MEAT AND MASCULINITY IN MEN’S MINISTRIES

Men’s ministries are initiatives that respond to a perceived feminization of the church and which seek to encourage men back into the church by creating masculine spaces and forms of worship. This is largely achieved by appealing to what men’s ministries perceive to be appropriate signifiers for masculinity, which include sporting, military and mythopoetic images, and a particular understanding of servant leadership within the home. This paper extends previous analyses by demonstrating how men’s ministries also appeal to hunting and meat consumption as signifiers for masculinity, which results in a way of engaging the non-masculine world in a violent and sexualized manner.

Keywords: men’s ministries, masculinity, hunting, meat consumption

“Why am I here? I heard that at my church there were going to be a bunch of men and a bunch of meat, and it was going to be a bloody mess”—Josh from St Augustine’s Church, Neutral Bay, NSW, Australia

Contemporary men’s ministries comprise what might be called a “third wave” of Muscular Christianity. The first wave gained momentum in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Allen, 2002; Bederman, 1989) and “can be defined simply as a Christian commitment to health and manliness” (Putney, 2003, p. 11). The second wave took hold after World War II, with special reference to Christian sporting activities (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). The third wave began in the late 1970s—starting with the establishment by Ed Cole of the Christian Men’s Network—and saw the creation of what we now know as “men’s ministries” (Gelfer, 2009).

Men’s ministries can be non-denominational—such as the well-known Promise Keepers—or affiliated with specific denominations, the most noticeable of which are Catholic (Gelfer, 2008). Some men’s ministries speak generally to men, while others have a specific masculine focus, such as fatherhood (Gelfer, 2010). Most men’s ministries are based in America, but they also operate in a similar fashion in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand (Gelfer, 2011). While it is possible to identify a number of different masculine performances in men’s ministries—from the “harder” evangelical masculinity to the “softer” Catholic masculinity (Gelfer, 2009, 2010)—the common motivation for men’s ministry is an anxiety about the fading of men within the church: either an anxiety about men losing power in the church as a result of increasing feminine influence, or a missiological anxiety that fewer men are being brought to Christ. In order to mitigate this anxiety, men’s ministries seek to attract men back to the church by appealing to what they perceive to be attractive masculine characteristics and appropriate models of masculinity, largely based on sporting, military and mythopoetic images (Gelfer, 2009), and a particular understanding of servant leadership within the home (van Leeuwen, 1997), or what has worryingly been described as “soft patriarchy” (Wilcox, 2004). This process has largely led to men’s ministries being seen as a conservative backlash against feminism (Conason, Ross, & Cokorinos, 1997; Eldén, 2002; Kimmel, 1997; Messner, 1997; Poling & Kirkley, 2000; van Leeuwen 1997) and is thus a site of volatile debate within the politics of gender and sexuality, both culturally and theologically. Via website content/textual analysis, this article extends previous research by demonstrating how both the hunting and consumption of meat is used as a signifier for normative masculinity in men’s ministry.

Hunting has long since been an activity through which men have defined their masculinity (Bye, 2003; Fine, 2000; Littlefield, 2006; Littlefield, & Ozanne, 2009; Loo, 2001; Mckenzie, 2005; Smalley, 2005). There is also a clear historical precedent for a Christian concern about masculinity to appeal to hunting: Clifford Putney shows that hunting was often brought up as an exemplar of authentic masculinity by the Muscular Christianity movement as it manifest in both Britain and America (2001, pp. 6, 14, 30). Similarly, on the other wide of the world in Australia, the “very masculine” revival of the Billy Graham Crusades included hunting for kangaroos (Piggin, 1996, p. 156).

Eating meat has also long since been an activity through which men have defined their masculinity (Buerkle, 2009; Gal & Wilkie, 2010; Parasecoli, 2005; Parry, 2010; Potts, & Parry, 2010; Sobal, 2005; Stibbe, 2004) in contexts as diverse as American firemen (Deutsch, 2005), the Baltic States (Prättälä, et al., 2007), Finnish carpenters and engineers (Roos, Prättälä, & Koski, 2001) and India (Roy, 2002). Again, we have the historical precedent in Muscular Christianity, an example of which is members of the Men and Religion Forward Movement being described as “hearty meat eaters” (Putney, 2001, p. 139).

The following sections offer examples of how hunting and eating meat manifest in men’s ministries in both America and Australia: they are the “raw” data or the “meat in the sandwich,” as it were. Viewed via the lens of Carol J. Adams’ (2010) The Sexual Politics

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2 Mythopoetic here means the mythopoetic men’s movement typified by the work of Robert Bly, which resonates with images of neo-Jungian archetypes, father absence and a fascination with psychological/inner wilderness and the literal wilderness.
of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory, (referred to here in the twentieth anniversary edition, but eerily as pertinent as ever), the concluding section chews over how meat in men’s ministry functions not just as a signifier for normative masculinity, but also as a way of engaging the non-masculine world in a violent and sexualized manner.

**HUNTING MEAT**

There are many men’s ministries that refer to hunting, but not all employ it in the same manner. While by their very definition all hunting ministries revolve around the normative masculine signifier of hunting, not all hunting ministries are men’s ministries *per se*. Rather than using hunting to attract men to the church, some ministries simply consider hunting constituencies to be their mission field; for example, Christian Bowhunters of America does not refer specially to “men,” rather it describes itself as a “non-denominational ministry to the bow hunting world.”3 However, more often than not, hunting ministries are put in explicit dialogue with men’s ministries, either as examples in themselves of independent men’s ministries, or specific initiatives that can be mobilized in a broader strategy for regular men’s ministries. Christian Sportsmen’s Fellowship, for example, describes itself as “a non-profit organization serving as a resource team to help you reach the men in your church community”4 and suggests strategies it imagines will attract men to regular churches such as “Wear Your Camo Day” and distributing free copies of *The Christian Sportsman* magazine.5 Examples of ministries which appeal to men and hunting include—but are by no means limited to—Ironman Outdoors, Outdoor Connection, South Carolina Baptist Convention’s Bow Hunting with a Purpose, and the ironically-named “Friendly” Community Baptist Church’s Annual Skeet Shoot and Pig Pickin’, as well as its Turkey Shoot.6 However, in order to gain some depth, the following analysis refers specifically to Brent Henderson’s Hunting Truth Seminars & Wild Game Banquets.

As a “professional hunter,” “professional musician” and “professional men’s minister,” Henderson’s biographical statement waxes lyrical: “Prostaff Member of Bear Archery, Grim Reaper Broadheads, Whitetail University, In God’s Country, and God’s Country Camo, Brent has hunted from the plains of Africa to the rugged mountains of Alaska.”7 We see in

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3 http://www.christianbowhunters.org. There is something of a paradox in this hunting ministry. Its key piece of scripture used is John 3:36, “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This passage is about everlasting life, but is literally transposed upon images of men drawing their bows, which symbolize death (or perhaps dispatching the prey to everlasting life?).


5 http://www.christiansportsman.com/index.php?env=news_article:m235-1-1-4-s:n-90—& n_event=. Just like Christian Bowhunters of America, Christian Sportsman also focuses around a verse of scripture with an odd interpretation given its context, with its Vision Statement beginning with “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalms 42:1, NIV). Members of Christian Sportsman presumably seek to kill the panting deer: if they liken themselves to the deer, is this some curious statement about bloody martyrdom for God?


Henderson’s ministry a clear echo of the renaissance years of men’s ministry in the early 1990s when there was a complex two-directional influence with the secular mythopoetic men’s movement and its love for the wilderness and the numinosity of the great outdoors (Gelfer, 2009, pp. 52-55; 77-83). A straight-talking man himself, one testimonial has Henderson’s ministry described in almost Thoreau-esque terms:

In the great outdoors, surrounded by streams, woods, and wilderness, God has communicated and confirmed His presence, His purposes, and His promises to Brent in powerful and picturesque ways. Brent has been wonderfully enabled to convey his “in the wild experiences,” coupled with God’s word, to help transform the lives of men.8

At the same time Henderson communicates this mythopoetic majesty he also appeals to a more high-adrenalin form of ministry, the like of which elsewhere can manifest in explosive feats of strength at the altar, such as ripping telephone directories and smashing concrete blocks (Gelfer, 2009, pp. 69-70). For example, in his video “Hunting Truth,” Henderson states, “in the last two years I have been charged by a buffalo, a rhino, a red stag and a 400 pound Russian boar. It’s living on the edge of what God created that makes me tick.”9

For Henderson, the appeal to hunting and “living on the edge” is not primarily one of appealing to normative masculine signifiers to lure men into church, rather theological. In his video, “Drivetime Adventures … The Hunt for a Man’s Heart,” Henderson says it is not just the “harvesting”10 of an animal or the planning and preparation that goes into a hunt that makes it appealing, rather the very fact of being where God intended man (in the strict sense) to be. Quoting Genesis 2:15, Henderson reminds us that Adam was placed by God in the Garden of Eden and that his heart was “fashioned in the wilderness;” hunting then becomes a way of returning to the place where God intended man to dwell (Henderson refers to Eve being created in the “lush beauty” of the Garden, rather than the “wilderness” which is presumably why women feel no special need to hunt).11 However, given the missiological aspect of men’s ministry, hunting should be read chiefly as a shorthand for masculinity which at once appeals to that which men are presumed to desire and also a statement—akin to sex role theory—about what is appropriate behavior for men.12

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10 “Harvesting” is the euphemistic term Henderson and other hunting ministries use instead of “killing.” Clearly, it is a less emotive term, suggesting the divinely-ordained natural resources gifted to humanity in Genesis, as well as being a word used in diverse theological contexts. This is an example of what Adams (2010) would describe as “the role of language in masking violence … the use of adjectives in the phrases ‘humane slaughter’ and ‘forcible rape’ promotes a conceptual mis-focusing that relativizes these acts of violence” (pp. 99-100).
11 Adams (2010) highlights the Genesis narrative from 1:26 as being a prime example of how “our world as we know it is structured around a dependence on the death of other animals” (p. 94).
12 It may be extending the metaphor too far, but in light of the above reference to Psalms 42:1 it is also easy to imagine the hunting metaphor being transposed onto the Great Commission, akin to fishing.
Henderson’s appeal to the normatively masculine has a distinctly performative nature, and not just in a Butlerian sense of constructing an “authentic” masculinity through repetition (Butler, 1999), but also literal performance. The “Hunting Truth” video shows Henderson initially performing one of his “nine top 10 singles” before speaking on a stage decked with hunting paraphernalia: weapons, camouflage, stuffed animal heads and so forth. Henderson wears hunting clothing that takes on a pantomime-like or camp appearance given the wilderness-free context of the stage. However, any temptation for comedic interpretation evaporates with his video “Men’s Ministry Speaker Hunts a 500 lb. Boar!” that provides a paradoxical insight into the ethics of boar hunting relative to the familiar discourse in men’s ministries about the importance of husbands and fathers.

In the video, Henderson is out seeking an infamous 500 lb. boar that is thought to be hiding in a haystack. We see an animal shoot out of the hay and Henderson narrates, “about a 150 lb. sow comes barreling out of the stuff, and I noticed that she must have had a bunch of piglets with her so I thought, ‘I’m not going to shoot this sow.’” Clearly the prospect of harvesting the sow with her piglets seems an ethically questionable thing to do for Henderson. However, we then see another animal that Henderson describes with the narration, “this nuclear submarine starts coming out of the water of this hay.” This is the 500 lb. boar that Henderson tells us can “mess you up pretty bad:” the boar stands there looking calm and indifferent before trotting off in the other direction, at which point Henderson shoots it with his high-tech bow. Henderson then says, “most men, if they get the opportunity to get out and do the things they love, usually become better fathers and husbands.” Clearly the same respect for the 500 lb. boar—presumably out with its partner sow and piglets—is not accorded the same wish to do the things it loves and father its offspring. At the end of the video, a lone piglet is discovered in the haystack, its mother and siblings having fled, its father harvested: Henderson and his two buddies laugh heartily as the piglet squeals in their hands.13

Aside from Henderson’s performative aspect of hunting, his ministry also seeks to get other men to embody hunting and meat, both in terms of activity and consumption. In his Event Planning Guide (sent free of charge to those willing to hand over their email address), Henderson lists the kind of prizes he believes should be handed out at a hunting ministry event, which include: a quality bow from a trusted manufacturer; a popular muzzleloader; a shotgun; a dozen arrows; a bow or gun case; arrow broadheads; gun and/or bow accessories; camouflage hunting outfits and hats; outdoor bibles, hunting books, or adventure audio CDs; tackle boxes and/or hunting knives; fishing poles and/or lures; taxidermist discount cards and shooting range cards; hunting safety systems; a lock-on tree-stand and safety harness; deer, turkey, predator, and waterfowl calls (pp. 6-7). There is a clear message here: you have seen me behave like a man and harvest animals, now here are the tools for you to do the same.

Further still, Henderson creates a kind of “everybody’s doing it” justification to his deadly activities. In planning the banquet that concludes his ministry event, he suggests the organizers “obtain wild game from members of your church.” He claims it is both “more economical to provide men of your church the opportunity to share the meat they personally

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYizjRYT0w0.
have harvested” and “when men of the church provide the wild game, it inevitably provides opportunities to ‘tell their story’ of how the game was harvested” (p. 18). By first performing the divinely ordained hunt, then enabling the hunt with prize tools, then encouraging other hunters to share their harvest and stories, Henderson creates what might be described as an animalistic “text of terror” (Trible, 1984) in which all men are encouraged to participate, at once demonstrating their masculine lineage from Adam in the Garden of Eden and naturalizing acts of worldly violence.

Of course, once you’ve killed it, you must eat it: Henderson’s seminars end in the consumption of meat in men’s ministries, as discussed below. It is noteworthy, though, that Henderson describes the meat consumption in terms of a “banquet,” which demonstrates how volume of food consumption is also a gendered construction, with larger volumes of food being seen as signifiers for masculinity (Basow & Kobrnyowicz, 1993; Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Chaiken & Pliner, 1987).

**Eating Meat**

One needs look no further than how-to manuals for men’s ministries to identify the consumption of meat. *Men’s Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas*—whose first piece of advice for making “entry-level events safe” is to “have food”—states, “men can sit together and talk as long as they have a purpose like devouring a roast pig!” (Group Publishing, 2004, p. 76). Similarly, *No Man Left Behind: How to Build and Sustain a Thriving Disciple-Making Ministry for Every Man in Your Church* refers to when “the men of your church get pumped up … everyone is talking about last year when they roasted a whole pig on a spit” (Morley, Delk, & Clemmer, 2006, p. 149). However, it is the way men’s ministries themselves parade meat consumption in their public image that is most graphic and bloody.

In American men’s ministries there is a broad spectrum of positions taken when it comes to meat consumption: to be fair, sometimes it is even problematized or mitigated with the inclusion of a dessert. At once consolidating and seeking to transcend normative masculinity, the men’s ministry at Harpeth Community Church states, “being a man is easy and simple … huh? work hard, eat cooked meat, go to church on Sundays, watch the game or shoot an animal, right? NOT QUITE! Being a REAL AUTHENTIC man is not easy or simple … especially in 2011!”*14* Henderson Hills Baptist Church holds an annual Wild Game Dinner, “a wonderful evening of ‘Feathers, Fish & Fur.’” Attendees are asked to bring “a wild game dish to the ‘Feast,’” with a way-out for those who don’t have the inclination to kill themselves: “If you can’t bring a dish, bring a dessert.”*15*

Perhaps most commonly benign is the inclusion of a BBQ in men’s ministries. St. Aidan’s Men’s Ministry had a “Men Meating the Challenge BBQ” event in which “Malcolm the butcher demonstrated how to professionally carve and cook meat for a BBQ and also gave his testimony. Everyone had a great time.”*16* Mount Zion Family runs the “Men’s Ministry BBQ Cook-Off” of manly proportions: “Contestants will be provided one half hog (50 to

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60 lbs.) and one Boston Butt roast." A separate Mount Zion Men’s Ministry shows pictures from its Pig Roast, with the pig in increasing states of dismemberment. Bachelor Creek Church of Christ has a Men’s Ministry Cookout with a graphic of a BBQ containing the words “You Kill It—We Grill It.” Grace Community United Methodist Church has the G3 Night: “Guys Grillin’ at Grace.” There is also plenty of relatively genteel meat-eating in men’s ministries. Foothills Church men’s ministry runs Men, Meat Movie Mondays (“MMMM!”) nights. Crosspoint Church men’s ministry holds its Sportsmen’s Banquet and Game Tasting including pork BBQ, quail pie, venison stew roast venison, alligator, mako shark, and bison. Raffle tickets are $5: First prize—2-person hunting blind; Second prize—Remington 870 12 ga. shotgun.

Slightly more aggressive is the steak, as this moves from a form of rather domesticated cooking to something a little wilder. Stillwater Evangelical Free Church has Steak Outs: “Steak Outs are exactly that. Bring some meat and eat it.” It seems the steak is a good socializer: Cross Point Baptist Church has “Men’s Meat & Greet” and their 2011 conference ticket naturally includes “a steak dinner.” Sometimes the language gets a bit beefier. Complete with a picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger carrying a machine gun, UCSB Real Life Men’s Ministry run “Meat n’ Mud Mantastic Mantime” where men are enticed with the promised plan of:

We’re going to be meeting at the Plex (6504 Madrid) at 11 am, then we’ll be going to play mud (if it rains) football, then head over to the MANsion (7284 Del Norte) for a tri-tip BBQ provided by Chef Trevor Wolfcale, some sweet men’s devotional time, and some other games that involve duct tape on t-shirts.

Immanuel Baptist Church men’s ministry has a spring retreat where they “get together and do a ‘guy thing.’” This usually involves multiple forms of outdoor recreation, flames, red meat and God's Word.” Men’s ministry at Grace Community Church has a Beast Feast where “guys come together to eat, eat and eat some more meat from that year’s hunt.”

American’s men’s ministries can even perform what they perceive to be meaty humor, or get a little misty-eyed for the good old days. Men of A.I.M. has a store with a number of sizzling products (t-shirts, bumper-stickers, button badges) with messages such as: “Bacon: The Sixth Language of Love;” “Save Our Planet: It’s the Only One with Bacon;” “If an

20 http://www.gracecommunityumc.org/#/Grow/Men%27s%20Ministry.
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Animal Didn’t Die It’s Just a Snack;” “Maybe I Should Eat Better: Can You Juice Bacon?”; Genesis 9:3 accompanied by a deer and wildfowl: “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat to you.”28 Hope Church’s men’s ministry have their “Big Pig Shindig: Pig Roast with Corn Toss Tournament” where “the aroma was tantalizing!” and seemed to regress men to a halcyon mood of supposedly authentic masculinity: “Footballs were zooming around the parking lot. Men were talking, running, and goofing off like I recall from my collegiate days. We don’t get too many moments like that as we go through adulthood.”29

Meat in men’s ministries appears at its most gory in Australia, where gathering around meat is something of a national identity-deriving activity: historically, “the barbecue was where Australians celebrated their culture” (Hamilton & Denniss, 2005, p. 24). Meaty ministries have even resulted in media take-up in New South Wales: in 2008, Sydneyanglicans.net ran the story “Men Meat the Challenge” (Smith, 2008), and in 2010 the mainstream media picked it up when the Sydney Morning Herald ran the story “Parishioners in for their Chop, Chapter and Verse” (Blain, 2010).

The Sydneyanglicans.net story makes light of the event, but its language suggests some curious distancing of the business at hand from “real” people: it is not men who attend the event, but “60 blokes” and they are there not to learn so much about butchery, but to “cut up a cow” (Smith, 2008, para. 1). Then, curiously, as if something rather untoward was going on in which one’s identity was better concealed, “it was unilaterally decided everyone would just be called ‘Dave’ for the night. The only exception was the guest of honour; ‘Daisy’ the Half a Cow” (para. 5). So, in effect, we have a bunch of anonymous men gathering for a lynching, and the only named entity at the event is the subject of the butchery, which also happens to be female (with an infantilized feminine name). Normative masculinity is asserted again elsewhere: the attendant Daves who cannot butcher are firstly emasculated by being described as “poor city boys” (para. 7); heterosexuality is then assumed when they are “expected to put these skills into practice for their wives and girlfriends” (para. 7). The article also offers us some (literally) bloody theology, when Preacher Dave reminds the Attendant Daves about the importance of sacrifice: at this point he is covered in fake blood and reminds the others “what a bloody mess being a priest would have been” back in Jesus’ day, but that this is no longer necessary now that “we can be made clean and new” thanks to His sacrifice (para. 8).30

The graphic nature of the event is also described in the Sydney Morning Herald story where, “The altar and pews have been pushed to one side. In their place, a group of about 70 men watch intently as a butcher goes to work on a side of beef suspended from a steel frame” (Blain, 2010, para. 2). The accompanying photograph with the caption “feeding mind and body” shows a butcher hacking away at meat hanging from the frame, with a tarp

30 This is the type of event referred to in the above epigraph: “I heard that at my church there were going to be a bunch of men and a bunch of meat, and it was going to be a bloody mess,” which suggests some form of theological horror show: a “real life” one-upmanship to the cinematic “bloody mess” of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ which was described by one critic as “a two-hour-and-six-minute snuff movie—The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre—that thinks it’s an act of faith” (Edelstein, 2004, para. 6).
stretched out across the floor to catch the waste. Echoing the previous story, but with a rather more voyeuristic twist we read that, “the men watched as half a cow was cut up” (para. 9). Normative masculinity was again bolstered here with the volume of food eaten: “after a hearty three courses, including steaks, pork ribs and lamb leg, Mr Taylor said the only thing left over was salad” (para. 9).

While Australian men’s ministries extend the use of meat beyond their American counterparts, they of course also have a number of more modest performances. Ignite Life Church’s men’s ministry is called “Real Meat For Real Men!” and comes with a picture of steaks sizzling on a BBQ. The beefy tag line is “the herd is back!!” and it takes place in the “shed.” Windsor District Baptist Church’s “Big Boys Toys” event is masculinized not just by the four-wheel-driving and golf, but the fact that “much steak was consumed.” Concord Baptist Church has a “men and meat” night where “there is always a good feed.” At once confirming and—refreshingly—problematising the assumption of eating meat and other signifiers for normative masculinity, Springwood–Winnalee Anglican Church asks “what ministry there is for men has a strong focus on ‘blokiness’ (sport/car/beer/meat)—what about men with different tastes/pastimes?”

**CONCLUSION**

Certainly, Muscular Christianity offers an historical precedent for a masculine-identified Christianity that promotes the kind of masculine normativity that appeals to hunting and eating meat. However, despite the readings of Genesis offered above, it is important to note that when considered in a broader historical context, the connection between meat and Christian masculinity—or at least the gender performances of Christian men, which is not exactly the same thing—is somewhat more ambivalent.

David Grumett and Rachel Muers (2010) show how meat has fallen in and out of favor in the Christian diet over the centuries. Rather than being specifically about gender performance, the reasons for meat’s mixed reception in Christian history has more to do with the complex relationship between humanity and the world we inhabit. Early monastic communities, for example, felt abstaining from meat “contributed to the ordering of society through liturgy and relationships with the natural world” (p. 22); other times, ascetics ate meat simply “to be rooted in eating practices deemed ordinary in order not to be regarded as suspect” (p. 129). Far from being marginal, in later years in the UK, abstinence from meat was actively encouraged by significant Christian identities such as John Wesley and Charles Spurgeon, as well as a number of small groups such as the Sacred Socialists, Concordists, Owenites, Chartists, White Quakers and even the Salvation Army (pp. 63-66).

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31 [http://yarrawongalifecommunitychurch.org/content/ministries/mens](http://yarrawongalifecommunitychurch.org/content/ministries/mens). The shed is an iconic men’s space in Australia, and has been used recently as a metaphor for creating men’s health and wellbeing initiatives: see Ballinger, Talbot and Verrinder (2009) and Morgan (2010). At the same time, the shed resonates with a certain type of rurality where meat might be harvested, or the packing shed where it is dispatched.


There is no suggestion here that abstaining from meat is normal across Christian history, simply that there are plenty of examples that problematize the assumption that eating meat is normal, let alone that it functions as a signifier for Christian masculinity.

Of Grumett and Muers’ (2010) examples of historical meat abstinence, perhaps the most interesting is the Anchorites, to whom “meat was viewed as the paradigmatic ‘hot’ food, with many puns linking the sexual pleasures of human flesh with the dietary temptations of animal flesh and the carnality of the carne” (p. 9). Beyond the basic assumption that society views meat as something men do, and men’s ministries will do anything that appeals to such assumptions, it is the connection between meat and sex that offers the most compelling reason behind the privileging of meat in contemporary men’s ministries.

Adams (2010) shows how meat is not just something that is inherently bound up with masculine gender performances, but also patriarchy and sexuality. Meat is a sign of power for men: “women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered second-class foods in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits and grains rather than meat” (p. 48); meat is also generally reserved for the male of a household to bear witness to his superiority (pp. 50-52). Further still, the very language around meat and power is gendered: while the masculine “meat” is considered the essence of something, the feminine “vegetable” is a sign of passivity or even mental dysfunction (pp. 60-61). Adams also makes a compelling case for how meat and women (or, more specifically, butchery and rape) are combined in the logic of male power. Women are often defined in terms of being pieces of meat: for example, a man is often expected to be a “leg” or a “breast” man, as if he were consuming a dead animal rather than describing a woman and his sexual “tastes” (pp. 71-74).

In men’s ministries, two things are therefore happening with the centrality of meat. First, as has been demonstrated elsewhere in the debate around “servant leadership,” male authority in the home is a key aspect of men’s ministries. As a symbol for the dominance of the non-human-male world, notable shows of meat consumption reinforce male authority over women in the home. In a world in which even conservative Christian men acknowledge social resistance to overt male dominance—recasting it as “soft patriarchy” (Wilcox, 2004) or “symbolic traditionalism” (Gallagher & Smith, 1999)—being able to use meat consumption as a metaphor for these dominator values is increasingly attractive. This assertion of male authority is central to the core anxiety in men’s ministry about men losing power in the church as a result of increasing feminine influence. Just as both Christian and secular forms of the mythopoetic men’s movement sought to simultaneously articulate their inner “wildness” and engage wilderness as a way of rejecting and asserting power over perceived feminization (Gelfer, 2009, pp. 30-33; 52-55; 77-83), so too with meat: “the more men sit at their desks all day, the more they want to be reassured about their maleness in eating those large slabs of bleeding meat which are the last symbol of machismo” (Jean Mayer, cited in Adams, 2010, pp. 57-58).35

35 There is also a sense of apologia here in dialogue with secular society. Men’s ministries are preoccupied with over-turning the image of the “Christian nice guy” (Coughlin, 2005). If an ambivalence toward (let alone rejection of) meat is considered feminine—and even treated with outright hostility (Potts & Parry, 2010)—a show of consuming meat by men’s ministries is a signal to secular society that Christian masculinity is comparable with secular masculinity. It can therefore be considered an act of strategic mainstreaming, similar to the way that Mormon
Second, if, as Adams argues, there is an explicit connection between meat consumption and the sexual objectification of women, the centrality of meat in men’s ministries serves as a proxy for the same which otherwise has no other outlet. Typically, in men’s ministries sexuality is viewed with anxiety. Take, for example, *Every Man’s Battle: Every Man’s Guide to Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (Arterburn, Stoeker & Yorkey, 2000), a book commonly advertised by men’s ministries: the authors attempt numerous strategies to fend off sexual desire, but in the end “are so convinced of the depravity of what they understand as ‘male’ sexuality that they cannot find either a language of worship or an understanding of God that includes them as male” (Justad, 2008, p. 55). We thus find a curious paradox in men’s ministries: on the one hand, they reiterate the values of a broader patriarchal society, and are more than happy to articulate dominance over women; on the other, due to a long and complex history between theology and sexuality (Nelson & Longfellow, 1994; Rogers, 2002), they are not comfortable with sexually consuming women. In short, the fetishization of meat in men’s ministries borders on the literal: a substitute object of sexuality and a vehicle through which men can perform aggressively and sexually in a context which denies all but the tamest desires; it is an example of “the frightening reality of meat as a metonym for women’s bodies” (Buerkle, 2009, p. 87).

Men’s ministries appeal to a broad range of masculine signifiers, mobilizing sporting, military and mythopoetic images, as well as dominance within the home. Hunting and meat consumption intersect with these themes: there is a sporting element to hunting (hunters are described as “sportsmen”), a military aspect (the use of camouflage and firearms), a mythopoetic aspect (being within the wilderness), and a dominance aspect (the history of men being assigned the best meat in the family). But unlike most other masculine signifiers in men’s ministries, hunting and meat consumption have a strong sexual sub-text. As Adams demonstrates, this sub-text is oppressive toward women (let alone animals, an issue which has barely been addressed here), which is worrying enough. However, of further concern is the fact that this sub-text appears to pass completely unnoticed in men’s ministries, and that it operates in a domain—sexuality—that is acknowledged only with fear and trepidation.

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men “learned to perform normativity without losing their abject identity” (Ruchti, 2007, p. 148) when negotiating their faith-based position in relation to secular American society.


