

Book Review

Borderline: Reflections on War, Sex, and Church by Stan Goff

reviewed by Rachel Elizabeth Asproth

Stan Goff's *Borderline: Reflections on War, Sex, and the Church* offers a fresh, if controversial perspective on the relationship between the church, war, and patriarchy. Goff's central argument is that war loving and women hating are ultimately two sides of the same coin, driven by the same fears that allow for the rationalization of conquest and colonization.

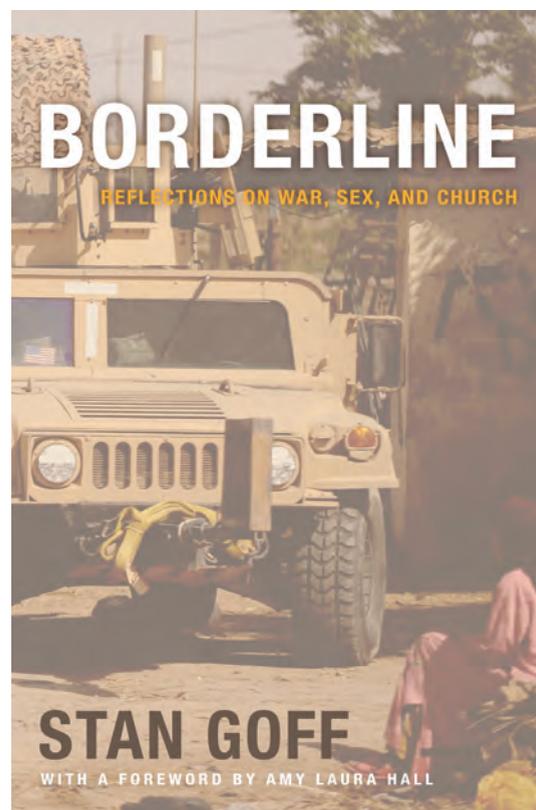
Goff's argument is underlined by a survey of church and military history in which he highlights the relationship between domination masculinity and violence, often expressed in war. An Army veteran, Goff draws from his personal experience as a former career soldier to argue that fear of the feminine and hatred of women define military culture, war strategies, and even military language. Goff testifies to the pressure-cooker, hyper-masculinity of war that defines women as both "other" and "enemy" as well as his own emergence from that destructive culture and embrace of Christian theology and feminist critique.

Borderline is a no-holds-barred critique of church complicity in war and patriarchy. Surveying church history, Goff makes a compelling case that the church has supported, affirmed, and participated in violence against women, including in war. In order to accept Goff's hypothesis—that the church is implicated in the crimes of war and that both war and the church are implicated in the oppression of women—readers must accept his underlying theology. Namely,

the gospel contradicts the church's often-undiscerning acceptance of violence and its treatment of women. On these grounds, *Borderline* puts the church on trial for its record with women, asking the painful question again and again: "do you see this woman?"

Borderline also examines the sexual tone of military strategy, highlighting a connection between sexual violation and border trespass. Terms such as "penetration," "insertion," "extraction," and "climax" indicate both a conquest approach to war and the desire to sexually humiliate opposition. Considering the earth is traditionally personified as a woman, while force, conquest, and conquering are male-identified actions, crossing borders becomes a metaphor for the domination of women—sexual, social, and spiritual.

Goff testifies to his past friendship with Christian soldier and serial rapist, Marshall Brown. Analyzing the connection between Brown's crimes and his experiences with hyper-masculinity in the military, Goff suggests that some interpret rape as merely crossing a line or a border, similar to a military objective. Further, he argues that rape functions as an instrument of social control in war, and he makes a connection to pornography, noting that domination and humiliation fetish pornography are chiefly about the crossing and violation of borders, the



primary metaphor that shapes his cultural critique in *Borderline*.

Goff devotes significant time to establishing the foil that women provide in hyper-masculine culture. In war/patriarchal culture, men are valuable, worthy, and unique by virtue of being unlike women. In fact, men become manlier the more they differentiate themselves from women. This social rule results in an intense cultural fear of effeminacy and women in general. In other words, women become the true enemy. Women are hated, Goff submits, only because they are women, and because men are everything they are not. This hatred, Goff believes, drives church and war culture. *Borderline* traces the emergence of muscular Christianity, one reaction to this deep fear/hatred of the feminine, of women in general, and of diminishing male control/rule.

Goff is a committed advocate of non-violence. This approach colors his arguments throughout the book, so those who disagree with his non-violent interpretation of the gospel will likely

reject Goff's conclusions. And, readers may wish for a more nuanced discussion about the motives of war, noting that not all war has been driven solely by a desire to dominate, but sometimes to liberate. Further, readers may feel that *Borderline* generalizes about church and military culture too liberally.

While Goff's pacifist view informs his argument, it is important to note that his argument is not about whether war itself can be justified. Rather, he is critiquing the nature of war and the culture of patriarchy that justifies violence in general and toward women—a system that soldiers and Christians both participate in, even unknowingly. Even if readers do not fully agree that war is an expression of masculine domination, Goff's critique of Christianity, hyper-masculinity, and abuse still offers a challenge to the assumptions and ideology of some Christians.

Lastly, readers may object to a chapter devoted in part to homophobia in the church and military, where Goff cites it as a one factor in the creation of a dichotomous hyper-masculinity. His treatment of the issue is, for most of the book, historical.

However, in the closing chapters he takes a stance in favor of same-sex marriage. Though mentioned sparingly, his stance on this issue may deter some readers from picking up *Borderline*.

Reservations aside, *Borderline* is a bold feminist critique of male domination as expressed in war and culture. Goff is a staunch advocate, unafraid to push men to "see women" in ways they have not before. Goff writes,

All we men need to do is fear a walk in the park alone, to be judged by how young, how thin, how hairless, how symmetrically featured we are, to be raped and disbelieved, to feel compelled to look in our backseat before entering our parked cars. To be excluded from a calling. To be a metaphor for weakness and cowardice. To be used as a receptacle for masturbation... to be beaten by someone who will tell us later he loves us. To be a scapegoat for men's desire, or his lack of it. To stand in the presence of others without recognition. To be silenced, immobilized, masked, and reinterpreted. To hear "old woman,"

little girl," "cunt," and "bitch" used as epithets to put men down. To be defined by those who can never know what it is like to live in our skins." (413)

Goff asks his readers one final time, "do you see this woman?" and it this question that reveals the most about *Borderline*. This book is about male domination. It is about war, sex, and the church and it intends to critique masculinity. But, it is a work for women, on behalf of them, and alongside them in relationship and advocacy. Goff presents his case against war and patriarchy intellectually, but his mission is a heart one—to cast a vision for a world free from patriarchal masculinity. *Borderline* is a redemptive prescription for the future that is focused whole-heartedly on the peace and justice provided for in the gospel.



Rachel Elizabeth Asproth graduated from Bethel University with a degree in English literature and reconciliation studies. She is currently the editor of the *CBE Scroll* and *Arise*. Her chief passions are reading, writing, social justice issues, and travel. She lives in New Brighton, MN.

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