

CONCEPT OF GOD AND PARENTAL IMAGES

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and

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This research investigates the relation between images of parents and of God, with special attention to the difference between maternal and paternal characteristics. Subjects rated each of their parents and God on eighteen maternal and eighteen paternal characteristics. Subjects were selected to permit comparisons between sexes, different ages, and different fields of study. Data presented here are drawn from United States samples, but comparisons are also made with previously reported results from Belgium samples.

In all samples, the image of God is more paternal than maternal. In the American samples, unlike the Belgian, God appears to become gradually more maternal. American females and males both emphasize the paternal qualities of God (the males somewhat more so), unlike the French speaking Belgian sample who emphasize the parental qualities corresponding to their own sex. In the American sample, specialized field of study does not appear related to the God concept, unlike the Belgian among whom scientific students conceive of God more maternally and literary students more paternally. (In the American sample, liberal arts students do report a more maternal mother and a less paternal father than science students.)

THE IMAGE OF A PARENT is a combined cognitive and affective schema which results on the one hand from individual experiences with particular parents, and on the other, from the structuring elements of family and society as these become integrated into the relationship between child and par-

ent.¹ Obviously, because of different experiences and different social struc-

¹ Here we take images of a parent at a symbolic level, distinguishing two dimensions in the parental images. As a result of the experience between the child and the father, the real presence of the father produces in the child's consciousness a certain paternal image. We shall call this the memory-image. But the father image, far from being exhausted in the memory-image, is also composed of all the signification which the subject's cultural world confers on it. We shall call this the symbol-image. For a more detailed discussion of this matter see A. Vergote. *Psychologie Religieuse*. Brussels: Charles Dessart, 1966,

* This research was done at the Laboratory of Religious Psychology of the Institute of Psychology, Catholic University of Louvain. Professor Antoine Vergote is Director of the Laboratory. Alvaro Tamayo and Luiz Pasquali are completing research on this matter for the Ph. D. degree in Psychology at the Institute.

turing, these differ between the two parents. They also vary with the age and sex of the child and with the different value orientation that may be represented, for example, by a choice of studying in the liberal arts versus the sciences.

This research proposed to discover whether the concept of God corresponds to these differential images of parents.

In particular, the research paid special attention to the differences between maternal and paternal characteristics. It is our impression that previous research on images and God concepts has not adequately made this distinction.² Even when subjects have been asked to make separate ratings of fathers and of mothers, this has largely been in terms of maternal characteristics (acceptance, love, warmth, etc.). By asking subjects to characterize each parent on distinctively maternal and also distinctively paternal qualities, our research tried to recognize both the fundamental distinction between masculinity and femininity, and also the fact that any person or relationship possesses both these characteristics.

Research reported here is all with United States samples. But because it parallels previous research³ on Dutch

pp. 184ff. (An English translation will appear early next year.) In speaking of "image" in this article, we shall refer to the symbol-image.

² Cf. O. Nelson and E. M. Jones. An application of the Q-Technique to the studies of religious concepts. *Psychological Reports*, 1957, pp. 293-297; O. Nelson and E. M. Jones, Les concepts religieux dans leurs relations aux images parentales, *Lumen Vitae*, 1961, pp. 105-110; O. Strunk, Perceived relationships between parental and deity concepts, *Psychological Newsletter*, 1959, pp. 222-226; and A. Godin and M. Hallez. Images parentales et paternité divine. *Lumen Vitae*, 1964, pp. 243-276.

³ Summarized in A. Vergote, M. Bonami, A. Custers, and M. Pattyn. Le symbole paternel et sa signification religieuse. *Revue de Psychologie et des sciences de l'Éducation*. Groupe de Louvain, 1966-1967, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 191-213.

speaking and French speaking Belgian samples, some cross-cultural comparisons are also possible.

PROCEDURES

Our research instrument consisted of a list of 36 characteristics—18 maternal and 18 paternal—arranged randomly.⁴ (These are listed in Table I.) Each characteristic was accompanied by a seven-point scale on which a subject rated the degree to which he associated that characteristic with a parent or with God. Our questionnaire booklet repeated the list of 36 items three times; and in our procedure subjects were asked to rate each parent (half of them rating mother first, half father), then God. Subjects were encouraged to answer spontaneously, without looking ahead or back in their booklets, and were asked to rate parents at a symbolic level—describing them not as they really are, but as they should be.

Development of Instrument

Canvass for items. We first examined more than a hundred psychological, philosophical, religious, and literary works in order to compile a list of characteristics that could be used to describe parents, and we undertook to distinguish those which clearly designated mother or father. We compiled 226 qualities; 58 maternal, 138 paternal, and 30 which could be applied either to father or to mother.

We found in our research that the maternal image is one of mystery and deep affection. The mother is the ambient presence who surrounds the child with love. She is the model of the warm,

⁴ This is obviously an adaptation of the semantic differential technique. See Charles E. Osgood, E. J. Suci and P. H. Tannenbaum. *The Measurement of Meaning*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957. An important difference is that our rating scales were unipolar rather than bipolar; the latter forces the subjects to the more primitive pattern of thinking by opposites.

nourishing, and protective experiences which the man had or the child will have. Added to these qualities are the feminine dimensions of receptive fecundity, warm tenderness, and the veiled gift of oneself. This image of the mother is symbolically associated with the earth-mother, nature, the sea, the protecting cave, water, home, surrounding vegetation, etc.

The image of father presented in our research is one of power, strength, authority, creative breath, action, dynamism. According to psychoanalysis, the most basic dimension contained in the paternal image is *law*, in as much as the father is the one who comes between the mother and the child, causing him to rise above the principle of immediate pleasure and introducing the principle of reality into his life.

First validation by judges. We asked a group of 19 female and 28 male graduate students, representing 15 different fields of study, to rate each of our 226 items on a ten-point bipolar scale judging the degree to which each item was distinctive-ly maternal or paternal.

Selection of items. From the pool of items we selected 18 maternal characteristics and 18 paternal characteristics which showed clear differentiation and which represented a diverse range of characteristics.⁵

Modification through group interviews. In order to check the intelligibility and the exact meaning of each quality contained in the English version of the questionnaire, we interviewed small groups of high school and college students at length on their understanding of these items. We asked students, four at a time, for periods up to two hours, to

⁵ The Dutch language was used in preliminary procedures. The three forms of our questionnaire, Dutch, French, and English are not perfectly equivalent. To some extent, such a list of items needs to be developed anew for each culture.

discuss these terms in our presence. In each of the first 21 such sessions, discussion was intensively focused on just two or three characteristics. As a final check, in each of the final four sessions, we discussed all of the characteristics. These interviews led us to modify certain expressions which appeared ambiguous. But the interviews basically confirmed our impression of the validity of the instrument.

Final validity testing. The final version of the instrument was administered to a pretest sample of 62 subjects (17 boys and 17 girls in the last two years of high school, 8 college men and 6 college women majoring in science, and 7 college men and 8 college women majoring in liberal arts.)

Each of the 36 items significantly discriminated the parental images at the .01 level of significance.

The maternal qualities tended to be rated strongly on ratings of mother, and paternal qualities strongly on ratings of father. On a seven-point scale, 80 per cent of the ratings of mother on maternal qualities and of father on paternal qualities used scores of 5, 6, or 7. Fewer than 7 per cent of the ratings used scores of 1, 2, or 3.

These pretest results correspond with those in Belgium.

Sample

The American sample consisted of 180 students, all single, Roman Catholic, and from a middle socio-economic level. Sixty were high school students, 60 were liberal arts majors in college, and 60 were science majors in college. Half of each group was male and half female. The Dutch speaking Belgian sample, with whom some comparisons will be made below, consisted of 178 technology students (82 females and 96 males). The French speaking Belgian sample consisted of a scientific group (male professional and student engineers, and female students of physics and mathematics) and a literary group

(male and female students of philology and adult male teachers of liberal arts).

RESULTS

Mean scores

Table I presents the mean scores (on the 7-point scale) for the entire sample

on each of the items for the ratings of each parent and of God. The image of the mother appears to be most distinct, receiving high ratings exclusively on maternal characteristics. The image of father is more complex, containing a relatively large component of maternal as well as paternal characteristics. The

TABLE I

MEANS OF SCORES OF INTENSITY FOR THE THREE IMAGES

Maternal Qualities	Mother	Father	God
the one who is most patient	4.98	4.14	5.52
warmth	5.40	3.76	4.73
a warm-hearted refuge	4.76	3.45	4.56
who takes a loving care of me	4.64	3.49	4.70
who will sympathize with the child's sorrows	5.01	3.79	4.97
tenderness	5.34	3.14	4.66
who is intimate	4.34	3.29	4.25
who gives comfort	5.14	3.75	4.98
who brings out that which is delicate and refined	4.84	2.51	3.63
close to whom one feels at home	5.08	4.05	4.16
self-giving love	5.34	4.32	5.25
sensitive	4.83	3.12	4.12
who welcomes me with open arms	4.88	3.61	4.80
who is always waiting for me	3.92	3.10	4.98
intuition	4.29	2.95	3.94
who is all-embracing	4.31	2.89	4.96
charming	4.25	2.47	2.28
Paternal Qualities	Mother	Father	God
strength	3.39	4.96	5.69
power	2.39	4.51	5.67
who gives the directions	2.99	4.98	4.16
systematic mind	3.68	4.80	4.74
who is the principle, the rule	2.59	4.90	5.26
who takes the initiative	3.63	5.17	3.88
the one who has the knowledge	3.57	5.01	5.72
the authority	2.63	5.16	5.33
the one who acts	3.25	4.98	4.43
who makes the decisions	2.64	5.29	3.84
firmness	3.64	5.11	4.50
the judge	2.58	4.45	5.36
dynamic	3.13	4.45	4.77
the one who maintains order	3.73	4.94	5.01
who gives the law	2.44	4.51	5.12
stern	2.10	3.63	3.55
who examines things	3.68	4.79	4.27
protection against danger	3.34	5.05	4.82

image of God, as expected, contains both characteristics, the paternal characteristics being more accentuated than the maternal ones. The former account for 51.5 per cent of the image. The image of God is especially strong in basic paternal qualities of knowledge, strength, power, justice, authority, model, law, and order. Fathers tend not to be rated so high on these qualities as in those reflecting more concrete action, giving directions, taking initiative, making decisions.

Examination of the means suggests that the maternal qualities are most pervasive, applying to the image of father and of God, as well as to mother; and that the paternal characteristics assigned to father and to God tend to be different.

Internal structures of three images

Both of these same tendencies are also demonstrated in comparing the internal configuration of each of the images. Table II presents the average correlation of the 18 maternal characteristics (below the diagonal) and the 18 paternal characteristics (above the diagonal) between each of the pairs of images. (Table IV presents data corresponding to Table II for each of the separate sub-samples.) Do characteristics tend to receive similarly high and similarly low ratings, relative to each other, within each of the images? Or does the order of scoring among characteristics tend to change from one image

to another? The high correlation below the diagonal in Table II (and on the left side in Table IV) suggests that the maternal characteristics tend to remain in a relatively constant constellation from image to image. The paternal characteristics become the same configuration in ratings of mother and of father, but become rearranged when applied to God. Paternal characteristics appear to have one structure for God and another for father.

It is possible that the more consistent structuring of the maternal characteristics reflects a more primitive and more fundamental apprehension of these characteristics, since they contain values which the individual experienced in his very early childhood and which left nostalgic memories throughout his life. Consequently, the maternal values represent the essential core of affective existence for every individual. These maternal qualities are felt by the students to be essential values in the relationship between child and parents, and between man and God.

Distances among images

Using the generalized distance formula devised by Osgood,⁶ we can assess the degree of correspondence between each pair of images considered as a whole. Table III reports these distances. The total image of God is clearly more paternal than maternal. It is also clear (second and third line of Table III) that considering just one of the parental qualities, the divine image is closer to the parental image corresponding to that quality. These results correspond to those found with the Belgian sample.

The fact that all distances are close when only maternal characteristics are considered (second line of Table III) corroborates what has been seen previously—that maternal characteristics tend to be consistently pervasive. When only

TABLE II

CORRELATION OF CHARACTERISTICS BETWEEN IMAGES

	Mother	Father	God
Mother		.55*	-.01
Father	.63**		.10
God	.37	.70**	

Paternal characteristics above diagonal.

Maternal characteristics below diagonal.

** p < .01

* p < .05

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

paternal characteristics are considered (third line of Table III) the low distance score between father and God demonstrates that, despite the fact that the paternal characteristics present one structure for God and another for father, they apply to a high degree to God.

Differences due to sex

Table V presents data corresponding to Table III for each of the separate subsamples. This will permit analysis of the differences due to age, sex, or choice of major. The above results hold

TABLE III

DISTANCE SCORES BETWEEN IMAGES

	M-F	M-G	F-G	p Values for Differences		
				M-F	M-G	M-F
				vs. M-G	vs. F-G	vs. F-G
All characteristics	12.83	13.75	12.16	<.01	<.01	<.10
Maternal characteristics	8.31	7.82	9.48	n.s.	<.01	<.01
Paternal characteristics	9.51	11.00	7.24	<.01	<.01	<.01
p value for difference between maternal and paternal characteristics	<.01	<.01	<.01			

TABLE IV

CORRELATIONS OF CHARACTERISTICS BETWEEN IMAGES WITHIN EACH SUB-SAMPLE

Sample	Maternal characteristics			Paternal characteristics		
	M-F	M-G	F-G	M-F	M-G	F-G
High school						
Males	.42	.24	.60**	.36	-.25	-.02
Females	.56*	.47*	.76**	.43	-.03	.41
Total	.48*	.36	.75**	.36	-.15	.18
Liberal Arts						
Males	.55*	.05	.44	.52*	.12	-.11
Females	.75**	.56*	.59**	.55*	.10	.38
Total	.68**	.29	.54*	.54*	.06	.10
Science Majors						
Males	.37	.23	.68**	.55	-.02	.04
Females	.71**	.54*	.68**	.64**	.17	.11
Total	.65**	.41	.70**	.52*	.16	.04

** p < .01

* p < .05

TABLE V
DISTANCE SCORES BETWEEN IMAGES WITHIN EACH SUB-SAMPLE

		M-F	M-G	F-G	p Values for differences		
					M-F vs. M-G	M-G vs. F-G	M-F vs. F-G
High School							
<i>Males</i>	All characteristics	15.62	15.83	12.45	<.10	<.01	<.01
	Maternal charact.	9.25	8.93	9.28	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Paternal charact.	10.93	12.72	7.80	<.01	<.01	<.01
<i>Females</i>	All	11.47	11.81	10.70	n.s.	<.05	n.s.
	Maternal	7.34	6.88	8.81	n.s.	<.01	<.01
	Paternal	8.59	9.30	5.68	<.10	<.01	<.01
<i>Total</i>	All	13.05	13.82	11.58	n.s.	<.01	<.05
	Maternal	8.30	7.91	9.05	n.s.	<.01	n.s.
	Paternal	9.76	11.01	6.74	<.01	<.01	<.01
Liberal Arts Majors							
<i>Males</i>	All	13.67	15.64	13.28	<.05	<.01	n.s.
	Maternal	8.60	9.01	10.14	n.s.	n.s.	<.05
	Paternal	10.21	12.65	8.21	<.01	<.01	<.05
<i>Females</i>	All	11.90	12.23	11.82	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Maternal	8.04	6.26	9.40	<.05	<.01	<.05
	Paternal	8.57	10.17	6.88	<.01	<.01	<.05
<i>Total</i>	All	12.79	13.94	12.55	<.10	<.01	n.s.
	Maternal	8.32	7.64	9.77	n.s.	<.01	<.01
	Paternal	9.39	11.41	7.55	<.01	<.01	<.01
Science Majors							
<i>Males</i>	All	13.87	14.16	12.64	n.s.	<.01	n.s.
	Maternal	9.00	7.84	9.79	n.s.	<.05	n.s.
	Paternal	10.49	11.42	7.62	n.s.	<.01	<.01
<i>Females</i>	All	11.43	12.83	12.04	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	Maternal	7.64	8.01	9.45	n.s.	<.01	<.01
	Paternal	8.29	9.75	7.23	<.05	<.01	n.s.
<i>Total</i>	All	12.65	13.49	12.34	n.s.	<.01	n.s.
	Maternal	8.32	7.93	9.62	n.s.	<.01	<.01
	Paternal	9.39	10.58	7.42	<.01	<.01	<.01
Total Sample							
<i>All Male Students</i>							
	All	14.15	15.21	12.79	<.01	<.01	<.05
	Maternal	8.95	8.59	9.74	n.s.	<.01	<.05
	Paternal	10.54	12.26	7.88	<.01	<.01	<.01
<i>All Female Students</i>							
	All	11.60	12.29	11.52	n.s.	<.01	n.s.
	Maternal	7.67	7.05	9.22	n.s.	<.01	<.01
	Paternal	8.48	9.74	6.60	<.01	<.01	<.01

substantially the same for both males and females in our American sample. The image of God is closer to the image of father when all characteristics are considered, as well as when just maternal or just paternal characteristics are considered. The results are slightly weaker for females than for males but still statistically significant. These results contrast with those of the French-speaking Belgium sample, who showed a tendency to associate the divine image with the paternal image of their own sex.

Differences due to age.

Divine image. Our data with the American sample suggests that the divine image becomes more maternal as persons move from high school to college status. God is definitely closer to the father than to the mother (in corresponding qualities) for high school students ($p < .01$). This is not so for college students, where there is no significant difference. The distance between the total image of father and of God becomes larger, this being more true for the males.

Parental images. Increasing age also finds increasing maternal characteristics in the parental images among the American males, but not among the females. Thus, girls tend to grow in the direction of a more maternal God, but not toward a greater integration of maternal values in the parental images.

In the French-speaking sample we found no such significant modification in images associated with differences in age.

Differences associated with field of study.

Liberal arts students have a more maternal mother than science students. This is especially true for females. The father of male science majors is more maternal than the father of male liberal arts students. For liberal arts students, the mother is closer to the father than to God.

But we found no differences in the American sample in divine image associated with differences in major field of study. This contrasts with our results with the French-speaking sample where we found that intellectual professional training seemed strongly associated with differences in the image of God. In that sample, the scientific students have a more maternal God than literary students.

We also found in the French-speaking Belgian sample that science students had reduced distance between parental symbols. Among males, the scientific students had a more paternal image of father than literary students, but among females this difference was reversed.

CONCLUSIONS

(1) The paternal image is the most adequate symbol for the image of God, since the divine image is always closer to the father than to the mother, and contains essential attributes of the father-image, which are not included in the symbolic image of mother. Besides, the paternal image appears to be more complex and more complete than the maternal.

(2) The paternal symbol which is attributed to God does not correspond to that image of a father to whom a person turns in situations of distress or frustration. This finding disputes theories of projection. Indeed, the father image in God does not compensate for or restore that which dissatisfactions or affective misfortunes take away from man; but, rather the paternal God represents the cultural and ethical impositions which force man to renounce his affective needs, in order to enter the new condition of adult filiation.

(3) However, God is not exclusively a paternal being. As the harmony of contrasts, the dynamic synthesis of human polarities, God is also the being who contains the maternal values of satisfaction of desires and affective security.

(4) The appropriation of these contrasted qualities by the divine symbol differs from one cultural group to another. We may infer therefore that the divine image is determined by cultural orientation, as well as by differential psychological experience. (Through methods of research of a more clinical orientation, one might come closer to the actual psychological process involved in that appropriation, such as specific manners of perception, identifications, compensations, and so on.)

(5) The fact that several paternal qualities are particularly emphasized in the divine image (power, law, knowledge) suggests that the paternal symbol acquires some specific connotations from the image of God. Thus, in the formation of the paternal symbol, there is a mutual in-

fluence of the divine image on the one side, and on the other, of the paternal pole as it is understood in the family's constellation.

(6) In comparing the results of our research with the Freudian theory about the father, we may acknowledge an extraordinary analogy between the Oedipus structure and the structuring of the religious attitude. But there is also a great difference in so far as Freud stresses the neurotic nature of the religion of the father. The sole fact of the presence of the polarity father-mother in the divine image shows that, beyond the conflict introduced by certain paternal connotations, the faithful tend to find in God also reconciliation and pacification.



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