

## Must “Real Men” Have Sick Souls?

Charles Joseph Meinhart  
*University of Oklahoma*

In her book *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families*, educational philosopher Jane Roland Martin writes about issues facing schools today. One current concern relates to boys and masculinity. She challenges an assumption put forward by many that the masculinity of boys is somehow endangered or emasculated by educational and social policies that constrain violence, aggression, and male supremacy. Martin suggests that the pursuit of virtue in educating boys will, in fact, confront honestly the issues of violence, aggression, and misogyny with care, concern, and connection.<sup>1</sup> She reads statistics regarding juvenile male incarceration, suicide, and other forms of violence as indicating that the present education of boys is brutalizing rather than enriching them. To fall back on “traditional” values and beliefs about masculinity would only heighten the brutalization, since the manhood boys seem to be learning represents the excesses of the traditional masculine virtues. Boys today are growing up as caricatures of manhood in a masculinist form that perpetuates the social structures and relations of male supremacy. Martin raises this concern in discussing miseducation, reminding educators that the way boys learn masculinity has social consequence.

Brutalization, of course, has two outcomes: an assault on another and a diminishing of oneself. The beliefs a boy embraces regarding masculinity will enrich or brutalize both the boy and society.

William James states in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* that beliefs are rules for action. Here he explores in a helpful way the relationship between experience and belief. Beliefs have practical consequences that affect how people understand themselves as well as how they relate to others and the world around them. Beliefs reflect and shape one’s vision of life, or what James would call the religious sense or experience. James says that “only when our thought about a subject has found its rest in belief can our action on the subject firmly and safely begin.”<sup>2</sup> If James is right, then in order to understand what is going on in American culture today in regard to masculinity, the beliefs that inform it need to be examined and clarified.

I will employ James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* for two purposes. I will suggest that masculinity is a spiritual quest with a wide variety of experiences. I also propose the use of *Varieties of Religious Experience* as a tool for thinking about the myriad ways in which boys react to the miseducation that comes with brutalization. I am suggesting that the masculinity experience is a (perhaps *the*) religious experience for men. Understanding various experiences of masculinity as varieties of religious experience might aid in constructing alternatives that mitigate those varieties that brutalize boys.

## THE SICK SOUL

James divides religious experience into four varieties, three making up one type of religion, that of the "sick soul," and the fourth consisting of a separate and radically different approach, the "healthy-minded." In the first three, some sort of melancholy, dissatisfaction, or evil is seen as a pervasive and determining element of the world in which we live. I will refer to the three varieties as "Prisoner," "Victim," and "Stranger." In sick soul religion, there is a rupture between what is experienced and what is thought to be desirable or expected. Enchantment turns to disenchantment. Brutalized, the sick soul looks at himself and the world as damaged goods. The sick soul is so grasped by its encounter with disenchantment or displacement that this disenchantment becomes central in sorting out meaning. There is a realization that the world of meaning does not just shed light on the world as it is being experienced, but may contradict it, calling it into question in some way or another (*VRE*, 150–60).

## THE PRISONER

James sees the first of these sick soul varieties as a crisis of meaning centered on sin, guilt, shame, and a sense of being polluted and unacceptable (*VRE*, 222–5). Shortcomings and a sense of not living up to expectations haunt this particular religious experience, which I call the "Prisoner" experience. The disenchantment the Prisoner feels is caused by disobedience and a sense of impurity or uncleanness. The Prisoner looks within and sees dirt. Self-contempt often marks this experience, especially at the beginning. The writings of spiritual pilgrim John Bunyan can provide an example. Bunyan was riddled with doubts, filled with fears of unworthiness and burdened by a sense of being polluted with wickedness (*VRE*, 175–81). He is constantly aware of his own sin and uncleanness and that of the world around him. In this spiritual path, the world and God are seen through the lens of crime and punishment. Indeed, the world can be seen by some in this experience as God's Panopticon: God is Watching You!<sup>3</sup> Fixing blame and punishment are central to this experience.

In a very real sense, the Prisoner experience is a response to being brutalized by the male supremacist system. The brutalized boy feels dirty by way of his brutalization. Having once tried the straight and narrow door to manhood and been mistreated, the Prisoner often acts out in a variety of "impure" ways before giving up, feeling guilty, and rediscovering the safety of the acceptable path. Since in this variety everyone is guilty or blameful, the Prisoner looks for forgiveness, so as not to be imprisoned in shame and guilt. The Prisoner, feeling unworthy, pursues those paths he feels will make him worthy (*VRE*, 176–7).

Such an approach might be good news for those boys whose daily performance of masculinity fits the general expectations. Boys learn what is expected of them in terms of masculinity, and they either feel comfortable with that or find ways to conform. Boys who stray from those norms would be seen as ignoring what comes naturally. Boys who explore a variety of relationships or sexual expressions, and boys who are not "strong," would be seen as harmful to cultural wealth as Prisoner men understand it.

Clearly, in the Prisoner experience, there is little room for the gay, bisexual, or transgendered boy, among others. A young man who questions the masculinity of domination is considered “confused.” (Prisoners treat sexual minorities as if they are Strangers.) Being gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer carries a (hidden) stigma of guilt and shame. Redemption comes when the guilt is admitted, and since it is often hidden (closeted) and not addressed, the redemptive steps required by the Prisoner experience are never taken.

#### THE VICTIM

The second variety of sick soul that James addresses (he refers to it as a dread-centered melancholy) is what I will call the “Victim” experience. James describes this experience as fitting those people who fear the universe, who experience it as a place of immense suffering. The real problem is not so much sin or being-out-of-place as it is the experience of anxiety, suffering, and fear. The Victim responds to his brutalization by living in constant anxiety and apprehension (*VRE*, 178–80). This particular path is represented in *Varieties of Religious Experience* by an anonymous writer (perhaps James himself) who speaks of anxiety and dread being at the core of his experience. The Victim walks a spiritual path that looks for security, protection, shelter in the storm, and a healthy dwelling in the midst of adversity (*VRE*, 178–84). God often becomes a Father-Protector, a light in the darkness of anxiety and fear and a model for men.

In the Victim experience, boys and men who do not “fit” experience insecurity about being “man enough.” They might tend to see themselves as victims (perhaps of genetics, a bad childhood, or a homophobic society). In a world of male supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality, life is experienced as hostile at many turns. Brutalization is no mere concept for this particular experience of masculinity. They participate in male violence often as recipient rather than dealer of violence. Victims are blamed for their victimhood, just as sexually abused boys are frequently demonized as having some seductive control over the abuser. Life may take a liberating turn when the Victim seeks a healthy dwelling in the midst of adversity, cultivating a sense of the divine as companion and co-sufferer (*VRE*, 240–3).

#### THE STRANGER

The last sick soul variety I name the “Stranger” experience. James describes this as an experience centered on the feeling that all is vanity, that life tends toward the absurd, and that the person just does not fit into the world as it is experienced. There is a feeling of being-out-of-place (*VRE*, 170). James uses words like “disillusionment” and “alienation” to define this variety (*VRE*, 175). His primary example is Leo Tolstoy, from his *Confessions*. Tolstoy saw the ordinary consciousness as the world of fashion, conventionality, and artificiality. (This is the world of “projects” and personal ambition as well.) His is an experience of not-being-at-home in the world that leaves him feeling purposeless, “thrown” into a world that seems absurd. His ambivalence regarding women may be seen in his relationships with women as well as in his portrait of *Anna Karenina*, at once admired yet dismissed as weak.

This disenchantment reaches a crisis point for Tolstoy. It is only addressed satisfactorily when he turns to God as the source of meaning in a new way (poverty)

and accepts his sense of difference or “thrown-ness” as a gift and a clue for living with purpose (*VRE*, 167–70). Tolstoy’s experience suggests that the Stranger makes a conscious decision to enter a new or deeper consciousness and leave behind the fashions and definitions of the world. Faith (or religious experience) thus nudges a person from falsehood and illusion to truth and clarity. In this spiritual path, the world and the divine are seen through the lens of disillusion and difference. The Stranger’s path, whether speaking of religious or sexual journeys, seeks to discover purpose in the midst of one’s difference, to develop what James calls a deeper kind of consciousness (*VRE*, 175).

The Stranger experience of masculinity raises questions about how comfortable boys and men might be with the socially approved domination paradigm for masculinity. A Stranger, upon realization of how brutalized he has been, either becomes, like Tolstoy and others, suicidal or bent on various forms of self-destructive behavior, or begins to rethink the whole enterprise, by trusting his own experience as the better guide.

#### THE CHOICES BOYS AND MEN MAKE

In addressing the experience of Stranger, Prisoner, and Victim, James points to differing manifestations of each experience that he refers to as lower forms and higher forms, or the pious and the saintly. He notes that lower or constrictive forms magnify excesses and caricatures of holiness. On the other hand, those who embrace the higher or expansive form can move through it to an experience that transforms them (*VRE*, 290). He calls this transcending experience “saintliness.” The saint sees and realizes a merging of the lived life and the ideal life (*VRE*, 403). The spiritual emotions become “the habitual center of the personal energy” (*VRE*, 298). James describes how saintliness is marked by certain universal characteristics:

- a feeling of being in a world wider than one’s selfish experience
- a sense of the presence of some power companioning one’s experience
- a “melting down” of the confines of selfhood and a sense of freedom
- a shift toward an emotional center built on love and a “yes” to life.

This has practical moral consequences that include resisting “official” values, embracing simplicity and honesty, enlarging one’s sense of life, being concerned for purity in a new way, and embracing compassion or “charity” (*VRE*, 298–300). The possibility of saintliness means that the sick soul can, by embracing the higher form of their experience, experience a healing of spirit and a new life in the world, a life that casts away fear and anxiety (*VRE*, 291).

In the masculinity experience, lower forms surrender to the masculinist vision and convert to and collaborate with brutishness. Following James’s lead, higher forms of the masculinity experience would convert away from brutishness and use the experiential reference to reframe and re-engage reality.

One example of Prisoner masculinity in what James would call its “higher form,” is John Stuart Mill. Raised in a class-conscious, androcentric, and confining Victorian culture, his personal transformation led toward an understanding of life

that found meaning in liberal values like equality and personal freedom, including social equality for women, a value absent in what James would call the “lower forms” of Prisoner experience (*VRE*, 358–72).

An example of a lower and more common form of Prisoner masculinity might be the muscular Christianity of the Promise Keepers movement, with its emphasis on piety, sin, and redemption. Promise Keepers are convinced that many social problems today are the direct result of men not taking charge of their marriages and families more decisively. Prisoners sustain the brutalization of masculinist culture by developing apology for it. They draw parallels between the general sin and redemption motif of evangelical Christianity and the sin of wandering from being a good husband and father. The religious task here is to experience mercy and reclaim masculinity in its traditional mode. From this Prisoner perspective, just as Adam and Eve were seduced by an apple, modern males have been seduced by the fruit of feminism, relativism, and the playboy philosophy. The task is to recover and maintain purity in themselves and in their families, where they are in charge as redeemed and “godly” men.

An example of what James calls a lower form of Victim masculinity might be careful and discrete closeted gay men, who live with a constant sense of insecurity and tragedy that affects their professional and personal destiny. The founder of Boy Scouting, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, is a Victim. He saw himself and the youth of England victimized by the feminization of school and church and organized the Boy Scouts as an antidote to “feminization” and “softness.” While married to Olave (thirty two years younger than Baden-Powell), he had a hidden relationship with a younger man for over thirty years. A higher form of Victim might be found in someone like Malcolm X, who wrestled with his own sense of being a man in the harsh environment of American racism and did time in prison. In his victimhood he first turned to the answers found in the teachings of Elijah Muhammed. Later, his encounter on the Hajj with a more global Islam changed his perspective again and enlarged his sense of humanity.

An example of a lower form of Stranger experience would be a boy or man who decides life is absurd and reduces life to a game to be played and “manhood” as a socially approved role to perform. The Stranger feels out of place and the resulting dissonance can become either a source of harm or an opportunity to re-examine life. An example of healthier Stranger masculinity might be a boy who accepts his sexuality without buying into the illusions of masculine supremacy, who understands that model as dehumanizing or brutalizing to himself. This is accomplished when the Stranger learns a different way of relating to others and refuses to buy into what James calls the “official values.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* relies on nature, but understands that a natural education will produce values contrary to those of the corrupt society.

We can see that each variety has a constrictive expression and an expansive one. It would seem that these expressions are fluid across varieties. A constrictive Stranger, for instance, is not necessarily stuck there. Transitions can happen in many

ways, from a constrictive to an expansive mode, or from one constrictive mode to another.

#### HEALTHY-MINDED EXPERIENCE

The fourth variety James examines is not part of the sick soul typology. He calls it (with tongue in cheek) “healthy-minded religion.” He also refers to it as “Sky-Blue,” because he considers it naïve. It is optimistic about reality as it is. James says that healthy-mindedness is the “tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good.” The “involuntary” variety is rather simple: being happy about things in their immediacy. The sting of sin and the sense of being disoriented are seen as false concerns. All is well with the world. What James calls the “voluntary” healthy-mindedness is a more systematic way of looking at life as good, “conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being” (*VRE*, 101). Because healthy-minded people see evil as a maladjustment to reality, which is best dealt with by focusing on the good rather than the evil, they insist on the dignity, rather than the depravity, of human beings. They trust in the possibility of human evolution (*VRE*, 103–5). James believes this to be dishonest, because it minimizes or denies evil. The Sky-Blue person often simply chooses to ignore evil, and this may grow into a deliberate policy, theologically and philosophically speaking. Yet James acknowledges that this systematic cultivation of healthy mindedness is not absurd, but “consonant” with currents in human nature. We avoid discussing death or disease; the world gets prettified in our minds on a regular basis. Who wants to address civilian deaths in Baghdad or Darfur when we can discuss “Dancing With the Stars” (*VRE*, 103)?

Some insist on happiness and success (positive thinking) in the midst of a world that sends mixed signals. Others see the world as really an enchanting and enchanted place. Still other healthy-minded folk acknowledge the difficulties of the world, but insist that this is the way things were meant to be. In terms of the question of masculinity, such thinking accepts the dominant paradigm for manhood and seeks to conform.

Sky-Blue masculinity would seem to be that approach to the cultural definition of manhood that embraces it uncritically. In its tacit appeal to gender essentialism, Robert Bly’s popular work, *Iron John*, could be an example of Sky-Blue masculinity. His claim is that men have lost touch with an innate or original maleness, the recovery of which will bring health and happiness; similar to the thinking of Mary Baker Eddy, cited by James as a model of this experience. Another model is found in the ways William Pollack addresses the “Boy Code.” Both Bly and Pollack claim that original masculinity is “just there,” if we would only recognize it.

The lower form of the Prisoner experience seems to capture the dominant paradigm for masculinity in America today. If philosophers of education are to work to evaluate broader and more expansive approaches to masculinity education, they should be aware of all these varieties. Because the Stranger experience stresses knowing and experiencing, it seems to fit well with pragmatist approaches. However, there is one experience James does not explore, which may be worth our attention.



While each sick soul variety plays out in what James refers to as lower (constricted) and higher (expansive) forms, all healthy-minded religion is dismissed as a lower form. I think James is unfair to the healthy-minded experience. He seems to sell the healthy-minded experience short by setting it up as a straw man. Yet, characteristics of those he calls saintly — fearlessness, a sense of union with nature, confidence — are similar to the marks of the healthy-minded folk he disparages. He seems to dismiss healthy-minded experience because it does not encourage a crisis approach to matters of spirit. He does so because it stresses goodness and appears to neglect evil. In transitioning from healthy-minded to the sick soul varieties, he remarks, in telling the distinguishing characteristic of the sick soul: “Now in contrast with such healthy-minded views as these, if we treat them as a way of deliberately minimizing evil, stands a radically opposite view, a way of maximizing evil” (VRE, 148). He never seems to consider the possibility that a healthy-minded experience might take what he calls evil seriously without wanting to “maximize” it. For James, evil is the interpretive key to life (VRE, 148). That is what makes all three sick soul varieties so appealing to him. Viewing healthy-minded religion as naïveté in clerical robes, he does not seem to consider that a human being might choose goodness, truth, or beauty to be interpretive keys, while still acknowledging evil. Questioning James’s fascination with evil might be appropriate in light of his own experience as Victim. It might also be helpful to examine his approach to masculinity and his fascination with the battlefield experience. My claim is that James, by selling short the possibilities in healthy-minded experience, deprives us of another interpretive key and neglects an approach centered on goodness, truth, and beauty.

Must men be “redeemed” from harmful forms of masculinity only by maximizing evil? Might not the healthy-minded possibility of interpreting life by focusing on the good offer something new to the discussion of masculinity? What if boys and men constructed meaning by using something other than evil as the key to existence? A higher form of healthy-minded experience has yet to be constructed, but Baruch Spinoza and perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau could provide clues.

Consider Rousseau’s *Emile*, where the philosopher claims that humans are not only naturally good but also can become naturally just. Rousseau contends that humans are free by nature and that virtue is in some sense natural to being human. Rousseau argues that moral virtue is the culmination of natural human development: the natural human can become moral. An education that trusts this goodness in nature can make *Emile* good both for himself and for others. This trust in nature and goodness does not ignore problems or destructive behavior, but brings to bear an approach that refuses to “maximize evil.” In contrast, James himself links trust of nature with lower forms of religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience* and calls for a war against nature in *The Moral Equivalent of War* (VRE, 98–103 and 158–9).<sup>4</sup> War seems fascinating for James, along with heroism in the face of struggle and the possibility of death and other dangers. He distances himself from the popular Chautauqua movement because he sees it as soft and therefore harmful to society.<sup>5</sup> Martin’s critique of James’s masculinist approach is instructive in helping to locate

James in his own schema. His love of “robustness,” view of the feminine, and disdain for cooperative ventures may block his ability to listen to healthy-minded voices. James seems a Victim, drawn to the muscularity of the Prisoner.

Perhaps James excludes an expansive healthy-minded experience because healthy-minded people he examines seem uninterested in aggressive warrior behavior. Perhaps one should take into consideration the number of women James cites as examples of Sky-Blue thinking. (He does include Teresa of Avila among the sick souls, yet dismisses her as a model of excessiveness.) Is there a reason for his seeming slight of women’s experience?

Again, Martin’s critique of James’s famous essay, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” is helpful. In the essay, published in 1906, the year before Baden-Powell founded the Boy Scouts, James argues that the martial virtues (virtues inherent in the war experience) are superior to others, bringing out the best in a society. Identifying the martial virtues as obedience, intrepidity, contempt of softness, and surrender of self, he proposes the development of social projects as a moral equivalent to war, with the aim of positively redirecting the nation’s energies.<sup>6</sup> These projects would engage young men in highly disciplined social service. Done correctly, such projects would preserve the martial virtues and help men see the importance of a war, not against each other, but against nature. Furthermore, James urges teachers to encourage a combat mentality in their students, including the use of shame to motivate learning.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE SICK SOUL AND THE FUTURE OF BOYS

Learning from James, might not educators make connections between religious experience and masculine experience? There are harmful forms of religion or spirituality, as well as helpful (constrictive as well as expansive, in Jamesian terms). If I am correct in seeing the experience of coming to terms with one’s maleness as a religious experience, and the varieties as responses to the brutalization that accompanies the dominant forms of masculinity, then enlarging the discussion by showing the religious import of masculinity could have vital social and educational ramifications.

If “masculinity” is an experience — indeed, a plethora of experiences — it cannot be reduced to a “traditional value” set in stone (what Martin might call a “dead relic”). By exposing boys and men to the whole variety of experiences, it is possible to promote a more fluid way of looking at masculinity (and gender). Masculinities are plural, because they are varied in light of differing responses to the brutalization that results from the male supremacy promoted by dominant culture and imposed on boys by miseducation in myriad forms. It seems obvious that there is no “true masculinity,” but rather there are masculinities — a variety — each with its own assets and liabilities. Is it not also possible to begin to address the brutalization of boys by beginning to understand the variety of spiritualities they embrace as responses to their brutalization?

Do boys and men see themselves primarily as human beings or primarily as bearers of manhood? Is a model of manhood that rejects the objectification of



women and nature, that teaches a child to rely on experience and reflective action, even compatible with masculinity? The possibility of taking bodily differences seriously without buying into current masculinities would seem to invite us to consider the primary question to be, what does it mean to be fully human in a male body? Seeing masculinity as a religious experience with a variety of possibilities might open up new prospects in redirecting education. What might happen to American masculinity's sick soul if the whole range of religious experience is brought into play? How could acknowledging the varieties of masculinity as religious experiences — in response to brutalization — affect the welfare of boys and men?

Getting all the “higher forms” on the table may be a necessary step for a meliorist approach in constructing a future that is healthier for boys and men. (For instance, setting the higher form of Stranger masculinity in dialogue with the higher form of Victim might help boys see new choices in reflecting on and constructing their own experiences of masculinity.)

How might educators help in constructing possible ways of thinking about a higher form of Blue-Sky masculinity? Could not such a construction rely on boys' own reflections on their experience, rather than speculation? I realize my essay provides more questions than answers, but it does claim that to take seriously the brutalization of boys, we must address the consequences of that brutalization.

---

1. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 108–11.

2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 484. This work will be cited as *VRE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. This is a reference to the Panopticon designed by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham and utilized by Michel Foucault as symbolic of observation and bodily discipline as social control mechanisms.

4. William James. “The Moral Equivalent of War,” paragraph 25, <http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm>.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 127–30.

7. Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome*, 54–61.