

RITE OF PASSAGE, KYRIARCHIC WARRIOR MENTALITY, OR ISSUES WITH  
FATHER?

Universal Elements of Male Initiation and Their Potential for Men in the West

by

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A research essay submitted to the Department of Religious Studies  
in conformity with the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in Religion and Modernity

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

July 12, 2011

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## **Abstract**

The decline of male initiation rituals in the West is lamented by authors articulating a variety of perspectives. However, the full extent of the decline and the subsequent impact on men, women and children is difficult to measure. There are many different descriptions of male initiation and many different conclusions regarding its purpose. Rather than concluding that the decline of male initiation contributes to hypermasculine behaviours or that the decline of male initiation frees men from forms of oppression, in this essay I both review a number of approaches in an assessment of current literature and undertake a search for common elements in such rituals with a view to determining whether a “good” ritual or rite of initiation for men in the West is possible, and, if so, what it might include. Identification of universal elements of male initiation across different approaches provides a starting point for re-defining and recovering “male initiation” in the West. Three of the most prominent approaches to male initiation in the West are those of ritual theorists, those of Christian ministers and scholars, and those of secular practitioners and writers. This paper examines perspectives on male initiation and the sub-topics within each of the three approaches. It traces the development of each perspective and identifies common elements of male initiation. Arguments will be made for the rejection of certain elements not common to all three approaches. My concluding analysis will review the elements I find to be universal and potentially valuable to new rites for men in the West.

## **Introduction**

Male initiation rituals are often employed as a preventative measure against the potential formation of hypermasculinities. In most cultures hypermasculinities are characterized by various extreme behaviours in which uninitiated men engage. The supposed necessity of male initiation to combat wide-spread hypermasculinity is based on a belief that ritual will result in successful transformation of a boy into a non-hypermasculine adult male. The plausibility of this belief cannot simply be abandoned. Testimonies to the effectiveness of male initiation can be found in various cultures. While the pedagogical interest in masculinities and male initiation is exploding, the extinction of formal male initiation rituals in the West is nearly realized. Laments regarding the decline of male initiation have been made with several assumptions at play, as have attempts to recover male initiation in the West. If there is to be a recovery of male initiation in the West, the first step is to sift through different approaches and to identify some common elements which may be helpful, while discarding those that are not. This paper aims to show that there are universal elements evident in different approaches to male initiation. In addition, selected elements from different approaches would be valuable for re-invented rites in the West, while other elements would not.

To support my thesis, I will examine the traditional understandings of male initiation as a rite of passage from boy to man; these understandings have been much influenced by ritual theory. I will then examine new forms of male initiation that are developing beyond the traditional understandings professed by ritual theory. These new forms include Christian and secular approaches which have re-invented male initiation rites for use in particular contexts. Each of the three main approaches I will examine has advantages and disadvantages when applied to the Western context. I will describe each of the three types of literature on male

initiation and engage in a review and critical evaluation of each one. I will conclude with a brief commentary highlighting the elements I believe are common among all these forms, and which elements I believe should be part of any male initiation ritual.

## **Chapter 1: Male Initiation as a Rite of Passage: An Overview of Rites of Passage/Ritual Theory**

### **The notion of “Rite of Passage” within Ritual Theory**

Ritual theory has benefitted from the unique contributions of many scholars writing from a variety of perspectives. Within the field of ritual studies, many important theoretical ideas have emerged and have been sustained. One example is the link between myth and ritual known as the myth and ritual theory.<sup>1</sup> Though these themes are important to a basic overview of ritual theory, this paper is concerned with providing a focussed overview of ritual theorists who have chosen to focus on rites of passage as a sub-topic within ritual theory. As such, only scholars who have theorized specifically on rites of passage will be included in this review. I acknowledge that the work of several influential ritual theorists has not been addressed in this paper. However, these theorists have not conducted in-depth research on rites of passage. Instead they chose to direct their efforts to other facets of ritual theory.<sup>2</sup>

### **Toward a focus on rites of passage: myth-ritual forerunners of Arnold van Gennep**

Arnold van Gennep wrote his most famous work, *Les rites de passage*, in 1909. It was not translated into English until 1960. Van Gennep is singled out here because his work on rites of passage became highly influential on scholars who continued work on the topic. In the interest of tracing ritual theory to its roots, it is important to consider which scholars influenced van Gennep. In the introductory pages of his book, van Gennep provides a list of scholarly work from which he has drawn. There can be no question that James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* heavily influenced van Gennep. Frazer acknowledged his

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Segal notes that this theory was established by W. Robertson Smith (1846-94) and brought to fruition by Smith’s contemporary and good friend James George Frazer. Robert A. Segal, “Myth and Ritual,” in *The Routledge Companion to The Study of Religion*, ed. John Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2010), 384-385.

<sup>2</sup> The notable ritual theorists not addressed in this paper include Émile Durkheim, Johan Frederik (Frits) Staal, and Mary Douglas to name just a few. Durkheim wrote on the general social purposes of ritual. Frits Staal’s work in ritual studies focuses on Vedic rituals of the East while Douglas’ work on ritual was intertwined with Christian theology and cultural concerns.

awareness of William Robertson Smith's work which attempted to link myth and ritual. In fact, as Robert Segal notes<sup>3</sup> Frazer dedicated *The Golden Bough* to Smith, and the two shared a close friendship. Frazer continued Smith's work by arguing that rituals were re-enactments of stories that were part of a "large class of myths which are made up to explain the origin of a religious ritual and have no other foundation than the resemblance, real or imaginary, which may be traced between it and some foreign ritual".<sup>4</sup> Frazer's influence on van Gennep is most evident in Frazer's argument that the religious beliefs of any given human underwent a three-step process. The first step was a primitive understanding of religion as a sort of magic. The second stage was the replacement of this belief in magic by belief in religion. The third stage was the replacement of the belief in religion by the belief in science. Van Gennep eventually applied Frazer's three-step process of religious beliefs to rites of passage. Though he was influenced by Frazer, van Gennep reformulated the three-step process to apply specifically to rites of passage and with the added concept of liminality [to be discussed later in this paper].

Since Frazer was influenced by William Robertson Smith, it is important to consider Smith's work further as it applies to the development of ritual theory. As a biblical scholar, Smith completed many works of biblical criticism and commentary. However, his 1894 book *Religion of the Semites* addressed ritual in specific ways. Smith argued that modern religions were rooted in beliefs, while "primitive" religions were based on rituals that held significant social meaning.

By current standards, Smith's work is problematic in several ways. In the foreword to the 2002 edition, Robert Segal notes Smith's "anti-ritualistic, Protestant viewpoint".<sup>5</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>3</sup> Segal, *Myth and Ritual*, 385.

<sup>4</sup> James, G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: MacMillian and Co, 1890), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Segal, foreword to *Religion of the Semites*, by W. Robertson Smith (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002, x).

Segal shows the book clearly favours Christianity over what Smith refers to as the religions of “heathen Arabia”.<sup>6</sup> However, despite the clear biases in Smith’s approach, his theories on rituals of sacrifice and their role in “primitive” religions were revolutionary at the time. Smith characterizes rituals as a method of communication with supernatural agents. Indeed, Smith insists that rituals offer a “means of converse between God and man”.<sup>7</sup> Smith also characterizes magic as immoral and suggests any culture relying on magic for religious purposes will remain primitive. Frazer draws from Smith’s discourse on magic to construct his theory of religion as a three step process [to be discussed below]. In turn, van Gennep draws from Frazer’s three step process of religion to construct the three stage liminal process of rites of passage [discussed below]. Though Smith does not address rites of passage specifically, it is important for a rites of passage theorist to be aware of Smith’s work and the influence it had on Frazer and thus on van Gennep.

### **Rites of Passage theory established within Ritual Theory: Arnold van Gennep**

Though ritual theory continued to develop and others commented on rites of passage, van Gennep’s 1909 book, *The Rites of Passage*, introduced new ways of thinking about rites of passage. Van Gennep devoted chapter six of his book to theoretical discourse on initiation rites. He challenged “unacceptable general theories”<sup>8</sup> that attempted to link initiation rites to the onset of puberty in both girls and boys. He argued that each male or female experiences the onset of physiological puberty characterized by specific developments in the body. Van Gennep did not question the obvious occurrence of puberty; however, his primary concern was that initiation rites had been called “puberty rites” even though puberty was both biologically and culturally

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>7</sup> William R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1894/2002), 216.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 65.

determined.<sup>9</sup> The physiological developments of puberty occurred at different ages across cultures and races. These differences pressured societies to make general judgements about the usual time that puberty occurs. This was what van Gennep called “social puberty.”<sup>10</sup> He claimed that social puberty rarely converges with physical puberty; thus he rejected the contention that initiation must always coincide with puberty. Van Gennep illustrated his point by discussing menarche as a sign of physiological puberty in girls, and the legal age of marriage for girls as a sign of social puberty. Using data from Rome and Paris, van Gennep compared menarche and the legal age of marriage between the two cities:

In Rome, girls are legally marriageable at the age of twelve, but only a twelfth of the Roman girls menstruate at that age; most of them begin to do so only between fourteen and fifteen, while others, very rarely, begin at nine. In Paris it is legal to be married at sixteen years and six months, but the average age at puberty is fourteen years and four months...*Thus in Rome social puberty precedes physiological puberty, and in Paris it follows physiological puberty.*<sup>11</sup>

In consideration of cultural examples like this one, van Gennep suggested it was an error to assume that ritual initiation and physiological puberty intersect.

Van Gennep’s arguments regarding physiological puberty and social puberty suggest that initiation rites should be available at various ages or any age. By destabilizing initiation as something which was once inextricably linked to puberty, van Gennep offered part of a theoretical basis for a proposal that male initiation can be re-conceptualized to suit cultural demands. Van Gennep also articulated the notion that social puberty may come later for boys, and that it may be more difficult to recognize because of the disappearance of certain male

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 66.

gender roles such as hunter and warrior.<sup>12</sup> Although van Gennep noted the decline of traditional male gender roles in 1909, this trend has continued to the present, especially in the West. Van Gennep certainly saw a strategic place for male initiation in many societies, but he was also critical of rites that discriminated based on age or social puberty.

Rites of passage theory also credits van Gennep with theorizing the elements of rites of passage. In classifying different rites of passage, van Gennep outlined the three elements of any rite.<sup>13</sup> Rites of passage begin with separation from the community, or a period of group segregation for initiates, known as the preliminal stage. During this phase, the initiate is torn away from his or her previous way of life. The second stage is a time of transition from the old way of life into the new, known as the liminal phase. Van Gennep proposed the idea of “liminality”, which refers to the period when the initiate is on the verge of entering a new phase of life. The concept of liminality has become an important term in ritual theory. The final step to a rite of passage is reincorporation into the community and into the new way of life with attached social status, referred to as the post-liminal phase. Van Gennep’s theory of the three elements of initiation has endured. Most authors writing on male initiation describe a three step process similar to that articulated by van Gennep.<sup>14</sup>

Van Gennep proceeded to describe the initiation rites of various cultures. These included several tribes in Australia, North America, Africa and Asia. Employing the three steps of a rite of passage, van Gennep argued that in many cultures violence played a role in the liminal phase. He claimed that rites of passages transformed an individual by providing a new social role or status. However, a visible sign of this new role was often desired, and therefore violence in rites

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Bly, Keen, Rohr and Corneau all describe a three step process to male initiation that bears resemblance to van Gennep’s description of rites of passage.

of passage either ensured a mutilation of the body that would be visible to all, or a mutilation of the sex organs that would be visible to the individual and his or her sexual partners. Van Gennep cited several examples including the removal of a tooth, having a finger cut off, incision of the penis, female circumcision and infant and adult circumcision.<sup>15</sup>

Another valuable part of van Gennep's work was his review of Christian rites of initiation. Prior to discussing any Christian rites, van Gennep cautioned the reader that to understand Christian initiation rites, one must first look back further to other examples that strongly influenced Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Van Gennep reviewed examples from various cultures from which Christianity borrowed. These included Egyptian, Syrian, Asiatic and Greek. In the history of Christianity, as van Gennep noted, practices of initiation have greatly varied as they have been adopted from other groups and adapted to suit Christian interests. He illustrated his point by discussing the Christian rite of baptism in detail:

There was a strong influence of Gnosticism, which also had degrees and successive rites of initiation which fit the pattern of rites of passage. Early Christian baptism included a fast and an immersion into consecrated water or a sprinkling with it. Furthermore, in various places and times all sorts of ritual details (of purifications, exorcism, etc.) have been added under the influence of local beliefs and practices.<sup>17</sup>

Van Gennep's review of Christian initiation demonstrated that, unlike the majority of cultures and groups, Christianity never really adopted male initiation as a priority. Though there have been and continue to be many rites of passage in Christianity, none have been aimed specifically at the widespread initiation of boys, adolescent or adult males.

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<sup>15</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

## Joseph Campbell and his influence

Although he is not considered a ritual theorist, Joseph Campbell's work is important to consider. Campbell was influenced heavily by van Gennep's work as he theorized that myth informs many male initiation rites. In turn, Campbell has influenced many Christian authors writing on masculinity and rites of passage for men. Although Campbell's work has been described as highly problematic by ritual theorists like Ronald Grimes, it is important to be aware of Campbell's work and its trajectory into Christian scholarship on the topic of male initiation and masculinities.

Using van Gennep's three stage process as a template, Campbell divides his book into three sections: departure, initiation, and return. Although he refers to the initiation rites of some of the same tribes van Gennep discussed, Campbell focuses on reviewing ancient myths and the initiation stories within them. He devotes a major portion of his book to this topic, beginning with his understanding of initiation. He writes, "The traditional idea of initiation combines an introduction of the candidate into the techniques, duties, and prerogatives of his vocation with a radical readjustment of his emotional relationship to the parental images."<sup>18</sup> Based on the reference to "the parental images" in this definition, Campbell introduces the common figure of the "ogre father" who plays a role in many cultures where male initiation takes place. Campbell describes the ogre father or elder as a mature male who has some control over the initiation ritual. The role of this character is often to humiliate the son or initiate. The father or elder assumes this role based on his duty to separate the boy from his mother. This separation is then celebrated through ritual violence. Campbell uses the example of circumcision to illustrate his point.<sup>19</sup> In some cultures the father or elder acts as the circumciser. The entire ritual is intended

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 136.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

to be a representation of the father ripping the boy away from the harmful feminine influence of his mother and other women. In this case, the foreskin of the penis represents the mother, and so the father separates it violently from the boy's penis. The figure of the ogre father presented by Campbell lends support to concerns that male initiation can be critiqued in some cases as a vehicle of transmission of oppression of younger men. Campbell describes the ogre father as a wise, yet oppressive, figure. In many cultures this father or elder transmits the secrets of masculine life and the political power over the community in ways that are not only extremely violent, but also inherently distrustful and oppressive toward women.

Campbell's work is valuable because he gathers together a collection of ancient myths and then attempts to contextualize the realities of rites of passage. However, Campbell has also been heavily critiqued for the biases in his work and for his skewing of understanding myth and ritual from a Christian perspective. For example, Campbell fails to include any myths which portray relationships or lifestyles that are not heterosexual. This omission is troubling, since it assumes that male initiation is only for heterosexual men. Further, Campbell's heteronormative presentation of initiation myths containing the woman as temptress motif suggests that male initiation must be about resisting and overcoming the so-called "power of women". This is a recurrent theme in many male initiation rituals, yet Campbell imposes Christian notions about woman as evil seductress and the male initiate as the hero who resists the woman. Ronald Grimes rejects Campbell's work entirely:

I reject the sexism and cultural imperialism of the heroic model propounded by Joseph Campbell and find the Jungian tendency toward purely interiorized initiations precious and disembodied. Ethnocentric images in heroic films like *Emerald Forest* or books like *Hero with a Thousand Faces* do enormous damage.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 144.

### **Beyond van Gennep: Victor Turner and further developments in rites of passage theory**

Victor Turner's 1969 book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* is considered a major accomplishment in the development of ritual theory. It is also invaluable to rites of passage theory as Turner devotes considerable discourse to rites of passage. Beginning with indigenous cultures, Turner endeavours to classify various rites and to assign meanings to symbols and actions employed in tribal rituals. Using the matrilineal tribe of the Ndembu people of northwestern Zambia as a case study, he documents the structure of the ritual process in a way similar to that of van Gennep. This research provides additional support for the concept that initiation as a ritual is often structured in similar ways across cultures. In his observation of rites for Ndembu women, Turner notes the common elements of separation, initiation or rebirth, and return to society in a new form:

Women's cults have the tripartite diachronic structure made familiar to us by the work of van Gennep. The first phase, called *Ilembi*, separates the candidate from the profane world; the second, called *Kunkunka* (literally, "in the grass hut"), partially secludes her from secular life; while the third, called *Kutumbuka*, is a festive dance, celebrating the removal of the shade's interdiction and the candidate's return to normal life.<sup>21</sup>

Following this basic description of the three classical stages of rites of passage presented by van Gennep, Turner describes the reasons for rituals as well as the types. According to Turner, there are two main types of rites of passage. There are rites that seek to prevent something, and those that seek to correct a condition that is perceived to be pathological. According to Turner, some rituals are performed as a preventative rite against a potential taboo that might break a sacred rule in some way (for example, initiation rites that claim to prevent the formation of cruel or

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<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1995), 14.

unethical warriors). In others cases, rituals are performed to reinstate a person to good standing within the tribe after a taboo has been committed: in this case, a “curative rite”. Turner uses the Ndembu example of women who have temporarily lost their fertility. He notes that the affliction of infertility is thought to be caused by the woman “forgetting” that the loyalties of her and her children lie with her husband.<sup>22</sup> To force the woman to remember her loyalty, a “curative rite” is required.

Turning his attention to rites of passage specifically, Turner seeks to further develop the concept of liminality. Citing the importance of van Gennep’s work<sup>23</sup> he explains that people engaged in a rite of passage are “liminal entities”<sup>24</sup> who are in constant transition throughout the three stages. According to Turner, liminal entities temporarily defy typical cultural classification. They are outside the acceptable cultural space of any given society while engaged in the ritual process. Turner’s consideration of liminality is another piece of the puzzle to understanding the recurring preoccupation with certain themes evident in male initiation such as death, rebirth and nature. According to Turner, these themes have developed precisely because of the awkward task of placing liminal agents in society during their ritual process. I find Turner’s articulation on this point compelling, so it is stated here in entirety:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there: they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 94

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 95

the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.<sup>25</sup>

Turner's assessment of liminality became entrenched in rites of passage theory, and also impacted ritual theory as it related to many rituals. Although many people today may have difficulty including themes such as death, darkness, rebirth and temporary or permanent bisexuality in new initiation rituals for men, the concept of liminality suggests incorporation of these themes may be necessary to give credibility to the process itself as well as to the fluid state of the liminal entity who is the initiate.

Turner insists liminal entities cannot be assigned a definite cultural role since they are in a state of transformation that will not allow them to assume any defined cultural roles. Therefore, Turner's concept of liminal space can produce paradoxes which prevent reconceptualization of rites of passage. Turner's thoughts are problematic if the concept of liminality resists the developing necessity to identify the state of the initiate within the ritual process. Ronald Grimes and others have targeted Turner's focus on liminality and his insistence that rites of passage are transformative. Citing the work of various scholars, Grimes summarizes the critiques of Turner's theories:

Liminality is better understood as a temporary respite from obligation by elite men of power. This depiction is a far cry from the Turnerian celebration of liminality as the engine of ritual and culture. The "transformationism" implicit in theories of ritual by van Gennep and Turner is now in serious question.<sup>26</sup>

### **The emergence of ritual theory/rites of passage gurus: Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell**

Grimes is considered a guru of ritual theory because he is astutely aware of the evolution of the field and because he has made many original contributions. Not only does his

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Grimes, "Ritual," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 267.

comprehensive body of work specifically address initiation, it addresses specific issues within the topic of initiation. Grimes theorizes the following: initiation as a global problem, patterns of initiation, initiation around the world, initiatory wonder, initiatory disenchantment and reinventing initiation rites.<sup>27</sup> Although not all these issues are relevant for this paper, listing them demonstrates the sheer volume of scholarship produced by Grimes on this topic. In his chapter on initiation, Grimes reviews the development of ritual theory while referring to the work of Emile Durkheim, van Gennep and Turner. He credits Turner with advancing the development of the field by differentiating ritual from ceremony:

For Durkheim ritual had been an agent of bonding, a kind of social glue. But for Turner the new image of ritual was that of a generator or matrix. In Turner's theory-perhaps more accurately, in his vision - *ritual* is subversive, the opposite of *ceremony*, the staunch conservator of culture and guardian of the status quo. Ceremony may be the glue of society, but ritual is its mother.<sup>28</sup>

Grimes values Turner's work for its potential in reinventing rites of passage. The primary method for reinventing rites is to violate "the near sacred line between theory and practice."<sup>29</sup> Grimes argues that those studying ritual theory and rites of passage should experience these rites for themselves. He applauds Turner as the model for tightrope-walking the line between theory and practice:

Turner unshackled the Western scholarly imagination, which had been able to conceive of ritual only in terms of its more staid features. In addition, he crossed the near-sacred line between theory and practice. Not only did he engage in "performance ethnography," an experimental form of pedagogy much indebted to both ritual and theater, he was also initiated by the Ndembu of Zambia. He had not only studied them; he studied *with* them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Grimes. *Deeply into the Bone*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

Grimes offers further support for both theory and practice by recounting his experience of traversing under a waterfall with a group of male Haitian Vodun practitioners and artists. He describes this as a reinvented rite of initiation. Reflecting on the experience, Grimes situates the title for his book:

Nothing could have been simpler. There were no words, only hands carefully offered, skin and bone bracing skin and bone against the threat of slippery stone. The shock of the water, the gasping that punctuated our week-long silence, the remarkable gentleness of our teachers – all this drove something deeply into the bone. What that something was I could not name then, nor can I name it now.<sup>31</sup>

With such theatrical descriptions of personal experience, and with his reputation as a theorist, Grimes has almost succeeded in placing male initiation in conversation with science. In other words, Grimes makes a case for the possibility that there is an inherent human need for initiation, for validation, and for formal recognition of one's accomplishments by others.

As stated earlier, Grimes clearly appreciates Turner's work, yet he is also critical in specific ways. Grimes challenges Turner's argument that ritual is inherently transformative and also that rites of passage have been misunderstood. In questioning Turner's work, Grimes is concerned that van Gennep and Turner have romanticized rites of passage as a sort of magical process.<sup>32</sup> Grimes suggests that there is a real danger, especially in the West, to think of rites of passage as a form of "divinity" that can solve various problems. It is clear that Grimes rejects the idea that rites of passage are magical. However, Grimes argues that the experience of ritual initiation can be meaningful if it is understood to be just that: one meaningful practical experience contextualized in the time and place it occurs.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 267.

The value Grimes places on experience of initiation is precursory to his reassessing, or rather, repositioning of its value. Yet, Grimes can be critiqued for blurring the line between theory and practice to such a degree that his arguments become unclear. While Grimes has placed great value on experiencing initiation first-hand, his conception of his waterfall experience as a reinvented initiation rite implies that anything could be labelled as initiation. Though concerns remain unaddressed on this matter, Grimes partially appeases his critics by reiterating that experiences that seem initiatory should follow the liminal pattern. This defence seems insufficient considering the critique Grimes has levelled against the concept of liminality put forward by van Gennep and Turner.

Catherine Bell is also known as a leading authority on ritual theory. Her work displays a keen interest in considering how ritual continues to morph into new forms under the pressure of social and cultural forces. As was true with the work of Grimes, the depth and detail of her many publications on ritual theory cannot be fully reviewed in this paper. She is aware of the many critiques of van Gennep and Turner, yet she certainly respects the value of their work. Bell is quite familiar with van Gennep's classification of rites of passage, as well as his classic interpretation of rites of passage as a three step process intended to provide movement into new social space.

Bell's work is noteworthy for several reasons. First is her focus on the alteration, or reinvention, of various rites of passage in American culture. In addition, she specifically addresses the assumption that a lack of initiation will result in disaster. Like Grimes, Bell questions the idea that rites of passage are transformative based on the concept of liminality. Bell's willingness to challenge this assumption provides strong support for an argument that hypermasculinity may not result if initiation is not practiced. She draws attention to the lack of

clarity around the effects of declining formal rites of passage in the West. She also questions what constitutes a rite of passage in modern American culture. Bell posits that many of our cultural practices have now become a sort of altered form of initiation. She critiques both those who assume the decline of rites of passage is harmful, and those who deny that this decline has actually occurred at all:

It is often suggested that the lack of clear life-passage rites in American culture has contributed to the loss of community and a growing sense of social alienation. Some scholars and social critics have even argued that without formal testimony to their passage into adulthood, young people are pressured to prove themselves, both personally and publicly, in rash displays of daring or excess. Yet it is far from clear whether the loss of formal rites of passage is a cause or a symptom of the breakdown of small traditional communities, or that American life is so lacking in rituals.<sup>33</sup>

Though Bell admits formal rituals may be declining in the West, she argues that ritual and rites of passage are still all around us. The possibility of a natural human desire for rites of passage is important for Bell, and she employs this possibility to defend her argument that rituals in some form will always persist in society. She recognizes that some scholars have theorized that a “deep human impulse”<sup>34</sup> for rites of passage plays a role in attempts to transform culture into something rational that humans can understand. Rites of passage accomplish this by offering the individual recognition of his or her new place and role in society.

The appropriation of rites of passage by religious traditions is of great interest to Bell. She discusses various rites in an attempt to demonstrate that “many religious traditions go on to orchestrate the whole of human life as a series of ritual passages and obligations.”<sup>35</sup> Using the seven sacraments of Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholicism as one example among many,

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<sup>33</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Bell ties each sacrament to a different stage of Catholic life. This example is helpful in demonstrating that, despite the considerable role of ritual, the Catholic Church has never adopted male initiation as a priority. A task worth undertaking is to critique Christian rites of passage for contributing to heteronormative approaches to gender identity. As Bell remarks “cultures construct models of masculinity and femininity, subtly pressuring people to conform to them.”<sup>36</sup> Though this paper is more concerned with Christian kyriarchy and Christian attempts to make male initiation about becoming a warrior [discussed below], another critique of existing Christian rituals for men is that they privilege the heterosexual male who intends to raise a family within a Church-sanctioned heterosexual marriage. Many Christian authors writing on male initiation do so without addressing homosexual men, single men, men with no father or an absent father and men who are well beyond puberty.

### **The future of rites of passage theory: Pascal Boyer’s approach as an example**

While rites of passage have always been studied from the perspective of religion and anthropology, things are beginning to change. In many places there is dialogue among various academic fields of interest, and rites of passage are now being analysed using various different methodologies. For example, Pascal Boyer claims that evolutionary biology and cognitive science can be employed to understand rituals and rites of passage. Using new approaches such as these, scholars like Boyer seek to examine newer claims by ritual theorists. A few examples of these recent claims are that humans have a deep internal desire for initiation and that rites of passage are transformative in some way.

A brief review of Boyer’s discourse on ritual demonstrates new approaches to ritual and rites of passage theory. His 2001 book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* is valuable to this review not only because he addresses ritual theory, but also

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 101.

because he specifically includes several examples of male initiation rituals. Boyer describes rituals as special kinds of action differentiated from normal action. According to Boyer, rituals are different from ordinary action because rituals take place at specific times and places for specific reasons. However, Boyer is more interested in attacking certain assumptions about rituals. He rejects the widely held assumption among religious practitioners that rites of passage are transformative. Reflecting on various examples from indigenous tribes, Boyer questions the purpose and goal of any rite of passage. “People perform rituals to achieve particular effects (receive the gods’ protection, turn boys into men) but the connection between the actions prescribed and the results expected is often rather opaque.”<sup>37</sup> Boyer suggests the transformative nature of male initiation is an illusion:

A familiar explanation for initiation rites is that young boys must acquire the secret knowledge and skills that define real manhood...In many rites the candidates are taught that the secret of the rite is precisely that there is no secret at all, or that they will not be told what it is until they reach a further stage of initiation. The rites seem to promote what anthropologist Fredrik Barth called an “epistemology of secrecy,” a notion that knowledge is intrinsically dangerous and ambiguous.<sup>38</sup>

Boyer shifts his discourse to an examination of the psychological nature of rituals. He notes the similarities between ritual and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). As evidence, he cites the work of the anthropologists Alan Fiske and Michael Houseman. Fiske demonstrated the similarities between OCD and ritual after some anthropologists had dismissed this possibility as a coincidence. Houseman also examined the paradoxical events inherent to male initiation rituals. He demonstrated that the actions of the rituals actually had very little to do with turning boys into men, but more with social interaction which aims to create what Boyer calls

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<sup>37</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 232.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-244.

“coalitional behaviour.”<sup>39</sup> Boyer wrote this book in an attempt to explain many of the common questions about religion. He addresses issues such as the employment of rituals for religious purposes, how religions impact ideas about death, why doctrines are formed and why religious violence is so prevalent in many societies. Although Boyer’s book is now ten years old, his approach relies on several fields including religious studies, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science and evolutionary biology. Multidisciplinary approaches like Boyer’s represent a new development in rites of passage theory.

While I have only touched on aspects of rites of passage theory applicable to the decline and recovery of male initiation in the West, I have also chosen only segments of these selected works that specifically apply to my research topic. I am heartened by the multiplicity of theories emerging from ritual studies that impact strong scholarship on male initiation. Familiarity with rites of passage theorists is a foundational requirement for developing new theories regarding male initiation. As the title of this paper suggests, the theorists addressed in this review have debated the structure and purpose of male initiation as a rite of passage. In theory, male initiation is a rite of passage, but debates about its role and purpose are far from resolved.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 245.

## **Chapter 2: An Attempt to Adopt (or re-adopt) Male Initiation in the West: The Interest of Christian Scholars and Ministers**

### **Critiquing Christian approaches: the selected theme of the warrior psyche**

Christian approaches to male initiation can be critiqued in various ways. However, one significant theme on which it is important to focus is the Christian preoccupation with the warrior psyche. In this chapter I will define the term “kyriarchy” and apply it to certain Christian perspectives on male initiation. I will argue these approaches and the obsession with the warrior psyche are not always helpful to men. To balance the critique, I will discuss Christian writers who resist the warrior mentality. The chapter will conclude with the analysis of a re-invented rite for men developed by Richard Rohr, one of the most influential Christian writers on the topic of male initiation.

### **Examining Christian motivations: the legacy of kyriarchy**

Kyriarchy is a term coined by the Roman Catholic feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. She distinguishes kyriarchy from patriarchy in the hope of more accurately describing certain situations and cultures. Fiorenza formed the term using two Greek terms κύριος (lord, master, emperor, husband, father) and ἄρχω (to lord over, to reign over, to rule). She defines kyriarchy as “the rule of the emperor/master/lord/father/husband over his subordinates. With this term I mean to indicate that not all men dominate and exploit all women”.<sup>40</sup> A simpler definition of kyriarchy is as follows: the oppression of men, women and children by one or more elite, powerful man. Since the term kyriarchy recognizes the oppression of men, as well as the oppression of women and children, it can be fittingly applied to studies of masculinities. Kyriarchy is a broader term than patriarchy in that kyriarchy recognizes that a subset of men tends to benefit most from systemic oppression of others, and those oppressed are

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<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 14.

often men, as well as women and children. At the same time, even those who experience oppression tend to participate in kyriarchy, thus sustaining the oppression.

A valuable resource to explore the legacy of kyriarchy is James Poling's book *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem*. Though he does not use the term kyriarchy, he makes several observations about men who reveal kyriarchic activity and attitudes. Poling offers an observation about kyriarchy that should cause all Christians to be more critical of the structure of the church: "The patriarchal ideal of autonomy and individualism also enables the powerful to hide or be invisible."<sup>41</sup> It is certainly wrong to put every Christian leader on trial, or to become suspicious of all Christian male leaders and their motives for being involved in their important ministries. However, encouraging Christian men to think more critically regarding the kyriarchy in the church is in order. In a later article Poling voices his opinion regarding men: "We enjoy our power and privileges; we have to be converted to a new way of thinking and acting."<sup>42</sup>

To compare the oppression of women to the oppression of men throughout the history of Christianity, or any other religion or culture for that matter, is problematic. Women have certainly been oppressed in several ways that are quite obvious. From the misogyny evident in denying women leadership positions within the Church, to the treatment of women as second class citizens in many Christian cultures, women have endured lower status and power than men. To suggest the oppression of men is equal to or greater than the kyriarchic oppression of women would clearly be an overstatement. In addition, the oppression of men by other men is often difficult to identify. A great deal depends on how men define oppression. As I noted earlier, in the case of kyriarchy, many men willingly participate in their oppression, and so the oppression of men is often not questioned if the oppressed seem to be willing participants.

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<sup>41</sup> James Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 142.

<sup>42</sup> James Poling et al, "Men Helping Men to Become Pro-Feminist," in *The Work of Men in Preventing Violence Against Women*, ed. Christine Neuger and James Poling. (New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2002), 107.

The idea of kyriarchic oppression has been briefly introduced above. While it is neither possible nor required to trace the legacy of Christian kyriarchy in this paper, it is necessary to contextualize kyriarchy as it pertains to forms of male initiation. Kyriarchic oppression is manifested in several forms cross-culturally. However, in Christian literature on masculinity and male initiation, one notion stands out as particularly kyriarchic.

Using Fiorenza's definition of kyriarchy, I will briefly explore the warrior psyche still valued by some Christian leaders and authors. Initiating young Christian males into the warrior psyche often involves the kyriarchic interpretation of certain scripture passages, or of particular Christian theological concepts, by powerful male church leaders. In contrast, there are other Christian writers who denounce the Christian preoccupation with the warrior psyche, thus moving away from a kyriarchic structure.

### **Male Initiation for warfare: The Christian preoccupation with the warrior psyche**

Christian authors often insist that boys and men must adopt a "warrior psyche" in some realm of life. The assumption is that if a man can become a successful warrior, this strength makes him able to push himself to succeed in any situation and at any cost. Initiation rituals are often suggested as an introduction to the warrior stance. Sam Keen explores the embedded nature of the warrior psyche in the West. The dangerous binary produced by the warrior psyche is also identified clearly by Keen: "Kill or be killed; you are either for us or against us."<sup>43</sup> He cautions that ongoing emphasis on the value of the warrior psyche is dangerous for men. "We need to look at what happens to a man when his mind, body, and soul are socially informed by the expectation that he must be prepared to suffer, die, and kill to protect those he loves."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider how the warrior mentality became so central in the Christian motif. In their Jungian approach to the archetypes of masculinity, Moore and Gillette offer a simple explanation that reveals Christianity's role in establishing the warrior mentality in many areas of the world:

The biblical Hebrews were originally a warrior people and followers of a warrior God, the God of the Hebrew scriptures, Yahweh. Under the warrior-King David, the benefits of this new religion, including its advanced ethical system based on the Warrior's virtues, were consolidated. Through Christianity, which drew heavily on its Hebrew heritage, many of these Hebrew ideas and values eventually were carried by the European warrior classes to the four corners of the world.<sup>45</sup>

Despite Moore and Gillette's implicit assertion that the Christian emphasis on the warrior has faded since its "original" appropriation from the biblical Hebrews, some recent Christian authors are relentless in reinforcing the supposed necessity of the warrior psyche for men. In his book, *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey*, John Eldredge writes from this perspective. Throughout his book, he employs scripture and his pastoral experiences with men to support the notion that all Christian men must adopt a warrior stance of some kind. Eldredge views this warrior psyche as absolutely essential to Christian masculinity. Reflecting on boys who are transitioning into men, Eldredge insists: "He is made for battle, and he must be given a Christianity that includes a great battle."<sup>46</sup> Eldredge equates the Christian masculine mind, body and soul, (indeed, the wild masculine heart he refers to in his title) with a warrior mentality. This formulation of Christian masculinity not only excludes men who do not identify with the warrior psyche, but it also injects the dangerous preoccupation with competition into the

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 78.

<sup>46</sup> John Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for The Masculine Journey* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006), 166-167.

young Christian male. In contrast to Eldredge's view of the warrior masculine "heart", Keen suggests that a man forced to adopt the inherently competitive warrior psyche becomes an enemy of his own heart, figuratively and quite literally:

Thus, the social forces that encourage a man to be an extrovert, hard-driving and iron-willed, prepare him equally for success and a heart attack. (And why does the heart "attack" a man if not because he has become an enemy of his own heart? And why does it most frequently attack a man at 9 A.M. on Mondays?)<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, Eldredge does not seem to be informed by approaches like those of Keen. Although Keen's work was written about 15 years before, Eldredge prefers to rely on scripture to inform his arguments about the warrior Christian male. In fact, quoting several passages from the Hebrew Bible<sup>48</sup>, Eldredge reaches what can be argued to be a rather archaic view of God. He concludes that the Christian God is a "warrior God" and men must follow this model since they are made in God's image. It is this sort of arbitrary interpretation of scripture that is not helpful to Christian men. Failing to contextualize these passages for the time in which they were written, or for present day, Eldredge reaches a harmful conclusion:

Our God is a warrior, mighty and terrible in battle, and he leads armies. It is *this* God that man is made in the image of...because a man will be in a much better place to enter the stage of the Warrior if he knows this is thoroughly grounded in Scripture, supported by Scripture, *compelled* by Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

Eldredge either fails to recognize, or ignores, the context in which the Hebrew Bible references were written and attempts to weave them into his version of a modern Christian masculinity. These passages were written in various times throughout the history of Israel with the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of Yahweh over polytheistic cultures. Eldredge's attempt to

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<sup>47</sup> Keen, *Fire in the Belly*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> The passages to which Eldredge refers are Exod. 15:3 NIV, Isa. 42:13 NIV, Jer. 20:11 NIV, Ps. 24:7-8 NIV.

<sup>49</sup> Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart*, 138.

import them into his vision for a modern masculinity is problematic not only because his approach assumes the Christian God can conquer other gods within our modern pluralist world, but also because Christian men should aim to do the same in some form. Eldredge's work is a prime example of Christian men being strongly encouraged to adopt the warrior psyche by their faith tradition. It is not difficult to recognize how the Christian emphasis on "the warrior male" contributes to problems of stress and fatigue for Christian men. Nor is it difficult to see that many Christian men are victims of kyriarchic males in leadership who promote this warrior mentality to maintain the need for such kyriarchy.

Some Canadian Christian theorists exhibit a similar approach to masculinity and Christianity. The work of Dr. Ross Perry is one example. Written from a Christian perspective and relying on scripture, his book, *Thundering Silence: A Masculine Journey*, reflects an approach similar to that of Eldredge. Not surprisingly, Perry quotes Eldredge at the beginning of his chapter on the topic of Warfare. Like Eldredge, Perry suggests the Christian God is the epitome of the warrior. Employing scripture<sup>50</sup> to refer to battles in the physical and spiritual realms, Perry states: "The battle still rages, the war in both realms continues, but He fights alongside us. He is our Warrior King."<sup>51</sup> Though similar to Eldredge, Perry's approach differs in that he attempts to explain why the Christian God should be conceptualized as a warrior. According to Perry, God's warrior nature is required to combat evil. He also perceives Satan to be a very real figure, threatening men especially, and requiring all Christian men to adopt a Christian warrior psyche. "We fight a battle in the unseen world, and the devil is real...As individuals we have our goals for what we want in life. However, Satan wars against us."<sup>52</sup> Perry's arguments are potentially dangerous for men because they not only set the stage for men

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<sup>50</sup> Perry refers to Revelation 22:17.

<sup>51</sup> Ross Perry, *Thundering Silence: A Masculine Journey* (Belleville: Essence Publishing, 2005), 165.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

to live in fear of the literal and spiritual figure of Satan, but they also insist that men must remain in this strained warrior posture continuously. The potential stress for men from such a posture raises the serious concern that some Christian theologies are not helpful to men. In fact, in the case of Perry's work, Christian theologies actively contribute to the stress and crises with which men live on a daily basis.

### **Rejection of the warrior psyche within Christianity**

The critique of Christian authors advocating the warrior mentality is balanced by Christian authors who downplay the emphasis of the warrior psyche in Christian masculinities. One Christian scholar who expresses caution regarding the warrior psyche is James Nelson. He has researched the negative effects of the warrior psyche on Christian men in considerable detail. He speaks out against the continual emphasis on warfare and the insistence by culture and religion that men must be warriors in some way. Nelson exposes the dangers by outlining the conditions required to produce the warrior psyche in men:

The warrior psyche can be achieved only by the systematic destruction of "feminine" characteristics in the young male. To feel neither emotion nor pain nor vulnerability is requisite. A blend of hostility toward women, repressed homosexual feeling, and phallic aggression is necessary for the manhood of the successful warrior.<sup>53</sup>

Nelson presents convincing arguments. He recognizes that many Christian pastors and scholars highly value the warrior psyche. What is remarkable about Nelson's arguments is that he seems to understand that the warrior psyche is harmful in how it may be acted out. As Nelson implies, the warrior psyche almost always creates problematic behaviour by men. The link between the prevalent warrior psyche and the repression of emotion may offer an explanation of pervasive

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<sup>53</sup> James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 73.

stereotypes of the “macho-man” who shows no vulnerability, oozes arrogance and claims a right to sexual power over others.

Another exceptional Christian scholar who echoes Nelson’s concerns is Marvin Ellison. In his discussion of male violence, Ellison addresses military training and the pressure placed on men to be “good soldiers” in various facets of life:

Training to be a “good soldier” is a process of instilling macho-masculinity, an intensification of the typical male socialization process in which men are trained to be violent, aggressive, controlling, and emotionally detached. Men are socialized to “toughen up” in order to be able to dominate and coerce other people without self-reflection or guilt.<sup>54</sup>

Like Nelson, Ellison identifies the repression of emotions and hostility toward others as prerequisite for the warrior mentality. Nelson and Ellison’s work can be employed to suggest that the warrior psyche presents serious challenges to a central Christian teaching: love of self and neighbour.

### **Evaluation of Richard Rohr’s approach and his re-invented rite**

Writing on the topic of male initiation from a Christian perspective, Richard Rohr (a Franciscan priest) recognizes that past male initiation rituals were often employed with the hope of producing responsible young warriors in any given society: “In the human realm, when there are no ‘kings,’ young warriors become brutal, magicians behave as charlatans, and lovers are soon addicts.”<sup>55</sup> However, Rohr does not incorporate this focus on the warrior into his suggestions for the recovery of male initiation rituals in modern societies. His approach is much more accepting of the notion that there are a variety of behaviours, mentalities, and roles (eg.,

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<sup>54</sup> Marvin M. Ellison, “Refusing to Be “Good Soldiers”: An Agenda for Men.” In *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. Sandra P. Longfellow and James B. Nelson. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 337.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2004), 12.

King, Warrior, Magician, Lover)<sup>56</sup> that can contribute to Christian masculinities. According to Rohr, a man does not need to traverse these supposed archetypes in any order. More importantly, Rohr does not conceptualize Christian masculinities as reliant upon the warrior psyche: “Initiation is not about being a warrior as much as it is about being conscious, awake, and alert. Note how much Jesus talks about the same issue, and ‘I am awake’ is the very meaning of the name Buddha.”<sup>57</sup> Rohr can be applauded for suggesting that the warrior mentality should not be the focus of modern male initiation. His olive branch toward other faiths outside his own is also commendable.

Rohr outlines five common lessons that are taught to men through ritual initiation. Rohr argues that learning these lessons is a common goal of male initiation across cultures. He also suggests that these lessons will allow a boy to adopt a mature and responsible masculinity:

The entire process that we call initiation somehow made it possible for a man to experience these five essential truths. They became the five essential messages of initiation:

1. Life is hard.
2. You are not that important.
3. Your life is not about you.
4. You are not in control.
5. You are going to die.<sup>58</sup>

After outlining his basic understanding of male initiation, Rohr devotes a great deal of effort to arguing that Christian men need initiation. He does this in two parts. First, Rohr laments the decline of male initiation, especially in North America. He refers to many problems common among men and argues that most men have not learned the five lessons about life

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<sup>56</sup>A reference to the *The Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* by Moore and Gillette. Using a Jungian approach, they propose four universal archetypes of masculine identity: King, Warrior, Magician, Lover. References to these archetypes are fairly common in literature on masculine identities and sexualities. Christian authors have adapted these archetypes with a colonial agenda. One example is Eldredge’s proposed archetype of “the cowboy”.

<sup>57</sup> Rohr. *Adam’s Return*, 36.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

offered by male initiation. According to Rohr, activities like Boy Scouts have failed to offer anything substantial to boys who are growing into men. Second, he argues that initiation for Christian men can and should be recovered. His main suggestion for doing so is to model modern initiation rites after biblical figures like John the Baptist, Jesus, and St. Paul. Rohr argues these men were classic initiators. He praises them for using formal rituals like baptism, but also credits oral tradition and storytelling as the great methods of initiation used by Jesus and St. Paul.

Though Rohr has done extensive work in the area of Christian masculinity and though his approach is promising in some practical ways, his approach has serious theoretical flaws. Rohr has certainly read some ritual theory texts. The question is: has he read comprehensively, or has he chosen to rely on certain out-of-date ritual theory texts without familiarizing himself with new developments? I conclude the latter. He refers to the concept of liminal space as he notes Victor Turner's refinement of the concept following the work of van Gennep.<sup>59</sup> Rohr endorses the concept of liminal space. Like Turner and van Gennep, Rohr argues that rituals are transformative. This transformation, Rohr insists, takes place in liminal space. He bases his entire twelfth chapter on Turner's notion of liminal space, which transforms an individual from the old state to a new one. Though Turner's work in 1969 was significant, ritual theory has evolved significantly since then. As noted earlier, ritual theorists are questioning the concept of liminal space and the assumption that ritual transforms an individual. The theorists making these arguments (mainly Grimes and Bell) have produced well-researched texts that are much more recent than the work of van Gennep and Turner. Considering Rohr's efforts over many years to produce several books on masculinity and one specifically on male initiation, it is surprising that he remains ignorant of new developments in ritual theory.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 135.

Despite Rohr's apparently incomplete knowledge of ritual theory, he deserves credit for his efforts in constructing something modern that may be valuable for men. Unlike many scholars working on the topic of masculinity, Rohr has made a practical attempt to address the topic of male initiation by developing a five day initiation rite for men. Such modern rites for men are rare, and so Rohr minimally deserves recognition for giving this a try. Elements of his rite may certainly be valuable to most men. I will briefly describe the rite, and then offer my brief evaluation.

Each of the five days of the rite is themed, and they follow the typical pattern of initiation observed by ritual theorists and anthropologists: separation from the community, initiation, and then reincorporation into the community. Rohr has adapted the classic structure of initiation to suite modern times and his understanding of initiation. Each day contains activities aimed at reaching certain goals. The first day is a day of separation. On this day the initiate moves into the initiation space in nature and the elders direct his efforts at creating liminal space. The initiate is encouraged to slow his thoughts and relax his body, and to think about and discuss his desires and anxieties regarding the days ahead. The initiate will separate from his typical roles and routine, as well as from those things which give him security and comfort. The second day is a day of death, which Rohr claims should be "A stark day to shock the psyche out of its trance and the body out of its complacency."<sup>60</sup> The purpose of this day is to dramatize the death of the former initiate and the entrance to the new, true self. Rohr recommends symbolization and verbal presentations. Role playing may be effective. The third day is a day of grief. This day is designed to help men think about what they must let go of or surrender in order to reach mature masculinity. They are introduced to their fears and to grief, loss and sadness. The fourth day marks an important milestone in the process. It is the climax of the rite: the day of initiation.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 170.

Men are blessed and then sent alone into nature for a day of fasting and solitude. A formal ritual of initiation and the five essential promises of male initiation are provided to the men. Finally, a celebration late at night around a communal fire ends the day. The final day is a day of communion and reincorporation. The five promises of male initiation are repeated and a ritual of communion or camaraderie takes place before the men depart.

Rohr's rite provides what could be the beginning of what many men are searching for: male friendship and companionship in a non-threatening, non-competitive, safe environment. This rite could be a seed for male friendships to form and to blossom. The rite is designed to get the men thinking about themselves and others. The ritual activities and the communal fire provide excellent opportunities for emotional expressions that may not otherwise occur and for the formation of male friendships.

Another positive element of this rite is that the themed days and the planned activities allow for sincere self-reflection without the distractions that might impede such reflection. Many men live very busy lives and shoulder significant responsibilities. Temporary suspension of stressful responsibilities and distractions offers a great opportunity for initiates to address the problems, issues and questions they have about manhood. The solitude of the day of initiation is potentially a very powerful experience from which many men would benefit.

The rite Rohr has constructed is heavily invested in providing validation to initiates. Whatever their form or purpose, male initiation rituals usually recognize that the boy has become a man, and so a certain degree of validation is inherent to such rituals. They convey that he has responsibilities to the community and to himself. Male initiation does indeed convey information about how to live as a responsible male. Rohr's rite employs male "elders" who have much experience leading a vast number of men through the rite. This massed experience

becomes more valuable with each rite. Employing “elders” produces an obvious concern, namely, whether male initiation reinforces a hierarchical kyriarchy. However, without the focus on the warrior mentality, Rohr’s rite is refreshingly unique.<sup>61</sup>

A significant weakness of Rohr’s rite is that it depends entirely on the notion of liminal space. As stated earlier, ritual theorists have challenged the idea of liminal space proposed by van Gennep and refined by Victor Turner. Rohr has centred his rite for men on an outdated concept that can never be proven to exist. Some current ritual theorists argue that initiation rituals allow initiates to explore or determine their desired role or place in society and have other men validate these newly determined roles or a newly determined status in the community.<sup>62</sup> Though I am critiquing Rohr on theoretical grounds, the point I am making here may be merely academic. Men of all ages and backgrounds continue to flock to his five-day initiation rite. The large numbers of men interested suggest that the rite is fulfilling a need, and may indeed indicate the beginning of the recovery of male initiation in the West. If so, I would welcome this development, despite my theoretical challenges to Rohr’s approach.<sup>63</sup> Rohr’s rite is good, but perhaps it could be modernized further using current ritual theory. This might result in an even more effective and meaningful experience for men.

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<sup>61</sup> I have not experienced this rite personally, and so I am evaluating Rohr here based on my theoretical/theological knowledge. As part of my continuing work on this topic, I am in conversation with Rohr regarding my possible participation in a rite of initiation. I believe experiencing such rites is as important as the theory behind them. Indeed, the interest in male initiation seems to suggest that there is something about this phenomenon that theory cannot explain.

<sup>62</sup> Pascal Boyer credits Houseman with a fine examination of the paradoxical events inherent to male initiation rituals. Houseman demonstrated that the actions of the rituals actually had very little to do with turning boys into men. As noted earlier in this paper, Houseman theorized about social interaction which aims to create what Boyer calls “coalitional behavior.” Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 245.

<sup>63</sup>As stated, my major issue with Rohr’s approach is his reliance on liminal space. However, the decline of male initiation rituals also needs to be researched with the themes of modernity in mind. Concepts such as secularization, rationality, projection and new religious forms need to be considered in relation to the topic at hand to explain further the decline of male initiation.

## **Chapter 3: Concerning the Father: Secular Approaches to Male Initiation**

### **Navigating the selected secular approaches**

Traditionally, male initiation has been discussed within rites of passage and ritual theory, or within religious approaches. For many possible reasons associated with modernity, male initiation rituals have declined sharply in the West. Recent secular approaches to the topic do not conform to traditional expectations, and these approaches are fascinating since they exclude religion and do not adhere to the theoretical guidelines handed down by rites of passage theory. First, I will discuss Robert Bly's work as the re-ignition of interest in male initiation in the West. Second, I will describe and evaluate Bernard Weiner's secular rite of initiation aimed at teenage boys. Finally, I will briefly discuss two approaches to male initiation that do not involve formal ritual. These include self-fathering as initiation and male friendships as initiation.

### **Re-igniting the interest in male initiation: The legacy of Robert Bly**

Any discussion regarding the lament of fading male initiation rituals in the West would not be complete without mentioning Robert Bly. Bly's book *Iron John: A Book About Men* has often been understood as the catalyst for the Expressive Men's Movement. Bly is deeply concerned about the decline of male initiation in the West. He insists almost any problem with any man can be traced back to a lack of initiation. His lament is passionate and expresses an almost panicked sense of urgency:

The recovery of some form of initiation is essential to the culture. The United States has undergone an unmistakable decline since 1950, and I believe that if we do not find a third road besides the two mentioned here, the decline will continue. We have the grandiose road, taken by junk-bond dealers, high rollers, and the owners of private jets; and we have the depressed road, taken by some long-term alcoholics, single mothers below the poverty line, crack addicts, and fatherless men.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Cambridge, First Da Capo Press, 2004), 35.

Bly's book hit best-sellers lists shortly after its release in 1990. Clearly, his readers were hungry for something on this topic. Though Bly's text is not a Christian one,<sup>65</sup> it is reminiscent of Christian heteronormativity and kyriarchy. Regarding male initiation, Bly is adamant that women have no part in the ritual. (As the reader will see, this view is not shared by Bernard Weiner, whose rite is discussed later). Further, he suggests that women cannot be initiators of men and that it would be harmful to assume women could take part in rites of passage for men. While the company of adult men may be valuable to boys in many situations, Bly takes his argument to the point of misogyny. Without offering any support or evidence, Bly makes sweeping claims about gender, sexuality and initiation:

During the sixties, some young men drew strength from women who in turn had received some of their strength from the women's movement. One could say that many young men in the sixties tried to accept initiation from women. But only men can initiate men, as only women can initiate women.<sup>66</sup>

Bly provides no examples of initiation in the sixties. He fails to offer further support to his argument that women must be excluded from male initiation.

It is unfortunate that much of the still current resistance to male initiation was caused by Bly's work. Perhaps he wrote with the best intentions for men, but his writing reflects a kyriarchic attitude. He acknowledges that thousands of women are single parents raising young boys.<sup>67</sup> Bly also repeatedly stresses the importance of some sort of initiation for boys. However, as demonstrated by the quote above, Bly insists that women cannot initiate a boy or man. This

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<sup>65</sup> Bly would never consider his work to be Christian in nature. However, the flaws in his approach are similar to those of other Christian writers, which demonstrate how embedded conservative Christian notions have become in the West. Bly attempts to dissociate his work from Christian approaches by claiming "For generations now, the industrial community has warned young businessmen to keep away from Iron John, and the Christian church is not too fond of him either." Bly, *Iron John*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 17.

provides no option for a single woman raising a young boy. Bly implies that a woman should either re-establish a heterosexual relationship for the sake of her son or, as Bly himself says, “send the boy to his father when he is twelve.”<sup>68</sup> Bly’s arguments are weakened by his disregard for women and what they may contribute to male initiation. He makes many assumptions about the father or male role model who may take the place of the father. The first is that if a single mother establishes a relationship with a man, that man will be an effective initiator. Bly also assumes that if the boy is sent to his father at age twelve, the father will be willing and able to act as initiator in some way. Of course, there are many circumstances when this is not the case. If the couple separated at some point and the father left the son with his mother, this may not only indicate trouble in the relationship between the mother and the father, but also that the father may not be interested in the boy’s life to a degree necessary to provide initiation of any kind. The decline of male initiation is partially due to a lack of initiators. Bly’s insistence that fathers are the only initiators for their sons is problematic in an age when divorce rates are high, the absent father is common in Western families, and traditional marriage is being challenged by alternative ways of living and celebrating relationships. If there are no alternatives to the father as male initiator, then the phenomenon can at best be available only to a few.

Despite some obvious critiques, Bly’s work was ground-breaking. It was a bold work which sought to talk about masculinity in a much-needed unapologetic way. Bly articulates something about male initiation that not only acknowledged the mystery surrounding its purpose, but also partially explained it. Using the example of wise, old male initiators of young men, Bly suggests that male initiation is about fulfilling a need for validation. According to Bly, this validation is not easy to explain and is not usually conveyed in oral tradition: “The old men

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17.

initiators, by contrast, conveyed to boys some assurance that is invisible and non-verbal; it helped the boys to see their genuine face or being.”<sup>69</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, I will critique Bly’s approach in much the same way as I do Rohr’s. Like Rohr, Bly focuses on Victor Turner’s work. Bly wrote *Iron John* in 1990, 14 years prior to Rohr’s work in 2004, so Turner’s 1969 work was more recent for Bly. Still, there were ritual theorists who actively wrote in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>70</sup>. It is curious that Western authors on masculinity choose to focus on Turner to the exclusion of other theorists who wrote much more recently and challenged parts of Turner’s work. Turner certainly deserves credit for his substantial contribution to ritual theory, and most post-Turner theorists have given due credit without hesitation. Elements of his work will probably always be sound, and he will always be remembered as a pioneer in the field of ritual theory and rites of passage theory. However, modern theorists of masculinity introduce theoretical flaws into their texts when the focus is on Turner’s work only. Current students and scholars interested in the topic of male initiation must pay attention to developments in ritual theory post-Turner if they wish their academic and practical approaches to be as fulsome as possible.

### **Kicking ritual theory and religion out, welcoming women in: Bernard Weiner’s approach**

In 1992, Bernard Weiner released a small booklet 70 pages long entitled *Boy into Man: A Father’s Guide to Initiation of Teenage Sons*. This obscure work outlines a modern initiation weekend for fathers and their sons. The author and a group of fellow fathers planned and implemented an initiation rite which they claimed was a great success. The booklet describes the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>70</sup> In 1982, religious studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith published what would become an influential essay, *The Bare Facts of Ritual* in his book *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. In 1987, Smith also published *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Admittedly, Smith does not address rites of passage in a focussed way like Grimes and Bell. However, Grimes and Bell were both doing work prior to Bly’s 1990 release, as was Tom F. Driver, another ritual theorist.

rite which was held in the woods of North Carolina. In addition to a basic description of the rite, Weiner and his colleagues offer suggestions for future attempts. Following the description of the rite, the booklet lists the actual text used in the theatrical elements of the weekend. Finally, the booklet includes reflections from the mothers of the boys who were initiated. A few of the boys also wrote their own reflections on the initiation weekend.

The initiation weekend is described by Weiner as a mix of intentional activities to immerse the boys into manhood. Many activities were planned around a fire, and the boys had ample time to ask questions on various topics. A play was performed by the leaders of the weekend which introduced various archetypes of masculinity, and the figure of woman, which the boys were taught to treat with respect and as equal life partners. The fathers and sons took part in various activities together such as baking bread from scratch and cutting logs with a handsaw in a father-son team. The climax of the weekend was Saturday evening when the boys each spent the night alone in the woods. This activity was designed to encourage the boys to face fear and to construct their own space of safety and security. The following morning was marked by a formal initiation ceremony. During the ceremony, the name of each initiate was called, and the group recognized his passage to manhood.

The rite Weiner has constructed is significant for many reasons, but two among them stand out. First, the initiation weekend he has constructed excludes religion.<sup>71</sup> The rite is focused on the fathers and sons interacting in intimate ways. I must confess to a bias here: the work is a breath of fresh air. Christianity and other religions have too often claimed authority over male initiation, sometimes (though not always) making it a kyriarchic process. However, Weiner suggests the ritual process for young men move away from religious and academic

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<sup>71</sup> The rite involves acts such as fathers and sons breaking bread together and the theatrical figure of the Shaman speaking to the young men. These acts are certainly reminiscent of certain faith traditions. While the rite may involve a degree of spirituality, Weiner does not address religion specifically.

modes. By reflecting on his Jewish background and the experience of his bar mitzvah, he opines that these modes hold no practical meaning for boys;

The bar mitzvah didn't really mean that much to me. Supposedly, I was now "a man," but nobody, not the rabbi and not my father, explained what being "a man" might mean. I had participated in an old-age ritual of induction into manhood, without having the slightest emotional or even intellectual understanding of how the event connected to my teenage self.<sup>72</sup>

Second, Weiner defies a great deal of literature on masculinity and male initiation by including women in male initiation. As discussed above, much of the Christian scholarship on male initiation insists that boys must learn how to be a man only from other men, and that women have no place in such rituals. Weiner seeks to relax the rules that have dominated male ritual for so long. He includes the mothers of the boys in various ways. Part of the weekend ceremony was for the boys to write a letter to themselves from their mother's perspective. The mothers were also invited to write a letter to themselves from their son's perspective. Weiner's work contradicts some ritual theory/rites of passage theory as well as some Christian ideas about masculinity. Further, it is promising because it is a real and practical attempt to re-invent male initiation ritual in the Western context.

Previously I argued that male initiation rituals should be sensitive to the particular needs of the male individuals involved. In other words, male initiation will never be effective if rituals are constructed using a 'cookie-cutter' design. A few practitioners like Rohr and Weiner recognize this, which is encouraging. In his preface, Weiner is insightfully aware that the recovery of male initiation is dependent on customizing rituals for the group of male initiates.

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<sup>72</sup> Bernard Weiner, *Boy Into Man: A Father's Guide to Initiation of Teenage Sons* (San Francisco: Transformation Press, 1992), 12.

Commanding the reader's respect, Weiner speaks confidently from the perspective of the initiator:

That difficulty in finding a ready-made model is, I think, the key to the whole enterprise. Your needs might well be different from what I and my colleagues were faced with; certainly, your cast of characters (boys, parents, associates, etc.) will be different, with a resulting different chemistry. That chemistry is all-important and cannot be forced into existence or purchased in a bottle (or picked up whole from a guide such as this).<sup>73</sup>

Weiner's attitude toward male initiation is dynamic. He not only realizes the need to adjust ritual to the needs of the initiates, but he is willing to disregard some of the foundational elements of past male initiation rituals.

Perhaps the most significant element in Weiner's modern rite is his offer to women to become involved in the initiation process of young men. While I believe a cornerstone of male initiation is for young men to spend time with and learn from older men, I find most of the literature on excluding women completely untenable. There are no real practical reasons why women cannot be welcomed into male initiation circles to some degree. A certain amount of time in an all-male environment is vital. Yet, there seems to be little reason to fret about the positives and negatives of female involvement in male initiation. Even when invited to participate, women often show a delightful sensitivity to the male need for other all-male company. As one invited mother puts it, "this was definitely a time for the boys to be welcomed into a circle of men."<sup>74</sup>

Weiner's approach marks a significant departure from the typical male initiation ritual. Not only were the mothers of the initiates invited to the ceremony, they were also invited to provide the initiates with materials for their night alone in the woods and to host the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 50.

reincorporation celebration when the men returned home. Weiner's book includes a reflection by one of the mothers regarding the roles they played in the initiation weekend. Though it is encouraging that Weiner invited the mothers, his invitation privileges the married, heterosexual mother, as well as the son who has a father who is present and engaged in fatherhood. This approach leaves single mothers, and sons with an absent father, in much the same position as Bly's approach. There seems to be no advocate for male initiation rituals for those not part of a nuclear family. In our current Western context, those not part of a nuclear family are numerous indeed.

### **Self-fathering as an alternative to initiation**

While the privileging of the nuclear family is a concern I have with surviving male initiation rituals, it would be foolish to ignore the craving for the father's presence. This must be given due attention if male initiation is to be valued. Whatever social position a young man is in-whether he is straight or gay, transgendered, single, employed or not, religious or not, popular at high school or not-the role his father played, or could have played; is analyzed and often lamented by his son. With patriarchy/kyriarchy rightfully under attack, there is often hesitation to affirm a strong male presence in any situation. In a unique way, Guy Corneau has reaffirmed the value of a strong male presence in the life of men. He suggests that men employ the practice of "self-fathering" in place of formal initiation when it is lacking. In his book *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity*, Corneau argues that the decline of male initiation ritual is linked to the widespread problem of the absent father. He recommends that men accept the fact that there is no ideal father, although boys often assign god-like status to their fathers. Corneau also suggests that men find ways to forgive their biological fathers for failing to live up

to this god-like image. These two tasks are the beginning of self-fathering, which Corneau describes:

Adult sons must be able to mourn their ideal fathers. The mourning process will teach them how to father themselves, how to fill their inner emptiness through creativity. The transition from being a son to being a man involves giving up the ideal father and giving in to the ideal itself. The challenge for men with missing fathers is to themselves become the fathers they lacked.<sup>75</sup>

Although Corneau's book is in many ways a practical guide for men, he touches on a significant issue raised by ritual theorists like Grimes and Bell. Corneau posits that all men have "initiation hunger" at some point in their lives.<sup>76</sup> This is similar to ritual theorists who argue that humans have a deep desire and need for ritual initiation. Corneau's approach differs by suggesting this inherent human desire for initiation can be taken up in ways different from formal ritual.

Corneau's concept of self-fathering is valuable because it is a new approach to male initiation that is inclusive of all men and their selected psyches and lifestyles:

Most important of all, men must move away from rigid behavioural models and make room for the workings of their inner souls: the warrior soul, the sentimental soul, or the homosexual soul. The monotheism of Western thought has made them soulless men in the literal sense.<sup>77</sup>

Setting men on a path of forgiveness toward their fathers may assist in the healing process between fathers and sons. It may also be the beginning of a way for men to thrive beyond their "initiation hunger". Self-fathering may allow men to take control and do something about the initiation they seek.

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<sup>75</sup> Guy Corneau, *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1991), 178.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

### **Male friendship as re-invented initiation**

Corneau also addresses the deepening crisis in male friendships. As an alternate form of initiation, Corneau encourages men to seek friendship with other men; “Too many men live cut off and isolated from the male community. Cultivating the friendship of other men can only be a beneficial experience for them.”<sup>78</sup> While I agree with Corneau’s basic premise, I wish he had been more precise. Many men withdraw from male friendships because they find other men too demanding and self-serving, so cultivating male friendships is not always beneficial for men. In reality, finding male friends that are not engaged in typical hypermasculine behaviours is often very difficult. In my experience, many men are now seeking more ‘authentic’ male friends. Yet, many men recognize that many ‘friends’ are willing to take from them consistently, while never giving much in return. Social constructions of masculinity are so pervasive that they often prevent men from establishing friendships with one another. Men are in a constant state of uncertainty about how to interact with other men. As a result, many men fear being labelled ‘effeminate’ and any friendship that becomes too intimate risks deployment of the label. Yet, male friendships are sought as inherently as male initiation, so men need not shy away from this potentially powerful alternate form of male initiation. Simply being around other mature men, a man is initiated (though perhaps less formally) into the mysteries of manhood through conversation and activities enjoyed together. When I think about male friendships, or even male initiation, I am often reminded of one of my favourite proverbs: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another”.<sup>79</sup>

Corneau is not the first to suggest that male friendships can fill the need for ritual initiation. James B. Nelson suggests that male friendships are a gateway to mature masculinities.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>79</sup> The precise reference is Proverbs 27:17 New International Version.

According to Nelson, by engaging in male friendships, men discover they have similar feelings and problems as other men. Male friendships offer companionship and camaraderie, but also validation by other men. More importantly, Nelson suggests that male friendships can sometimes allow men to break free from the bonds of competition and just enjoy being male.

Some suggest that men have their own distinctive style of relating: it should be shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face. But must it be an either/or proposition? Friendship often means letting loose of the task, letting go of the need to prove one's usefulness. It means valuing the presence of the other just for the other's own sake. It is enough just to be, and to be with. That is playful. And that is gracious.<sup>80</sup>

Though Nelson is well-known as a Christian theologian, I would not characterize his book as a Christian text advocating the recovery of male initiation. Nelson's discourse seeks to include Christian men and non-Christian men, and he argues for alternatives to typical initiation rituals, male friendship being one such alternative.

John Stoltenberg's arguments are helpful in highlighting the negative influence of social constructions of masculinity on male friendship. Stoltenberg condemns the objectification of women by men. I applaud this. However, I am disheartened by the ignorance of an obvious roadblock to male friendship. Speaking of how men treat others, Stoltenberg remarks: "Some of us with penises think it's sexy to treat other people as objects, as things..."<sup>81</sup> In the interest of exposing the kyriarchy at play in many male-male relationships, I would re-formulate: Some of us with penises think it's sexy to treat other people *with penises* as objects, as things. Men objectify other men, and the kyriarchic control that results is damaging for many men. I believe that is why non-kyriarchic male friendships are so rare. Many men treat other men as they do

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<sup>80</sup> Nelson, *The Intimate Connection*, 58.

<sup>81</sup> John Stoltenberg, "How Men have (a) Sex," in *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism*, ed. Lisa M. Heldke and Peg O'Connor (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 152.

women, as something to be exploited. Those exploited withdraw from male friendships without protest because they fear any protest will be perceived as weakness. Silent men run away, true to the social construction. They pay no attention to self. They surrender for another, not for the self. I believe the lack of male friendship is deeply entwined with a lack of self-love.

## Chapter 4: Concluding Critical Analysis

### Examining my agenda in relation to the topic

After a great deal of reading and research on this topic, I wonder if an academic approach has limitations when examining male initiation. Ritual theorists such as Turner and Grimes have called attention to the theory versus practice issue, yet both clearly value theoretical and practical approaches to male initiation. Christian and secular approaches use ritual theory to a degree, but are more interested in offering something practical for men of the West. It seems there will always be a degree of mystery swirling around the idea of male initiation. Yet, all three approaches I have examined in this paper profess a deep, inherent need for initiation, or “initiation hunger”. Rather than trying fully to understand this need or desire for initiation, it may be better just to accept and to respect that it exists. Reflecting on the many sources I have reviewed, most authors were forthright concerning their personal interest in the topic. For these authors, reviewing their personal experiences with manhood and male initiation (or lack thereof) seemed to introduce their theories on the topic. To avoid perpetuation of the kyriarchy I adamantly oppose, it is important to examine my motives for interest in this topic. As Johnson *et al* suggest, good research in the humanities begins with an examination of one’s motives: “It begins with you, the reader of our book, asking similar questions about your agenda.”<sup>82</sup>

My interest in male initiation comes from many years of working as an employment counsellor, but I suspect the “seed” was within me since boyhood. I often listened to men’s laments regarding a lack of recognition of their skills, experience and value. I observed that these laments often were related to what seemed to be a lack of initiation. Reflecting on my past work with men, I wonder if I am objective in any sense. However, being cognisant of these issues is a first step. I realize that my motivations for studying male initiation need to be

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Johnson et al., *The Practice of Cultural Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 17.

considered. While my work with men impacts my preliminary arguments that male initiation could have a strategic place in the West, I am also aware that my motivations will need to be constantly re-examined so that I remain open to various forms of recovered ritual for men, and to the possibility that male initiation may evolve in forms that are different from ritual forms.

As a boy I did not undergo any meaningful initiation ritual. There were times when I hunted and fished with my father and brothers, but there was never any real initiation. I have certainly experienced “initiation hunger” and there are often times when I wish to be in the company of my male friends, my father, and my biological brothers. My brothers and I have grown up, and we’ve all started families and grown apart somewhat. Ethically speaking, I think it is very important that I consider the possibility that I am attempting to self-initiate in some way. Ronald Grimes posits that education is one of the most prominent methods of initiation. As my years of graduate work continue, I am often reminded of these words by Grimes:

Some of us spend so many years in educational institutions that we have little sense of education as an event, as a performance, therefore as a rite of passage. But when functionally considered, it is. Whether it is a good one or the best one is another question. Education is our society’s most sustained effort at initiation.<sup>83</sup>

My attempts at self-initiation may also explain why I am drawn to alternate forms of initiation such as self-fathering and male friendships.

### **Universal Elements of Male Initiation and their value to Western rites for men**

I have attempted to survey and analyze three different approaches to male initiation and the prevalent notions within them. Though I have critiqued many elements of these approaches, I would now like to identify some elements that are common. Identifying these “universal elements” of male initiation may be helpful to those interested in recovering male initiation in

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<sup>83</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Marrying & Burying: Rites of Passage in a Man's Life* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 44-45.

the West. These universal elements could be incorporated into a new, highly adaptive rite for men.

The three approaches examined in this paper agree that a degree of risk and mystery is important to male initiation rituals. Weiner suggests sending the initiates into the woods alone for a night; Rohr suggests a similar day of solitude in the woods. Ritual theorists also value the concept of a challenge or task for initiates. The role of risk is valued differently, but valued by all three approaches nonetheless. Weiner recognizes the mystery that is seemingly inherent to male initiation. He does not seek to understand or explain it; he just values it for what it is and what it provides for not only the initiate, but also the initiator:

What cannot be conveyed in words is the emotional and spiritual power felt by each man and boy during the three day event. That aspect of ritual is magical and perhaps is best left ineffably vague...Needless to say, this booklet should not be shared in advance with potential initiates. It's amazing what a little anticipatory mystery can do to heighten the impact of ritual and ceremony<sup>84</sup>

This degree of mystery and risk would be beneficial to many uninitiated men in the West. When used in a ritual for men, I think there is potential for risk and mystery to motivate men and shock them out of the complacency they live in.

Regarding re-invented rites for modern men, the approaches I have examined all openly lament the decline of male initiation. They warn that if male initiation is not recovered in the West men will continue to engage in hypermasculine behaviours and continue to face many crises. The Christian approaches to male initiation are the strongest in this regard. The preliminary laments regarding the decline of male initiation have also been incorporated into new rituals for men. For example, Rohr is particularly concerned about the decline of male

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<sup>84</sup> Weiner, *Boy Into Man*, 10.

initiation, and his re-invented rite is aimed at men of all ages. Part of Rohr's retreat is a day of grief. During this time, an initiate can openly lament the lack of initiation and his feelings of loss and sadness. In Weiner's book, one of the initiates writes a small reflection piece. He expresses regret that male initiation rites are nearly extinct. Ritual theorists may not lament the decline of male initiation with as much emotion, but the serious attempts by Ronald Grimes to write texts on how rites can be re-invented suggests that he wishes to reverse the decline with new ideas. Building an open lament into new rites may be very helpful for men. It may help them to deal with emotion and loss within a safe space. Of course, this lament should not be pried out of an initiate, but it should be welcomed if it comes.

An all-male rite is valued by all three approaches. Obviously, it wouldn't be male initiation if men were not involved. Though there are significant differences in attitude toward women among the three approaches, the role of men as leaders of initiation is foundational to rites for men. Without entering lengthy discussions about gender, and while respectful of some peripheral involvement of women if they wish, the key to male initiation is men who are mature and invested in the process. If the all-male rite could be brought back to the West, it might heal a wound that continues to fester. As this paper has suggested, problems like the absent father or the crisis in male friendships may be partially addressed by re-inventing a modern rite for men.

In our current age of technology, many men do not exercise regularly and have lost any connection with nature. According to the approaches discussed, one of the best places for male initiation is in nature. Weiner and Rohr are strong advocates of campfire discussions about issues such as sex, emotions, power and money. Ritual theorists from van Gennep to Grimes and Bell all refer to the effectiveness of indigenous rituals carried out in a natural environment. The setting in nature and the use of a fire ensure the focus is on initiation and that a degree of mystery

and awe is present. If there is something inexplicable about the male initiation ritual taking place, then the magic and mystery is there. A campfire seems to repulse anything a young man doesn't need. A fire seems to inspire the writer of this paper.

Perhaps the most important element emerging from Christian and secular approaches is the recognition that male initiation rites need to be adapted to suit each individual male. Male initiation cannot be mass produced in a single form as if one approach is applicable to all men. Weiner's rite includes a play that is meant to teach the initiates about masculinity. One of the initiates clearly understands the purpose of the play as he reflects: "The meaning of the play was clear to us, that the secrets of masculinity were different for everyone."<sup>85</sup> Corneau also recognizes that male imitation must cater to the unique needs of each initiate: "A man needs a variety of masculine models if he is to attain his own individuality."<sup>86</sup> If rites for men in the West could be made sensitive to each initiate, perhaps male initiation would be more appealing en masse. Rites for gay men are virtually non-existent, and this situation needs to be addressed.<sup>87</sup>

While male initiation in the West has declined, it is not yet extinct. A small band of scholars, authors and practitioners is keeping male initiation alive. It is discouraging, however, that many men seem to have drifted into complacency regarding their masculinities. Men need initiation, but they also need to be educated about its potential value. Men could then provide valuable input into the construction of meaningful rites that will help them explore and feel comfortable with their masculinities. New rites could become powerful for men if they were constructed with input from the initiates and based on the universal elements of different approaches.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>86</sup> Guy Corneau, *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1991), 176.

<sup>87</sup> To help remedy this situation, a next step would be to incorporate queer theory into further discourse on male initiation.

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