



**A REVIEW OF *NO APOLOGIES: WHY CIVILIZATION DEPENDS ON  
THE STRENGTH OF MEN, BY ANTHONY ESOLEN*  
(REGNERY GATEWAY, 2022)**

*Paul Nathanson*



---

**Abstract**

*'No Apologies' is not an academic book and therefore does not require an academic review. The book is a cri de coeur, in fact, and therefore deserves a response that is at least partly both subjective and emotional. With this in mind, I must begin by acknowledging my profound ambivalence over what this book says. On one hand, I agree with Esolen's general thesis. On the other hand, I deplore his presentation of it. Consequently, I have written not one but two reviews.*

**Keywords:** male, men, misandry, myth

---



---

**1**

Anthony Esolen's thesis, a very unpopular one right now (which is no measure of its usefulness), is that men and women are equal in value but also *fundamentally different*. In other words, "equality" is not a synonym of "sameness." This makes sense as long as you describe the sexes in terms of *interdependence* (a.k.a. complementarity). Each sex contributes *what the other lacks and needs*, thus ensuring not only the happiness of each person as either a man or a woman but also the endurance of each family, community, society and civilization. In the five chapters of his book, Esolen describes the specific contributions of *men*, because so few people in our time are willing to acknowledge them. And his primary descriptor is *male strength*, whether he refers to it in physical or metaphorical terms. Although Esolen recognizes some degree of variation among men, he argues (in somewhat tedious detail) that men are *collectively stronger than women* and therefore that men have an innate affinity for two of the masculine functions that have usually prevailed both historically and cross-culturally: protector and provider.

It has taken me many years to reach the conclusion that men and women are different in *significant* ways. As an idealistic young man, I was a fervent supporter of feminism in general and of sexual equality in particular. This was not entirely or even primarily due to altruism. I cared about what equality would mean for women, sure, but I cared even more about what it would mean for men. After all, I was a man. The implication of early feminism for me (though not one that any feminists actually explored then and very few explore even now) was that if women could liberate themselves from cultural tyranny by challenging what they consider negative stereotypes of femininity, men could liberate themselves from cultural tyranny by challenging what they consider negative stereotypes of masculinity.

These masculine stereotypes were of central importance to *me*, because they didn't fit me. I was not only a man but also a *gay* man. I had had endured *relentless identity harassment* every day in both elementary school and high school (though not at home) during the 1950s and 1960s. If the early feminists were correct, then the children who had persecuted me, both boys and girls, had been wrong to do so. And they had been wrong not only on moral grounds, which I had long understood, but also on factual grounds. In college, I moved beyond feminist articles in the newspaper to heavy-duty feminist tomes. I called myself a feminist, in fact, long before I called



---

myself gay. But I was wrong.

Fast forward to 2022. Most feminists (though not necessarily most women) either still insist that men and women are equal in the sense of interchangeability (with legal, economic, technological or other help from the state if necessary), or now insist that men and women are not equal (women being innately superior to men). Both paradigms are essentialistic. Esolen's thesis falls very clearly into a third version of essentialism. Men and women are of equal value, he insists, but innately very different. Many feminists consider this "misogynistic" or "patriarchal" and therefore despicable for supporting oppressive historical stereotypes of women (but don't care about oppressive historical stereotypes of men). I no longer consider myself a feminist.

From my point of view, Esolen's contribution to what I call "inter-sexual dialogue" is an important one. It is to state the obvious—that is, to re-state what has *always and everywhere been self-evident* (until the rise of transgender ideology): that men and women have evolved not as interchangeable cogs, not as two rival species, but as *collaborators* within the same species. Men and women have a great deal in common but not everything. In short, we *need* each other and cannot produce a healthy society by competing with or undermining (let alone attacking) each other. This is common sense and should lead to common decency toward men (but won't as long as feminist and woke ideologues control the public square). Esolen defines masculinity not only in physical and occupational terms but also in psychological terms. He argues that men prefer traditional societies—he provides many examples not only from Western literature but also from ancient, tribal and other non-Western societies—for reasons that are either *indirectly* associated with the male body or directly associated with *lack* of female bodies. However, little about women except for the fact that they give birth and men do not. Women internalize this existential fact by focusing on the here and now, on the immediate needs of their infants. Men, he says, focus instead on the larger world and how it works. All of this is familiar in conservative circles that rely on nostalgia for the *non-feminist* essentialism of "traditional" society.

My own research on men, conducted with Katherine K. Young at McGill University, has taken me to a position very close in some (but not all) ways to that of Esolen. Like him, probably, I was motivated originally by a need to oppose feminist misandry—that is, to expose ideological



---

lies about men—but also to propose more helpful ideas about men. As a result of four volumes on misandry<sup>1</sup> and many articles, I have come to the conclusion that misandry (the sexist counterpart of misogyny) is pervasive but has been, until very recently, unacknowledged. Its baneful effect on boys and men in everyday life is what I call “identity harassment.” No attempt to cure this disease, which is both psychological and spiritual, will succeed without acknowledging that self-evident fact of life in modern Western societies. But unlike Esolen, probably, I don’t think that masculine identity has become problematic due only to the implacable hostility of feminist and woke ideologues and their relentless attempts to destroy our allegedly patriarchal society in order to create a utopian one on the ruins.

Masculinity did not become problematic with the advent of feminism. Rather, it has been a slowly growing problem since the Neolithic period—that is, since the Agricultural Revolution with the consequent rise of settled communities or cities, warfare, occupational specialization, elaborate political hierarchies and elaborate gender systems. These technological and cultural innovations affected lower-class men, middle-class men and upper-class men in different ways. Lower-class men—that is, most men by far—became serfs. Their masculine identity was directly correlated with backbreaking work in the fields and thus required the physical strength of male bodies. Middle-class men—the relatively few merchants, traders, artisans, scribes and administrators—did not depend on male strength. They depended on brains, in fact, not brawn. Their work was defined by education and mental or artistic skills. Upper-class men—the very few aristocrats and members of the royal entourage—sometimes carried on ancient hunting traditions (although they did that more for prestige than for food) and sometimes led armies (although most of the soldiers were conscripted peasants). Even though prowess in hunting and warfare were features of elite masculinity, however, so was leisure. This was an early step in the very long process—a series of technological and cultural evolutions that gradually reversed the status of the male body. During the Industrial Revolution, for instance, machines soon displaced the male body. Men with the lowest status still tended some machines in factories or dragged coal out of

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001). Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, *Legalizing Misandry: From Public Shame to Systemic Discrimination against Men* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006). Katherine K. Young and Paul Nathanson, *Sanctifying Misandry: Goddess Ideology and the Fall of Man* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010). Paul Nathanson and Katherine K. Young, *Replacing Misandry: A Revolutionary History of Men* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).



---

mines (alongside women and even children until reform movements removed them). Men with the highest status did no work at all (either marrying money or winning it at gambling casinos). More recently, computer technology has continued to erode the importance of male bodies, and new technologies have undermined its importance even in reproduction.

My point in this brief romp through history is that all people, both men and women, need *healthy identities* and also that no society can endure any other way. By a “healthy identity,” I mean the ability to make at least one contribution (to family, community or society) that is (a) *distinctive*, (b) *necessary* and (c) *publicly valued*. Trouble is, women can do almost everything that men can do (if not by themselves, then with help from the state). Only fatherhood remains, and many people (notably single-mothers-by-choice) believe that women can be fathers too because fatherhood amounts to nothing more than assistant motherhood. Men, therefore, find it difficult to do anything distinctive (let alone necessary and publicly valued).

Failing to find a healthy identity, boys and young men soon wonder if even a negative (anti-social) identity—conveniently provided by the prevalent feminist or woke lies about men—might be better than no identity at all. In our time, at any rate, we have a growing epidemic of boys and young men who *abandon society*. Some do so by dropping out of school (becoming an unemployable underclass) or by becoming addicted to drugs or video games. Others, especially those without fathers, abandon society by resorting to either street crime or mass murder as their way of abandoning a society that has no room for them as men. Still others abandon life itself by committing suicide. These obvious signs of pathology are far more common among young *men* than they are among young women. Esolen doesn’t spell this out, but I think that he would agree with me. His entire book, after all, is an indirect warning about what can happen to any society that fails to find room for men, per se, and honor their contributions.

2

Although I find that Esolen’s basic thesis is convincing (that men need to recover some function that is not only distinctively masculine but also closely related to maleness that can be changed or abandoned at will), I find also that his *presentation* is very alienating, misleading and *unconvincing*. That is why these two reviews are utterly



---

incompatible. Choosing between them is up to readers.

Esolen writes very clearly and sometimes beautifully, although he comes up with more than a few vaguely sanctimonious or highly romanticized clichés. But never mind style. In effect, this book is not only a personal *cri de coeur* but also, and primarily, a *sermon*, a collection of five closely related and somewhat repetitive sermons. I will now evaluate it on that basis.

Many of Esolen's quotations happen to be biblical and Christian (and the book gradually becomes more and more overtly Christian), but his gospel, as it were, would be accessible to many non-Christians or even to all people, religious or secular, who reject what now passes for conventional wisdom about sex and gender—especially that of feminism, and other derivatives of postmodernism. Christian or not, though, Esolen is a preacher. Like many other people, I don't like to be preached at. It's not that I object to reading polemical works, especially if I already agree with the general point of view, but that I expect even polemical works, whether academic or popular, to take opposing arguments seriously by *quoting them* (in context) and arguing with them. Esolen doesn't do that.

Like Robert Bly, founder of the “mythopoetic” men's movement<sup>2</sup>, Esolen has ransacked world folklore and literature in order to support his point of view. Because you can find almost anything if you look hard enough, though, that method is not particularly convincing as evidence for a thesis. It's called “cherry picking.” You can easily point to traditional stories about heroic men who protect or even sacrifice themselves for women, after all, but also to ones that are about nothing of the kind. Esolen refers often to biblical stories, especially to those in Genesis, but he ignores the one about *Dinah's rape* (Genesis 30:21; 34; 46:15), which would clearly *not* support his point of view. If men were driven by nature to protect women, then how could we explain the men who rape and kill women? Most men don't, but some do. Are they all genetic mutants?

Sometimes, Esolen refers to literary works, especially to works of poetry. Usually, though, he refers to myths. I have no problem with that. In fact, much of my own research has explored mythic themes. But I discuss them as *symbolic* stories about how things were in the beginning, how things have come to be as they are now or how things will eventually be once again. They are

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990).



---

*not descriptions of everyday life* and not necessarily even prescriptions for social arrangements. The heroes are *idealized* or even divinized, not real people. Each hero provides a model of behavior, sure, but in the cosmic context of either the primeval past or the eschatological future. Millions of Hindus admire Rama and Sita, for instance, but very few imagine that they are or could ever be like them (at least not consistently). Not all would even want to be like Rama or Sita. Similarly, millions of Christians admire Jesus and Mary, but very few imagine that they could ever live up to those divine standards or even want to do so. Besides, both Hindu and Christian societies have more than one ideal of human behavior. These are expressed in the stories about countless saints, local heroes, movies, videos and so on. I don't want to argue that he is wrong about the ideal of manhood that he advocates or that he has mistakenly read this ideal into oral and written genres. I do want to argue that the experience of ordinary men in daily life does not add up to the ideals of mythic or poetic archetypes. Real life is much messier than Esolen imagines.

Consider the *Titanic*, which has become a *secular* myth. According to the myth, male passengers sacrificed their own lives in order to save female passengers and children. Well, some of them did (partly because the ship's officers had been ordered to shoot men who dared to get into lifeboats). Those men were in first class. To their credit, they not only understood that the gender and class systems had given them some advantages over women and other men but also found it hard to imagine living on (after this extraordinary event) without paying the price for those advantages (and would otherwise have been killed socially, even if not physically). Not nearly as many men in second class acted so nobly. Hardly any men in steerage did or would have done if they had managed to reach the boat deck at all. But the *Titanic* soon took on mythical overtones not only for men but also for women. Within weeks, feminists were arguing about "women and children first." Some argued, correctly, that this traditional sentiment worked in favor of elite women but against sexual equality.

Although Esolen mentions war as a traditional masculine occupation, he never mentions military *conscription*. That would defeat his purpose. If men were *instinctively* eager to risk or sacrifice their lives—and he does say that, not once but many times—then why would governments find it necessary to *force* men into combat by law by a combination of bribery



(rewards for the survivors and fame for the others) and intimidation (shame and even execution for “cowardice”)? Why, in fact, would it require such a huge cultural effort to create the illusion of men *sacrificing themselves* (“giving” their lives on the nation’s “altar”) but also deny the reality of those men *being sacrificed* by the state (and thus, in democracies, by their own parents)? Here again, there’s a huge gulf between what Esolen sees as a given of nature for men and what others see as a given of culture.

It’s all very well to argue that traditional notions of manhood are nobler and more effective than the current ones, but I draw the line at the notion that men are “expendable” or “disposable.” That notion is implicit in much of the book but also explicit here and there. Esolen could (and probably will) write another book to say precisely that by drawing on the currently popular work of evolutionary psychologists. And I would argue against that on *moral* grounds among others. It’s true that we have evolved from the apes, but we have evolved into *moral* apes. Life must make sense to people. No community can endure unless most people, male and female, believe that working, striving, fighting, risking and even dying for it is worthwhile. That’s the most fundamental social contract. No society that considers my life innately less valuable than someone else’s life, which is surely the ultimate in dehumanization, would be worthy of my respect. So this feature of Esolen’s book repels me on moral grounds, even though I do agree with his larger thesis of sexual differentiation combined with sexual equality.

It wasn’t exactly fun for me to read this book as a *gay* man. I do realize that gay people are a small minority of the population and always will be. I don’t believe that my preferences should take precedence over the needs of society as a whole. I don’t support gay marriage for instance, because I think that children need both mothers and fathers, not two mothers or two fathers. And I think that, moreover, because, as Esolen says, fathers are not assistant mothers; their function is very unlike that of mothers. Even so, he has written a book about *men* without once even *mentioning* gay men. Speaking for myself at any rate, we are men, and yet our entire lives do not revolve around women, let alone risking our lives for women. And I do suspect that many directly or indirectly gay men would say the same thing. From Esolen’s point of view, we have no purpose, no meaning, no healthy identity, which makes us nothing more than aberrations. So, if that’s what he would like to say, then he should say it and be prepared to defend it.





I conclude with a more practical matter. Whatever men might think of *No Apologies*, what would *women* think of it? As he himself notes more than once, men and women are interdependent. Whatever affects one sex affects the other. In this book (as distinct perhaps from some future one), Esolen declares that his point of view is the best (in theory, as exemplified on the Titanic) but refrains from explaining how to make it work (in practice). Almost all of his examples are drawn from pre-industrial societies. Assuming that most men would actually want to live as hunters or farmers, which I don't assume, would women want to restore a patriarchal system? Okay, he defines patriarchy as hierarchical but benevolent, and yet patriarchal benevolence would amount to *paternalism at best*. I doubt that he could convince many women to go along with that.

---

## AUTHOR PROFILE



**Paul Nathanson** has a BA (art history), a BTh (Christian theology), an MLS (library service), an MA (religious studies) and a PhD (religious studies). Of particular interest to him is the surprisingly blurry relation between religion and secularity: how religion underlies seemingly secular phenomena such as popular movies and political ideologies. With Katherine Young, he has written a series on the problem of masculine identity in an age of identity politics and sexual polarization.

**Contact details:** [wordwatcher@videotron.ca](mailto:wordwatcher@videotron.ca)

---

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE.

THIS JOURNAL USES OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS 2.3.4.0, WHICH IS OPEN SOURCE JOURNAL MANAGEMENT AND PUBLISHING SOFTWARE DEVELOPED, SUPPORTED, AND FREELY DISTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT UNDER THE GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE.

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://NEWMALESTUDIES.COM](http://newmalestudies.com)