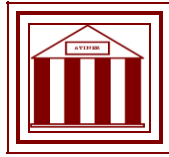


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**Masculinity and Religion in
Southern Brazil**

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Masculinity and Religion in Southern Brazil

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyze how religion contributed to the formation and reproduction of gender roles, especially the male roles. Starting from a theological perspective, we look into paths that can be traced to overcome the male dominance, always taking into account the ambiguous participation that religion has played in the construction of gender roles, including the male roles. We argue about the need for a spirituality that takes embodiment as a starting point for the expression and experience of masculinity, no longer guided in strength and power, but in sharing and solidarity. In a country where religion plays an important role in building society, this approach has a practical and theoretical importance.

Keywords: Gender Roles. Masculinities in Southern Brazil. Gender Policies.

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This paper brings some results from my dissertation in theology. Initially, it discusses some relations between the construction of male identity and sexuality. From a young age, the boys compete among themselves to increase their capital of masculinity in order to earn respect and get the control over others. I also discuss corporeity from a theological perspective. In Western theological tradition, the body was pushed into the background, and for this reason it is important to address the theme in the theological reflection. Combined with the theoretical knowledge, I have experience as a volunteer in a unit that houses young boys in conflict with the law. Because it is an exclusive male environment, the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, corporeity and religion are latent and deserves further study.

Masculinity and sexuality

It is not possible to talk about masculinity without referencing sexuality. Many studies show that games, jokes, rhymes and words that bring to mind elements related to sexuality are evoked in many environments. Although it is a serious theme, we play with sexuality all the time, building a capital of masculinity that allows us to strike the different games and jokes made by others, since “the manly identification of one is constructed through the negation of the masculinity of the other”.¹ In the anthropological study developed with street kids by Lisiane Leczneiski, we can identify two elements related to male sexuality: the exaltation of masculinity through word games and the defense of honor through duels. There is a language code shared by street kids, in which the use of bad words creates a relaxed atmosphere of disputes around the capital of masculinity:

The “swear words”, which may shock us or sound grotesque, seem to not have the same connotation in the universe of the boys, but follow a pattern which is impregnated in such a way in their language, that, in the context of music, it seems to be more a fun way of showing and exalting their masculinity.²

Although there is the presence of women, the environment in which street kids live is a predominantly male environment. In those environments,

¹Szasz, I. (2000). “la identificación viril de uno se construye a través de la negación de la masculinidad del otro”. *Varones mexicanos: género, sexualidad y salud reproductiva. Estudios Feministas* 8(1): 190.

²Leczneiski, L. (1995). Corpo, virilidade e gosto pelo desafio: marcos de masculinidade entre os guris de rua. *Horizontes Antropológicos* 1(1): 95-111. Available at: <<http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/HorizontesAntropologico/article/viewFile/2585/1886>>. Access on: Sep. 12th 2008. “os ‘palavrões’, que a nós podem chocar ou soar grotescos, parecem não ter a mesma conotação no universo dos guris, mas seguem um padrão que está impregnado de tal forma na sua linguagem, que, no contexto das músicas, parece mais uma forma divertida de mostrar e exaltar sua masculinidade”.

references to sexuality have the role of homosociability and at the same time they hierarchicize the boys according to the capital of masculinity distinguishing between “real men” and the others. The homosociability is not restricted to street kids and can be found in any environment where the male presence is predominant. “The explicit talk about sex and the lower body, as well as the games, jocosity, aggression and challenges which hover over the subjects, especially the sexual ones, is not an exclusivity of the boys”.¹ The situation of social vulnerability makes street boys to reproduce the traditional male *ethos*, in which symbols of virility are unquestionable. Therefore, there is a limit well delimited between the games about sexuality and the harm to male honor. The honor must be respected and, in case of offense, defended at any cost. The defense of honor happens through the enactment of characteristics considered typical of male identity:

One of the causes of fights and duels among the boys is the defense of honor. Getting satisfaction for the accusations made, means, among them, defending tarnished honor. And this is something the boys highly value. The importance of defending one’s honor is also clearly expressed in recurrent sayings such as, for example: “a man cannot take affronts home. All has to be cleared up front” In this universe, notions such as challenge, honor, virility and “being active” are all inter-related.²

Among the street kids the question of the virility needs to be tested, leading to the duel. Not all offenses lead to the duel, only those that question the masculinity explicitly: “In this sense accusations of bitch, fagot, thief, son of a bitch, little woman, etc.”.³ The purpose of dueling is not to bring harm to the opponent, but to demarcate a space within the group, demonstrating that they possess the characteristics attributed to masculinity. The fights are not interpreted as acts of violence because they play a dual role for the group: fun and hierarchy:

As a demonstration of personal attributes, they would be, through these enactments, demarcating hierarchical positions of leadership. Contemplating all these dimensions, the fight would reveal itself as a significant articulator of variables of symbolic as well as practical importance. Perhaps this is the reason for the resistance of taking the

¹Leczneiski (1995). “as falas explícitas sobre sexo e o baixo corporal, assim como o clima de brincadeira, jocosidade, agressão e desafio que paira sobre os assuntos, especialmente os sexuais, não é exclusividade dos gurus”.

²Leczneiski (1995). “uma das causas de brigas e duelos, entre os gurus, é a defesa da honra. Tirar satisfação de acusações sofridas significa, entre eles, defender a honra maculada. E isto é algo que os gurus prezam demais. A importância da defesa da honra fica também claramente expressa em ditados recorrentes como, por exemplo: “Um homem não pode levar desaforo pra casa; Tudo tem que ser tirado a limpo”. Neste universo, noções como desafio, honra, virilidade e “ser ativo”, estão interrelacionadas”.

³Leczneiski (1995). “neste sentido são consideradas muito sérias acusações de puto, bicha, ladrão, filho-da-puta, mulherzinha, etc.”

serious fights to the last consequences. As a source of prestige and a potential instrument in the defense of honor, the body should not be hurt.¹

Male sexuality is not a unit throughout the life of man. When a man is single, sexuality is not related to the sexual act. Through sexuality, there is an attempt to affirm a fragile male identity. Sexual performance should be the best possible, compared with other men, in order to demonstrate their masculinity to them—and to himself. Ivonne Szasz argues that, from birth, there is a double social message to the men: 1) It is advantageous to be a man; 2) no one is a man until he proves it. Therefore, penetration is necessary, because “the masculine genitals represent value, pride, prepotency, strength, well being, and and they can be conceived separate from the body, having a life of their own”.²

Fatherhood represents a breakthrough in male sexuality, because a son brings responsibility to the family. According to Rosely Gomes da Costa, fatherhood includes the ability of making children and providing for them: “Thus, if “making children” serves to prove the physical attribute of paternity, being able to sustain them and educate them proves the moral attribute”.³ Thus, fatherhood upgrades two characteristics attributed to male identity: virility and the role of provider.

In the traditional view of masculinity, it is expected that the man provide for their families. This condition gives men control over female sexuality at the same time that it demands constant willingness to perform sexually. However, the sexual act does not express an emotional relationship, but a power relationship, a relationship of domination. Therefore, there is an expectation on the man to be sexually active.⁴ Such demand comes from the need of reaffirmation of male identity in the face of fear of femininity and homosexuality. Not being able to have children questions the virility of a man. “From the fact that masculine sterility is commonly associated with impotence, not being able to have children, for men, is related to sexuality and threatens

¹Leczneiski (1995). “como demonstração de atributos pessoais, estariam ainda, nestas encenações, demarcando posições hierárquicas de liderança. Contemplando todas estas dimensões, a briga se revelaria como articuladora significativa de variáveis de importância tanto simbólica quanto prática. Talvez se deva a isto a resistência dos garotos em levar as brigas sérias até as últimas conseqüências. Fonte de prestígio e instrumento potencial de defesa da honra, o corpo não deve ser ferido”.

²In traditional masculinity, there is an intrinsic relationship between masculinity, penetration and erection. According to Ivonne Szasz, to be considered a sexual relationship, the penetration must happen, ignoring mutual caresses and erotization. Szasz (2000): 189. “los genitales masculinos representan valor, orgullo, prepotencia, fuerza, bienestar, y se pueden concebir separados del cuerpo, cobrando vida propia”.

³Costa, R. G. (2002). Reprodução e gênero: paternidades, masculinidades e teorias da concepção. *Estudos Feministas* 10(2): 341. “assim, se ‘fazer filhos’ pode servir para comprovar o atributo físico da paternidade, conseguir sustentá-los e educá-los comprova seu atributo moral”.

⁴Giffin, K., C. Cavalcanti (1999). Homens e reprodução. *Estudos Feministas* 1-2: 56.

their virility”¹. Not being able to have children reduces the capital of masculinity because it questions the virility. Furthermore, having a child means, in this perspective, an evidence of his heterosexuality.

Although sexuality occupies a privileged place in the constitution of male identity, paradoxically, the issues related to reproduction are computed for women. Worrying about reproductive health is women’s responsibility, since the dimension of care is placed upon women: “For the men, issues of fecundity are perceived as legitimately not of their concern”,² because if a man seeks medical care, his capital of masculinity can be reduced, because he shows signs of weakness and vulnerability.³ Therefore, two policy implications can be derived: the naturalization of motherhood and the secondary role of man in the reproduction, understood as a mere semen donor. According to Juan Guilherme Figuero Perea, the discussion of reproductive rights is linked to the empowerment of women, there are needs to be extended to men, because

[...] the empowerment of women cannot be simply interpreted as synonymous to the disempowerment of men, but, taking into account the social conditions which influence being a woman and being a man, one can assume that the empowerment of the women, as well as their more direct exerting of influence and of negotiation with the men, will obligate these to rethink their identity as men and as human beings, learning new models of negotiating and of exchanging, and in some way, empowering themselves while dignifying the criteria with which they create bonds with other human beings, such as women.⁴

In this conception, fatherhood is no longer an upgrade of male virility. It becomes relational. From the negotiation of the couple regarding their reproductive rights, male sexuality loses part of its narcissistic character and acquires a dialogical dimension. However, the negotiation cannot be considered a concession. Moreover, it is necessary to overcome the idea that

¹Costa (2002): 344. “pelo fato de comumente a esterilidade masculina estar associada à impotência, não conseguir ter filhos relaciona-se, para os homens, à sexualidade e ameaça sua virilidade”.

²Fachel Leal, O. (1998). Cultura reprodutiva e sexualidade. *Estudos Feministas* 6(2): 379. “para os homens, questões sobre fecundidade são percebidas como legitimamente não de sua competência”.

³Costa (2002): 347.

⁴Figueroa Perea, J. G. (2000). Derechos reproductivos y feminismo en la experiencia de los varones. *Estudos Feministas* 8(1): 138. “[...] el empoderamiento de las mujeres no puede ser interpretado simplemente como sinónimo de desempoderamiento de los varones, sino que tomando en cuenta las condiciones sociales que influyen sobre el ser mujer y el ser varón, puede asumirse que el empoderamiento de las mujeres, así como su ejercicio más directo de influencia y de negociación con los varones, obligará a éstos a repensar su identidad como varones y como seres humanos, aprendiendo nuevos modelos de negociación y de intercambio, y de alguna forma, empoderándose al dignificar los criterios con los cuales se vinculan con otros seres humanos como las mujeres”.

fatherhood is superfluous.¹ Thus male sexuality becomes a responsible sexuality, giving man the ability to share the pleasure with his companion and the consequences of the sexual relationship. In this way, male sexuality loses its connotation of domination and acquires a connotation of sharing and intimacy between partners.

Masculinity and corporeity from a theological perspective

During the I Latin American Congress of Gender and Religion, theologian André Musskopf affirmed that masculinity has been defined in a negative way: being a man means *not being a woman, not being homosexual*.² In a way, the paradox of the identitary definition from the denial of otherness is upgraded. According to Pedro Paulo de Oliveira, society has expectations that a man fulfill four preconditions: “1) the need to be different from women; 2) the need to be better than the others; 3) the need to be independent and self-confident; and 4) the need to be more powerful than the others, through violence, if necessary”.³

Many studies have drawn attention to the “crisis of masculinity”, proclaiming the emergence of a “new man”. However, André Musskopf understands that we need to critically analyze this statement, because it creates a dichotomy between the “new men”, capable of expressing their feelings, and the “traditional men”, which are unexpressive and hipermasculine.⁴ “The ‘new man’ arises in place of the ‘old’, that is, an individual who behaved within the expected patterns for a traditional male”.⁵ As the crisis has different interpretations, changing according to the social group, there is the possibility that the result be an increase of consumption or promotion of a liberating male identity.⁶ The male experience has been addressed in theology from the corporeity of power and spirituality.

According to Renate Gierus, the bodies have specific languages that must be interpreted as other sources. Bodies are shaped from their experiences. “The body is constituted of many marks and many models. It carries within it life, being impressed upon the skin and the entrails the daily paths and

¹Siqueira, M. J. T. (2000). Saúde e direitos reprodutivos: o que os homens têm a ver com isso? *Estudos Feministas* 8(1): 165.

²Musskopf, A. S. (2005). Identidade masculina e corporeidade: uma abordagem *queer*. In: Musskopf, A. S., M. J. Ströher (Orgs.). *Corporeidade, etnia e masculinidade: reflexões do I Congresso Latino-Americano de Gênero e Religião*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal. 80.

³Oliveira, P. P. (1998). Discursos sobre a masculinidade. *Estudos Feministas* 6(1): 99. “1) a necessidade de ser diferente das mulheres; 2) a necessidade de ser superior aos demais; 3) a necessidade de ser independente e auto-confiante; e 4) a necessidade de ser mais poderoso do que os outros, através da violência, se necessário”.

⁴Musskopf (2005): 108.

⁵Ribeiro, C. R., V. H. F. Siqueira (2007). O novo homem na mídia: ressignificações por homens docentes. *Estudos Feministas* 15(1): 217. “o ‘novo homem’ surge no lugar do ‘antigo’, ou seja, um indivíduo que se comportava dentro dos padrões esperados para um macho tradicional”.

⁶Musskopf (2005): 92.

waywardness”.¹ To understand the body language is not an easy task. It is an ambiguous language, permeated by power relations.

The male experience is also a bodily experience. “We are body”, argues Daniel Sánchez Pereira.² It is not possible to talk about the male experience outside the body. The strength of this statement is given by the context of the duality between body and soul. For too long, Christian groups supported the dichotomy between body and soul, giving to it the highest properties and understanding it as a locus for the sin,³ an instrument to be used by the mind.⁴ According to the theologian Jürgen Moltman, this dichotomy has no biblical basis, being developed in Christian Gnosticism and deepened by Augustine’s anthropology.⁵ In Ernst Käsemann’s idea, ‘flesh’ denotes the condition of the human creature and it does not constitute a synonym for ‘body’. In the sense given by Apostle Paul, ‘flesh’ represents all that which is ephemeral, fleeting.⁶

Men and women learn to play roles from an early age. The learning of masculinity involves a double violence which constitutes diacritical marks written in male bodies over time: violence against themselves and violence against otherness. A traditional masculine corporeality has been linked to sexuality, limiting the potentiality of the body.⁷ Through the reproduction of the male *ethos*, corporeality continues to maintain a close relationship with sexuality, understood as an act of updating masculinity because domination manifests itself in the sexual division of labor. The opposition high vs. low, the sexual position considered ‘natural’ is that one in which the man lies on the woman.

Socially differentiated, female sexuality has been guided to intimacy, while male sexuality has been compartmentalized and focused on penetration in a phallogocentric attitude.⁸ The penis is not just a part of the male body: it must receive a name that distinguishes it from others, because it symbolizes

¹Gierus, R. (2004). CorpOralidade: História Oral e copo. In: Ströher, M. J., W. Deifelt & A. S. Musskopf (Orgs.). *Á flor da pele: ensaios sobre gênero e corporeidade*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal/CEBI. 44. “o corpo constitui-se de muitas marcas e de muitos modelos. Ele carrega consigo a vida, imprimindo na pele e nas entranhas os caminhos e descaminhos cotidianos”.

²Sánchez Pereira, D. (2005). Além dos limites impostos pela cultura e pelos preconceitos: pistas para uma releitura da Carta a Filêmon, Ápia e Arquipo na perspectiva das masculinidades. *Estudos Bíblicos* 86(2): 37. “somos corpo”.

³Irrázaval, D. (2005). Corporeidad masculina. In: Musskopf, A. S., M. J. Ströher (Orgs.). *Corporeidade, etnia e masculinidade: reflexões do I Congresso Latino-Americano de Gênero e Religião*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal. 137.

⁴Irrázaval (2005): 140.

⁵Apostle Paul used the concept in three different senses: “flesh” referred to the created world; “in flesh” referred to the transitory condition of the world; and “according to the flesh” referred to the time in this world. Moltmann, J. (1998). *O espírito da vida: uma pneumatologia integral*. Petrópolis: Vozes. 90-91.

⁶Käsemann, E. (2003). A antropologia paulina. In: Käsemann, E. *Perspectivas paulinas*. 2. ed. São Paulo: Teológica/Paulus. 48.

⁷Musskopf (2005): 85.

⁸Souza, E. (2008). O papel da teologia na superação da dominação masculina. In: Schaper, V. G., K. L. Oliveira & I. A. Reblin (Orgs.). *A teologia contemporânea na América Latina e no Caribe*. São Leopoldo: OIKOS. 274.

masculinity itself. By penetrating the man proves to himself that he is not a woman or a homosexual.

The legitimate use of the male body requires an active sexual position in intercourse from the man. Ultimately, what matters is the act of penetration, not the partner. When a man is penetrated by another man, he is stigmatized by using his body in a dishonored way. In doing so, he gives up all capital of masculinity he has.¹ If we remember the character of nobility of masculinity, we can infer that in the traditional view, the man who is penetrated smears his identity forever. On the other hand, when a man penetrates another man, his capital of masculinity does not decrease, because he is not considered a homosexual.² The social expectation is that the man remains active in sexual intercourse and the reduction of the other's masculinity causes satisfaction, at least for his ego.

Adilson Schultz draws attention to a little explored detail in the analysis of the relationship between masculinity and corporeality: men know and barely speak about their own body. When they talk about corporeality, they evoke bodies of others.³ It is not surprising that the main conversations involve sexuality. Male conversations in social environments are built on themes that simultaneously involve without commitment. It would be uninteresting to discuss something that could question the capital of masculinity. Schultz advocates the creation of groups to discuss masculinity, believing that men are willing to overcome their silence.⁴ At the same time as there are benefits coming from the male condition, there also comes the burden. The creation of spaces for discussion and questioning of masculinity provide the development of alternatives to current models.

The Bible offers several narratives that can discuss the male experience with the body. The application of non-fundamentalist hermeneutics makes possible many plausible interpretations for the construction of new models of masculinity. This movement is worth it, given that some models were sanctioned by the biblical message. Adilson Schultz presents 18 typical-ideal models of masculinity built from biblical stories. Despite the fictional character, the exercise demonstrates the plurality of perspectives present in the Bible.⁵

In the narrative of Genesis 38, André Musskopf and Yoimel González Hernández identify the presence of alternative models of masculinity, definable from corporeality. There is an expectation that is placed upon the men in patriarchal societies: the ability to generate descendents, preferably sons. Confronted with the death of Er, Judah's firstborn, before he conceived a son,

¹Torrão Filho, A. (2005). Uma questão de gênero: onde o masculino e o feminino se cruzam. *Cadernos Pagu* 24: 143.

²Torrão Filho (2005): 2005.

³Schultz, A. (2004). Isto é o meu corpo – e é corpo de homem: discursos sobre masculinidade na Bíblia, na literatura e em grupos de homens. In: Ströher, M. J., W. Deifelt & A. S. Musskopf (Orgs.). *A flor da pele: ensaios sobre gênero e corporeidade*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal/CEBI. 172.

⁴Schultz (2004): 189.

⁵Schultz (2004): 177-182.

it is his brother's obligation to continue the name of the deceased, according to the law of the levirate. Onan refuses to play the male role ascribed to him:

Upon refusing to father a descendance for his brother, Onan enters into contradiction with three different positions: his father, the social legislation of the times, and Tamar. For her, having children guaranteed a more advantageous position than the condition of a widow without sons. After all, maternity, in the patriarchal culture, gave status to the woman. These three positions represent a real pressure against which Onan reacts corporally, through the exercise of his sexuality.¹

Onan's disobedience cost him his life. The narrative of Genesis 38 shows the competition of alternative models of masculinity, ending with the defense of Judah's masculinity: "Judah's body, in spite of his age, is a masculine body carrying the full procreating faculties and, therefore, the indisputable symbol of masculine sexuality".² Meanwhile, the bodies of the children of Judah are stigmatized as weak and unable to fulfill the patriarchal demands. The learning of masculinity happens in an explicit and implicit way in this narrative: being a man means to be manly, despite advanced age; one who does not have virility, even a young man, does not deserve to be called man. Er's and Onan's death symbolize social death, the non-recognition of the masculinity of those men whose bodies do not meet social demands.

Male bodies are trained to not feel pain, or rather, to not demonstrate the pain they feel. We cannot continue thinking that men are insensitive beings. The isolation and loneliness to which they are submitted shape their identities and their bodies in order to suffer in silence. The challenge that is before us is the valorization of male corporeality without the need to maintain the dichotomy body vs. spirit; sex vs. love.³

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¹Musskopf, A. S., Y. González Hernández (2005). Homens e ratos! Desconstruindo o modelo hegemônico de masculinidade e visibilizando modelos alternativos construídos nos corpos de homens em Gênesis 38. *Estudos Bíblicos* 86(2): 62. "ao evitar gerar descendência para seu irmão, Onã entra em contradição com três posições diferentes: o seu pai, a legislação social da época e Tamar. Para esta, ter filhos garantia uma posição mais vantajosa que a condição de viúva sem filhos. Afinal, a maternidade, na cultura patriarcal, dá status à mulher. Estas três posições representam uma pressão real diante da qual Onã reage corporalmente, através do exercício da sua sexualidade".

²Musskopf, González Hernández (2005): 63. "o corpo de Judá, apesar da sua idade, é um corpo masculino portador de plenas faculdades procriadoras e, portanto, símbolo indiscutível da sexualidade masculina".

³Irrázaval, D. (2003). Justicia de género e identidad masculina. In: SOTER (Org.). *Gênero e teologia: interpelações e perspectivas*. Belo Horizonte: SOTER; São Paulo: Paulinas/Loyola. 220.

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