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Faith of the Fatherless

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Paul Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Co., 1999, 200 pages).

With the prevalence of divorce and the ever-rising rate of out-of-wedlock births in the US, sociologists have begun to study the effects of growing up without a father in the home. In seemingly every measurable category, the lack of a sustained, committed father-child relationship puts the child at a disadvantage: lower IQ, lower academic achievement, higher anxiety, higher rates of disruptive behavior, lower self-esteem, higher rates of drug use and violence, and an increased chance of child abuse have all been linked with the absence of fathers from their children.

In his 1999 book *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, psychologist Paul Vitz proposes another likely effect of the loss of the father on children: a distance from and doubt of God, which leads in many cases to profound atheism. Vitz develops his proposal as an inverse to Freud's projection theory of belief in God, which proposes "wish-fulfillment derived from childish needs for protection and security" as the major psychological factor leading to religious belief in God (p. 6). Without giving credence to Freud's conclusion that psychological factors in belief render the belief itself suspect or false, Vitz notes that the projection theory in fact offers just as plausible an explanation for unbelief as for belief. Taking up the insight that a child's "psychological representation of his father is intimately connected to his understanding of God," Vitz proposes to test a "defective father" hypothesis, in which an "atheist's disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies his rejection of God" (p. 16). His method is a historical survey of the biographies of prominent atheists and theists, particularly major figures in the development of modern atheism and their interlocutors on the side of faith.

In the column of founders and major proponents of modern atheism, Vitz addresses nineteen cases, from Voltaire, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, to Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Joseph Stalin, and Sigmund Freud himself. In each case, the "defective father" hypothesis holds to some degree. Each of these men experienced a rift in his relationship with his father: whether the early death of his father, or abuse, neglect or abandonment at his hands, or an unattractive weakness or overbearing character in his father, which led to a personal break and rejection of the father's values. In a few cases, these men themselves draw a parallel between the absence of their fathers and the absence of God. Explaining his mother's inability to impart her waning faith to him in the face of her husband's careless neglect of the family, H.G. Wells relates: "My father was away at cricket, and I think she realized more and more as the years dragged on without material alleviation, that Our Father and Our Lord, on whom to begin with she had perhaps counted unduly, were also away – playing perhaps at their own sort of cricket in some remote quarter of the starry universe" (p. 51). The lack of stability from a father's care appears to leave a void that a discredited God cannot fill, and that instead requires

the search for a new principle of order and flourishing, e.g., mathematics (Russell), existential philosophy (Sartre), totalitarian political order (Stalin), and so on.

In his selection of a “control group” of theists, Vitz focuses on prominent intellectual defenders of faith against the atheism or skepticism of their times and reveals a more varied set of circumstances. Blaise Pascal’s father retired from the law on the death of his wife to devote himself to the education of his children, while Edmund Burke was separated from his father at a young age because of health, but was instead raised with the help of three maternal uncles who impressed him with their integrity, benevolence, and faith (p. 65). G.K. Chesterton spent his childhood at his father’s side, imbibing his love of literature and beauty, while Martin Buber lost his mother and was separated from his father at an early age but was raised by grandparents who were attentive and loving. Albert Schweitzer was able to describe his father as “my dearest friend” (p. 86), while Abraham Heschel lost his father at the age of ten but felt himself from an early age to be following in the spiritual footsteps of several Hasidic rabbis whose example guided his growth.

In the examples of theists Vitz cites, the lives of those whose loss or estrangement from their fathers that would seem to locate them in the “defective fathers” category also included the secondary influence of some kind of substitute father figure. And although many of the theists were sons of devout, and even ordained, men (Paley, Schleiermacher, Schweitzer, and Barth were all ministers’ sons), Dietrich Bonhoeffer was raised by a devoted father who was himself agnostic and in a household whose Christian practice was mostly nominal. The commonality appears to be that a father or father-figure in each of these cases was able to provide a stability, affection, and attention that at the very least did not impede the development of faith in God.

The initial conclusion to be drawn from Vitz’s survey is that the historical evidence appears to support his hypothesis that the childhood experience of a “defective father” is a contributing psychological factor to the rejection of God in adulthood. Further, Vitz is able to contextualize this formative experience of the prominent atheists he identified with several further shared personal characteristics that appear to contribute to their skepticism regarding belief: high intelligence, overweening ambition, and the free choice to reject the strictures that belief in God might place on the realization of personal development. Indeed, many of his examples would seem to share the understanding of God’s role in their lives that Sartre attributed to fatherhood in general: “Had my own father lived, he would have lain on me full length and crushed me” (p. 30). In this way, the modern “romance of the autonomous self,” free from all restraint, plays directly into a rejection of belief in God (p. 136).

In substantiating his hypothesis of a projection theory of atheism based on the experience of a “defective” father, Vitz shows that the Freudian dismissal of religious belief based on psychological projection is illegitimate: the ultimate truth (or falsity) of religious belief cannot be determined by psychological factors (p. 145). However, for the general reader, Vitz might have strengthened his presentation by stepping outside this Freudian frame. His discussion of the relationship between family dynamics and belief in God is interesting not primarily for polemical reasons, but insofar as it resonates with the experience and truth of the human person as such. In a fallen world, every father fails in some degree to reflect and interpret the fatherhood of God, and yet many children implicitly or explicitly reconcile that gap with trust in the providence and faithfulness of God. A discussion of this universal human experience would have added a greater depth and credibility to the selective historical survey of exceptional figures that forms the bulk of Vitz’s observations and argument.

