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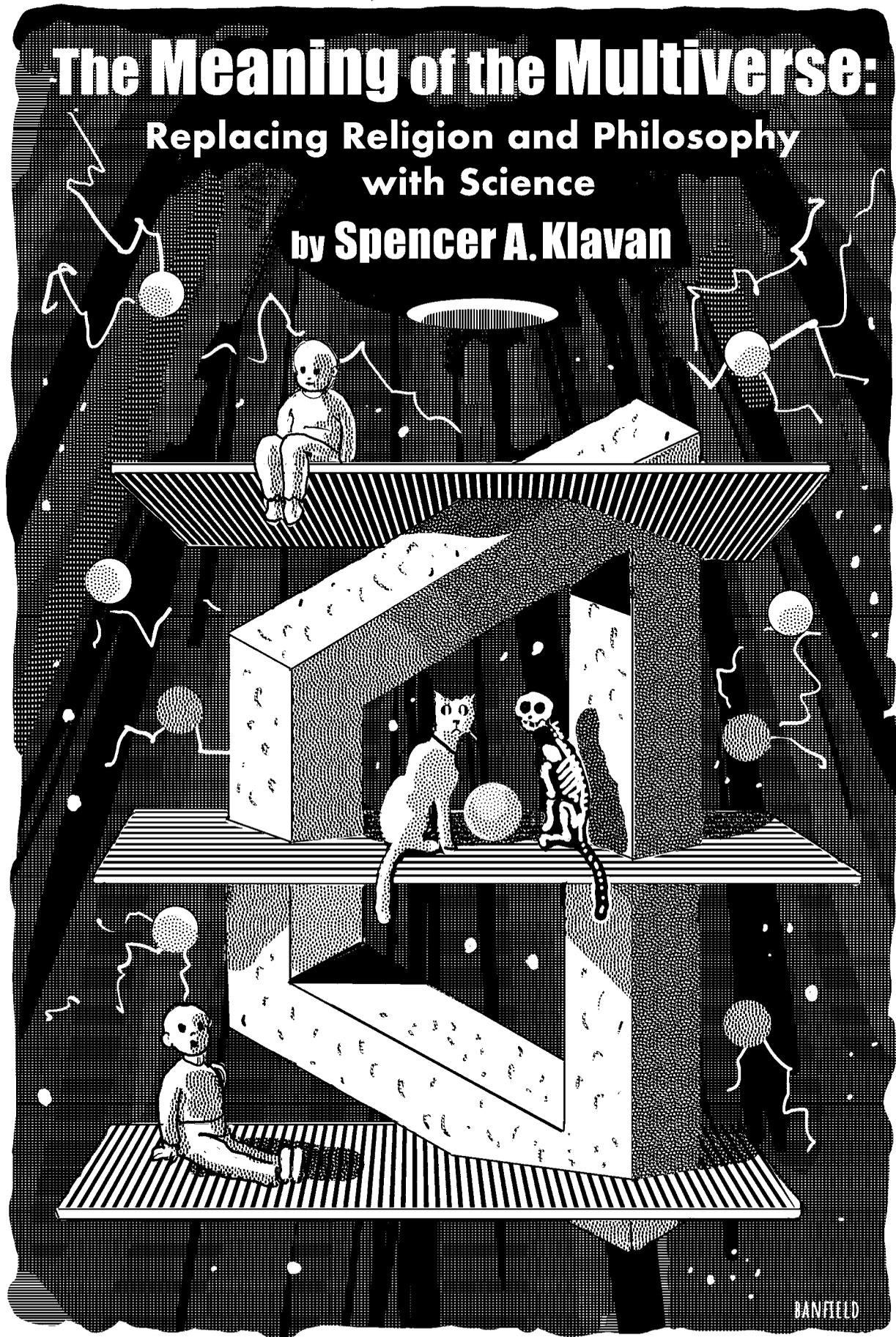
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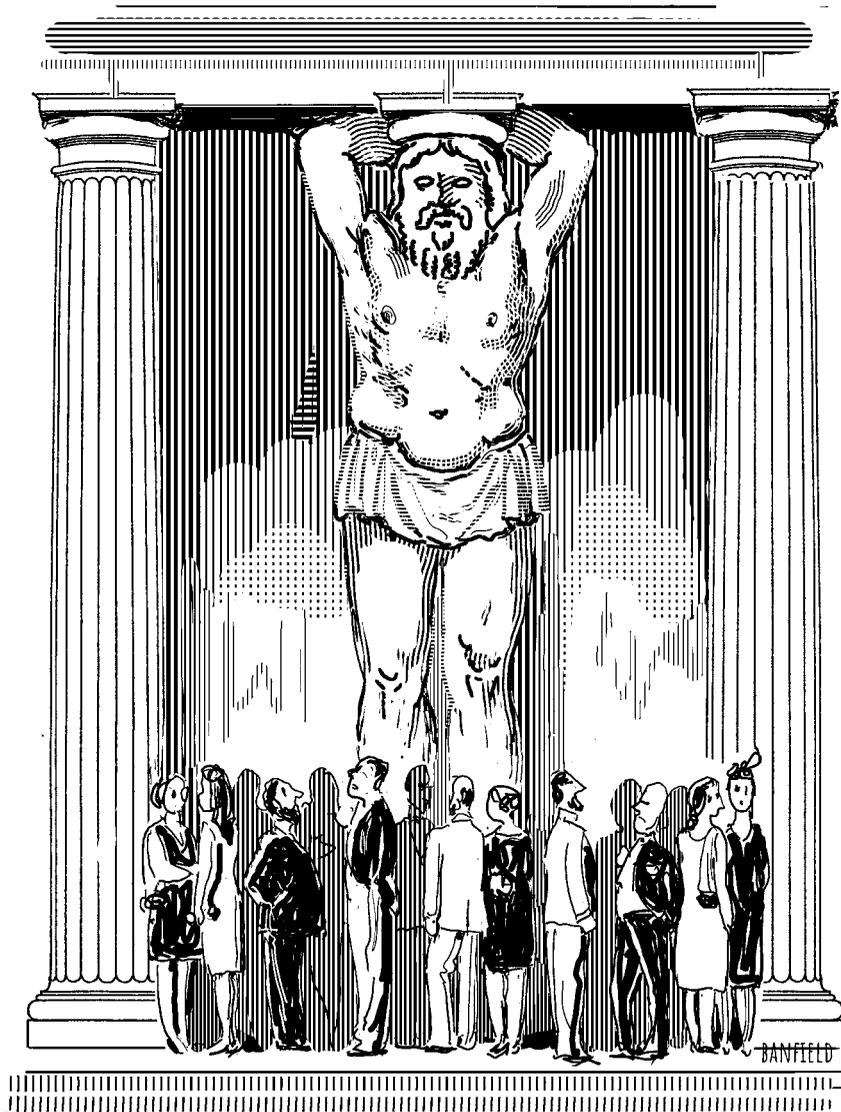
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Book Review by Noah M. Peterson

BOYS TO MEN

No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men, by Anthony Esolen.
Regnery Gateway, 204 pages, \$29.99



A MERICAN MEN ARE BEING GASLIT. “[T]alking about ‘healthy masculinity’ is like talking about ‘healthy cancer,’” says author John Stoltenberg. Drexel University law professor David Cohen agrees: “Traditional masculinity has oppressed girls and women and limited the identity construction of all boys and men.” And if you ask Lisa Wade, sociology professor at Occidental College, she’ll tell you that “we need to call masculinity out as a hazardous ideology and denounce anyone who chooses to identify with it.” All the while men are assured no one is attacking masculinity.

Adult men can handle vilification. But what are boys to think when they’re taught that men are to blame for all of society’s ills? That masculinity is not just bad, but destructive?

Anthony Esolen has written a rebuttal. In *No Apologies*, the prolific Writer-in-Residence at Magdalen College in New Hampshire attempts “to return to men a sense of their worth *as men*, and to give to boys the noble aim of manliness, an aim which is their due by right.” He argues that throughout history, masculine qualities were essential to society. Strong men killed buffalo, built roads and buildings, extracted and refined the oil that lit homes and ran factories. The agency of men—their drive to create and conquer—motivated technological development. Men formed teams to accomplish things impossible individually. They headed families and governments. Far from being obsolete, Esolen argues, the masculine qualities remain indispensable today. We have not outgrown our nature.

Esolen finds support for his message in unusual places, like ancient Roman aqueducts. The city, before it would become a bastion of culture and power, needed fresh water from a spring miles away. Esolen devotes three pages to explaining the resulting complexities. An aqueduct requires stone, bricks, and clay—all of which must be gathered and transported. You must calculate the exact gradient of the pipes so that the water does not flow too fast or too slow. Then you have to *build* it. Without machines. You must dig trenches, lay pipes, and work around land barriers. “Multiply that project by innumerable thousands, just for the Roman Empire. Multiply those thousands by millions more, everywhere.” This is how civilization was built. That it was built by men is neither a coincidence nor an anachronism.

HERE ARE, OF COURSE, FUNDAMENTAL differences between men and women, which Esolen illuminates throughout the book. But the question at the heart of our modern disagreements is whether these are produced by nature or nurture. Many modern feminists conclude it's solely the latter: men and women would act the same if not for cultural pressures to conform to gender stereotypes. Esolen disagrees: "Every typical difference between the behaviors of boys and girls can be seen as the natural expression of the forms of their bodies." He is half right. But he follows this belief to its logical conclusions no matter how controversial, adopting anti-suffragist arguments and questioning the wisdom of women entering politics. He laments how women gaining the right to vote shifted the basic political unit from the household to the individual. And women legislators, he argues, have fundamentally changed the character of our governing bodies, contributing to the dysfunction we see today.

He implies that women are incapable of dispassionate analysis, their sensitivity prohibiting real, honest deliberation. Men are, in general, good at assessing and solving problems. Women, in general, are good at discerning and assuaging emotions. Both aptitudes are necessary. Neither should be mistaken for the other, or equated with it. Esolen believes men's purpose for creating government in the first place was to protect women and children, thereby making human flourishing possible. And men's faculties—their willingness to set their emotions aside and to intellectually fight with each other—were and are better suited for the brutal business of politics, where decisions that benefit some often hurt others.

So, yes...Esolen is correct that biological differences *influence* behavior. But so do culturally and politically specific mores. Nature and nurture being intertwined, men and women have perspectives and desires that differentiate them from one another, but these are diffracted through different social orders existing in various times and places. Dispositions may be unvarying; their expression is not.

How, then, do Americans honor the natural differences between men and women while respecting the egalitarianism present in our founding? Some conservatives (Esolen is not one of them) advocate "John Stuart

Mill in public and Aristotle in private," political scientist Diana Schaub maintains. In a CRB review (Spring 2006) of Harvey C. Mansfield's *Manliness*, she wrote, "In public and under the law, we should continue to insist on gender neutrality, but in private there should be a more honest acknowledgment of gender differences, and yes, even the truth of sex stereotypes."

This seems to be the least unworkable option. Imposing sex differences by law—an extrapolation from Esolen's defense of male-only institutions—would require reinstating discrimination on the basis of sex and stripping women of the right to vote. Removing sex differences by law, however, would require forcefully eliminating disparities between men and women in positions of power and prohibiting women from staying home to raise children, as Simone de Beauvoir advocated. Better to keep the law neutral, then, and let men and women choose the lives they prefer.

STILL, POLITICAL SCIENTIST SCOTT Yenor's question in an essay for the *American Mind* remains important: "Given the differences between men and women, what mores, institutions, and laws will best help them lead happy and rewarding lives?" Citing academic studies, Yenor points out that "women [today] are more unhappy, depressed, medicated, anxious, neurotic, and suicidal" than ever before. Feminism was supposed to make women better off, to solve "the problem that has no name," as Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). As more women continue to realize the dissatisfaction awaiting them at the end of total liberation, conservatives can offer a better way, equipped with policies that help facilitate "happy and rewarding lives." This political platform would make it easier to marry and raise children. It would support part-time work for mothers, adequate wages for fathers, and incentives for marriage. Keep the law neutral while facilitating lives well lived.

Yet Esolen's rigid biological explanation for gendered behavior also fails to teach boys how to live well. Highlighting boys' common tendencies across cultures to demonstrate masculine behavior, he underemphasizes the component of manliness that is *learned*. For example, there's something in man that enjoys

a fight—on the sparring mat or the debate stage. This is why, Esolen argues, "men will be the greatest intellectual fighters in our midst." But what are the guidelines for *how* to fight? What distinguishes the gentleman from the jerk?

THE MISSING COMPONENT IS VIRTUE. Esolen implies that the male attributes should be employed for the common good but doesn't provide a standard of virtuous masculinity that men can strive for—principles that inform men how and when to use their strength and aggression, how to determine which situations require self-sacrifice and control over one's emotions, how to channel the desire to conquer into ends that further the common good. Virtue is a means of restraint, tempering the masculine impulses.

Boys need an ideal to which they can aspire. Yet modern feminists strip boys of "the noble aim of manliness" and expect good men. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "[they] castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." Writing in the *New York Times*, progressive journalist Liza Featherstone acknowledges, "Our side...has struggled to articulate what a 'nontoxic' masculinity might look like, or where boys might look for models of how to become men."

There is simply no escaping the influence of role models. If you discard some, they will be replaced by others. Tear down the great men of the past and they will be replaced by professional athletes and rappers, movie stars and YouTube influencers. Boys will be boys, and boys will be shaped...by something.

There are heroes throughout history. We need more today, facing today's problems and today's constraints. We need men modeling virtue in their families and communities. As Senator Josh Hawley has said, "American men are and can be an unrivaled force for good in the world—if we can strengthen them, if we can empower them, if we can unleash them to be who they are made to be." The stories we tell about masculinity matter. So do the men we point to and say, "Be like him." Civilization, as Esolen's subtitle states, does indeed depend on strength: good men must be strong, and strong men must be good.

Noah M. Peterson is assistant editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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