Borderline, by Stan Goff

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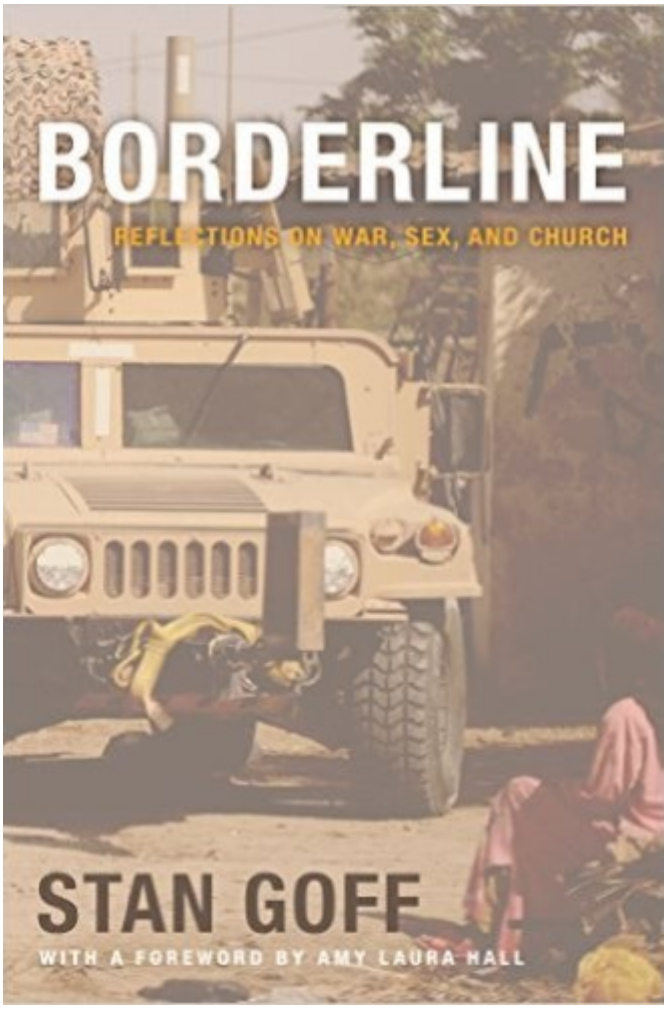
In Review



Borderline

By Stan Goff
Cascade

The news media have recently been ablaze with stories of police brutality, campus rape, military conflict, and mass murder. Such violence is sometimes attributed to race or religion, at other times to alcohol or mental illness. In an eclectic set of

essays, *Borderline: Reflections on War, Sex, and Church*, Stan Goff urges us to see a single thread running through virtually all such stories: masculinity. Moreover, he finds Christianity undeniably complicit in the cultural norms that encourage and reward male violence.

Such a critique is not new. Feminists have been decrying violent masculinity for a century, while for millennia Christian pacifists and witnesses have heaped shame upon kings, popes, and soldiers. What makes Goff's argument remarkable is the way feminism, Christian pacifism, and sophisticated theological analysis have been pulled together by a career military officer turned antiwar activist who also happens to be a refreshingly accessible writer. "My engagement with feminism led me into the church, and war led me to feminism," he writes. "There are probably few people who narrate their conversion to Christianity in that way." Such startling incongruity demands our attention.

Goff argues that "masculinity constructed as domination, in war and in relation to women, is really just one story . . . of manliness, . . . [and] this very construction has steered the church away from the story in the Gospels." To demonstrate this point, he presents "a rough genealogy of church-and-war alongside church-and-sex, in which the reader can discern how often, and often terribly, the church has allowed itself to be pulled away from the example and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth."

Goff mingles his own life story with history and theology, always with an eye toward unpacking Christian masculinity. He writes about his 1950s suburban childhood; his experiences in boot camp and with special operations; and his time in combat zones, including Vietnam and Somalia. Meanwhile, his examination of male role models goes from scripture to the early church, through the Middle Ages and into the modern era, with the help of such intellectual companions as Ivan Illich, Catharine MacKinnon, and Stanley Hauerwas. Few stones are left unturned in Goff's quest to understand and demonstrate that war, sex, and church are a triple-braided cord that is not easily broken.

The strength of that cord becomes apparent as Goff repeatedly demonstrates the connections between Christianity, misogyny, and violence. Among the many topics he addresses are Constantine, prison rape, the Crusades, witch trials, the film *Man on Fire*, Scholasticism, the Reformation, the industrial and scientific revolutions, nation-states, the Civil War, Freudian psychology, *Leave It to Beaver*, Ayn Rand, the Progressive era, guns, Thomas Hobbes, Hitler, homosexuality, the Steubenville rape

case, eugenics, American military cover-ups, and baboons. By covering so much ground, Goff makes a persuasive case that “there was no pretty time, when the masculine powers were as they ought to be, which were then corrupted by the misapplication of principles.” By and large, Christians have always gotten masculinity wrong. They have ignored the self-emptying model of Christ while conquering, plundering, and killing in the name of Christian manliness.

This is partly a scriptural problem. Goff contrasts, for example, King David and Jesus. Stories about David portray him as a manly man, powerful and aggressive in both war and sex, whereas Jesus “radically supplants” the Davidic version of manhood. For Christians, a “real man” is one who is vulnerable through love—who rejects political might, refuses to have enemies, and prefers death over winning. Not surprisingly, this apparently wimpy Jesus, “the peacemaker and friend of women,” has been largely ignored by popular audiences.

While Goff’s point is important, there is some danger when Christians apply a supersessionist framework in which Christ replaces prior prophets, priests, and kings, since this has often led to the kind of anti-Jewish violence that Goff rejects. Christian masculinity cannot easily overthrow its violent Old Testament forbears—including the Lord “himself,” who is among the worst offenders.

There are a few points at which Goff touches on the ways race and class intersect with sex and war. The chapter in which he contrasts the military’s and media’s treatment of Pat Tillman and LaVena Johnson is particularly haunting. Equally disturbing is the chapter on World War II and “the Greatest Generation,” who fought Hitler while engaging in vicious white supremacy at home. But this book is largely an exploration of white masculinity, the only kind that can pose as masculinity in general. Womanists and other women of color have long critiqued white feminists for erasing race and class from their analyses. White feminists are only beginning to understand, so a relatively new feminist like Goff can be forgiven for falling into a similar trap. To crawl out, he might begin by expanding the recurring question he raises from Luke 7, “Do you see this woman?”—perhaps by also asking, Do you see this trans woman? or Do you see this African-American man? or Do you see this undocumented immigrant?

Still, the women of the world, along with other vulnerable and victimized groups, could certainly use more allies like Goff—allies who have the privilege to say critical things to audiences who might otherwise not listen. Feminist Christian pacifism does

not often come in the package of a self-reflective, well-read, Catholic, male, retired American soldier. When Caitlyn Jenner speaks about gender, or when President Obama speaks about racist violence, many Americans find them easy to ridicule or ignore. But it will be much more difficult to ignore the thoughts of someone who has proven himself by all the measures of traditional masculinity. Goff's claim that "men, males, bear a special responsibility" for "manhood," while potentially troubling in its paternalism, can be appreciated insofar as he is writing for men (the "we" to whom he occasionally refers).

The span of Goff's broad historical account will likely irritate historians. One concept Goff writes about might be an apt metaphor for his work: bricolage—unorthodox piecing together of everyday tactics, which "renders established boundaries permeable." His transgression of scholarly borders is a strength overall.

Furthermore, Goff's writing is lively and irreverent. Then again, I have a soft spot for theologians who use the occasional well-placed profanity, and for Catholics who critique their church's most patriarchal traditions.

Goff does not want us to be surprised when men do terrible things. He wants us to see that "men behaving badly" is part and parcel of cultural norms for men behaving "like men." Certainly not all warriors are rapists or murderers, but rape and murder are on the spectrum of a warlike masculinity that is defined as the opposite of femininity. I cannot help wishing that every man in America—and every pastor who preaches to men—would read and absorb this book.