**The Fatherhood of God**

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I have never been persuaded by the argument that if we speak of God as 'Father', we thereby present God as the universe's dominant male and its despotic patriarch. Although fatherhood is the 'root metaphor' for Christian talk about God, it cannot be understood to imply that somehow God is more 'male' than 'female'. These categories simply do not apply to God, any more than 'right-handedness' or 'left-handedness' do: God is not sexed, and God has no hands.

The issue, however, is a live one: a few years ago, an eminent American Biblical theologian told me that in his college chapel people started hissing if the Eucharistic celebrant began with the words, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. In the same spirit, during a ceremony in the college chapel, the Book of Common Prayer was burned as a sexist document: these are wild, adolescent times. The politically correct alternative to the traditional formula is 'In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctif­ier', which avoids the danger of using gender-specific words of God, but these are the activities of God rather than ways of identifying a differentiation proper to God’s being. And, in some parts of the Church, this is seen as a test which discrimi­nates between those whose allegiance to the principle of equality between the sexes requires the removal of gender-specific language from theology and those for whom the traditional language of the Church is both normative and preferable.

**A cultural problem**

Considerable rhetoric has been generated on the topic not because of its centrality for theology, but because it is a theological symptom of the failure of some Western cultures to relate positively to any symbols of maleness. (The same comment can be applied equally to the silly question, 'If Jesus was a man, can he save women?' Mary Magdalene, like every other woman saint, would have found it absurd.) It is a problem in culture and anthropology about how best to understand the complex dynamic within humanity of maleness and femaleness; the theological discussion, at a secondary and dependent level, simply reflects the questions asked about human beings.

Without reducing its complexity, the problem at the cultural and anthropological level is how to differentiate between the sexes, without at the same time undermining their equality in the one human continuum. Significantly, the same tension exists in ecclesiology: how can we give an account of the internal *differentiation* of charisms and ministries within the Church without betraying the fundamental *equality* bestowed in baptism? The Catholic tradition holds that the Church is *hierarchically differentiated* according to office, represented symbolically by Peter and the Twelve, but it also insists that the perfect archetype of Christian discipleship is lay, represented by Mary, and that this Marian dimension -- the deepest dimension of the Church's identity -- marks a fundamental *equality* which is never left annulled by the differentiation which office introduces. Since there is no higher vocation than simply being a Christian, office in the Church is simply service.

Inevitably, questions about the relationship of the sexes in a period of cultural dislocation affect the use of these categories in theology. An uncertainty about how to differentiate adequately between male and female identity -- and why should we presume that this is ever simple? -- is bound to affect the use of this differentiation in their application to God. If we are unable to say what we mean by a 'good man' or a 'good father', and if, consequently, the negative connotations of fatherhood spring strongly to mind, then it is hardly surprising that this should affect the use of the terms in our language about God.

**Hesitancy**

There are understandable reasons why the instinct of many people is to register a hesitancy about the value of 'God the Father' as an immediately accessible symbol of divine love. Their instinctive judgement is that because these connotations send the wrong signals about the character of relations within the human community, we should cease to speak of God as 'Father' since it is intrinsi­cally deficient and misleading. There are two main objections to the phrase 'God the Father' which can inhibit the spontaneity with which Christians traditionally have allowed the word to arise in their hearts in prayer.

The first is that the image expresses a preference for the superior status of one half of the human race, and since that (male) part of the human race stands in an unjust relationship to the other (female) part, then God is invoked as an ally of male domination over women. 'If God is male, then the male is God', in Mary Daly's acid formula: by such usage, the Christian Church makes yet another preferential option for the subjugation of women: as on earth, so also in heaven. If this is what the image necessarily implies, the image, then of course it should be abandoned. My only comment at this stage is that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is as radical challenge to viewing God as a male tyrant as anything Ms Daly has come up with.

Secondly, since there is a widespread uncertainty about the quality of fatherly relations in the human community, is it appropriate to apply such an ambivalent symbol to God? We are only beginning to realise the scale of abusive relationships which some fathers have towards their sons and daughters -- not only the extremes of physical and sexual abuse, but the infliction of psychological damage which can affect a son or daughter all through his or her lifetime. If the symbols of 'father' is to work properly, it must have a basis in our pre-rational experience, and for some people, it is only after a long struggle that they eventually feel comfortable with an image of God's paternity.

**Possibilities**

So what should be done? There are perhaps three considerations which do not exclude one another, but which, taken together, might stop some of the silliness which often surrounds the discussion. The first two are a natural pair: you can either *abandon* the phrase completely because all analogies between human and divine qualities distort by saying too much or saying precisely the wrong thing about God, or you should *balance and correct* it by a richer symbolism which would incorporate positive symbols related to femaleness and revive the inclusiveness of Genesis 1.26 in which the divine image is seen in the double modality of male and female humanness.

The first of these proposals is a variation of the *via negativa* or *apophatic theology*, the tradition which denies the adequacy of all created images to refer to God. In Augustine's words, *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*: paraphrasing this very loosely: 'If you think you understand positively what you're saying about God, then you're certainly not dealing with God!' In the Western Church, this is given classic expression in the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): 'Between the Creator and the creature, no similarity can be expressed without including a greater dissimilarity.' (*Inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda.*)

If we restate this for our present discussion, it might mean, 'If you want to speak of God as Father, you must at the same time *deny* any similarity between God's fatherhood and human fatherhood'. Why? Because the difference between God and the creation is not a difference of degree, but a difference on the order of being: 'infinite' does not mean 'bigger', and you cannot use words, as it were, 'in a straight line' between the creation and God. God's relationship to us cannot be contained within imagery of gender. This first proposal is a corrective which ought always to be in our minds: *Deus semper maior* [God is always greater]. We must consciously undermine all our images because God is always greater and different. To use human categories of the divine may be natural, but, if left unchecked, it is not far from the idolatry which is the death of authentic worship.

The second solution -- seeking to supplement the deficiencies of the image with the strength of others -- revives the tradition of the *via positiva* or *cataphatic theology*, in which a positive, but always limited, value is seen in the use of created images to speak of God. The need to say *something* in order to characterise God cannot be avoided: thus, for example, while acknowledging God's ineffability, we can nevertheless say that 'father' or 'mother' or 'defender' is more appropriate as a way of referring to God than 'tyrant', 'destroyer' or 'deceiver'. This tradition would seek, instinctively, a number of positive ways in which God could be described -- all of them inadequate, of course, but together, like beads on a chain, they form a cluster of significant, positive images: God is Father, and God is mother; God is light; God is stillness; God is an inexhaustible stream, etc.

This proposal is eminently Biblical and liturgical: because no one account of God can be adequate, you should amplify the range of terms which you use, as the Church has always done in its liking for litanies. The Jewish Scriptures, in bequeathing to us a range of descriptions of God -- 'the Most High', 'Yahweh', 'the Lord of Hosts', 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', 'the Lord', 'the Holy One', 'the Redeemer' etc. -- supplements these names with a range of striking metaphors: the faithful husband of a wayward wife (Hosea); the protective shepherd of the flock (Isaiah 40.11); the mother who treasures the child of her womb (Isaiah 49.15), etc.

There are also negative images such as chastiser, judge and avenger which are meant to disconcert and counter human complacency before God, and troubling images which suggest a dark inscrutability in God's dealings with us: this is the God who tests Job, who sends his angel to wrestle with Jacob, who makes his people dwell forty years in the desert, who consigns them to exile, etc. Although the image of God as Father, especially through the teaching of Jesus, comes to assume a central importance for Christians -- it becomes the 'root metaphor' which organises the deployment of other images -- it still belongs in this complex of metaphors which defy simple harmonisation with one another. *Deus semper maior* even when many images are used.

**What might be meant?**

The third proposal starts from the assumption that it is a mistake to think that we have an immediate grasp of what we mean by the 'Fatherhood' of God. Both its critical opponents and its sometimes uncritical defenders seem to assume that its meaning is obvious, but no word used of God has a transparent meaning. And certainly a word like 'father', which in our human experience is open to so many nuances, has multiple connotations when applied to God. When we speak of the Fatherhood of God, it ought to be the occasion of a deeper reflection on both the character of fatherhood and the mystery of God caught in this image. This double focus is suggested by the words from Ephesians, 'I bow my knees before the Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name' (3.14-5), which invites us to relate our worship of God to the experience of relating to a human father.

Athanasius wrote about the fatherhood of God in a way that suggests that God, as the origin and sustainer of life, is the primary, fatherly source of life; human fatherhood mirrors imperfectly God’s relationship to his creation:

If the very notion of God transcends such thoughts; and if, as soon as he hears [the name ‘God’], a man recognises that [God] has being, not as we have being, but as God; and that God creates, yet not as humans create, but as God -- then it is plain also that He begets not as men beget, but begets as God. God is not the imitator of man. On the contrary, because God also is properly and truly the Father of his Son, we men are also called the fathers of our own children. For from him ‘every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named’. [[1]](#footnote-1)

The first part of the focus invites us to draw upon the experience of being the son or daughter of a good father as a resource for interpreting how we relate to God. Equally, it suggests that the human experience of fatherhood offers some insight into how to think of God's relationship to his free children. Of course, if our experience of being fathered well, or of fathering well, is a good one, there's less incentive to think deeply about it: here, as elsewhere, a sense of failure is a stronger stimulus to reflection than is contentedness. But Balzac's Père Goriot says, *Quand je suis devenu père, j'ai compris Dieu*: 'when I became a father, I understood God'. We can read what this means in the context of the novel, but the simple formula sets a broad agenda which Christian fathers need to amplify from their experience and about which they should speak to the Church. Can something also be learned from the experience of adopting a child, where a father commits himself to a child who is not his own, and who brings a sometimes troubled experience into this relationship with a new parent? This is surely a primary analogy for the redemptive process by which God draws us sinners into an intimacy which we do not wholeheartedly choose, in which although 'He destines us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ' (Eph.1.5), he still has to cope with our resistance to the intimacy he wants to create.

**Drawing on the tradition**

The second part asks us to draw upon resources from Scripture and tradition in which God's fatherhood is interpreted. The centre, of course, will be Jesus' own teaching about the Father, since Christians are taught to share in his experience of being a son. Taking Matthew's gospel: God is the Father who makes his sun and rain fall on good and bad alike (Mt 5.45), who loves those who do not love him and invites imitation by his children (5.46-48). He sees all good deeds done in secret and takes delight in what his children keep from public display (6.3-4), requires of them that they be forgiving adults in his likeness (6.14-15), urges them to avoid self-obsession and anxiety and live with a trust in his care for them and always gives to his children what they need (7.11). He reveals the mysteries of the kingdom even to the least of his children (11.25), and it is never his will that any of his children should be lost when they go astray: he leaves those who are safe and braves the mountains to rescue his forsaken sons and daughters (18.12ff).

In Luke, there is the great parable of the Prodigal Father who has to cope with two very different sons: he is filled with compassion for his rebellious son, and yet he still does not forget his righteous son and says to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours'. There are no favourites in his family, but each adult son and daughter is treated according to his or her needs. His aim is to enable his children to grow to a maturity characterised by generosity, compassion, selflessness, kindness and forgiveness towards those who hate them: 'then you will be children of your Father, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (6.35). I defy anyone to say that this father is an instance of 'patriarchal oppression', or that these images maintain human beings in an infantile dependence on an indulgent parent. (It is always best, by the way, to think of the Father relating to *adult* children, rather than to toddlers!)

The other resource is from the representation of the Trinity in Christian art since, in many ways, this image-making is more insightful than technical theology. In the 14th Century, we begin to have images which portray the suffering, affliction and distress of the Father in relation to the Crucified Son. These are the 'Throne of Grace' images of the Trinity in which the Father holds either the Cross of the Son or holds his tortured body on his lap. These are the *sorrowful mysteries* of the Father, in which the Father shares in the distress of those who have come to love the Crucified One. These medieval images are never excessive in their grief, yet it is hard to look at them without recalling the grief of Jacob when he thinks that his son Joseph is dead:

Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning". Thus his father bewailed him. (Gen 37.34-5)

The Fatherly God is bereaved because he endures the rebellion of the children he adopts who bring about the death of the 'Son of the House' (Mk 12.1ff). He is prepared to endure the negative consequences of the freedom of his adult children, and in return for the death they inflict on his Beloved Son, he gives life, 'for he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked' (Lk 6.35). He experiences a fatherly pain which accompanies his active and victorious mercy shown in his Son. In Barth's words, 'This fatherly fellow-suffering of God is the mystery, the basis, of the humiliation of his Son; the truth of that which takes place historically in the crucifixion.' (*Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p.357)

These *Pietàs of the Father,* are a 'silent preaching of the image of the compassionate Father', who, at a cost to himself, actively seeks the reconciliation of his children, endures patiently their resistance, permits their violent handling of his Beloved Son and still waits for them to turn back to him. [[2]](#footnote-2) Our Christian faith reveals to us that the Father loves us, his troublesome children, no less than he loves 'the Son of his bosom' (Jn 1.18), and that is the unfathomable mystery. The history of our salvation is the story of how God patiently takes our ways upon him 'as a man bears his son' (Deut. 1.31), so that no one remains a stranger, but eventually is given the rights of a full son or daughter within his house. The Fatherhood of God is shown to be a long-suffering, sacrificial and gentle presence which never weakens even while his children rebel, and which waits patiently until his children grow to maturity in his image. We still need to think more about the richness of the image of the Fatherhood of God before, in ideological haste, we brush it aside. Only then can we properly use it in conjunction with the other images that the experience of faith suggests.

Much will depend on getting this right, both for our theology and for the fostering of good fathering in our community. Although the image of God as Father depends for its strength on our sense of what good fathering is, it also sends back to us a pattern of what good fathering might be within our families. We know that families work well when the father is integrated into the life of the family, but when he is marginalised, or when he marginalises himself, it goes disastrously wrong. (Is there any more urgent pastoral problem than that of enabling men, especially young men, to find their place within the stability of family relationships?) Deny the value of the image of God as Father, as some have suggested, and you send a message to all fathers that their relations to their children cannot be regarded as a genuine sacrament -- a luminous sign and an effective communication of God's love. It would be a very unwise step, for men, for women and for their children. But if we say that the image is valuable and irreplaceable, we may be giving ourselves a deeper insight into God and saying something of immense importance for human beings.

1. Father in the Old Testament

Dt 32.6: ‘Do you thus requite the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?’

Dt 1.31: ‘..in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God bore you, as a man bears his son, in alla the way that you went until you came to this place.’

Is 63.16: ‘For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; thou, Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name.’

Is 64.8: ‘Yet thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art the potter; we are all the work of thy hand.’

1. Athanasius, *C. Arianos*, I,23; quoted by Barth in *Church Dogmatics* I/1, p.451 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. F. Boespflug, 'The Compassion of God the Father in Western Art', *Cross Currents* 42 (1992-3), pp.487-503; quotation from p.502. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)