaptured, something from the past, something that dwelled inside men which needed to be rediscovered. They did this primarily via the adoption of archetypes: Iron John, or the "wild man" was the first of these archetypes, which was followed soon after by others such as the king and the warrior. We were told that these archetypes existed whether we liked it or not. Some said, following Jung, that they

dwelled in the collective unconscious, others that they were hard-wired into the reptilian brain. And if we ignore them, we were told, problems occur, and this is why modern men were in trouble.

But the problem with these archetypes was that they promoted a certain type of masculinity. The wild man required an earthy, hirsute individual who belonged deep in the forest. He demanded challenging initiation rituals that transitioned boys into a certain vision of authentic and mature masculinity. The king archetype demanded that men see themselves at the center of their own mini kingdom, the people in their lives as subjects who need to be directed, resources to be secured and exploited. The warrior archetype demanded that men see themselves as soldiers on some kind of crusade. Life is to be framed in militaristic terms: battles are to be fought and won. All these archetypes, for all the noises about thinking of them in terms of myth and metaphor, promoted a type of masculinity that is at best oppressive, and at worst pathological and violent. Anyone thinking this interpretation is rather excessive is gently reminded of the recent tragic deaths of three people in a sweat lodge at Sedona who were involved in precisely this thing: seeking the spiritual warrior within.

The mythopoetic movement was part alternative spirituality, part pop psychology. But traditional religions also perpetuate similar problems. Around the same time that *Iron John* was released we saw the establishment of Promise Keepers which sought to re-establish male authority in the home. Promise Keepers is just one of many thousands of men's ministries operating around the Western world. Today, Christian manhood has once again been realigned with biblical manhood, where the husband and father is the intermediary between his family and God. Even academics have begun to speak about this in positive terms with the identification of "soft patriarchs" who are more involved with family life than non-Christian men due to their "symbolic" headship of the family. Presumably soft patriarchy results in soft oppression.

Other men's ministries revolve around the theme of sport. Training manuals for these ministries are laid out like play books, and talk about life in terms of sporting metaphors and how men must lead their families in the way a coach leads his team. Other men's ministries base their whole identity around military themes such as Band of Brothers, BattleZone ministries and Top Gun ministries. They read books such as John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* in which the author dances around his house wielding replica swords and defining masculinity by battles that must be fought. Again, there are real-world ramifications of this, and not just by families damaged by the assumption of a patriarchal male figure. Recently, it has been discovered that John Eldredge's book is used by the violent Mexican Christian drugs cartel, La Familia, to provide a model of masculinity to which to aspire which results in being, quite literally, murderous.

Like the mythopoetic movement, the intentions of the Christian men's movement are often good. They want to think more closely about masculinity, and they want to support their families and communities in which they live. But their answer to this is to promote rather unsavory masculinities: male authority in the home, whether it be biblical patriarch or sports coach. Where is the mutuality and respect here? What signals are young boys being sent in these families about the role of women in society? Or, as with mythopoetic archetypes, masculinity is aligned

with violence. Why? Where is the inspiration for men who do not want to lead families, who may not even be part of a family, or who do not like sport, or playing real or imaginary war games? And we tend to think of the men's movement as historical, but there are more and more men's ministries every year. And new forms of men's movement adopting themes of male power and archetypes are appearing right now.

For example, alternative masculine spirituality today looks quite a lot like previous forms of masculine spirituality. One popular book is David Deida's *The Way of the Superior Man: A Spiritual Guide to Mastering the Challenges of Women, Work and Sexual Desire*. Deida presents himself as a kind of Buddhist sexual radical, but his message is anything but. Deida promotes a very muscular way of being a man: of taking control, making decisions and generally being a success with women. Deida is very popular in the pick-up-artist community, which provides techniques for men to seduce women, which seems rather at odds with the kind of spiritual development Deida promotes. Old ways of doing masculinity in new spiritualities appear in other venues such as Andrew Cohen's *EnlightenNext* magazine. A recent edition focusing on the "new masculinity" kicks off with an interview with Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield, author of the book *Manliness*, which paints a picture of a feminized society that could benefit from learning about the history and virtues of traditional manliness stretching all the way back to roaming the savannah. The next article, "Beyond the Rambo Mentality" sounds much more promising; however, it speaks of "authentic" masculinity, archetypes and initiation, which could have been lifted directly out of Robert Bly's *Iron John*. Next is an interview with Erwin McManus, a Christian minister popular at Promise Keepers events whose book *The Barbarian Way* wants men to engage with "the ancient, primal, and dangerous." This is followed by the story of Nathaniel Fick, an Ivy League graduate who learned how to be a man in the Marines. Later we read about how Scandinavian men lost their Viking spirit, the "confessions of a formerly sensitive New Age man" in which a Californian generation-Xer laments being feminized by his psychotherapist mother, and finally Cohen and the "integral philosopher" Ken Wilber bemoan postmodernity which "creates weak, inauthentic men" who have overly bought into the myth of patriarchy. It seems that even at the glittering edge of alternative spiritualities, when men are referred to we come back to the same old story: power, control, strength, the poison of the pharmakon that has got us in the hole we are in today. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Consider this quote from a leader of a particular form of men's movement, outlining the attributes of its participants:

- They are not, by nature, territorially aggressive and do not impose their political claims on others.
- They are not, by nature, competitive but are passionately interested in sharing with others.
- They are not interested in conquering nature but are interested in harmonious living with all of nature.
- They are not interested in denying bodiliness and carnality but are passionately involved in celebrating all aspects of human sexuality.

That sounds like quite an interesting complement to the previous forms of masculine spirituality I've been discussing, doesn't it? Not aggressive, not competitive, harmonious with nature. This is actually a quote from Harry Hay, the unofficial leader of the gay men's movement. What I find interesting about this quote, and I'll out myself here as a straight man, is that there's nothing specifically "gay" about it. There's nothing in it that should unsettle even the straightest of men. Gay spirituality is a useful example for all men. I'm not suggesting that straight men should all go out and try and adopt a different form of sexual orientation, rather there are things that can be learned from the way that gay men see masculinity, and the way they express themselves spiritually.

The key issue is multiple masculinities. All the other forms of masculine spirituality assume masculinity to be a certain, fixed type of thing: specifically, a married, rather conservative man who should provide for, protect, and lead his family. Gay spirituality assumes there can be any number of ways of being a man: maybe married, maybe not, maybe tough, soft, competitive, whatever. These different types of masculinity offer complements to traditional masculinity. And as traditional masculinity in spiritual contexts has tended to be rather unfortunate, I'd suggest gay spirituality offers *better* types of masculinity.

But the gay issue is just a jumping off point, not the focus. I started by saying that without a doubt, in the name of numerous divinities, men have wrought great turmoil on the world: on women, children, less powerful men, animals, and the earth on which we live. Yet at the same time, many of the most peaceful and divinely inspired individuals of all religions have been men. Clearly, there is nothing inherent in men that demands destruction; clearly there is something in men that also seeks peace. The future of peace requires the mobilization of men in all faiths who reclaim what is naturally peaceful about being a religious man. It is a process of healing within each faith, between different faiths and with those who choose no faith. And it is not simply men's work, but a partnership between men, women, children, less powerful men, animals, and the earth on which we live.

But we cannot achieve this while masculine spirituality is defined by a patriarchal nature and restrictive treatment of gender: I would go so far as to say we should reject masculine spirituality as a term because it does not seem capable of shaking these critical issues. But, importantly, this does not close down in any way men discussing religion and spirituality in terms which resonate with being a man. It opens up a conversation which resonates with any number of ways of being a man (or masculine) that rejects patriarchy. It is a pro-man conversation because it is pro-person, which by necessity must involve the liberation of all people. Feminist and queer theories and theologies have done most of the work in making way for such a conversation. What is needed now is for predominantly straight men to step up and play their part in a process which will benefit the vast majority of people. This is hardly a new or radical suggestion, but its realization remains elusive. Such is the insidious nature of patriarchy. But, as the saying goes, the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

Notes

¹ This is drawn largely from the book *Numen, Old Men: Contemporary Masculine Spiritualities and the Problem of Patriarchy* (Equinox Publishing, 2009) and the article “Pray Like a Man” (24 March 2009), *The Guardian* [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/mar/23/christianity-religion-mens-ministries>].

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