

Will the Boys Become Men?

by Theodore Plantinga

It takes courage to embrace an unpopular opinion. Christina Hoff Sommers seems to possess this quality in abundant measure, for in her latest book she tells us that "... one of the more agreeable facts of life is that boys will be boys." Now, these are the very last words in the book; [NOTE 1] presumably some readers who are decidedly *not* on her wavelength will have dropped out by then. Yet it should be noted, to her credit, that she *starts* the book by affirming: "It's a bad time to be a boy in America." (p. 13).

The reason why it's a bad time, in certain respects, is that a "misguided feminism" is at work in the land. "Misguided feminism" is a phrase Sommers puts right in her subtitle: *How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*. Her book, then, is not supposed to be an attack on feminism as such: after all, she is a feminist herself -- or claims to be one. I say "claims" because her profession of adherence to feminism is not always accepted at face value: she reports that she is sometimes asked to leave public meetings because she is thought to be an enemy agent, so to speak.

Why would people take her to be an enemy agent rather than a feminist? Could it be that in the back of her mind she equates "misguided feminism" with feminism as such? Readers inclined to draw such a conclusion may well pounce on her statement: "Mother Nature is not a feminist." [p. 88]

Of course, if Sommers did not claim to be a feminist in some sense, she would hardly be eligible to speak on the subject of the roles of the two genders today. The issue, for Sommers, is that the *misguided* feminism afoot in the land is harming our boys, our sons. (Sommers makes it clear that she speaks not just as a philosopher but also as a mother of sons.)

If males and females live in close interaction, changes in the one group are likely to set off changes in the other. That women have changed significantly in the last hundred years is denied by no one; whether all the changes are for the better might, however, be debated. Given the reality of those changes, however,

we should also expect to find changes on the side of men and boys. And it is possible that the changes which have already occurred are not for the good.

Sommers is not the only thinker to raise such worries. The poet Robert Bly comes to mind in this regard: his well-known book *Iron John: A Book about Men* is sometimes referred to as "the bible of the men's movement."

About Bly I have had more to say in an LINK MAE earlier issue of *Myodicy*. Pertinent to the question of the "war against boys" is the supposition that as women have grown "stronger," men have grown "weaker." Now, some might think that it is a good thing for men to grow weaker, but Bly is not so sure. In another work he writes:

... the feminist movement encouraged men to actually look at women, forcing them to become conscious of concerns and sufferings that the Fifties male labored to avoid. As men began to examine women's history and women's sensibility, some men began to notice what was called the *feminine* side and pay attention to it. ... There's something wonderful about this -- I mean the practice of men welcoming their own "feminine" consciousness and nurturing it -- this is important -- and yet I have the sense there is something wrong. The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. ... In the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the "soft male." Sometimes even today when I look out at an audience, perhaps half the young males are what I'd call soft. They're lovely, valuable people -- I like them -- they're not interested in harming the earth, or starting wars. There's a gentle attitude toward life in their whole being and style of living. But many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. [NOTE 2]

One could take Bly's term "life-giving" literally and note that the capacity of men to "give life" in the sense of fathering children seems to be in decline in the industrial West: for years we have been reading to this effect, and in some countries there is a population decline underway, which must then be offset by immigration from other parts of the world, where, one would presume, men are still men. But this aspect of the problem is not Bly's main concern, nor does Sommers dwell on it. Indeed, focused as she is on education, she celebrates the notion of boys being boys, and boys, we may presume, aren't expected to take on the manly responsibilities of fatherhood. But it seems fair to extend her

thesis to the point of observing that if we encourage boys to be real boys, they will grow up to become real men.

A reader of my reflections might suspect that the discussion is now heading in the direction of male homosexuality. Yet one of the puzzles about Sommer's treatment of the question whether today's boys will one day become men is that she leaves this currently dicey topic out of the picture. To me this is a shortcoming in her book; it is somehow incomplete without it. But I don't believe it reflects a failure of courage on Sommers' part; she has demonstrated her intellectual courage in abundant measure. Perhaps she will address this subject in a future publication.

Part of her agenda is to attack those thinkers (feminists in the bad sense) who are responsible for most of the confusion about boys today. Chief among them is Carol Gilligan, whom she assails throughout the book (see especially pp. 99-137) and Nancy Chodorow (see pp. 124-126). In opposition to such thinkers, Sommers wants to recall us to common sense and the wisdom of the ages. Gilligan, her chief target, makes claims which she does not argue for or support with evidence. Under the influence of such misguided feminism, writes Sommers, many people wind up assuming "... that preschool children are as malleable as putty and can easily be socialized to adopt one or the other gender identity to suit the needs of equity and social justice." [p. 75] And so boys are subjected to a "makeover." Sommers herself speaks of an "overhaul" whose aim she sums up as follows: "The belief that boys are being wrongly 'masculinized' is inspiring a movement to 'construct boyhood' in ways that will render boys less competitive, more emotionally expressive, more nurturing -- more, in short, like girls." [p. 44] So alarming is this prospect that what we have underway can be called an "undeclared war on boys" (p. 72).

The analysis Sommers offers is compatible with a Christian understanding of human nature that includes the theme that God created the two genders as different and as oriented toward each other. Sommers herself shies away from such language and tries to root her convictions in "findings" of science. She assures us that there is a "... large and growing body of scientific literature from biologists and developmental psychologists ... showing that many male-female differences beyond the obvious physical ones are natural, healthy, and, by implication, best left alone." [p. 75] I quite agree, but I would wish to argue that our reasons for accepting her practical advice -- and thereby leaving her own boys to be boys -- also draw nourishment from provinces of thought which we do not ordinarily consider to be part of science, namely, Christian philosophy (in both its Thomistic and Calvinistic varieties) with its emphasis on a fixed and given (i.e. not constructed by us) human nature.

In the title of this piece I asked whether the boys playing in our streets today (or perhaps glued to electronic games) will one day grow up to be men. This was also Robert Bly's concern, especially in *The Sibling Society*. [NOTE 3] And it should be the concern of Christian families and educational institutions. The transition from childhood to adulthood can no more be taken for granted on the male side than on the female side.

It does not suffice to be on the right side of this issue in practice, as a great many Christian families are. We also need to be on the right side in theory, so that we can instruct others. To be in the right theoretically requires more than shaking our heads when we hear a line of thought that strikes us as wrong. Therefore we need to read the scientific literature that Sommers appeals to, and also refresh ourselves, if need be, in the kind of Christian philosophy and social thought that can help us understand how God arranges affairs on earth through ordering principles that are reflected in what common sense regards as human nature.

Boys will indeed be boys -- here Sommers is right. And with the proper guidance and encouragement, they can still turn into men and fathers.

NOTES

[NOTE 1]

The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 213.

[NOTE 2]

Iron John: A Book about Men (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1990), pp. 2-3.

[NOTE 3]

Robert Bly *The Sibling Society* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996).