Acad. Quest. (2022) 35.1
DOI 10.51845/35.1.6

Articles

Be a Man: Lessons from Three Literary Priests

Alexander Riley

Manhood is the object of a fair amount of attention in cultural debate these days, most of it critical, when not outright denunciatory. The various strands of feminism now dominant in many cultural institutions—certainly in our higher education and increasingly in tech industries and elsewhere in the corporate world—present men and masculinity in broadly negative terms. Attitudes and behaviors that were only decades ago utterly normative—men expressing strength and competence, for example—are decried as "toxic masculinity" and virtually all assertions of deep emotional and psychological sex differences are sneeringly anathematized. Men, in this view, are morally called, if they would escape vilification, to stop being men altogether. Some on the right react to this by embracing ways of being male that are nearly as infelicitously distanced from the most culturally productive manifestations of real masculinity as the hateful feminist caricatures. These often involve the stereotype of the brute male individualist who sees economic success, physical strength, and a propensity to philandering as the only measures of manhood.

We are in dire need of a careful consideration of real masculine virtue that steers past the exaggerated extremes and endeavors to reconstruct the conditions under which morally viable masculine virtue can be produced and preserved.

It is a largely unrewarding business in today's literary culture to look to literature for models of anything admirable, and certainly contemporary fiction is dominated by just the feminist man-bashing described above. But if one goes just a bit into the past, more success can be had. In a course on the sociology of religion that I have been offering for more than a decade, I frequently teach two novels—one published exactly a half century ago last summer, the other about thirty years earlier—in which my students are introduced to literary models

Alexander Riley is Professor of Sociology at Bucknell University whose latest books include *Toward a Biosocial Science: Evolutionary Theory, Human Nature, and Social Life* (Routledge, 2021) and, ed., *Reflecting on the 1960s at 50: A Concise Account of How the 1960s Changed America, for Better and for Worse* (Routledge, 2020); atriley@bucknell.edu.

NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION
of SCHOLARS

of Christian manhood that offer a profound critique of both feminist misandry and exaggeratedly egoistic machismo.

In *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Graham Greene gives us one of the great religious figures of literature in the main character, referred to as the "whiskey priest." We never learn his name, and in that absence, his mystery and myth, his capacity to stand as a male type, are enhanced. He is a figure who transcends the mundane at the same time as he bears many of the characteristics of the everyday characters who surround him in just post-revolutionary Mexico, wherein a radical anticlerical movement, personified here by a cold and merciless lieutenant, hunts and eliminates priests. In his mystery, the whiskey priest symbolically suggests another, still more profound connection to the Host which he administers to his flock. He meditates on the seeming contradiction of a "mystery bec[o]me too great, a damned man putting God into the mouths of men," struggling with it, failing to see a solution to the seeming inconsistency, but ultimately resolving it through his sense of responsibility to those whom he administers: "When he was gone it would be as if God in all this space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist. Wasn't it his duty to stay, even if they despised him, even if they were murdered for his sake, even if they were corrupted by his example?"

The whiskey priest is a man in every earthly way, not least of which concerns his having fathered a child with a local woman. This is of course a grave transgression for a priest, and much Christian reflection on this character has unfortunately stopped here in evaluating the whiskey priest, finding in it unanswerable evidence of his depravity. It is true, the whiskey priest is corrupted by his moral imperfection, but Greene's fallen priest suffers immensely for this sin, "carr[ying] a wound, as though a whole world had died." He loves and tries to protect the child of that union, a cursed girl who clearly disdains him and seems marked for disaster.

His alcoholism also ties him to the earthly, material world of everyday Mexican life, and to the poor *campesinos* to whom he provides God's gifts. The crushing difficulty of that lowly and grinding peasant life is embraced by the priest, not only because it is the world of his flock, but because it is the testing ground for those who would prepare for Heaven. "Pray that you will suffer more and more and more," he tells them, "[t]he police . . . the soldiers . . . the beating you always get from the *jefe* . . . smallpox and fever, hunger . . . Perhaps without them . . . you wouldn't enjoy heaven so much. Heaven would not be complete."

This refusal to reject suffering, and even to cultivate it as a blessing, is a consummately masculine virtue, a good father's morality. "No pain, no gain" is the modern trivialization of this profound ethic that the whiskey priest shows us in its fuller tenor.

The novel's Judas figure, the man identified only as "the half-caste," convinces the whiskey priest to suspend his flight from the country to save himself from the revolution's priest-killers that he might instead attend to a dying American who wants to give final confession. Throughout this episode, Greene makes it clear that the priest cannot have missed all the clues that he is being set up by the half-caste, who is eager to collect a ransom offered by the lieutenant for information on any still practicing priests. His "story had as many holes in it as a sieve," and yet the slight possibility that there might truly be a dying man in need of absolution is enough to persuade him to the task. Encountering the dying American, the whiskey priest's efforts to prepare his soul for death are resisted by the mortally wounded criminal, who, seemingly aware of the half-caste's game, only tells the priest to take his weapon to protect himself. The priest refuses and hurriedly prays over the wounded man as he dies. He is afraid his effort has been useless, and indeed he goes to his own death shortly thereafter, at the hands of the lieutenant who has been stalking him throughout, convinced that he has "done nothing for anybody" and that he "might just as well have never lived." He goes to God, in his account, "empty-handed, with nothing done at all." His last reflection would merit his castigation as an unsalvageable reactionary by contemporary woke culture, fixed as it is in its hatred of perfection and the pursuit thereof: "He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint."

The whiskey priest is sure he is very far from sainthood. But how else would a saint regard his own potential sainthood, and how else does a virtuous man consider claims about his own virtue, but with sharply self-critical humility? Not "did you see what I have done?" but "I should have done more"; this is the rallying cry of the man whose striving in the world he evaluates always by a standard he knows he cannot ever reach. His own view of his achievement can be no evidence, for he can be counted on to view his achievements against a measuring rod of unachievable perfection. What matters is what he has done. That account for the whiskey priest is not unimpressive: he has tended to the flock under conditions of harsh repression, at risk of his life, and eventually at its cost; he has struggled—if often without success—against his own demons,

and he has shown radiant love for those he has inadvertently harmed by his failings; he refuses to despise his betrayer, who merits just such a response, and his killer, instead feeding them both spiritually and, in the half-caste's case, materially; he goes to his death having rejected the chance to escape in order to do his duty as a priest and minister to those in need.

The mother meditating on his story at the novel's conclusion hears the child complain of the smell of alcohol on his breath and gives us the truth: "He was one of the martyrs of the Church . . . You must never say that again . . . He may be one of the saints." He *may* be a saint, but he is certainly a man worth reckoning with as such. Brave, faithful, humble, susceptible as men are to transgressive pleasures, yet capable too of resisting and reviling them and recognizing his defects and repairing the damage they have done to others. The lieutenant is the classic Mexican macho figure in the novel, the version of exaggerated machismo that we see played out today in some corners of the non-Christian right, but every reader knows he is the story's villain. The whiskey priest bests him, not through superior firepower and violence, but through his ability to withstand what the lieutenant offers in that regard, and with a superior will to forgive him for that offering. Greene is demonstrating to his reader that resistance to the totalitarian—which is without doubt represented by Mexico's revolutionaries—is, at least sometimes, as effective, perhaps more so, when it is not armed. Or, rather, when it is armed with spiritual rather than mortal weapons.

By contrast to the physically unimpressive whiskey priest, in William Peter Blatty's popular fiction *The Exorcist*, the two priests, Merrin and Karras, who are called upon to exorcise a demon that has possessed a young girl, outwardly glow with masculine prowess and competence. Each is a physical presence—the older Merrin with an overwhelmingly intense gaze; Karras with the robust build of a former boxer—and also an intellect of formidable power. Merrin is a scholar of renown, and Karras has a medical degree and expert knowledge of psychopathology. The novel's narrative emphasizes not solely their assertive male capabilities, but also the centrality of their submission to the source of their own powers, and their recognition of their imperfect ability to properly acknowledge that source. Pride is a common human, and perhaps especially male, defect, and Blatty sketches both priests as suffering from it. Karras is experiencing a crisis of faith that makes it nearly impossible to properly equilibrate his elite status as an intellectual with his humble spiritual calling. He knows only too well that had he rejected the priesthood and followed a purely

medical career path he might have saved his ailing mother from the grim fate that has befallen her, dying abandoned and alone in rotting tenement housing. In a chilling encounter, Karras meets a filthy, alcoholic beggar, who implores him, "Could ya help an old altar boy, Father? I'm a Catholic." The priest recoils in disgust. The demon later jeeringly recalls this to Karras, who winces at the direct hit on this moral wound.

Merrin's pride is similar—is it ever that variable in different sufferers?—but more subtle, and, unlike Karras's, absent altogether in the cinematic adaptation of the novel. It too has to do with his elevation of himself over those of lesser intellectual ability. This attitude has played a central role in driving his paleontological career. Merrin understands that this is the part of his personality that most inclines him to his own ruin, and he knows too that he is called to find a way to act in affirmation of his fellows, in magnanimity toward them even if he of necessity mostly lives apart from them. Yet his inability to easily mingle with other men who are not scholars and writers, with their mundane interests and their incomprehensible lack of concern for serious matters, causes him great pain. And the demon does not miss the opportunity to use the flaw against him. "Your abode is in a nest of peacocks, Merrin! Your place is within yourself! *Go back to the mountaintop and speak to your only equal*!" the demon thunders at him, witheringly revealing that the novel's great hero, the exorcist of the title, is marked by the same fundamental flaw as that which turned an angel into Satan.

Both men of the cloth, like the whiskey priest, are consummately fallen, incomplete in their ability to live up fully to the Christian ethic, yet both, again as the priest of *The Power and the Glory*, go to their ends in selfless sacrifice for others in spiritual need. Merrin dies under the manipulations of the demon after having sent an emotionally exhausted Karras from the room for rest while he faces the emissary of Hell alone. Karras renews his faith in seeing a poem written by the girl Regan to her mother, which pristinely, in the child's view, expresses the immaterial spiritual perfection of love. As his confidence in the Christian victory over death surges back into him, he again ascends the stairs to the room where Regan, still possessed, lies, the body of Merrin on the ground before her. His explosion of male—*fatherly*, in both senses of that term—protective power is at once earthy and transcendently heroic: "You were losing! . . . Yes, you're very good with children! Little girls! Well, come on! Let's see you try something bigger! . . . Try me! Leave the girl and take me!" Then, when the demon has taken the bait, Karras the amateur boxer, and thus possessive of

the most primal kind of male prowess, that of combat, overpowers it. In the film, this is entirely visual, visceral, physical, in his struggling, grimacing face, throwing off the demonic glare and becoming human again in the instant before he launches himself out the window. In the novel, it is both this physical act of the strong man and the spiritual commitment to self-sacrifice and selfless aid to the weak, as his last words are “No! I won’t let you hurt them! You’re not going to hurt them! You’re coming with . . . ”

The relationship to women and girls is a crucial aspect of male character. Greene gives us female characters with varied perspectives on the whiskey priest and his virtues: some recognize his sainthood; others disdain him for his mortal weaknesses. Despite his serious transgressions involving the affair with the woman and the birth of his daughter, he displays just the respectful and protective attitude toward the fairer sex that is expected from the virtuous man. In *The Exorcist*, the possessed girl Regan’s mother Chris is the central female character whose interaction with the priests sheds light on this element of their manhood. She has an uncompromising reverence for both men. Blatty makes much of the divorce of Chris and Regan’s father, and the possible role this fracturing of their family has played in Regan’s psychological troubles. Mother and daughter alike seek protective male figures, and Merrin and Karras are primordially fatherly figures, the former in a wiser, more confident guise, the latter’s greater uncertainty balanced by his passionate, energetic will to fight the evil force that would destroy this family. The film alters the scene in which Karras summons the strength to go and finally face down the demon, but in a way that is still consistent with his masculine virtue. While he is resting downstairs, Chris tremblingly asks him, “Is she going to die?” His energetic “No!” is that of both the priest and the substitute father-protector.

Frequently, my students want to class the conclusions of both novels—all three of the heroic priests die—as “tragic.” What they mean by this is not that the novels are tragedies, like *Antigone* or *Macbeth*, but that these are bad endings, and that perhaps the good guys have come up short. I explain to them why this reading will not fit the texts. The whiskey priest’s death is a pure martyrdom, and it contributes to the mythos of the faith and to its ability to persevere amid the revolution’s effort to annihilate it. Father Karras’s heroic act saves Regan, and he recovers his faith and makes confession in his last minutes of life. Merrin’s death does not change the fact of his irreplaceable role in putting the demon to rout, and we feel confident, given his righteous actions and abundantly

evident faith, that his post-death trajectory will be upward. Merrin's death, and Karras's fury in reaction to it, are essential to Karras finding the power to vanquish the demon. For if Merrin had not died, the girl and Karras might well not have been saved. His passing is an act of martyrdom that saves two other souls.

The deaths of the three priests are sad, but they are also triumphant. The values they manifest will outlive them, we are assured by the narratives of both novels. Virtuous men can ask of nothing more in their worldly struggles.

The masculine characteristics of these three beautifully sketched literary priests are precisely those that a vibrant culture needs in abundance in men of all callings and professions. They are possessed of a vigorous faith in unassailable moral values, an eager fearlessness and willingness to sacrifice themselves in defense of the weak, and a humble self-conception rooted in the perfection of an eternal model. It is an optimistic affirmation on the part of Greene and Blatty that the final pages of both novels portray men who have taken the places of the perished male heroes to stoically carry on their business. Men and women who feel disheartened by our current misandrist cultural malaise might well, in reading Greene and Blatty, refresh their courage and more determinedly slog on through our depressing present toward a better time to come.