

IMPLICATIONS OF VITZ'S "DEFECTIVE FATHER" HYPOTHESIS FOR THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract: Two related and oft-repeated criticisms of religion are that it promotes regressive sexual mores and patriarchal archetypes. Such criticisms are not very surprising, considering that apex deities in each of the world's three largest religions—Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—are all portrayed as male, and each of these religions frown upon non-marital sexual relationships. But this raises a question: why are the world's most successful religions more patriarchal and less sexually "liberated" than society at large? This article suggests that promotion of marriage and of patriarchal archetypes may be crucial to the transmission of religious values from one generation to the next, as Freudian "Father Complex" theory holds that a healthy relationship with a father is a critical factor in the formation of religious belief. The article provides evidence that, consistent with Vitz's "Defective Father" hypothesis of atheism, a rise in out-of-wedlock births is highly correlated with a rise in irreligiosity in the United States. The article concludes that this finding could have implications for Islam and Hinduism, and suggests that future studies conducted in India (a religiously-pluralistic, Hindu-majority nation) and Bangladesh (a religiously-pluralistic, Muslim-majority nation) would complement existing research conducted in the United States (a religiously-pluralistic, Christian-majority nation).

Keywords: Religion, patriarchy, marriage, Father Complex, Defective Father Hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Two related and oft-repeated criticisms of religion are that it promotes regressive sexual mores and patriarchal archetypes. Such criticisms are not very surprising, considering that apex deities in each of the world's three largest religions—Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—are all portrayed as male, and each of these religions forbid non-marital sex (along with imposing other restrictions on intimate relationships). But this raises the question: why are the world's most successful religions more patriarchal and less sexually-"liberated" than society at large? This article suggests that the promotion of marriage and patriarchal archetypes may be crucial to successful transmission of religious values from one generation to the next.

Sections 2 and 3 of this article will address the "patriarchal" features of religion. Section 2 will show that omnipotent deities in the world's three largest religions are male. Section 3 will discuss how the three major religions promote marriage and frown upon sexual relationships outside of marriage.

Section 4 will suggest that the patriarchal nature of the three major world religions may actually be a key ingredient of their success. Freudian theory holds

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that the “personal God” is nothing more than an “exalted father,” and that “youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down.” (Freud, 1910). The article will review literature that explains how children may be psychologically hardwired to conceive of God as a father figure, and then hypothesize that the success of the world’s three major religions is at-least partially attributable to the fact that they provide young children with a father-figure through their promotion of marriage, and provide adults with male deities that harken back to their early-childhood father-figures.

Section 4 will also show that this hypothesis is backed up by long-term demographic trends in the United States. The demographic data shows that rates of irreligiosity are almost perfectly-correlated with earlier rates of illegitimacy. The article interprets this data as an indication that the failure of the American church to enforce sexual norms among the Boomer Generation is related to the failure of the church to retain the devotion of Generation X.

The article concludes by offering some recommendations for further research into the relationship between fathers and religion. It notes that research thus far has been mostly limited to the United States (a religiously-pluralistic, Christian-majority nation), and suggests that research in India (a religiously-pluralistic, Hindu-majority nation) and Bangladesh (a religiously-pluralistic, Muslim-majority nation) would be very useful in rounding out the literature.

PATRIARCHY IN THE TOP THREE RELIGIONS

“Patriarchy” is a Greek word meaning “rule of the father,” and modern feminist theory uses the term to describe social institutions in which power is held by “male hands.” (Chowdhury, 2009). Though feminists are often criticized for “seeing patriarchy everywhere” (Woodhead, 1996), there can be little dispute that feminists are factually-correct when they say that religion tends to be patriarchal. In all three of the major religions, male deities reign supreme.

The world’s three largest religions by number of adherents are Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Nearly 70% of the world’s population belonged to one of those faiths in 2010, and this percentage is projected to increase in the future. (Hackett, Cooperman, & Ritchey, 2015). The prevalence of these religions means that the vast majority of believers around the world belong to a patriarchal faith.

In Christianity, for example, the Triune God holds “all power...in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18-19), and all three members of the Trinity are male. God the *Father* and God the *Son* are clearly male figures, and the Holy Spirit is described as a male capable of fathering a child (Matthew 1:18-20) and referred to in a masculine tense by Jesus Christ (John 14:26). Though some argue that Catholicism has a goddess figure in the Virgin Mary (Benko, 1993), the Catholic tradition treats her as an auxiliary deity whose has no inherent power herself,

but has intercessory power through her influence on her omnipotent son Jesus. (Pohle, 1914).

Hinduism also contains a trinity (called the "Trimūrti") of omnipotent gods: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer/regenerator. (Bailey, 2017). All three of these gods are male. Though Hinduism also has a triad of major goddesses (the "Tridevi"), mainstream Hinduism depicts them as consorts to the more eminent masculine Trimurti gods.

Regarding Islam, Allah is the all-powerful being worshiped by Muslims. In the Quran's original Arabic text, Allah is referred to by masculine pronouns, though some Muslims maintain that Allah transcends gender. (Morgan, 2010) Mohammed, the ultimate human authority on Islamic teachings, is also a male.

PROMOTION OF MARRIAGE BY THE TOP THREE RELIGIONS

The influential feminist Kate Millet argued that "patriarchy's chief institution is the family." She also describes religion as an institution that reinforces patriarchal family norms. Millet claimed that religion, in the name of family values, conspires to deny women "sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the cult of virginity." (Millet, 1970).

The allegation that religion promotes marriage and places restrictions on "sexual freedom" is hard to argue against. Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism all elevate marriage to a sacred rite. They also proscribe sexual activity outside of the marital context.

The Bible, for example, states that "to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." (1 Corinthians 7:2). Premarital sex is "strongly prohibited by Hindu scriptures" (Stayton & Pillai-Friedman, 2009), and virginity is prized by Hindus because it is seen as an indicator of marital fidelity (Young, 2012). In Islam, "marriage is a sacred act and the subject of serious consideration throughout the Quran" (Hidayatullah, 2003), and "traditional Islam prohibits premarital sex" (Stayton & Pillai-Friedman, 2009).

THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN RELIGIOUS INTEGRATION

The reason that the three most successful religions promote male gods and traditional family values may be related to the psychology of religious development. Freud (1910) observed that psychoanalysis "has taught us the intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God, has shown us that the personal God is logically nothing but an exalted father, and daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down." If people do, in fact, base their concept of God based on a childhood father figure, the success of the three major religions may be attributable to the fact that they provide young children with a healthy father-figure through their promotion of

marriage, and provide adults with male deities that resemble those early-childhood father-figures.

Though Freud identified a possible connection between paternal influence and religious belief over a century ago, the role that fathers play in their child's religious development has received little attention from academia up until very recently. This may be because "a consistent finding across the Western world is that women are generally more religious than men on a wide range of measures," and mothers "are typically expected to carry the bulk of the responsibilities surrounding religious socialization." (Storm & Voas, 2012). It may also be because there is "a difference in the way mothers and fathers transmit religiosity to their offspring" (Storm & Voas, 2012), and fathers transmit religiosity in a more indirect and subtle way than mothers do.

Under Freudian theory, a father's chief role in religious transmission is to provide the child with an example of a distant, mysterious, intimidating, but ultimately benevolent male authority figure. Through this example, the child learns to have "faith" and confidence in patriarchal authority. Religion later capitalizes on this faith by providing and even more distant, mysterious, intimidating, but ultimately benevolent male authority figure. (Vitz, 2011).

To understand why a child views the *father* as a god-like figure rather than the mother, one must begin with sexual dimorphism. An infant's original parent-figure is the mother, a woman whose soft, pillow-like body has been designed by natural selection to both feed and comfort the child. (Smith, 1986). Even a woman's naturally high-pitched voice is soothing and non-threatening to an infant's ears. (Trainor & Zacharias, 1998).

Men, on the other hand, have a body designed to intimidate other men. Unlike sexually-dimorphic traits such as the peacock tail, the traits of human males—such as a large body-size, conspicuous muscles, facial hair, and deep voices—evolved to repulse potential male competitors, not to attract potential female mates. (Penn State, 2016; Puts et. al., 2016). (Penn State, 2016; Puts et. al., 2016) Secondary male characteristics "make men more dominant looking, scarier and seemingly more dangerous." (Penn State, 2016).

If a man's physical characteristics are designed to be intimidating to other adult men, one would expect them to be downright terrifying to a toddler. The contrast between the mother's small, soft, smooth body and friendly, high-pitched voice, and the father's large, hard, hairy body and authoritative, deep-pitched voice could not be starker. Furthermore, women often stay home during infancy while the father works outside the home, so a young child's lack of familiarity with their father makes him even scarier.

NYU Prof. Paul Vitz, the most prominent modern scholar regarding the Freudian "connection between the father complex and belief in God," notes that a father's physical attributes leave a strong impression on a young child:

Usually, the father represents authority and serious discipline. A lot of his authority is just in his size. You have to remember what it's like to be a little child. Your father is big, and he's sort of scary. His voice is a little scary and he's got a beard and he's scratchy and he smells more. When he looks at you and shouts, you shape up. (Vitz 2011).

As a child's first parent figure, the mother plays a major role in establishing the father's parent-status in the mind of the child. By placing a child into the arms of the big, hairy, deep-voiced, intimidating stranger, the mother's actions effectively tell the child: "Be not afraid, this man is also your creator. He will not use his strength to harm you; he will use it to protect and provide for you."

Infants prefer their mother but gradually warm to their fathers as they grow older, until eventually coming to prefer the father over the mother in late childhood/early adolescence. (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl, 2010). Freud argues that the turn from "the mother to the father [...] signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the senses, [...] since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premise." Freud (1939). At the time Freud wrote this passage, genetic paternity testing had not yet been developed, so fatherhood was based *entirely* on faith in the wife/mother's vow of sexual fidelity.

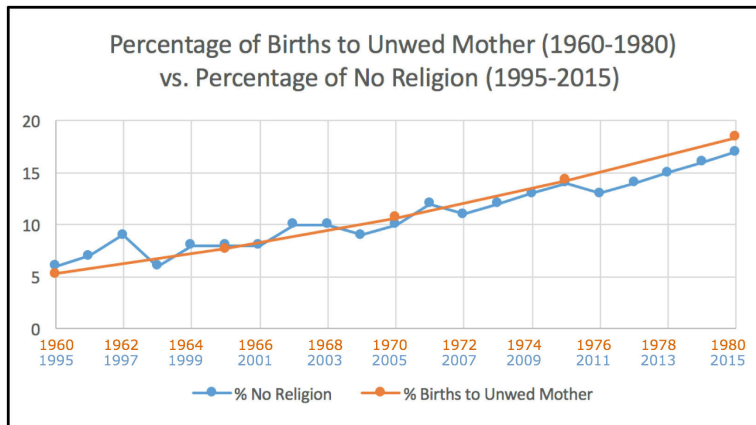
A child's development of faith in a god proceeds in much the same manner as the child's development of "faith" in a father. Like a man, religion is as physically-imposing. A house of worship "tends to be a monument to power, partially designed to inspire awe [and] to intimidate the masses." (Wilcock, 2004). Churches, mosques, and temples are usually designed to portray the majesty and mystery of the divine beings they honor, to reach to the heavens and dwarf the parishioner, to show that this is a house built not for humans but for a being bigger far larger than we are. Religious iconography, such as a crucifix or a statute of Shiva, also tends to be unsettling.

As such, places of worship can be intimidating, especially for a child. Mothers tend to be the ones who accompany a child to a house of worship (Storm & Voas, 2012), so it is a mother, again, who tells the child to have faith in the father-figure; who says, "Be not afraid, this god is your creator. He will not use his strength to harm you; he will it to protect and provide for you."

This development process helps explain why researchers have found that "God was perceived as more like father than like mother in early childhood. Interestingly, it was the father's nurturance that best predicted seeing God as nurturing." (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006). A child first learns to have faith in the imposing, intimidating, mysterious human father, which makes it easier to later learn to have faith in the imposing, intimidating, mysterious heavenly father.

Just as Freudian theory shows how a father might provide a template for children to refer to when developing a belief in a god, Freud (1910) also stated that experience “daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down.” Vitz (2000) refers to this as the “Defective Father” hypothesis of atheism. In *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, Vitz argues that Freud’s Oedipus complex, in which a son despises his father and seeks to overthrow him, provides insights into the psychological development of atheism. (Vitz, 2000). Vitz conducted a biographical survey of dozens influential theists and atheists over the past four centuries, and noted that atheists tended to have fathers while failed in some way (whether through death, abandonment, or abuse), while theists tended to have close, healthy relationships with their fathers.

If Vitz’s “Defective Father” theory of unbelief is correct, we would expect the irreligiosity rate to lag several decades behind the unwed birth rate, and that is exactly what the data is showing in the United States. In a yearly poll conducted by Gallup from 1995-2015, the percentage of Americans who said they were not part of any religion almost perfectly tracked the out-of-wedlock birth rate 35 years earlier. From 1960 to 1980 the out-of-wedlock birth rate rose from 5% to 18% (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000), and from 1995 to 2015 the irreligious rate rose from 6% to 17% (Gallup, 2017).



Many Christian leaders have criticized the church for “failing to resist” the sexual revolution of the 1960s. (Beckford, 2008). It could be argued, under Vitz’s “Defective Father” hypothesis, that the church’s inability to convince the Boomer Generation to abstain from premarital sex is directly related to increasing irreligiosity of Generation X. Adults born out-of-wedlock from 1960-1980 came of age during 1995-2015, and it could be surmised that many of those who responded “no religion” to the Gallup poll grew up without a father in the home, and therefore

the Christian concept of a caring and involved Heavenly Father did not resonate with their lived experiences.

Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism may promote male deities in order to capitalize on a child's tendency to view fathers as god-like figures. Once a child has come to have faith in their all-powerful human creator as a protector and provider, they have a reference point for developing faith in an all-powerful heavenly creator as a protector and provider. These three religions may also promote marriage in order to assure that children have a father-figure on which they can pattern their conception of god, and avoid situations such as the one currently taking place in the United States.

CONCLUSION

The literature regarding Freud's "intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God" is quite limited, and focuses almost exclusively on Christians in the United States. Vitz's *Faith of the Fatherless*, the most prominent work on Freud's Father-God theory, focuses exclusively on the Christian faith. Vitz rules out any investigation of Hinduism because he was under the impression that it does not contain "benevolent father"-type deities (and in doing so overlooks the creator, provider, and protector roles played by the Trimurti), and does not address Islam at all. (Vitz, 2000)

The literature would greatly benefit from research concerning the role fathers play in the development of faith among Hindus and Muslims. In particular, the authors believe that studies conducted in India (a religiously-pluralistic, Hindu-majority nation) and Bangladesh (a religiously-pluralistic, Muslim-majority nation) would complement the studies conducted in the United States (a religiously-pluralistic, Christian-majority nation).

The data analyzed in this article highlighted only the potential influence that being born out-of-wedlock might have on religious belief later in life. Vitz's "Defective Father" theory also holds that death, divorce, and abusive/absent/uninvolved fathers (whether married or not) can all have negative affects the development of religious belief. Future studies, therefore, should take these other potential contributing factors into account.

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