

Male Spirituality?

Paul Fromont

It is hard to put your finger on, but guys are in trouble. Guys are gloomy...¹

In the October 2006 issue of the *Spirited Exchanges* newsletter the “Ed” issued the following invitation:

This issue contains views on spirituality from three women. It would be great to hear other views and particularly from a man’s perspective. What is happening for men in [the] realm of spirituality...? How do men develop their spirituality, particularly when they move outside more patriarchal church structures?

As a consequence, after the following quote, I offer the following response in the hope of encouraging continuing reflection and debate around questions of gender and spirituality; particularly the **practicalities** around spiritual formation and gender – a dimension I’m sadly not going to be able to address in this reflection.

St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

While popular psychology differentiates people according to a wide variety of characteristics, and while these distinctions are tremendously useful in helping me understand myself and my relationships with others, psychiatrist and spiritual accompanier Gerald May suggests that the likes of saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross would draw the line at this kind of classification being applied to Spirituality – to my spirituality.



May notes, with reference to these two, that they make few suggestions and virtually no specific prescriptions as to ways of responding to God. Instead they offer that we “do what brings [us] most to love...and let God do the rest.” He further suggests that both these great Christian saints would balk at any statement that implies:

“Because you’re a woman [or man], your spiritual life and experience will be like this...”

Instead, they would affirm that:

“... The particular path a person’s soul life follows is determined by God’s unique, loving, and *always unpredictable* [activity]...”

“The deepest constants of the spiritual life are **the same** for everyone regardless of personality or gender. It’s always a process of liberation from attachment, of growing freedom for love of God and person, of self-knowledge and the realisation of one’s true identity [in Christ] in God.

...However [beyond those common foundations], our individual stories are coloured and textured by who we are as individuals and by God’s unique ways of loving us – ways that can never be prescribed, only **discovered**.”²

¹ Garrison Keillor

Gendered Spirituality?



are

means, what it means to have a male body, and what the particular hungers, joys, pains, and satisfactions of a mans life are.”³

While I agree with May about there being “deep constants” common to our spiritual formation and growth, I also believe that there is a particularity, a uniqueness about the ways and means through which we each experience and respond to God.

“Treating dominant males as generically and normatively ‘human’ has made men **largely invisible to themselves**. It has prevented men from exploring self-consciously and self-critically their own distinctively masculine experience. Now, for a variety of reasons, we are motivated as never before to inquire what our masculinity really means, what it means to have a male body, and what the particular hungers, joys, pains, and satisfactions of a mans life are.”³

So, for me, a dimension of masculine spirituality is about recognising that this –

“Masculine spirituality is rooted, consciously or otherwise, in men’s sense of self *as men*; that is, in men’s social, cultural, physical, sexual and psychological experience, **as distinct from** that of women.”⁴

Theologies (plural)⁵ have, argues UK Anglican priest Mark Pryce –

“Challenged the notion of a hegemonic and universal norm in human experience and Christian understanding. It [has been] recognised that spirituality *[is] gendered* – that is, **defined by** sexual difference, shaped by the embodied, socio-psychological, historically evolving experience of what it is to be a woman or a man...”

So if spirituality can be gendered and defined by diverse human experiences, it follows that, to a point, specifically masculine experiences of spirituality are likely in and of themselves⁵ to be far from uniform. Masculine experience is –

“Formed by class, race and differing cultures [and more besides], fostering a diverse range of distinctive and sometimes competing masculinities. From this perspective there can be no single or normative spirituality among men, but a plethora of spiritualities...”

That said; I’m increasingly looking for spiritual practices, contexts, spiritual friendships and ways of being “me” that encourage and enable both the honouring of my particularities as a male, while at the same time nurturing the “deeper constants” of the spiritual life that Teresa and John suggest ‘smooth out’ the particularities of gender. I’m looking for ways of unifying rather than dividing and fragmenting.

² Commentary from Gerald G. May was derived from his 2004 published book *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, pp. 164-168.

³ James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection*, London: SPCK, 1992, p.4.

⁴ Mark Pryce, *Masculine Spirituality* in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* edited by Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM Press), 2005, p. 426. The bold highlights in the Pryce quotes are mine.

⁵ For example, feminist, gay, indigenous peoples etc.

“This unity which is [S]pirit promoted, erases artificial boundaries and generates an ethic of transgression, **a liberating courage** to reject all that prevents flourishing, **thus enabling a boundless openness to life**.

The Spirit [is]... encountered as the creator of multiple levels of mutuality, in full respect of difference and diversity. The Spirit... can be experienced as crossing the false boundaries...of **sexual** and racial difference.”⁶

Christian Spirituality?



As I have already opaquely noted, in a discussion on gender and spirituality it seems important that we also start to reflect on what we mean by “spirituality”, whether we might own that as “female spirituality,” “male spirituality”, or some other kind of spirituality or combination thereof.

If “spirituality” has to do with “lived experience”, with ones experience of the living presence of God, then a distinctively Christian Spirituality is “nothing more-nor-less than life [lived] *by* the Spirit,” i.e. “one is Spiritual to the degree that one lives *in* and walks *by* the Spirit”⁷ (e.g. Rom 8:1-16 in particular, and Gal 5: 13-25).

In part then, spirituality for me has to do with my lived experience as a male, about how I as a male live my life increasingly as response and surrenderedness to the Spirit.

My capacity to respond to God, and my ways of experiencing God are richer than any constraints my gender might impose upon me. And it is precisely at this point that I don’t find notions of a “male spirituality” helpful or freeing – labels or boxes have a funny habit of reducing rather than liberating us.

Thus, my ways of talking about a Jesus-centred spirituality are less concerned with Jesus’ masculinity than with the broader categories of his humanity or personhood. I’m more interested in the mystery of his being the perfect embodiment of what it means to ‘image’ God humanly (*imago Dei*). I’m interested in how he relates in his breadth of personhood to God, self and others.

Here’s how I currently narrate my experience of spirituality:

My spirituality centres on the aspirational belief that in my cooperating with the Spirit, in my orientation toward God and in my living I am becoming increasingly human after the likeness and example of Jesus.

In becoming increasingly human I’m learning how, in the midst of **all** of life, to live more vulnerably, more freely, more lovingly, more honestly and authentically, and thus to live as a more integrated or *whole* person in relation to God, *myself*, and other persons.

⁶ Mary C. Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Crossroad Herder, 2001, p.72

⁷ Gordon D. Fee.

St. Irenaeus, a church leader in the second century said that “the glory of God is a person fully alive.” In other words, I glorify God my Creator in becoming more fully alive, in my becoming more fully and freely human.

Resurrection

“Much of the progressive developments in masculine spirituality have been outside mainstream Christianity...

Taking a Jungian approach to gender relations in the West, the poet and psychotherapist Robert Bly articulates in his book *Iron John* a culture of profound loss among men, which is in striking contrast to the confidence, and eloquence of women at the present. Men and boys are disconnected from their intrinsic, essential masculine qualities by a culture, which has suppressed masculine spiritual and emotional self-realisation in pursuit of consumerist goals where men are corporate wage-slaves, distanced from the earth, alienated from their fathers, partners, children and from creative relationships with one another through a regime of environmental exploitation, obsessive work and an absence of constructive male role-models...”⁸

One of my favourite icons is the one on the right

Notice that Jesus is standing between two persons whose hands he is holding, holding to himself their maleness and their femaleness. The two persons are Adam and Eve – the first imagers of God (Gen 1:26a, 27).

I wonder if St. Irenaeus’ notion of a fully alive person is in fact a person who *in* Christ is able to explore, develop and live out their humanity in terms of *both* the masculine *and* the feminine.

In other words, I wonder if Jesus somehow holds out the possibility of reconfiguring what it means to be human.



At the deeper levels of our humanity does Jesus somehow enable a breakdown of the ways in which gender so often divides us – both inwardly and outwardly? In Christ’s resurrection, are richer and ultimately more fulfilling possibilities held out to us as females and males.

⁸ Mark Pryce, *Masculine Spirituality in the New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM), 2004, p. 427. I must say that I find Jungian psychology (to a point) very helpful in grappling with issues having to do with what is popularly called “masculine spirituality,” especially when Jungian insights are reflected on through the lense of the narrative flow of Scripture centred on Jesus. I make this point to contrast what I regard as a misguided approach (which misreads the narrative of Scripture, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus) evidenced by the likes of John Eldredge; see especially his phenomenally popular book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul*. For a brief but useful critique of this book see Mark Mulder & James K.A. Smith’s paper, *Are Men Really Wild at Heart?* Published in the October 2004 issue of *Perspectives* – Available online here: <http://www.perspectivesjournal.org/2004/10/review.html>

I wonder too if Jungian psychology has stumbled upon something important when it talks of individuation⁹. Jung held that every man and every woman has both “masculine” and “feminine” traits. In the male, masculine priorities are usually dominant on the surface and feminine qualities are recessive. In women the opposite is true.

Jung refers to the inner feminine as the *anima* and the inner masculine as the *animus*. He understands these inner-figures to behave in ways compensatory to the outer personality. In a man, these are feminine characteristics, in a woman, masculine. Normally both are always present, to a certain degree, but find no place in the person’s outwardly directed functioning because they disturb the outer manifestation, his or her established ideal image of themselves.

Therefore... I wonder

Am I somehow my truest self, not when I align myself exclusively to male *or* female ways of configuring spirituality, but rather in my being able to live out of an identity that honours both?

Am I somehow responding to the Spirit, and thus more able to fully experience God, when I can utilise practical ways of nourishing and better integrating the masculine and the feminine within me?

Finally, I wonder if, in our maleness and femaleness, we’d be the better for it if we learnt how to more creatively value, honour and cooperate with the ways in which gender-differences (and friendship) grow and deepen us as persons in relationship to each other?

Further Reading

James B. Nelson – *Reuniting Spirituality and Sexuality* (1987). Online here: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=114>

James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.

Mark Pryce, *Finding a Voice: men, Women and the Community of the Church*, London: SCM Press, 1996.

November 2006

⁹ Where the individuation process is concerned with the realisation and integration of all the immanent possibilities of the individual.