

Review of Joseph Gelfer, *Numen, Old Men: Contemporary Masculine Spiritualities and the Problem of Patriarchy*, London: Equinox 2009, 224 pages, ISBN 9781845534189 (hb) or 9781845534196 (pb).

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What could possibly be wrong with men gathering in order to find a meaningful identity as men, husbands, fathers, or simply as members of present-day society by means of a spiritual approach? It is likely that such a question will be raised. Well, nothing – in an ideal world, Joseph Gelfer would answer. But since this ideal world is not available to us, we have to look at the underlying concepts of the various kinds of men’s spirituality to understand the actual problem. Gelfer argues, then, ‘that most manifestations of masculine spirituality are, in fact, manifestations of patriarchal spirituality’ (p 1). His initial interest was to identify a masculine spirituality that did not perpetuate patriarchal and homophobic structures. But as he soon found out, this needed a thorough ‘unpacking of the negative treatment of masculine spirituality’ (p x, preface). And Gelfer goes to quite some length to analyse what lies behind the various forms of popular masculine spirituality.

Having clarified the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘spirituality’ and the problems involved with them in his introductory chapter, Gelfer takes on some of the popular manifestations of masculine spirituality. Chapter 2 deals with the mythopoetic men’s movement and Gelfer makes it clear right in the header: ‘getting it wrong from the start’ (p 21). Although Gelfer

concedes that 'there are some clearly good intentions among members [of the movement]' (p 46, n26), the core problem is that the main advocates of the mythopoetic movement promulgate patriarchal structures and attitudes. The essentialist assumption that there are genuinely *male* characteristics which need to be *rediscovered* leads straight to re-establishing patriarchally oriented men. If men, by nature, are supposed to lead their families, it would be against nature not to do so. This stance is somewhat camouflaged by a 'strategic anti-intellectualism' (p 36, cit. Schwalbe) and the lack of political awareness (p 41 *passim*). What is more, the dimension of spirituality turns out to be a hoax due to the 'confusion between the psychological/psychic and the spiritual' (p 29), in which, for example, the archetype of *wilderness* is mixed up with the actual spiritual dimension. But as Gelfer points out, 'the mountain is *not* the source of "my help", the source is Yaweh' (p 33, referring to Ps. 121,1f).

Hardly any different is Gelfer's outline of the evangelical men's movement (chapter 3). Its heavy use of archetypes combined with a somewhat peculiar reading of biblical texts (or, rather, certain excerpts of them) produces strange results like the fear of a feminization of Jesus, who is depicted as 'the ultimate Man. Maximum manhood. The perfect Model. The complete Hero' (p 55, cit. Moore and Gillette). It is the duty of contemporary men to take heart from these images and to *take back* their true role as a husband and leader of the family (p 58). Realizing that this might not go down well in the new millennium, some authors have suggested more palatable concepts like the 'soft patriarchs' or the 'servant leadership', which seek to promote a more egalitarian understanding of relationships. But the bottom line still is: men are superior and they are the spiritual leaders. If they don't fulfil their role 'everything else is out of kilter' (p 61, cit. Doebler). Gelfer also points out that there is a notable underpinning of violence within these movements which takes a strange, even disturbing delight in war imagery and battle lingo and which is also deployed within a new version of Muscular Christianity, that is, sport spreading the gospel (pp 61ff, 67ff). Thus, Gelfer concludes, 'the net effect of men's ministry is a focus on domination and violence' (p 75).

The Catholic men's movement (chapter 4) is rather distinct from its evangelical counterparts in that sport and violent imagery play little if any role at all (although the propensity for archetypes and the like is highly prevalent). This has to do with a different intention. 'Evangelical men's ministries ... seek to evangelize. Catholic men's ministries rarely emphasize evangelism, seeking instead to minister to existing Catholics' (p 90). Therefore fellowship, or male bonding, is central and corresponds with the

importance of sacramental celebration. Gelfer's analysis of the Catholic men's movement comes to a rather surprising conclusion. Although the Roman Catholic Church is more conservative in various aspects, 'its men's ministry promotes a broader spectrum masculinity which is generally less patriarchal than that of evangelical men's ministries' (p 94). It is apt to say that 'Catholicism has a certain queerness ... exemplified by defining masculinity not exclusively in terms of heteronormativity but also a theoretically celibate priesthood with a propensity for campness' (p 77), and it is 'less inclined to the hyper-masculine and patriarchal models of their evangelical counterparts' (p 98).

In chapter 5 Gelfer criticizes Ken Wilber's considerations of views on alternative spirituality. Yet again Gelfer shows that rather essentialist assumptions stabilize a patriarchal system, this time coming in the guise of an 'allegedly transrational masculine and feminine' (p 106) with a certain tendency towards depoliticizing patriarchy. Thus, 'there is no such masculine and feminine integration in Wilber's spirituality, rather one which privileges the masculine in the past, present and future' (p 115).

After all this unpacking of the 'negative treatment of masculine spirituality' one is quite eager to get some 'packing' of a positive treatment, so to speak. But, maybe, this is a task to be delivered in another volume because the outlining of how this might be achieved remains somewhat vague. Gelfer takes a look at alternative concepts which might be fruitful in developing a non-patriarchal spirituality. The door seems to be opened by gay spirituality (chapter 6) – not only for gay but also for straight men. This might come as a surprise but the point, says Gelfer, is that gay spirituality and even more so gay theology avoid the 'patriarchal traps' which have 'littered' (p 126) other men's movements. Although (popular) gay spirituality shares some commonalities with the mythopoetic movement, like the 'rather essentialist gay spirit' (p 131), it can provide a different approach to spirituality, as Gelfer argues by referring to Harry Hay's 'creedal statement about gay men' whose approach 'could be beneficially adopted by any man, gay or straight' (p 133). In particular, Gelfer points out the asset of gay theology to 'critically and spiritually engage with the patriarchal order that oppresses them and others' (p 143) as an invitation to straight and gay men alike.

However, gay spirituality cannot really get the sense of what straight means; and if the mythopoetic movement cannot really grasp the possible political dimension of its endeavours, just as the pro-feminist movement lacks the sense of the spiritual – what is a straight man, like Gelfer, to do? In the following (pp 143ff), Gelfer turns to a 'spiritual queer-

for-all' arguing that *queer* is not something about 'being' queer in a gay or lesbian sense, but rather a concept of subversive destabilization of sexual categories as we know them. Or, as Marcella Althaus-Reid put it in a pointed remark, 'let us remember here that the Genderfucker might also be straight' (p 146). Therefore, queer theology can be deployed 'to destabilize notions of sexual identity within theology and at the same time the heteronormative institutions in which it functions' (p 150), providing a fundamental critique of theology and the churches.

Having opened the window to this outlook, in his final chapter Gelfer returns to his initial question: what about *masculine* spirituality? This is where the – so far – very readable book turns somewhat ambivalent. His reading of Luce Irigaray's approach of sexual difference with the help of Bracha Ettinger's matrixial model simply appears too sketchy to be convincing. Or note his reference to Gloria Anzaldúa stating '*in between is the norm*' (p 157) – earlier on Gelfer quoted Judith Butler's saying 'normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish' (p 144) and added that 'this is true only because queer simply cannot be normal' (p. 146). This is rather slippery terrain and illustrates the 'tenuousness of gender "reality"' (Butler). Of course, the point of queer theory is to see neither 'man' nor 'woman' but a *person*. The question remains: how to do that? To be sure, 'masculine' is a rather useless term if stripped of all cultural ascriptions. But how and why should this not be the case with 'feminine'? Especially, if Gelfer, along with Ettinger (and a not quite plausible reading of Butler), suggests that 'sexual difference is focused on the feminine, [but] its pre-ontological nature produces a feminine space for *all*' (p 161)? One would need some further reading to make sense of the appetizers presented.

At this stage of his book Gelfer's tendency to criticize patriarchy by using female-identified arguments (cf. H. Brod) is reinforced by a more outspoken evaluation of the male/masculine spiritualities of the first chapters. Gelfer speaks of the 'pathological nature of masculine spirituality' (p 170) which 'manifests in ... largely unsavoury ways' (p 173). Not to be mistaken, I do not share any of those ideas presented in chapters 2-5, but it appears not very helpful to simply pathologize the 'nature of masculine spirituality' – one cannot help sensing the implication of pathologizing the followers – while having a soft spot (that is, a seemingly uncritical sympathy) for feminine spirituality ('the good health and sustainability of what we perceive to be feminine spirituality' [p 165]). On the other side, Gelfer displays a sense for a dialectic approach in critical men's studies

saying that 'it is not masculine values that are in danger, rather the pre-eminence of masculine values' (p 165).

However, the outcome seems to be rather clear again. Referring to Henri Lefebvre's considerations about a gendered space, Gelfer argues that what we can strive for is a 'liberated space' that does not relinquish the 'up and out' (traditionally associated with the masculine) nor the 'down and in' (traditionally associated with the feminine). But 'the only difference is that any person can pick and choose any part of spiritual space, rather than that which gender has assigned to them' (p 171).

So what is the bottom line? *Numen, Old Men* is (mostly) a very readable book which presents a lot of sharp insights, creative thinking (never mind a few exaggerations), different perspectives and deserves a RECOMMENDED! However, as a theologian I cannot help missing the theological arguments (with a few notable exceptions), which seems to be the main *desideratum*.

If some strange writer depicts Jesus Christ 'on a white horse, in a bloodspattered robe, with a sword in His mouth and a rod of iron in His hand' (p 55), it is, of course, possible to look at this image sociologically, psychologically, mythologically, or whatever – but at the end of the day it is still a *theological* issue which needs to be tackled. Really, what kind of weird theology lies underneath an image like this (and we have seen similar things around the eve of World War I, for that matter)? What about 'servant leadership'? It resembles Karl Barth's *Primat des Dienstes*, which has received a host of theological comments. What about 'soft patriarchy'? It resembles Ernst Troeltsch's *Liebespatriarchalismus* and could be dealt with on that level. What about approaches such as Luce Irigaray's who says 'the only task, the only obligation laid upon us is: to become divine men and women, to become perfectly' (p 162)? How does this go together with the Pauline teaching of justification? And how would an anthropology based on this teaching deal with Irigaray's 'obligation'? These are questions – just to mention a few – which I would consider serious enough to be dealt with within a book on spirituality. But still, the field is open to discussions leading towards the further 'packing' of a positive treatment of men and spirituality and Gelfer has provided an important contribution to this.