



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Made in His Image: What is a father in 2023?

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Christianity has a lot to say about fathers. Taking just Catholicism as the most extreme example, we have a God in heaven who is like a father. Then we have his representative on earth, the Pope, whose title derives from the ancient Greek word for father. Then under him, we have individual priests, who are also referred to as “Father”. Admittedly, this is balanced out slightly by the fact that Catholics venerate the virgin Mary as a holy mother, but even so, this view of religion presents us with a veritable “Russian nesting doll” of fathers.

I’ve always found this obsession with fathers to be a little puzzling. According to the bible, a fatherly creator deity made the first man Adam, in his image, then took a rib from this first man and used it to create the first woman, Eve. This strikes me as odd for two reasons. Firstly, taking Adam’s rib and making a female version of him would imply that Eve is a transgender clone of Adam, and that just makes me smile. That’s actually why I picked the middle name Eve. But I digress. God is magic, and he can do whatever he likes without it being weird. Good for him.

Secondly, and more importantly, each of us was born to a mother, yet the book of Genesis relegates positive acts of creation entirely to male figures. God the Father gives birth to the cosmos, he gives birth to Adam, and he uses Adam’s male body as a surrogate to create the first woman. Eve eventually gives birth, but only after causing the damnation of the entire species. The bible takes the act of creating and maintaining life, and attributes that power to fathers, and then grudgingly admits that mothers create life too, but that kind of creation is dirty. It’s obscene. It’s sinful.

How Christianity (and many other religions) ended up with this father-centric view of the cosmos is too large of a topic for today, and frankly, I don’t have a comprehensive answer anyway. I just know that, if I were going to create a religion from scratch, a mother creator deity would make a lot more sense to me than a father. Regardless of how this situation came about, this view that the cosmos is inherently patriarchal has undoubtedly been used to justify the imposition of patriarchy on human society.

The word “patriarchy” is often accused of overuse in discussions about gender, but I use it here very deliberately. The word patriarchy literally means “rule by fathers”. The biblical account of creation, with a heavenly father ruling over everything in the universe, is the most naked example of patriarchy possible. Christianity tells us that we are ALL “created in God’s image”, but surely this statement is most pointedly aimed at fathers. Fathers rule with God’s authority. Fathers are the head of the family. A father has dominion over his wife and children. In this

worldview, each father is like a miniature version of God on earth.

Now, I bring all of this up not because I want to bash fathers, but because I feel somewhat sorry for them. It's not easy to be a god on earth. Once upon a time, fathers could exercise their power in a style very much befitting the God of the Old Testament. They could be, and were often expected to be, controlling and generally authoritarian. They were required to be stoic and unemotional figures of power and awe.

Now, plenty of people have good relationships with their fathers, with only positive and uplifting words to say about them. No class of people is uniformly tyrannical. But many of us, myself included, have experienced or witnessed family violence at the hands of a father. When we talk as a society about fatherhood gone wrong, many of us picture a man who was distant. Someone who was emotionally unavailable. Someone who we never really knew.

If you are someone who has experienced a very fraught relationship with a father, it becomes easy to universalise this experience. I had always imagined that the alcoholism and family violence I had experienced were just what fathers were like. I had images in my head of cavemen getting drunk on fermented berries and clubbing their wives over the head after a big row. I believed that things had simply always been this way.

Now I see things differently. Several years ago, I took a paper on the anthropology of human gender and sexuality. The lecturer pointed out that in some respects, the epidemic of family violence by fathers, especially alcohol-fueled family violence, is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Now, I'm sure that for as long as society has been male dominated, there has been gendered family violence to some degree. I'm sure medieval fathers weren't all angels. But my lecturer made a compelling case that the sheer scale of the issues we see with modern fatherhood originates in the material conditions of the industrial revolution.

As industrialisation took hold in the West during the 1800s, rural populations were incentivised to move into cities where the fathers could take up factory work. This work was more stable than subsistence agriculture had been, but it was also grueling and often traumatising. The human bodies running the machinery were often treated as little more than expendable machine parts themselves. Working class men performed mind-numbing, impersonal labour which frequently resulted in injury or death. Lack of safety regulations meant that these men were exposed to the all-too-common sight of limbs being crushed in machinery, the victim now permanently maimed and unable to work. Those who witnessed this would have to return to work immediately, knowing that next time, it could be them.

It is no wonder then that this period coincides with widespread accounts of an uptick in alcohol abuse and domestic violence. This also explains why early feminists in America were alcohol prohibitionists. Alcohol had smoothed the path towards making their husbands and fathers into numbed-out, emotionally-crippled zombies.

In addition, although the pay from factory work was more consistent, the lack of self sufficiency that came from leaving behind the rural farm meant that other family members - wives and children - often had to work as well. On a farm, each family member would have had chores to do to ensure that the household ran smoothly, but this would have all happened under the father's watchful eye, within the family home. For men who had been raised to view themselves as the head of a household, sending their family members out of the house to earn money on their behalf would have been completely humiliating. Faced with this loss of control, many men lashed out in pain, hoping through violence to underline and conserve the small amount of power they still had over their families.

Finally, in the 20th century, industrial mechanisation spread to the arena of warfare. Yes, warfare has always been traumatic. I'm sure many men in ages past were left permanently incapable of fulfilling their role within the family. But the wars of previous ages were very different. Firstly, nations that used conscripted levies could only do so for limited periods of time. There is only so long you can take farmers off of their lands before the whole nation collapses. Secondly, these shorter wars meant that battles were often decisive. Most of the war was spent marching around the countryside. Then you fought one or two big, scary battles, and hopefully lived to tell the tale.

Anyone who has had family that participated in the wars of the 20th or 21st century knows that this description couldn't be further from the experience of modern warfare. Men were taken from their families for years at a time, tossed into godforsaken muddy trenches and claustrophobic jungle patrols. The battles were no longer quick and decisive. Shells would explode overhead, day, after day, after day. You couldn't see the bright flags of the enemy and steel yourself for what was coming. You walk along, as quiet as a mouse, before the tree in front of you twitches, and your best friend gets shot in the head.

Those unlucky enough to be captured were locked up in prison camps, like animals in cages. In 1940 my grandfather was captured on a British merchant convoy by a German raiding ship that was pretending to be a Dutch vessel. He was taken to Germany, and spent 5 years in prison before being liberated. He must have seen a lot of death. They dug a tunnel under the fence, and my grandfather escaped, but was captured again the next day. Imagine the hope he would have felt, and then imagine having that hope stripped away as he was led back to prison at gunpoint.

By the end of the war, the prisoners stopped receiving their Red Cross parcels, which the Germans were stealing to survive. They resorted to eating rats. My grandfather survived that experience, but I can't possibly imagine that he was capable of being a father in the image of God afterwards. I can't possibly imagine that my own father, having been raised by that man, had a healthy image of fatherhood to aspire to. His violence towards my mother and I was inexcusable, but it was also very human.

As we strive for gender equality, we expect more of men, and consequently, more of fathers. But I think we have to look back at the last 200 years and realise just how thoroughly the role of

father has been undermined. We cannot, and should not, seek to turn the clock back. We no longer need fathers who carry God's authority on earth. What we need, in 2023, is fathers who are wholly human. I believe we can only have that if we strive towards a society whose material conditions respect the sanctity of an ordinary human life.

Meditation / Conversation starter

- How have ideas about fatherhood changed within your lifetime, or the lifetimes of your parents and grandparents?