

# The Father Almighty, Maker of Male & Female

*A Psychologist Looks at the Importance of God the Father for Male & Female Identity*  
by **PAUL C. VITZ**

IT IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED today that the Christian concept of God as Father is under attack. Specifically, various religious writers, primarily feminists, have proposed that God should be called Mother, or possibly the androgynous Father/Mother or Mother/Father. In some instances the term God as Parent has been proposed. In contrast, this paper will explore the psychological case for the orthodox understanding of God as Father. Obviously, this is a sensitive subject today—but where angels fear to tread, psychologists rush in.

But before getting to our primary subject, it is well worth summarizing some *a priori* reasons for not accepting the androgynous or feminized notion of God. To begin with, it should be clear that when people change the name for God, they have changed their religion. If a small group began to refer to God as Zeus, we would know that something non-Christian was going on. Likewise, when neo-pagans begin speaking of the "Horned God," this modification is not without significant theological impact, to put it mildly. Changes in the name of God, therefore, are truly great changes because they mean that you are changing religions. For example, to reject God the Father as a name is to deny the basic Christian creeds. It is to deny the language of baptism, and of course to deny the entire theology of the Trinity upon which Christianity and its theology have been constructed.

But we can get even more specific. Jesus himself gave us the terminology for referring to God as Father. He expressed himself in this language often and with emphasis in the Gospels, and it is clear that the notion of God as Father is a major new theological contribution of Jesus himself. This means that to deny the language of God as Father is to repudiate Jesus and his message. Therefore, whether one admits it or not, to do this is to reject Christianity.

## **MODERNISM AND FEMINISM**

Aside from such theological considerations, there are also historical *a priori* reasons for not changing the name of God. Looking back, we see that the history of Christian heresies has been the history of succumbing to the spirit of different ages. Ours is the age of modernism, with a great emphasis on egalitarianism and on sexuality. These two elements have combined to create the modern emphasis on androgyny. Androgyny or unisex is the notion that sexuality, male and female, is not fundamental to our nature, that all forms of sexuality are equivalent and basically arbitrary. From an androgynous perspective, male and female are not part of the nature of reality—much less of the nature of who each person is.

Since modernism was founded largely on hostility to Christianity, it should not be surprising that ideas coming out of it—particularly in extreme forms—are also hostile to the faith. Rationalism, materialism, individualism, nationalism, communism, evolutionism, fascism, and positivism are all examples of modernist movements that created Christian heresies or involved explicit rejection of important Christian beliefs.

Although the history of heresy has been the history of giving in to the spirit of the age, nevertheless heresies have been useful because they often attack an important but previously undeveloped aspect of our theology. As a consequence, Christian theology has often developed in response to heresies. In any case, when the spirit of the age, in some extreme form, presses for changes in theology, this is an a priori reason to say “No thanks!”

Another reason is that modernism itself is dying. The list of ideologies given above is also a list [end of p. 33] of exhausted world views. These are now has-been ideas that have lost their cultural energy, that have been thoroughly critiqued, and that exist primarily in college courses with titles like “The History of Ideas from the Eighteenth Through the Early Twentieth Century.”

In the context of the death of modernism, let us look at feminism, which arose in the mid-nineteenth century and is clearly modern in origin and character. The major ideas that had to develop first, before feminism, were individualism, egalitarianism, and socialism/communism. This is not the place to describe how these ideas laid the groundwork for feminism, but perhaps with some reflection it becomes obvious. In any case, many of the important feminists were Marxists or socialists (for example, Simone de Beauvoir, Rosa Luxemburg, Bella Abzug, and many others). Feminism took the basic idea of class warfare and used a similar rationale to interpret the conflicts between men and women. Marxism is known to be dead, or, at the least, mortally wounded. Socialism and the welfare state are well past their peak and literally facing bankruptcy. Individualism has been criticized for some 30 years, from both the Left and the Right—the Left longs for community while the Right (and sometimes the Left) is now advocating ethnic purity (as in former Yugoslavia and in some black movements), tribalism, or some other localism.

As for egalitarianism, it too has been rejected in recent years, even by many feminists. Modern feminism was very much about equality between men and women and was opposed to any emphasis on differences between the sexes. But in the last 15 years or so a new kind of feminism has arisen that might be called postmodern feminism. These feminists emphasize sexual difference very much—indeed some of these radical feminists argue not only that women are different from men but also that they are psychologically and morally superior to them. This emphasis on difference led rather quickly, in theology, to goddess-worship and to explicit rejection of Christianity.

Much less extreme examples of this postmodern feminism would include Carol Gilligan's 1982 work on how men and women demonstrate different approaches to the moral life, and even such popular works as Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* and John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. In short, egalitarianism in its extreme forms is decidedly on the way out. For Christians to buy into this kind of individualist egalitarian logic at such a late date is just another example of Christian intellectuals trying to catch up with a

dominant secular trend—with timing that is absolutely abysmal. Such Christians show the intellectual equivalent of the stock-market victim: buy high and sell low.

### **THREE MODELS OF SEXUALITY**

Beyond these theological and historical considerations, however, our primary concern here is with the psychological significance of the concept of the fatherhood of God. To set a context for this we address the major interpretations or models of sexuality. Probably the most familiar model of sexuality is the exploitive model in which men have traditionally dominated and taken advantage of women. This model has been rightly criticized, especially by feminists. I will call this the exploitation model. Throughout the world, men have dominated and exploited women in all societies of which we have any historical record. Sometimes the treatment has been relatively benevolent, but in any case the general picture is familiar to all.

The second model is what has already been termed the androgyny or unisex model. This is an understanding of sexuality as basically arbitrary, and of male and female as not only equivalent but as more or less interchangeable, except for minor differences in external genitalia and associated sensory pleasure.

Some people seem to assume that a unisex understanding of sexuality is less exploitive of women. There is, however, no evidence for this, and instead there is good reason to believe that the androgynous understanding leads to exploitation of both men and women. After all, in the unisex model, sex is essentially each individual's personal search for sexual pleasure, however experienced. It is this model that provides today's general rationale for pornography.

The androgynous understanding of sex means that any form of sexual pleasure is okay since there is no natural character to sexuality. It is an arbitrary social convention defined by each person. Once sex as recreation, rather than as procreation, is established, individual moral relativism goes with it. The result is the world of today's pornographic exploitation, in which sex with either sex, including—even especially—sado-masochistic sex, sex with children, and now sex with animals, is justified; if you enjoy it, it's okay.

But the logic that relativizes sex to each individual also relativizes power to the individual. That is, power can now be utilized in the service of pleasure with no more restraints as well. In short, if you have the power, you can get away with sexual exploitation. A feature of [end of p. 34] the current situation with regard to sex and power is that now exploitation is without any "principled" rationale. Men can exploit women, and occasionally women can exploit men, because those who have the power to exploit do so.

In the old days—under the old regime—exploitation was justified by bad social philosophy; in the androgynous situation exploitation exists in a philosophical vacuum in which anything goes. Do we really believe that the amount of sexual exploitation in the last 30 years has been significantly less than that under the old exploitive macho system?

The third model, which I believe to be the traditional Christian model, will be called the complementary model. Here, maleness and femaleness are seen as important and positive differences, and as fundamental to reality and to the nature of each person. God created us, male and female, and it was good. This emphasis on the reality and importance of

sexual differences contrasts with androgyny. Masculinity and femininity—maleness and femaleness—are seen as cooperating in a mutually supportive fashion. This also contrasts with the exploitive model. No doubt, the complementary model is hard to maintain and to live up to, but then so is much of the rest of Christianity. We all know that the Christian faith is not about how to live the easy life. Instead, it is a faith that challenges us to rise to a higher way of being.

What I will try to show now is how the psychological significance of the fatherhood of God helps to maintain the complementary understanding of the sexes, for both men and women.

### **DEALING WITH MACHO PSYCHOLOGY**

The psychology of men, influenced by the exploitive model, can be seen as the problem of correcting what can be called "macho" psychology. It is, I believe, easier to see the importance of God the Father if we see male psychology in the absence of such a concept. As noted, historically the predominant idea of male psychology has been one of male superiority, dominance, and exploitation. We'll call this kind of male "the macho."

The answer to macho psychology, provided by God the Father, is shown in the life of Jesus. The style of Jesus has been well described as servant leadership. Jesus was a tough man, living in what we today would call a rough, blue-collar world, filled with fishermen, farmers, and carpenters, as well as in the tough competitive world of the market place, i.e., that of tax collectors and money-lenders, and in an even tougher world of politics dominated by unsentimental physical power. But all of the authority with which he spoke and with which he led, all of the power that he manifested in his miracles, his mental power shown in his intellectual confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees, was put in the service of others and of God. He did not come to do his own will. Servant leadership is the only model I know of that is strong enough to remove the sin of male exploitive psychology.

God the Father figures into this explicitly in Scripture. For example, when the disciples ask Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus is somewhat taken aback and then says, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." The concept of fatherhood as involving sacrificial leadership is further underlined by the fact that Jesus as the image of the Father had no natural children and indeed was not involved in sexuality itself. Therefore, Jesus and God the Father model masculinity in its highest forms, independent of sexual activity or behavior. All children are God's; all children are Jesus'.

When masculine capacities are put in the service of others, neither women nor children nor community are likely to object. The basic point of the Christian model of God as Father is that it allows a boy to identify strongly and positively with masculine ways of life but removes the sting of selfishness—of what psychologists call narcissism—by placing male abilities in the service of others. The notion of God as Mother or androgynous Parent makes male identification psychologically not just difficult, but essentially impossible.

A serious psychological problem in talking about God as Father and Mother is the strong implication that God is two people just as our parents are two people. We [end of p. 35] would be setting up yet another Jupiter/Juno, Moloch/ Astarte pair. It should be noted that the various goddesses that have recently been proposed by certain feminists as

candidates for worship leave something to be desired. In most cases (as was true of the ancient goddesses) the modern examples also contain obvious aspects of evil. This is not surprising since feminists are especially concerned with advocating—and I might add, worshipping—female power. But the last thing that we need these days is a goddess patterned along the model of an Indian Kali.

How does the concept of God the Father help men who are drifting toward androgyny, the other pathological model of sexuality? Since in this unisex model, men and women are seen as essentially the same, this has led to the development of a new kind of man commonly called "the wimp." In many respects the wimp is based on the attempt to reverse the traditional logic of sex roles. In rejecting his basic masculine nature, this type of man is left in severe conflict and confusion about how to live. The result of this uncertainty is the psychological weakness of the wimp.

Today American men often seem to fall into one of these two categories—or to vacillate between them. The macho remains a man but does not care much for others; he devotes his energy, strength, and intelligence exclusively to his own individual well-being. He looks out for his career. He looks out for Number One. The macho treats women as sex partners; he understands marriage as something to be avoided or as a temporary arrangement to be maintained until something or someone better comes along.

Many other men—the new wimps—are nice androgynous creatures who are fun to go shopping with, but they are also indecisive, unreliable, and weak. In short, men are opting for one of two ways of being—the strong man who leads and exploits or the weak man who is ineffectual but nice. Recently, it seems as though the latter is the fastest growing category. We all know "the great American wimp." He feels uncomfortable around strongly masculine men because they sense that he is squishy.

The wimp needs to be loved at all costs, and the typical cost of the need to be loved is the truth. Holding to the truth in the face of social pressure, in response to political correctness, often means rejection by friends or parishioners. The easy way out is to compromise truth for social acceptance. In particular, the truth of manhood embarrasses him, and therefore he acts as though it doesn't exist.

This new type of sensitive American, the wimp-man, was at first welcomed by many women. But now the complaints have come in loudly. The wimp, like the macho, fundamentally avoids commitment to others. He can't be counted on; often he is still dependent, too much like a child—a Peter Pan. Hence both the macho and the "wimp" avoid true commitment to women—and of course women know it. The final result is that a good man becomes even harder to find. All this only increases the disappointment, frustration, and anger of many women—which only leads to further criticisms of men and manhood, which further pushes men away—a vicious cycle. Again, the answer is the strong man who serves who sacrifices for others.

## **FEMALE EMPOWERMENT**

For women, caught up in a society of exploitive men, which seems to be the historical rule—the psychological problem is different. They need to receive more power, encouragement, and autonomy. How is this psychological need met by the fatherhood of God, mediated through Jesus? It is met very simply by receiving the power of God through the Holy Spirit. For example, consider nuns and consecrated women. A woman

who has God as her Father, Jesus as her Husband, and the Holy Spirit as her best friend is largely an irresistible force. The history of many great female saints attests both to their womanliness and to their extraordinary power. They recognized that their power had been lent to them and was not theirs; thus, they remained feminine. We need think only of Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux—and many others whom history may not have noted but God has. indeed, there is nothing equivalent to the great tradition of female saints in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. In no other religious or secular tradition in the world do we find so many examples of women who were both truly holy, truly powerful, and truly women—and honored by men for being all three.

### **INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY & SEXUAL IDENTITY**

In a developmental sense, each child, male or female, has two major tasks in front of him. Psychologists refer to one of these tasks as individuation. This is the process of separating oneself from others, especially from the mother or mother figure. For a variety of reasons, male children find this task easier than female children. In part, it is because both the mother and the baby boy recognize the [end of p. 36] boy as different, and therefore separation and autonomy come more easily to the boy. A contributing factor is that male children are relatively less interested in people and in relationships, and more interested in objects and spatial exploration than female children (see Moir and Jessel). As a result psychologists generally agree that autonomy and independence come more easily to boys than to girls.

For the daughter, who is similar to the mother and closely tied to her, individuation can often be a problem (see Chodorow). One of the important natural functions of the father is to help his daughter separate from the mother, to help the daughter form her own identity, and to keep her from remaining "merged" with her mother.

The other major task for both sexes is the development of sexual or gender identity. This task is reliably understood by psychologists as more difficult for males than females.

Males may separate from their mother fairly easily, and recognize the mother as "not me," but that does not tell them who they are as males. They must find this male identity elsewhere—in their fathers or other father figures, who are often unreliable or unavailable, and in any case are usually not around much in the first few years of the child's life.

However, from the beginning, and apparently in all societies, little girls see in their mother the meaning of womanhood every day in very concrete ways, and understand this as basic to their identity. They have an adult woman close by to model the meaning of femaleness for them. What fathers do *qua* fathers is far less obvious.

God the Father, however, gives men a model with which to identify, even if their own fathers have been inadequate. Thus, the model of God the Father is a fundamental psychological support for this essential masculine need. It seems bizarre to the point of pathology at this time in our culture to be trying to remove God the Father from our theology. We are just now aware of the widespread social pathology, especially the increase in violence, resulting from fatherlessness in families—and the data are staggering (see Blankenhorn). What worse moment could there be to diminish fatherhood in our theology? We have enough absent fathers without trying to send God the Father

away, too. To remove God the Father is to remove a major support for positive male identity. In a Church that is already far more popular with women than with men, this means the removal of one of the few remaining supports for men.

## **FATHERHOOD & RELIGION**

Relevant to this point is the current situation in the world of religion. Those religions and denominations that have been most affected by modernism and feminism are those that are visibly in decline. Liberal Protestant denominations and Reform Judaism are good examples of this phenomenon. In contrast, evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism, with their energetic male leadership and their traditional theology, have been growing substantially and continue to do so. In Judaism, the very masculine Orthodox and Hasidic groups are growing with almost explosive vigor. In Roman Catholicism, those orders that have been most affected by modernism and feminism are those with the smallest number of novices and the highest average age. In contrast, the orders and groups that are doing well are orthodox and clearly endorse the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality—orders or groups such as the Legionaries of Christ, the Missionaries of Charity, Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, etc.

Finally, Islam is probably the most rapidly growing religion in the world today. And it is not growing only in third-world countries. In the United States, it is growing through immigration and in the black community, due to the conversions of large numbers of black men. Recently I heard a report that black Baptist women were urging their husbands to become Muslims because they thought their men should have a religion and thought Christianity to be inadequate for men. The African-American community has suffered greatly from fatherless families, and many blacks who have become Muslims openly claim that Islam restored their manhood to them.

In my judgment, the American black community has been an early warning system for the rest of our society. The African-Americans were the first to feel the scourge of drugs, but a decade or so later whites caught up; the same is true with regard to family breakdown and illegitimacy. The African-American illegitimacy rate is leveling off at a high level, and the white rate is just beginning to accelerate. Sociologists are predicting that the result will be the development of a white underclass in American society. This underclass will also be a fatherless society. In short, the potential for the growth of Islam among white male Americans should be taken very seriously. They too will need to regain their manhood. After all, God gave men their manhood, just as he gave women their womanhood. Christianity must recognize that manhood is a gift from God and that it must be honored as such—by the Church, not just by the National Football League.

## **FEMININE IDENTITY**

What about female psychology in a unisex society? We have already looked at how feminine autonomy and power [end of p. 37] are enhanced through women's relationship with their father or, spiritually, with God the Father. Now we turn to the problem of the psychology of female sexual identity and God the Father. In general, as already mentioned, women have an easier task at forming their sexual identity.

But how does the fatherhood of God enhance feminine identity? I believe that it is analogous to the way in which, through love and support, a good father enhances the sexual identity of his own daughters. Much research has shown that girls raised without

fathers tend to be less sure of their lovability and femininity. As a result, they are more vulnerable to pathologies ranging from depression to promiscuity. Here it will be useful to expand somewhat on what I see as a special feminine capacity for the spiritual life.

From the time they are born, little girls are much more responsive to people than little boys. Girls respond earlier and more strongly to the human face and the human voice. They smile sooner. As noted, boys are much more responsive to object—apparently primarily to objects that move or make noise. We have all noticed that the great majority of girls are more likely to play interpersonal games, often of a cooperative nature: girls' playing with dolls exists in every culture. Boys are much more drawn to competitive games where there are winners and losers, and rules to argue about, and to playing with things like balls, sticks, trucks, etc. Women are not only more sensitive emotionally—which means to interpersonal messages—they are more sensitive to different degrees of temperature, to different kinds of touch, to different tones of voice, different odors, and the like. (For a good summary of the many differences between men and woman that are now known to be rooted in biology and brain differences, see Moir and Jessel.)

Not only interpersonal relations but also that kind of relationship described as "intimate" is something on which many women place great value. In short, it is in concrete interpersonal relationships and intimacy that the majority of women seem to find their greatest rewards.

Since God made women that way, since He finds it "good," there is every reason to believe that He would honor this need. That is, God would honor women's special needs and abilities to have deep and intimate interpersonal relationships. Perhaps this is what is meant when Jesus told Martha that Mary had the better part; perhaps this is much of what is meant by the contemplative life. In any case, the lives of the female saints have been filled with language describing the intensity of their personal relationship with Jesus and with God. It is as though the capacity of women for spiritually intense relationships is rooted in their capacity for many and intense relationships in the natural world.

I do not wish to imply that the relationship of Christian men to God the Father is less rich, but themes of union, themes of love and intimacy seem to be much more typical of the female saints. And it seems that this is a good way to explain the great number of impressive Christian women throughout history. That is, women find something extraordinarily satisfying about their relationship with God as Father, or as Son, or as Holy Spirit. And as far as a woman's identity goes, how can she doubt her femininity, her womanhood, if it is acknowledged and honored directly through the love of God, her Father?

Yes, but what about the psychology of all those feminists? If things are so fine, why all the tremendous criticism? This question raises the issue of the special psychology of the radical feminists. First, it is important to note that such feminists represent a clear minority of women, although they are common in academic and religious settings.

Second, a significant number of feminists are responding to their experience of abuse or lack of respect from men. Psychological recovery from these experiences and their associated emotions requires the sympathetic and positive support of men. Spiritual resources available in Christianity include the Virgin Mary and Jesus, who can serve as spiritual models of holiness and in time lead women to God the Father. As tradition has



long held, Mary leads such women to Jesus, who can then lead them to a glorious affirmation of their womanhood by God the Father. In short, for women with a solid feminine identity but negative associations with men, especially fathers, there are available answers. In any case, such women often have little desire for God as mother—they are just fearful and distrustful of God as father.

## **GOD THE FATHER & CHRISTIAN WOMEN**

That orthodox Christian theology is thought to be somehow hostile to women or inadequate for their psychology remains a great mystery to me. It is not just that Christianity, compared to the other great religions, accords a remarkable place to women—after all, the Virgin Mary is [end of p. 38] the highest form of human saintliness. Women were central to the gospel story; they were among those who ministered to and helped Jesus. He treated them with unusual love and respect. Women—far more than the apostles—showed loyalty and support at the time of His Crucifixion. Women were the first to be told of the Resurrection.

All this took place in a Jewish society that gave less importance to women's testimony than to men's, even in court. Women were major contributors to the apostolate of St. Paul. Holy women surrounded many of the great early saints, such as St. Jerome. Thousands of the early martyrs were women. Large numbers of the greatest—and most widely acknowledged—saints were women. When I became a Catholic, it was mind-boggling coming from a secular and Protestant background—to find so many women held up as models of veneration and imitation. As I mentioned above, there is simply nothing like this great tradition of female accomplishment and of honor paid to women in any other religion or, for that matter, in any other domain of human endeavor.

So the supposition that the idea of God the Father has been an impediment to female religious life seems most unlikely in light of the historical evidence to the contrary. Somehow, for hundreds of years, millions of Catholic women did not notice that it was a problem! Indeed, this historical evidence speaks very much to the interpretation that the fatherhood of God has been a strong, positive component of Christianity for women (in part, for the psychological reasons given above).

Another relevant issue is that many radical feminists are lesbians, and thus it is important to discuss what can be called "lesbian psychology." I will refer here to the important work of the Christian psychologist Elizabeth Moberly, who has written extensively on the psychology of lesbians. Moberly's point is that lesbians represent that small proportion of women who never developed a strong feminine identity. This identity failed because of a disruption in the early mother-daughter bonding.

Their insecure feminine gender identity is associated with a great deal of anger that may erupt unpredictably. Because of their painful, often destructive relationships with their mothers, they are usually very ambivalent about women (same-sex ambivalence). For example, they may resent being treated as women by other women. However, they often seek other women who are positive mother figures or live out mother roles in their relationships with other women. Lesbian women also tend to be angry at men, especially if they have experienced indifferent or abusive men; they are very vulnerable to any criticism that they perceive to be directed at women. For such women, God the Father commonly fails to meet their psychological needs.

But what is the Christian psychological response to this? To begin with, you don't throw out what is good psychology for the great majority of normal men and women, in order to meet the needs of a very small number of lesbian feminists. Nevertheless, you still must try to find ways to support these women's needs, to help them. But how? Besides good psychotherapy, there is in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions an extraordinary mothering function that is sometimes met by the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Mercy. In short, spiritual mothering is one way, often overlooked, that can promote the psychological and spiritual healing of women with painfully defective mothering.

Finally, let me emphasize again the Christian model of manhood and womanhood as complementary. After decades of tension and paralyzing conflict over the roles of men and women in the Church, isn't it time to turn to a positive model that honors the sexes as different yet cooperative? Isn't it time for both sexes to honor the special gifts of the other? Isn't it time for the Church—of all places—to be open to such a recognition? It is just such a recognition, after all, that makes a wedding feast such a glorious symbol of men and women having a wonderful time in a mutually complementary celebration.

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