

Book Review

Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999.

Leon J. Podles holds a PhD in English from the University of Virginia and serves as a senior editor for *Touchstone, A Journal of Mere Christianity*. The first chapter of *The Church Impotent* begins: “Despite constant complaints of feminists about the patriarchal tendencies of Christianity, men are largely absent from the Christian churches of the modern Western world. Women go to church; men go to football games” (3). Thus begins Podles’s provocative analysis of the under participation of men in the modern church, which he describes as “women’s clubs with a few male officers” (ix). He contrasts modern Western Christianity with contemporary Islam and Judaism that retain dominant involvement by men. Podles seeks not only to describe the dearth of male participation in the Church but also to offer some corrective solutions.

The book traces the absence of males in the Western church to theology. Podles claims that Christianity has embraced a theology that emphasizes feminine aspects of faith (passivity, receptivity) that have tended to marginalize masculinity. He claims that men idealize the agonistic struggles of the hero who achieves self-transcendence through self-sacrifice, and modern men are not offered a satisfying masculine spirituality in the contemporary Church.

Podles begins by tracing the root masculinity of Judaism with its conception of God as Father. Podles praises the patriarchy of the Old Testament, which, he contends, is not based on exploitation and dominance but “is a system in which fathers care for their families and find their emotional centers in their offspring ... Patriarchy, we can easily forget, was and is a great achievement in the face of the male tendency to promiscuity and alienation from children and the women who bear them” (67). Podles sees the benevolent patriarchy and masculinity of Judaism continuing to find fulfillment in early Christianity. He sees this not only in the manly sacrifice of Christ and the martyred Church Fathers but also in early Christianity’s separation from the world in the initiatory rite of baptism. Early Christianity offered men, in particular, a heroic path to follow.

The foundation of feminized Christianity Podles traces to the high Middle Ages and the bridal mysticism of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the medieval women’s movement (*frauenwegung*), and the scholastic revival of Aristotelian thought. The result, according to Podles, was a feminized spirituality that idealized receptivity. Women were ideal disciples, because they were able, like Mary, to be passive recipients. This movement, however, alienated men and sent them from the church in droves. Podles traces countercurrents to the feminization of Christianity in both Catholicism (militant orders like the Jesuits) and in the Protestant Reformation and Revivalism. He also mentions the modern evangelical Promise Keepers movement as an example of this countercurrent. He observes that “Evangelical church life may be less feminized than Catholicism or mainline Protestantism, but the underlying problem, that men feel that religion is feminine, is still present” (162).

Finally, Podles traces a description of masculinity as a religion. He argues that “Masculinity is a religion, and in many ways resembles the Christianity of which it is a foretaste. Can men worship a savior unless they know what it is to be a savior? A man wants to be a god. He wants to be a savior, protecting all in his care, giving his own life to save theirs” (164). Podles traces the religion of masculinity in modern male fascination with sexual conquest, sports, fraternal organizations, and interest in war. The dark side of masculinity can lead to abuse of power as expressed in modern Nazism and fascism. “Masculinity can easily become nihilism ... To a nihilist the only good is what he wants. A soft nihilism is the ideal of the modern European society, in which sex and possessions and amusements are the goals of life” (194). Podles calls for the church to offer men in Christianity a satisfying alternative to nihilism. The “perverted masculinity” of our day can only be corrected by the real masculinity of Christ.

The final chapter of the book is titled “The Future of Men in the Church.” Podles begins with his familiar refrain “Men do not go to church. They regard involvement in religion as unmasculine, and almost more than anything they want to be masculine” (196). He also, however, acknowledges that “Christianity has within it the resources that allow it to appeal to men, to show that not only will Christianity not undermine their masculinity, but it will also fulfill and perfect it” (197). He makes suggestions for the recovery of male rites of initiation, masculine spirituality based on the struggle against evil, and brotherly (self-sacrificial) love. He also denounces liberal and mainline church campaigns “to establish feminism and the toleration of homosexuality as the new orthodoxies” as moves that “can only drive men even further from the Church” (208). Podles calls on the Church to define masculinity and femininity according to the Scripture. “Only then will men return to the Church, and the harmony of Adam and Eve in the new creation be at least in part restored” (208).

Podles’s well documented book is a unique analysis of the dearth of male participation in the modern, Western Church. Many, no doubt, will find his tone strident and his position extremist, particularly in his unrelenting criticism of feminist and homosexual inroads in the life of the Church. Others will find it merely truthful and thought provoking. Podles’s book seems to be primarily aimed at a Catholic and mainline Protestant audience. Outside of his truncated observations on the Promise Keepers movement, Podles devotes little attention to the participation of men in evangelical churches. Still, his book points a spotlight on an often neglected topic: the unique spiritual needs of men and the ways in which the Church meets, or fails to meet, those needs.

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