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Introduction

War is implicated in masculinity. Masculinity is implicated in war. Masculinity is implicated in the contempt for and domination of women. Together, these are implicated in the greatest sins of the church.

Borderline is about two questions. First, why have Christians been so warlike? Second, why do Christian men still caricature, dominate, misrepresent, condescend to, and dismiss women? I am convinced that these two questions must be answered together. In the various reflections that make up this book I hope to make a case for the following claims. Masculinity is very often constructed as domination and violence—direct violence or sublimated and vicarious violence. War is one of the most powerful formative practices in the development of masculinity understood as domination and violence; and recursively, masculinity established as domination and violence reproduces the practice of war. In societies that celebrate war, domination-masculinity is likewise celebrated and becomes a norm to which men, speaking here of *males*, aspire; and war becomes a defining metaphor for male agency. When this kind of aggression is valued, its opposite is devalued. When “male” aggression is valued, “female” lack of aggression is devalued, meaning that women themselves, associated with this “womanly” trait, come to be identified as a negative. Being a good man has come to mean being *not* like a woman. In this way, war contributes significantly to the hatred of women, and reciprocally, contempt for women contributes to the reproduction of war.

I will advance the claim, and attempt to support it, that the practice of war *inevitably* produces and reproduces the hatred of and contempt for women, even when that hatred and contempt is papered over by

sentimentalized pseudo-affection for “our women” or “good women” whom war must “protect.” This relation between war and misogyny exists even when it is unacknowledged in contexts where war is spoken of apart from the devaluation of women, and when the devaluation of women takes place apart from any explicit discussion of war. I will further advance the claim that unexamined notions of masculinity act as a cherished intuition operating prior to the “rational” defense of war as a practice, even the defense of “just war.”

I will also suggest that the life and teachings of Jesus undermine both those pre-rational and pseudo-rational justifications for mistreating and marginalizing women, because those justifications are entailments of masculinity constructed as violent power and not humble servanthood.

In critiquing both militarism and gendered violence, I will try to unpack how militarism and gender operate in our own milieu, and so I will also make an argument that liberal modernity, contrary to the clam that it does away with “religious” violence and replaces it with a “secular,” rational and peaceful order, reproduces the problem of violent power in a uniquely modern imperial form.

None of these arguments about gender, implicit or explicit, are premised on biological determinism or the notion that masculinity and femininity are *synonymous* with being biologically male and female, even though the examination of these cultural phenomena will show that most people in most times *do* in fact conflate biological sex with masculinity and femininity. Anyone seeking some “resolution” to the false dichotomy of nature versus nurture will be frustrated by this book. I do not believe they can be separated, so I won’t try.

The reason that feminist scholarship, emerging within a liberal milieu, is important is not on account of its variable relationship with liberalism, but on account of the ways that these works, often highly critical of liberalism, have described and affirmed the *standpoints* of women, as women. I use the plural to avoid the idea that there is a single woman’s standpoint. The standpoint of a peasant woman in Oaxaca and the standpoint of a well-to-do, professional white woman in Chicago are necessarily and decidedly different.

In every encounter in gendered society, and all known societies are gendered, the standpoint of the woman or women in each encounter is different from that of a man or men because of gendered (not merely biological) difference, and too often because of the domination and subjection that are attached to that difference. Men and women experience life differently, and to exclude the standpoint(s) of women is to render women invisible in order to treat the standpoint(s) of the men in those encounters as normative.

If feminism has taught us anything, it has shown us that what was once considered modern universalism was in fact male universalism, and what was once considered modern objectivity was in fact male objectivity. I will be bringing a number of key feminists into conversation with Christianity throughout the book, even though many of them are not Christians, because some Christians and several feminists share a good deal of common ground.

In discussions of contemporary attitudes about sex and aggression, I will show a number of ways in which sex and violence, sex and domination, are understood as the same thing—and how, in a glaring contradiction, contemporary liberal culture denies this common association with ideas about sex existing apart from the reality of social power.

This book will provide a rough genealogy of church-and-war alongside church-and-sex in which the reader can discern how often, and often terribly, the church has allowed itself to be pulled away from the example and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth by the fallen world, by power through control and domination, instead of what Kathryn Tanner has called the profligacy of Christ's grace. Rather than one consistent approach to questions about sex and/or war, what the record shows is that the church has consistently *adapted its practices and pronouncements to worldly power* with an eye to preserving the church's political influence and church men's prerogative. In a way, telling this story about the church's allowing itself to be diverted by power is the central goal of this book, even if a special emphasis is placed on war and sex. Whether we are looking at the Constantinian compromise or the Crusades or the witch trials or the Reformation or the wars of modernity, we will see again and again how the church has been pulled away from the Gospels by the material and cultural potency of the principalities and powers. This is not a new story; I just want to reveal how it looks when we examine it through the twin lenses of war and gender, and through the eyes of a former soldier, once sex and war have been de-naturalized.

The theological debates that animate some of these epochs are important but are secondary to my focus. The main question is, Why has the church been so consistently pulled away from the teachings and example of Christ by the world (a world constituted by male power and by war)? My tentative and partial answer is that men, males, bear a special responsibility for these failures, and that our attachment to something called "manhood," especially as that relates to sex and war, has significantly reproduced these failures. In many cases, maybe most cases, we, like those uniformed men who stood below the cross of Christ, know not what we do. We do not understand gendered power even as we wield it; and we wield it not knowing

we have it. So *Borderline* will talk about this power with the modest hope of increasing that understanding just a little.

This book is aimed at how masculinity informs the way Christian men view war, and how war informs our view of what it means to be men. It contends that how we view women underwrites our notions of masculinity, and that how we view men in relation to women informs how we think about war.

I will touch on the origins of liberal philosophy, the evolution of modernity, the development of the modern nation-state, and modern war. There is no credible account of the associations between war and masculinity without an account of the most consistent and identifiable agent of war today, which is the state. The evolution of war, and the evolution of masculinity inflected by the practice of war, will be incomprehensible without it.

There are several premises that this book challenges, directly or by inference, about war and the state. Modern war, as will become abundantly clear, cannot be conformed to *any* just-war rationale without first reinterpreting just-war principles through multiple layers of conceptual derivation and prevarication. The descriptions of the state that generally background the pacifism–just war debate assume a lot more than they explain. They not only assume the state as some constant in human society, when the state is actually a latecomer, but they also assume that the state is some static quality that serves to protect order, control violence, deliver justice, and so on. History does not support either idea, the stasis of form or the idealized functionalist account, without being disingenuously revised to fit a predetermined agenda. Representatives from both sides of this debate have claimed on occasion that the state is “necessary,” when a more accurate term might be “contingently unavoidable.” Legalized political authority, in its many forms, has over a few millennia insinuated itself into human affairs with a force that ensured societies would become self-organized around and through that authority, even though human beings lived without such authority for tens of thousands of years.¹ The state is not *necessary* in the way, for example, that oxygen is *necessary* for human life. It is necessary, that is, *contingently unavoidable*, in the same way that a car is *necessary* to find a job in some places in the United States or that money is *necessary* to survive in a commodified society. The claim that the state is *necessary* in the former sense is ideological, not descriptive. All “theories” of war that begin with the “necessity of the state” as a premise are not theories in the sense of scientific

1. By the state, here, I mean a political authority backed by a legalized monopoly on force. The nation-state, which is the subject of several chapters in the book, is a unique form of this political authority that is distinctly modern.

theory, the summary of conclusions that are so far confirmed by the body of evidence, but ideological presumptions disguised as theories.

As a Christian, I am not trying in this book to “make the case” for pacifism. I don’t need an account of the state, war, or masculinity to underwrite my commitment to nonviolence, because that commitment is based on my belief that war has been abolished in the kingdom of God, even as we live now between Pentecost and Parousia. I know that war is still a feature of the world and promises to remain so for the foreseeable future. Any number of Christian pacifists can and have explicated peace through Christology and eschatology better than I can. There’s no reason for me to conduct a detailed reiteration of their arguments.²

Christian pacifists dislike that war is brought into the sanctuary. “Hear, hear!” I say, agreeing with others who have already said it better. My point is that we are *also* bringing war into the sanctuary with our masculinity, and that by prioritizing an uncritical devotion to a particular kind of manhood, we continue to naturalize not just that version of manhood but war itself.

In what follows, I will challenge the usual moral accounts of war, wherein people obsessively tease out questions of good and evil based on the unpredictable outcomes and alleged motivations for war. My own experience as an insider and my own insights as an (admittedly very) amateur historian have revealed that historical outcomes are always mixed, often morally incomprehensible, and *never* final. In the real world, the justifications for going to war are, frankly, nearly always a pack of lies with a few convenient half-truths papering over the authentic and deeply sinful motivations that precede the bombs and bullets.

In the course of this book, I will provide examples of what men do to make war, to practice for war, to mentally prepare for war, and to learn to love war. It is nothing like the sterile and/or idealized accounts in war “theories” or war stories promulgated by various propaganda and entertainment media. (I confess to having difficulty making this distinction nowadays.)

There was a time when I myself advocated various justifications for violence, in writing and on the record. That was before I began to understand the relationship between my “sexual identity” and my experience of war—real, symbolic, and imaginary.

The organization of the chapters is aimed ultimately at an autobiographical account. While it may be counterintuitive to chronicle Pope Urban II’s war machinations in the eleventh century to explain Stan Goff’s military career in the twentieth century, and then to use that to explain the

2. Stanley Hauerwas, quoted above, is among the most prominent living theologians to articulate this peace theology, in which he was strongly influenced by the writings of John Howard Yoder and Karl Barth. Dorothy Day was also an eschatological pacifist.

relation between war, sex, and church, that is exactly what I'm trying to do. Think of it as flying towards a destination, reading about it on the way, then descending through the clouds. First, you see the curvature of the horizon, then the fields and roads and rivers. Then there is a distant landing strip getting closer and closer. You cross over highway overpasses, grass, runway lights. The tarmac appears out the window and reaches up for the landing gear.

In the first chapter, I will tell a story of which I was a part. This is your travel brochure for the flight. In the second chapter, I'll situate the first story in a bit of interesting primatology. Takeoff. In the third, I will go back four thousand years to get a handle on martial masculinity. Now we're cruising above the clouds. We will fly forward through time, pausing to illuminate history in a conversation with contemporary scholarship, especially feminist scholarship. We will pass through the history of the church, the Crusades, the Reformation, and into early modernity. This is the macro-history that I share with most readers in one way or another; and so it is a *group* autobiography. Then we will narrow the focus from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, flying in smaller circles over the Atlantic, then over the United States. As we approach the early twentieth century, I will begin to descend, describing—again, with occasional scholarly interventions and editorial asides—the formation of the specific culture into which I was born. In this respect, this will still be a group autobiography, albeit for a smaller pool of people, especially Western white men. As we approach the last few chapters, we will establish an historical context for the household into which I was born, then take a few snapshots of a childhood that began just a few years after World War II. My accounts will become increasingly personal until—after hundreds of pages of historical reorientation—you will rejoin me, this actual person, after having left me in the 1980s in the first chapter. Then you will take a few trips with me to places like Vietnam and Somalia and Haiti, where we can talk again as contemporaries; and I can explain after all why this is important to me—and, I believe, to you—as a Christian.

I will ask you to prepare for some turbulence along the way. The association of sex with domination, aggression, and hostility is simultaneously real and concealed by spiritual-talk about how sex is sacred, liberal-talk about how sex is harmless fun, or medical-talk about how sex is “healthy.” So when I describe the ways in which sex is not spiritual, not harmless, not “healthy” (God forbid it is therapeutic!), descriptions that will go against the grain of right and left in the dreary modern debates about sex, I will provide a lot of examples of the ways in which sex is so often about hostility, cruelty, and humiliation. The accumulated weight of these descriptions, as I can attest after having intentionally sat with them for over a decade now,

may well leave readers in a state of dislocation and doubt about their own lives as sexual beings. This may be necessary; but it is also necessary for me to remind myself and readers at the outset that, while the revelation that sex and power cannot be separated is essential and fraught with responsibility, we are not destined to live out the worst of our potentialities. At the risk of employing a cliché, love can indeed redeem sex from power.

There are men who are not living into the worst of this cultural fusion of sex and domination; and there are men of good will who want to do better. Moreover, sex can, under the right conditions, be simultaneously moral, mutual, and enjoyable without being exploitative or objectifying—and yes, even fun. How could a former soldier who comes into the church with the gift of the renunciation of violence not believe in everyday redemptions?

There will be places in the book where I will leave certain questions, and the reader, hanging. This is probably an indication that I haven't yet worked it all out myself; but it is also an invitation to readers to fill in the blanks for themselves. Having a lot of questions doesn't mean I have all the answers.

There is a good deal of political talk in this book, and there are some critiques of politics and economics that are commonly associated with political programs that claim to hold the keys to correction. This book does not endorse anything that looks, smells, walks, or talks like a political party or a political program. I am actually very pessimistic about the prospects of worldly politics changing the terrifying trajectory on which modern hubris has launched us. My hope for the future is not in politics, and certainly not in the politics I advocated in my pre-Christian past, but in the risen Christ.

Borderline is intended for discernment, not politics, unless you count the church as its own politics. Then and only then—yes!—let's get political. Let's live out the politics of vulnerability for all to see. Gramsci wrote about "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." I believe in "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of faith." It is about good news for all of us, but especially for men. I write this book as a witness to the power of death in the service of domination, of domination in the service of death, and as one who has been liberated by the knowledge that I never again have to raise my hand against another human being, that I never again have to dominate, humiliate, or retaliate against anyone. For men, this is very good news indeed. It means the door can be opened to God's greatest gift—love.

He who was most vulnerable; He who *saw* women through the veil of cultural invisibility (and told us to follow); He, having shed no other's blood, went to the cross.

He is risen.

Jesus is Lord.