

John Rowan on Men and the Male Psyche

The Editors

Introduction

One of John Rowan's most important books, in our view, is his *The Horned God* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987). We already have two contemporary 'Retro reviews' of John's books in this *Festschrift*, so we thought we'd plunder the archive again, and seek out the review of *The Horned God* that appeared in *Self & Society*, 16 (3), 1988, pp. 138–40. We're sure you'll agree that it's very interesting to see how this pioneering book was received almost 30 years ago.

John also wrote to us recently that his *Healing the Male Psyche: Therapy as Initiation* (Routledge, 1997) is still in print, and is perhaps one of the best discussions of male consciousness now available. So we're reproducing the 'historical' review of this book too, re-printed from *Self & Society*, 25 (6), 1998, pp. 44–6.

Enjoy!

The Horned God: Feminism and Men as Wounding and Healing

By: John Rowan, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987

ISBN: 978-0710206749, 160 pp

Reviewed by: John Lussier¹

The 'Horned God', a figure which has its roots in mythology and witchcraft, personifies that which is both fundamental and essential, that which is both personal and universal in man.

The Horned God embodies the power of feeling. His animal horns represent the truth of undisguised emotion, which seeks to please no masters. He is untamed.

But these untamed feelings, Rowan explains, are very different from enacted violence. This God is a life force, which remains within the orbit of the Goddess. Its power is always directed toward the service of life.

The Horned God is a rare book. The author goes out on a limb, sharing his personal and vulnerable

journey of healing and growth. His goal is to further the understanding of male consciousness and spirituality, thereby creating a climate where a new sharing of power between male and female might occur.

Reading *The Horned God* is itself a spiritual experience. One walks with the author through his anguished, painful, yet hopeful search for liberating images that speak about the journey all need to make. Men have to make this journey to free themselves of the sin of unyielding power and patriarchy, the myths and falsehoods of male dominance culture and conditioning, and the deep problems associated with the traditional male sex role.

The Horned God is a book written by a man for other men. Rowan recognizes that women have much better books than his to read, written by women for women.

I have read many of them over the shoulders of women, as it were. In the same way, I suppose women can read this book if they want to, over the shoulder of a man.

But he recognizes that *The Horned God* is not intended to enlighten or entertain women; its purpose is to help in starting to fill the enormous gaps in the education of men.

Citing truths from feminist works, Rowan pries open wounds that exist for men, challenging us to experience the wounding. The reader is then invited to move through various 'channels of healing'. Rowan's own personal reactions to the changing of a patriarchal consciousness within himself are compelling. He comes to the realization that the wounds of men run deep – that they are 'about deep archetypes where the pain is on a cosmic scale'.

For men, Rowan writes, facing the truth of feminism is an experience of wounding. It can make us despair about being men at all. But unless we accept that wound and admit the need for healing, nothing much can change in relationship to self and others.

Healing must occur at a conscious, socio-political level, transforming laws and one's daily behaviour. It must also take place on the unconscious level, through therapy

or self-help, where feelings about mothers, fathers, and men's internal female nature are explored. It must also occur as [sic?] a spiritual transpersonal level, within the realm of the Goddess and of the Horned God. 'Only then', says Rowan, 'can men start to have any real dialogue with women, and only then can the world begin to change for both men and women.'

(The new male hero) will not be clad in armour, and he will flow around adversaries rather than stand and fight, but he must not be confused with the spuriously gentle man of our time, whose softness protects a core of anger... Over and over again we seem to be getting the message that the man who is really going to be able to change his own patriarchal consciousness is the man who is able to go down into the depths.

If read with an open mind, *The Horned God* can educate and inspire men to change. The book is well written and well worth a careful reading by men who are concerned about their lifelong struggle to deepen consciousness as well as respond to the women in their lives. *The Horned God* makes me glad to be a man struggling!

1 This review first appeared in *Self & Society*, 16 (3), 1988, pp. 138–40

Healing the Male Psyche: Therapy as Initiation

By: John Rowan, Routledge, London, 1997

ISBN: 978-0415100496, 285 pp, price £27.00

(paperback)

Reviewed by: Martin Haddon¹

Reviewing John Rowan in *Self & Society* is a bit like painting Picasso or having Delia Smith to tea. But his latest book might almost have been written for me, a middle-aged male undergoing a social and psychological transition symbolized by counselling training. So I thought I'd have a go. John's own reviews are never superficial, but they often read like first impressions: how else could he get through so many? Mine will also be first thoughts, on a book that I know will repay closer study.

This is a multi-layered book. It combines the political, in a clear and confident handling of the main issues

of gender politics from a male pro-feminist point of view; the psychological with, in particular, a wise and compassionate account of men's emotional development and the obstacles thereto; and the didactic, incorporating a good deal of explicitly educational material on the theory and practice of psychotherapy and counselling from an integrative but ultimately humanistic perspective. The book is articulated and held together by reference to the stages of mediaeval alchemy; this is sometimes revealing, sometimes faintly irritating, but at least on a first read it helped carry me along from chapter to chapter, as the author no doubt intended, without wondering too much where he was heading.

By the end, a lot of ground has been covered. A rather Jungian sense of purpose emerges, but the usual comprehensive Rowan bibliography attests to the breadth of his sources. Throughout, the writing is suffused, sometimes directly informed, by his own personal experience.

The book's main aim, well reflected in its title, is that in a world still dominated by patriarchal structures (albeit beginning to crumble), the route to authentic non-exploitative masculinity, seen as essentially in service to a feminine life-principle, lies through a potentially painful but ultimately liberating symbolic process of initiation, for which therapy provides an exemplar.

John Rowan consistently and persistently reminds us that the playing field for the sexes is not level, and that for both men and women, the given is already a problem. He puts in a good word for Andrew Samuels' notion of acceptance of increasing gender confusion, but returns to the idea that men can still be men. His view of the authentic role for man as consort to woman, who is seen as somehow prior or superior ('the Goddess'), is to me an interesting and novel one, but this may be because I have never read his 1987 book *The Horned God*. He criticizes the Iron John type of men's movement precisely because it sets up an ideal image of man unrelated to or even cut off from woman; it is interesting to note that the latest American fundamentalist men's movement to hit our newspapers specifically excludes women from membership.

This must be right: over-emphasis on one sexual pole disguises the relational nature of sexuality itself. But I am left wondering whether Rowan leans too far towards acknowledging the primacy of the feminine principle, and thereby devaluing male identity. He may be right to emphasize the wound that a man must acknowledge before he can become whole; but he is almost suggesting

that we can never be as whole as women – shades of Freud!

The process of initiation into authentic manhood is presented concretely in a variety of ways. As well as mythological reference points, John Rowan gives us models of ritual, of consciousness-raising in groups and of group and individual therapy. For my money he could have gone a little further into the latter area and the typical issues arising: at one point he tantalizingly cites an interesting list of seven essentially psychological factors which interfere with men's friendships, but only looks in detail at one of them. The chapter on training for male therapy gives copious but unattributed rubrics on the competences required of a trainee therapist, but adds relatively little of specific reference to therapy with men.

But these are minor complaints and do not undermine my appreciation of the generous feast of ideas which this book provides. This is, I feel, vintage John Rowan, in

which many of his already familiar themes and interests (the critique of psychotherapy, new paradigm research, mapmaking, the transpersonal) are brought together to contribute to an overall message of great significance. And the texture of his writing seems richer, stronger, more personal than ever. I noticed a number of remarks to cherish and mull over, for example: 'Prolonged dependence on the therapist is a form of resistance', and 'Grief is often a man's first adult acquaintance with strong emotions'.

This is a book I am glad I bought. I enjoyed reading it, and there are bits I know I will go back to. It is recommended reading for men, particularly those who have an interest in therapy or have started to question themselves. I'd like to believe that women could learn from it too: perhaps we could hear from a female reviewer?

1 This review first appeared in *Self & Society*, 25 (6), 1998, pp. 44–6.

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