

## Manhood?

*Manhood* is an ambiguous concept, which carries significant cultural baggage. In practice, it has meant a *macho* masculinity, which does not suit every man. Moreover, this muscular manhood establishes a norm that shapes the personal and social formation of men, often surfacing as a sense of entitlement. In domestic violence, for example, a sense of entitlement to use violence, plays a major role in the abuse of women. Typically, violence is his prerogative.

I suspect; however, the macho man is often lonely and frustrated. He is lonely because his suit of armour keeps others out. He is frustrated because a macho, muscular, or manly man cannot express the things that really matter. So, let's explore manhood, in three stages:

- The macho-tradition of manhood
- The manhood box
- Central questions

### The macho-tradition of manhood

Studies in masculinity are thriving. From academic to popular works, people are asking what it means to be a man. Christopher Forth, for example, has written a readable analysis in *Masculinity in the Modern West*, which illuminates aspects of the history of the macho tradition. In the process, Forth focuses on "the male body itself". According to Forth, the male body is a source of normative masculinity. In other words, the male body is *the* standard for what it means to be a man. And, of course, real men have *hard* bodies.

Historically, *hardness* has been prized over *softness*. *Hardness* is associated with the strength of the primal or wilderness man, and the urban warrior (who can tackle anything). *Softness* is associated with weakness, which is symptomatic of the emasculating effects of modern civilization. As such, the subtext of modern Western history is: beware of sedentariness and refined manners, as well as dandies and fops.

In fact, there is a pathological fear of becoming soft, because softness is associated with effeminacy in general, and homosexuality in particular. As such, the term *effeminacy* is often used as a euphemism for the term *homosexual*. On the one hand then, the hard body provides a man with a suit of armour, representing "a penetrating, ideally impermeable force". On the other hand, effeminacy implies "a penchant for sensual pleasures and refined manners that had little practical or ideological value for the warrior".

Christopher Forth's approach is helpful, but limited. In contrast, Bonnie Mann's *Sovereign Masculinity* is insightful, critically and psychologically. Mann refers to the macho tradition under the heading of *sovereign masculinity*, "The sovereign man, in essence, declares his own state of exception, in which he fantasizes that he is no longer subject to human vulnerability and intersubjective dependency". That is, the sovereign man is hard, and does not need others. In addition, she argues that sovereign masculinity affects a man's capacity to think, that is, to make rational judgments (cf. "higher cognitive functioning").

### The manhood box

Another problem with manhood is that it became *the* benchmark for measuring what it meant to be human. In other words, regardless of human diversity, we are all put in the same box. So, what do I mean by this? Imagine, you have been asked by a park ranger to classify the animals in a local state park. To do this, then, the park ranger provides you with a template, which is of a red kangaroo. On this basis, you discover there are six red kangaroos, that is, by definition, there are only six animals. So, the founding presumption means that there is only one type of animal, which is the red kangaroo. This means grey kangaroos, wombats, parrots, possums, and emus, don't count. Clearly, this is a flawed research project. Historically, when it comes to humanity, there is a similar problem.

With humankind, the only template that mattered was *manhood*. For centuries, for instance, women were regarded as deficient men or non-existent. Moreover, it was a macho version of manhood that prevailed. That is, it was white, Western, and heterosexual manhood. Surely, this is a flawed project too? What about women and gay men, let alone transgender and intersex persons? Don't they count? What about asking others, like transgender persons, how they regard themselves? In the end, this leaves us with some major theological challenges.

### **Central questions**

The problems associated with *manhood* are legion. Arguably, for example, President Trump's muscular rhetoric strives for a "remasculinization" of America. It is the call to toughen up. Of course, in Australia, real men do not eat quiche. Instead, real men knock out others with one punch. But not all men are like this. Moreover, we recognize the limits of defining what it means to be human on the basis of stereotypes. As Forth concludes, "in practice masculinities are always multiple". There are also gay, lesbian, transgender, and intersex identities. So, where does faith come in?

We belong to Christ. We are part of a faith community of love. We celebrate diversity, which is the fruit of God's creation. We also proclaim the promise of a renewed humanity in Christ, which transcends the stultifying conventions of every time and place (Gal 3:28). On that note then, I want to raise some theological questions, on the premise that the Church has an important role to play in the renewal of humanity and creation.

As a resurrection people, what can we offer these debates on human identity? How can we contribute to the idea of a renewed anthropology? As members of an incarnational tradition, how can a theology of the sacredness and complexity of creation contribute to these issues? In other words, if God is the author of the wonder and diversity of creation, can we approach the question of humanity with a more nuanced and empathic perspective?

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