

Interview with Dr. Paul Vitz, author of "Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism"

Culture of Life

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Culture of Life speaks with Dr. Paul Vitz, Professor and Senior Scholar at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Arlington, VA and author of the recent book, "Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism" on the role of fatherhood in faith, family and culture.

CLF: Dr. Vitz, in your recent work "Faith of the Fatherless" you wrote about the role of fathers in the development of their children. How did this interest in the role of fathers in family life come to interest you as a psychologist?

"Well, it came partly because of my personal life. I have six children and so people began to ask me about what it was like to be a father of six. And because one's own experience is not always the same as others, I looked into the research on fatherhood. What I found was mostly on the negative effect of divorce, on children with the father leaving the family. However, the questions I received from others often related to other issues and so I began to look at the research related to other topics".

CLF: With regard to prominent atheists having absent or difficult relationships with their fathers, could you talk about what led you to make this interesting connection?

"It began with reading Freud who made an off-hand comment that it is common for a young person to lose their belief in God when they lose respect for their own father. Freud never followed this up although it fit his own life. I noticed when reading biographical material of the lives other atheists, not ordinary run-of-the-mill atheists but those who were adamant and public in their unbelief that bad fathers or dead fathers were extremely common. No one seemed to have looked at this. This is covered in detail in my book "Sigmund Freud's Christian Unconscious".

CLF: What other psychological evidence supports this notion that fathers and fatherhood are essential to the healthy development of children, both their faith as well as other areas?

"There are studies that indicate that the mother's faith is positively related to the faith of her children, but the father's faith is positively related to his children's faith even more. The father's function is to introduce the children to the outside world, outside of the family (e.g., sports, camping, business). That is he takes the child out into the world as a kind of guide. In doing this he helps his children in a major developmental task, to separate and individuate, to guide them toward independence and confidence. Another thing for which the father or father-figure (e.g., could be older brothers, uncles) is very important is in establishing healthy



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gender identity, especially in boys. The father models what it means to be masculine. While girls can achieve their gender identity from mothers, the fathers are also important by supporting their daughter's femininity, that is, to have a man who respects and admires her for her femaleness. Girls without a father when they hit puberty look for a male who will like them because they are female; this often leads to potential problems with premature sexual activity by seeking affection and affirmation from boys who are older. So you have a 14 year old girl looking for affirmation of her femininity from an 18 year old boy who she sees as mature and masculine. Then they get involved which of course leads to all kinds of problems: pregnancy, difficulty completing education, poverty, etc. However, if they have a father, who helps them realize they are terrific, and takes them out to have lunch, she will feel much more capable of saying "no" to premature sexual involvement. There is a lot of evidence that females feel strong, empowered, self-assured, and respected by other men, when they have a father or father figure who is present and involved in their lives."

CLF: So the role of the father, while obviously is important for males in their development, is also important in providing support to daughters.

"Yes, fathers do a great good by staying connected to their daughters, for example, when she is older, taking her to father-daughter events at school, etc. She will find these times important and will not have to go looking elsewhere for affection. Also, at times, particularly as a teenager, she will need to separate from her mother and may critical of her. Then she can turn to her father as somebody who supports her but also supports the mother, and so can help her sort through their tension."

CLF: How does having a stable relationship with your father in childhood help develop a sense of true dignity? In other words, is there something unique to the father-son or father-daughter relationship that helps a young person know their self-worth and promote self-respect and respect for others?

"People want to know who their father is or was because this gives them a sense of social or public identity. Even those who are adopted or who are the result of artificial insemination try finding the father. I'll give you an example: Let's say it's a family where the father has died in WWII or the Vietnam War. It is important that the mother keeps an honorable presence of the father in the home, e.g. a photo of the father in the living room perhaps in uniform. This helps the children have an image of the father as a strong, respected figure who died an honorable death. This helps the children develop a clear positive identity and dignity. The mother provides emotional strength and interpersonal skills and confidence about life in general; basic trust and hopefulness. The father gives public strength and status. So in this example, the children would feel protected by the image of their father, that he was a great fighter pilot, a strong image preserved by their mother's honoring of him. This is even more so if the father is alive and a positive figure."

CLF: If we could re-visit your initial comment, that the children of sperm donors have interest in fathers is there any scientific evidence of the impact of this?

"I don't know of any scientific evidence, but I do know there are children who find



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out who their sperm donor father was; they then have meetings with any other children who have the same father. This has a lot to do with the meaning of identity in both a social sense and a public sense.”

CLF: Part of the Culture of Life mission is to understand the truth about the human person at all stages of life; I am wondering if you have any comments on the role of grandfathers, especially if they are aging or infirm, in fostering healthy family functioning or development?

“I don’t know of studies on grandfathers. (Somebody should do some research on the important contributions of grandparents.) But grandfathers are very important; they can help sometimes be a substitute father, and they give their own children who are now parents a sense of support and family solidarity. The grandfather’s job and social identity can provide the sense of strength and status that usually comes from the father ... the doctor that everybody knew, or the upright businessman, etc. ... This provides a sense of tradition, of connectivity, and a sense that [the children] are honorable and respected in their community. Finally, a frail grandfather can also teach his grandchildren to be comfortable with old people and to respect them. He can show wisdom and easy going kindness that is often greatly needed and loved by children.”

Dr. Paul Vitz is Professor and Senior Scholar at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Arlington, VA and author of the recent book, “Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism”. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology from Stanford University and is widely published on the integration of faith and psychology.

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