

THE CHURCH IMPOTENT

The Feminization of Christianity

LEON J. PODLES



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To

PAUL VAN K. THOMSON

Minister

Marine Corps Chaplain

Teacher

Writer

Priest

Father

Friend

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INTRODUCTION

A Personal Note

MEN THINK RELIGION, and especially the church, is for women. Why are women “the more devout sex”?¹ Modern churches are women’s clubs with a few male officers. Or as Brenda E. Basher puts it, “If American religion were imaginatively conceptualized as a clothing store, two-thirds of its floor space would house garments for women; the manager’s office would be occupied almost exclusively by men.”²

Men still run most churches, but in the pews women outnumber men in all countries of Western civilization, in Europe, in the Americas, in Australia. Nor is the absence of males of recent origin. Cotton Mather puzzled over the absence of men from New England churches, and medieval preachers claimed women practiced their religion far more than men did. But men do not show this same aversion to all churches and religions. The Orthodox seem to have a balance, and Islam and Judaism have a predominantly male membership. Something is creating a barrier between Western Christianity and men, and that something is the subject of this book.

I came to my interest in this subject along a number of paths. I married late, and the difficulties of adjusting to marriage after a long bachelorhood made me acutely aware of the differences between men and women. My wife is an art historian, and in leafing through her books I became interested in the different portrayals of men

and women, how just two lines could suggest the differences between the male and female bodies. We then had twins, a boy and a girl, who not only had very different personalities, but the girl was extremely feminine and the boy extremely masculine. She at age two was already much more verbal than he was. We would ask Tom what he wanted, and Sarah would serve as his spokeswoman: "Tom would like a glass of milk and three cookies." We would ask Tom if that was what he really wanted and he would either nod his head or burst into tears at his inability to articulate his feelings.

A difference between men and women that caused me personal trouble was the lack of interest in religion among men, especially men of pronounced or even normal masculinity. The Catholic priests of my 1950s childhood, many of whom were veterans of World War II, sometimes seemed aware of the difficulty of getting men interested in religion. Football analogies occasionally enlivened sermons. As I was not a football fan, this was explaining the *ignotum per ignotior*. Catholic high school textbooks tried to speak to boys by comparing grace to jet aviation fuel (a metaphor of doubtful theological accuracy) and getting to heaven to winning a race (a comparison solidly founded in scripture).

My adolescent religious awakening occurred at a boys' high school. I read C. S. Lewis and Chesterton and tried to imitate Chesterton's combative style in my writing and conversation. I decided I might have a vocation to the priesthood and went to a pre-seminary house at a men's college. (I was privileged to have a now-rare single-sex education for eight years.) As I discovered, the seminary, unfortunately, was full of homosexuality of various sorts. The policy of the authorities was to ignore the situation, hoping it would go away. Whether it went away, I do not know, but I went away. The regular college students, though they had chosen to go to a religious college, plainly considered the required theology courses a bore and rarely showed up for mass. In fact, the college did not even have a chapel capable of holding more than a small portion of its student body, though its gym was big enough for the crowds drawn to its basketball games.

I occasionally became involved in parish life in the cities in which I lived. I noticed to my discomfort that an unusual percentage, perhaps

a quarter, of my male acquaintances were homosexual. On reflection I realized that they were the ones I had met through church or through religious gatherings. They were amusing, but I felt awkward around them, and some of them later died of AIDS. While I do not wish to question the sincerity of their religious commitment, and perhaps it is the wounded who especially know their need for the healing touch of Jesus, it was odd that they seemed to be the type of young men found disproportionately at church. Normal young women were there in abundance; indeed, I must confess that was one reason I spent time in parish activities.

In seeking an explanation for the lack of men in church and the lack of masculinity among some males in church, I read about the differences between men and women. Sociologists remarked in a general way that men were less religious than women, and I realized that my personal experience was only a particular instance of a general situation. This puzzle intrigued me. Why was it that men were so little interested in religion, and that the men who were interested often did not follow the general pattern of masculinity? Why didn't religion seem to interest men much, at least until they reached old age and death loomed? Sociologists have put forward a few theories, which I will discuss, but they did not seem to explain the situation very satisfactorily. The best writer on the general subject of masculinity is David Gilmore, and my great debt to his *Manhood in the Making* will become clear. Nevertheless, he does not treat of the lack of interest in Christianity among modern Western men. Walter Ong, SJ, in *Fighting for Life*, has written in a learned and slightly impenetrable style on the decline of masculinity in modern Catholicism, but seems to have dropped the subject after writing the book. His fellow Jesuit, Patrick Arnold, in *Warriors, Wildmen, and Kings*, has given this question the fullest treatment yet, but his book is marred by pop Jungianism and a very odd attitude to homosexuality.

I had also become interested in the literature of war after coming across Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. The analysis of tactics and strategy does not interest me, nor does the reporting

of battles in which the clichés burst in air, but rather the *experience* of war. Nor is my interest unique. Bookstore customers are mostly women; but they always have a section that might as well be labeled *For Men Only*: books on war.

In reading about war, I realized that here was something that men took with deadly (both literally and metaphorically) earnestness. War, and the vicarious experience of war in literature and reenactments, as well as the analogues and substitutes for war in dangerous sports and avocations, provide the real center of the emotional, and I would even say the spiritual, life of most men in the modern world. The ideology of masculinity has replaced Christianity as the true religion of men. We live in a society with a female religion and a male religion: Christianity, of various sorts, for women and non-masculine men; and masculinity, especially in the forms of competition and violence that culminate in war, for men.

My personal experience is limited to North America, and most sociological work on religion and men has been done in North America and France. Nevertheless, the comparative lack of masculine interest in Christianity is much the same throughout Western Christianity, Catholic and Protestant. South America is notorious. The church is for women; the bars are for men. In 1932, Evelyn Waugh visited a desolate Brazilian town, Boa Vista, where the Benedictines had a mission and had tried in vain to Christianize the inhabitants. Waugh comments that “the Church was, considering the villainy of the place, surprisingly well attended,” of course by the women and children, a “weekly blossoming of femininity.”³ The men came to enjoy the women: “They did not come into the Church, for that is contrary to Brazilian etiquette, but they clustered in the porch, sauntering out occasionally to smoke a cigarette.”⁴

A friend of mine stayed for several weeks in an Italian town, and he and his wife attended daily mass. He was the only man in the church apart from the priest, and his presence was so unusual that it attracted the attention of the carabinieri, who investigated to see what hanky-panky was going on. After he crossed the Aegean to Greece, he was startled by the difference in the Orthodox churches. If anything, there were more men than women; the men also led the sing-

ing and filled the churches with the deep resonance of their voices. The only time Americans will hear anything like this is if they attend a concert by a touring Russian Orthodox choir. There is no church music for *basso profunda* written by Americans.

Historians, theologians, and clergymen have occasionally noticed the lack of men in their own area of study or responsibility, but no one has surveyed the evidence for the lack of men throughout Western Christianity. Scholars try to explain males' relative lack of interest by the peculiar historical or social situation with which the scholars are concerned, but scholars of colonial American history show little awareness of medieval Germany, and sociologists confine their studies to situations they can measure.

The clergy have the most direct, practical interest in the situation, and they have shown a remarkable lack of concern. I suspect that the clergy are not unhappy with the absence of men. Women are easier to deal with than men would be. Even feminists can be satisfied to some extent. Hymns and the Bible are being rewritten to expunge references to men; the few men in the congregation will not protest. Protestant churches ordain women, the seminaries are already half-female, and the Protestant clergy will be a characteristically female occupation, like nursing, within a generation. If priests are unavailable, Rome allows Catholics who are not priests to be appointed administrators of parishes. This permission is intended for mission countries, but American bishops have seized on this provision and appointed nuns and divorced laywomen to head parishes, while staffing their diocesan bureaucracies with priests, or even leaving priests to cool their heels without assignments.

Many Catholic dioceses actively discourage vocations to the priesthood, in a transparent attempt to put pressure on Rome to allow the ordination of women, or at least of married men. The Second Vatican Council revived the permanent diaconate, which enjoyed popularity for several years in the United States, as mature married men were given theological training and then assigned to help in parishes. Nevertheless, these programs have been ended in many dioceses because the deacon is male, and deacons occupy jobs that could be given to women.

Because Christianity is now seen as a part of the sphere of life proper to women rather than to men, it sometimes attracts men whose own masculinity is somewhat doubtful. By this I do not mean homosexuals, although a certain type of homosexual is included. Rather religion is seen as a safe field, a refuge from the challenges of life, and therefore attracts men who are fearful of making the break with the secure world of childhood dominated by women. These are men who have problems following the path of masculine development, a pattern I will examine in detail later in the book. It is a truism among Catholics that priests become priests because of the influence of their mothers, and many priests are emotionally very close to their mothers, more so than to men, even to their fathers.⁵ The sentimental sermons on Mother's Day used to be a great set piece, a five-hanky special, in Catholic churches. Even devotion to Mary was affected. Such devotion has a sound theological base, but tended to replace a relationship to Christ or to the Father. The rationale for this was sometimes made explicit. At one Dominican seminary in the 1940s, a professor developed a following, which later matured into a small cult. He explained Catholic devotion to Mary in this way: Men have a more distant relationship with their fathers than with their mothers. They therefore have more trouble relating to a masculine God (the Father or Jesus) than to the reflection of maternal love in Mary. Devotion to Mary, on this view, should be stressed more than devotion to Christ. Despite the extraordinary theological implications of this line of thought, the professor obviously struck a nerve in his seminarian disciples: they were the sort of men who felt more comfortable with the feminine than with the masculine. The situation holds true in most of the Protestant clergy. Mary was not available, but first sentimentality, and now feminism, have filled the void.

This feminization of the clergy explains the lack of reflection on a subject that the clergy should be interested in: Why does half their potential congregation show an active lack of interest in Christianity, an indifference that sometimes considers male attendance at church suspect? Among Catholics, the few writers that have paid much attention to the question are Jesuits. As the early Jesuits were among

the most masculine of Catholic religious movements, this is not surprising. Yet the work of Walter Ong and Patrick Arnold has produced no lasting response. Catholic circles are full of committees and conferences on the place of women in the church, and almost none on the absence of men.

Among Protestants some evangelicals are aware of the problem with men and try to reach out to them. I was at a Baptist school to discuss a former teacher with the headmaster. The headmaster observed that the teacher was a decent person, but a bit soft. The headmaster had to teach him how to comport himself in a masculine fashion, to adopt an assertive body language. The teacher had come from a family in which the mother was the dominant religious force; she was the one who had chosen the church and made sure her son went to religious school and college. He was undoubtedly heterosexual, but had trouble breaking away from the feminine milieu and establishing himself as a man. In the 1970s I lived for a year in a household with a number of evangelical and charismatic students at the University of Virginia. They were part of a church, planted by a minister, which later grew into a large Presbyterian church that has some University of Virginia male faculty as members, mostly faculty from the science and engineering schools. Evangelical women perhaps realize the difficulty that men have with church and occasionally step aside to make room for men in the leadership positions in which men feel most comfortable. But a strong stream of evangelicalism, represented by *Christianity Today*, has made as many compromises as it can with feminism and ignores the problem of the lack of men in the church. Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, who has noticed this tendency in *Christianity Today*, is one of the foremost evangelical leaders who is concerned with the role of men in the family and church.

If the evangelicals occasionally show some awareness of the lack of men, the mainline Protestants do not seem to think there is a problem. The Methodist Church is a women's club at prayer. I once attended a Lutheran Ascension Day service that also commemorated Bach's birthday. The celebrants were men; a Catholic friend and I

were men; of the three hundred or so Lutheran faithful perhaps three or four were men. Luther, whatever one thinks of his reform, was masculine in his aggressiveness. Bach is one of the most rational of composers in a mathematical-artistic field, musical composition, that is almost exclusively male. Why would one be astounded if one went to such a service and found three hundred men and only four women? The situation is especially severe in black churches, whether established or storefront. Although the preachers are men, the congregations are overwhelmingly women. The absence of men has especially sad consequences for the black community.

The established churches have long made a parade of their concern for civil rights and for the plight of minorities. But there is one minority whose cause they quietly ignore: black men. The problem of criminality and drug abuse among inner-city black men is a problem of a distortion of masculinity. But the liberal churches have little to say about masculinity except to condemn it as an obstacle to women's liberation. Churches that spend their energy hunting out and obliterating the last vestiges of patriarchy are in no position to help black men attain the status they so desperately need for their own good and the good of black women and children: that of patriarchs, responsible fathers who rule their families in justice and love.

Nor has the absence of men left women untouched. As we shall see, women have been forced into an unnatural mold by a misunderstanding among Christians of the feminine. Much of current feminism is an understandable reaction against a caricature of femininity. The breakdown of the proper relationship of masculinity and femininity, male and female, Adam and Eve, is at the root of many of the church's failures in the modern world. This situation would not surprise the author of Genesis.

In chapter one, *Armies of Women*, I examine the lack of men throughout Western Christianity, beginning with the lack of masculinity among some male Christians. The best evidence comes from France, which has a long tradition of religious sociology, and from England and the United States. The various explanations for the lack of men are covered in chapter two, *Can a Man Be a Christian?*

Most people think not: either men are too bad for Christianity, or Christianity is too effeminate for men.

Masculinity is the key to men's behavior as men. In chapter three, *What is Masculinity?*, I use evidence from anthropology and developmental psychology to clarify the peculiarities of the masculine personality. Initiation into masculinity is a form of religious initiation. The initiated man becomes a hero, about whose adventures Homer sang in the *Odyssey*. Masculinity is essential to the Jewish idea of God and is a primary theme of the Scriptures, as I show in chapter four, *God and Man in Judaism*. Masculinity remains a characteristic of the three persons who are revealed in the New Testament, and the Christian is masculine because he is conformed to the masculine Son. The martyrs and monks were initiated into masculinity, and in *Beowulf* a Christian culture looks back at pagan masculinity, with its glory and self-destructive flaws. I take up these ideas in chapter five, *God and Man in Early Christianity*.

Chapter six, *The Foundations of Feminization*, treats of the conjunction of Bernard of Clairvaux, Scholasticism, and the medieval women's movement that brought about the initial feminization of the Western church. The Church has suffered from being overly feminized, as I show in chapter seven, *Feminized Christianity*. The quality of spirituality has changed. Bridal mysticism makes Christianity individualistic and erotic; feminine tendencies to union without a corrective masculine presence give rise to universalism and quietism. In chapter eight, *Countercurrents*, I look at the forces that have maintained some masculine presence in the church, from the Crusades to Promise Keepers.

Masculinity when it becomes a religion can easily become demonic. Sports may be harmless, but fascism and nihilism are the outcome of a masculinity detached from Christianity. The various forms of masculinity as religion are the subject of chapter nine, *Masculinity as Religion: Transcendence and Nihilism*. In chapter ten, *The Future of Men in the Church*, I look at possibilities for reconnecting men to the church, focusing on the areas of initiation, struggle, and brotherly love.

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