

One Father, Three Dysfunctional Offspring:  
On the 'Problematic' Aspects of Monotheism

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When two creative people like David Galston and Raheel Raza get together, one should, at a minimum, expect some provocation and controversy. So, here I am, lured on by the promise of both and ready for an intellectual spat with my two male brethren. After all, isn't quarrelling what dysfunctional families do best?!

Seriously, though, we have a real fight on our hands and, for me, it begins with the very title of this event that very problematically conflates God with Father.

(I am referring to the title that was sent to me: "One Father, Three Dysfunctional Offspring: On the problematic aspects of monotheism." After I wrote my talk I noticed that elsewhere this event is being advertised as "Father Abraham and his three dysfunctional families.")

In any event, I have focused on the view of God as Father, because even though it is more Catholic than it is Jewish or Islamic, Jews and Muslims have ended up conflating monotheism with patriarchy even without this Father/ing of God.

To me, this confusion is a sign of the dysfunctionality not of the so-called "One Father"—or monotheism—but, rather, of the three offspring, and I am going to spend my time chastising these self-sabotaging and perverse siblings.

The points of my critique are to show, first, that representing God as Father is shamelessly anthropomorphic and, second, that there is no scriptural or theological sanction for Muslims to patriarchalize God, hence monotheism.

While both these problems are related, I'm going to talk about them separately.

But first, I should say why focusing on the first half of the title—the Father—can say something meaningful about and to the second half—the offspring/ families.

Scholars of religion routinely point out that how we conceive of God is central not only to our "religious life but also to . . . social, political, familial institutions

and relationships."<sup>1</sup> Put differently, sacred knowledge has the power to shape our views not only of God, but also of our own self-worth and relationships.

That is why masculinizing God also impacts the relationship between women and men since men acquire power from "the fact that the source of ultimate value is often described in anthropomorphic images as Father or King."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, feminists like Mary Daly argue that it is this "Exclusively masculine symbolism for God, for the notion of divine 'incarnation' in human nature, and for the human relationship to God,"<sup>3</sup> that accounts for sexual oppression.

Now I don't agree with her completely, but I believe that the masculinization of God, and of monotheism itself, poses a formidable problem for believing women.

Some feminists have tried to resolve this problem by trying to de-gender "the word God;"<sup>4</sup> others, however, believe that we should reengender God so as to recover God's "female guises,"<sup>5</sup> and yet others have settled their scores with monotheism by breaking with it altogether and embracing a pantheon of pagan goddesses instead.

Curiously, however, each of these solutions makes the same mistake of thinking that the problem lies with the sex/ gender we ascribe to God rather than with projecting sex/ gender onto the divine in the first place. As a result, they end up evading the problem of anthropomorphism rather than avoiding it.

What precisely is anthropomorphism? The dictionary defines it as attributing "human motivation, characteristics, or behavior" to non-human objects or to natural phenomena. In other words, it involves reducing the entire spectrum of existence to one's own particular frames of being or reference.

One consequence of this narcissistic projection is to desacralize God, because, as some Christian feminists say, when "anthropomorphisms succeed in containing God, we have no God; we have instead a glorified image of ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne McGrew Bennett, *From Woman-Pain to Woman-Vision*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "' . . . And Woman his Humanity:'" in C. Bynum, S. Harrell and P. Richman (eds.), *Gender and Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1986: 1.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1973: 4.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Ramshaw, *God beyond Gender*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press 1995: 19.

<sup>5</sup> Carl A. and Susan D. Raschke, *The Engendering God*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press: 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Ramshaw, p. 21.

It shouldn't matter whether this image glorifies men or women; romanticizing women is the mirror opposite of glorifying men and thus hardly revolutionary. That is why I personally find the feminization of God (in the garb of goddesses or the sacred feminine) as specious and egotistical as the masculinization of God (in the garb of Father or patriarchal renditions of monotheism).

I guess you can tell that I'm not a big fan of *The Da Vinci Code* since I don't find "the feminine" inherently sacrosanct or liberating. (Lest I end up creating a hideous misunderstanding, let me clarify that I'm not treating the book as a theology; and the less I say about the excruciatingly pedantic movie, the better!)

As long as self-glorification remains at the core of how we conceive God, it keeps us from thinking critically about the problems that arise from ascribing human impulses, persona, conduct, or relationships to God.

In this context, and in passing, I should note that what makes monotheism in its patriarchal formulations oppressive is this anthropomorphism and not the idea of the one God. I make this point because some people seem to believe that simply multiplying God will resolve the problem of religious fanaticism or patriarchy.

Somehow I doubt that will happen because the real problem isn't oneness or manyness, but how we view them and their relationship to one another. (For those of you who are interested in an exposition of this relationship in the context of Islam, I'd recommend Ibn al-Arabi's work on religious diversity.)<sup>7</sup>

So much for the first part of my critique; I now want to say why equating God with father corrupts our very conception of God, at least for Muslims.

I say "at least" because it is not self-evident that such an equation is problematic for Christians. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argues that calling God father signifies a "theology of hope." As he says, a father is no more "an enemy to his sons; love, solicitude, and pity carry him beyond domination and severity."<sup>8</sup>

Even so, there is no such theology of hope for Muslims since the Qur'an condemns re-presenting God as father as a heresy. Again and again, it reminds us that God is One and that God's irreducible Unity is a function of the fact that God is neither progeny and nor progenitor:

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<sup>7</sup> William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al 'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY), 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretation*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.489.

Say: [God] is God  
The One and Only;  
God, the Eternal, Absolute;  
[God] begetteth not,  
Nor is [God] begotten;  
And there is none  
Like unto [God]  
(112; in Yusuf Ali, 1806).<sup>9</sup>

In other words, there is something about the very notion of God's Oneness in the Qur'an that also rules out patriarchalizing God inasmuch as the one God remains beyond real or symbolic, material or abstract, fatherhood or sonhood:

In blasphemy indeed  
Are those that say  
That God is Christ  
The son of Mary.  
(5:19; in Ali, 246-247).

...

... God is One God:  
Glory be to [God]:  
(Far Exalted is [God]) above  
Having a son  
(4: 171; in Ali, 234).

How "can [God] have a son When [God] hath no consort?" asks the Qur'an (6:100-01, in Ali, 319).

...

The Jews call 'Uzair a son  
Of God, and the Christians  
Call Christ the Son of God.  
That is a saying from their mouth;  
... they are deluded  
Away from the Truth  
(9: 30; in Ali, 448).

The Qur'an also condemns those polytheists who, it says,

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<sup>9</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988.

falsely,  
Having no knowledge,  
Attribute to [God]  
Sons and daughters.  
Praise and glory be  
To [God Who] is above  
What they attribute to [God]!

“Not only does God not stand in the literal relationship of son, father, husband, or partner to a divine pantheon, then, but God also does not stand in the symbolic relationship of a father . . . to human beings either.”<sup>10</sup>

(Both) the Jews and the Christians [say]:  
'We are sons of God, and His beloved.'  
Say: 'Why then doth [God]  
Punish you for your sins?  
Nay, ye are but men,—  
Of the men [God] hath created'  
(5:20; in Ali, 247).

I find these verses utterly momentous. Since “God can only be a patriarch or . . . God can only be patriarchalized, to the extent that God can in fact be sacralized as Father,” the Qur’an’s rejection of the trope of father/hood for speaking about God renders Islam a profoundly anti-patriarchal religion, at least in my reading.

For if “God is not Father in Heaven in either a literal or a symbolic sense,” then human fathers also cannot “represent their rule on earth as replicating the model of Divine patriarchy.” That being so, how can we argue that God is “on the side” “of fathers or of patriarchy? Indeed, if God is not father, son, or husband, in what sense can God be male (‘He’)?”<sup>11</sup>

If conclusion, I am suggesting that if anthropomorphism allows us to confuse God with ourselves, monotheistic patriarchy habitually confuse language about God with God by taking literally the idea that “man” is made in God’s image and that God is indeed male. To me, it is this double conflation that accounts for the malign dysfunctions that afflict “Father Abraham’s three families” today.

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<sup>10</sup> Asma Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002: 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.