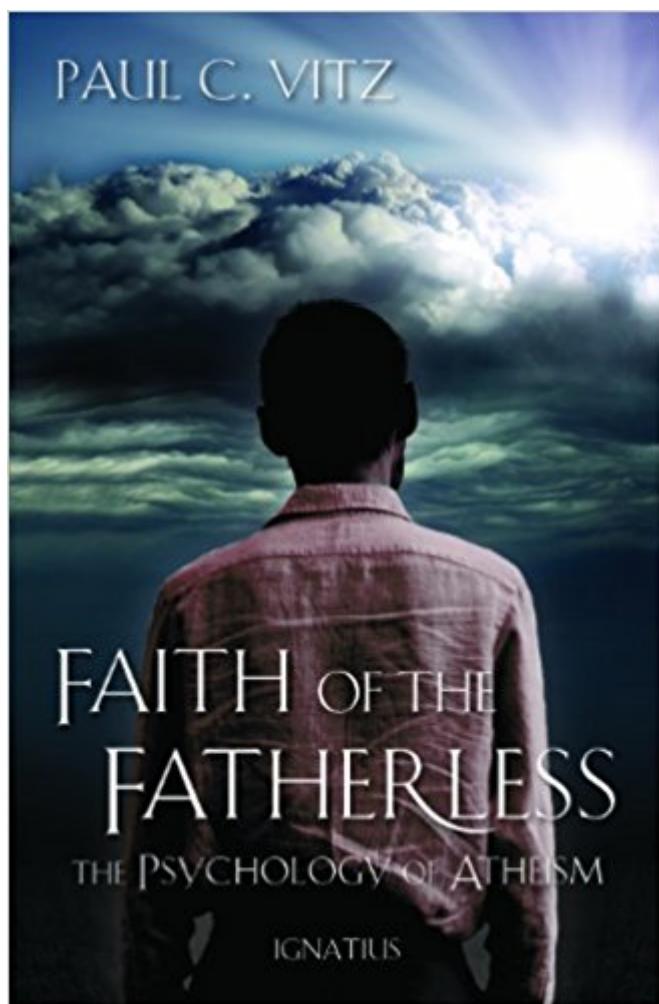


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# Faith Of The Fatherless: The Psychology Of Atheism



## Synopsis

In this updated, expanded edition, starting with Freud's "projection theory" of religion - that belief in God is merely a product of man's desire for security - Professor Vitz argues that psychoanalysis actually provides a more satisfying explanation for atheism. Disappointment in one's earthly father, whether through death, absence, or mistreatment, frequently leads to a rejection of God. A biographical survey of influential atheists of the past four centuries shows that this "defective father hypothesis" provides a consistent explanation of the "intense atheism" of these thinkers. A survey of the leading defenders of Christianity over the same period confirms the hypothesis, finding few defective fathers. Vitz concludes with an intriguing comparison of male and female atheists and a consideration of other psychological factors that can contribute to atheism. Professor Vitz does not argue that atheism is psychologically determined. Each man, whatever his experiences, ultimately chooses to accept God or reject him. Yet the cavalier attribution of religious faith to irrational, psychological needs is so prevalent that an exposition of the psychological factors predisposing one to atheism is necessary. Vitz offers a radical new thesis about the psychological origins of atheism. By studying the lives of numerous famous atheists, from the old atheists Nietzsche, Sartre, and Freud to the new atheists Hitchens, Dawkins, and Dennet, Vitz discovers a startling common pattern: atheism arises in people with dead, absent, or abusive fathers. By contrast, prominent defenders of religious belief-including Blaise Pascal, John Henry Newman, and G.K. Chesterton-were blessed with attentive, loving and caring fathers. Vitz's provocative book raises important questions about psychology, religious belief, and the importance of fathers. - Christopher Kaczor, Author, *The Seven Big Myths about the Catholic Church* Quite simply, Paul Vitz's *Faith of the Fatherless* is a minor classic, a book that should be on the short list of all those who want to understand, in the deepest terms, the ill effects caused by the failures of fatherhood. *Faith of the Fatherless* should function as a gateway book to research in all fields examining our current, highly-secularized culture, a culture marked deeply by both unbelief and hostility toward the family and especially fatherhood. - Benjamin Wiker, Author, *Architects of the Culture of Death*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In deploying Freudian theory against atheism itself, Paul Vitz has proven beyond a doubt what's missing from secular accounts of secularization: namely, actual human beings. His thesis is intellectual jujutsu of the first order, as anyone reading this timely revisiting will appreciate in full."

--Mary Eberstadt, Author, *The Loser Letters* and *Adam and Eve after the Pill*"Paul C.

Vitz has republished one of the most profound books in the empirical psychology of religion, *Faith of the Fatherless*, now with additional data. Here he skillfully demonstrates objective analogies between the family experiences of articulate atheists and their pronouncements concerning the family of God. Of course, since there is "nothing" more personal than God-and our beliefs and relationships to God-our capacities for personal relationship matter tremendously in the formation of our divine beliefs. Everything is interconnected, we know. However, Prof. Vitz's engaging style makes his demonstration of these objective analogies especially memorable and useful for understanding unbelief and ourselves."

--Paul de Vries, PhD, President, NY Divinity School"The reasons for belief in God and unbelief are complex and varied and hotly disputed. Paul Vitz makes a striking contribution to the current debate with an elegant and thoroughly plausible explanation for much atheism that turns the traditional Freudian critique of religion on its head.

Relying on the biographies of well-known modern atheists, he finds significant evidence that negative childhood experiences with regard to one's father can severely compromise one's capacity to believe in God. Whatever one's beliefs, there is much to ponder in this well-written and well-researched book." --- Eric L. Johnson, PhD, Director, Society for Christian Psychology

Paul C. Vitz, is Professor/Senior Scholar at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, Arlington, Va. and a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at New York University. He earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Michigan and his Ph. D at Stanford University. He was an atheist until his late 30s. Professor Vitz is the author/editor of a variety of books including: *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis*, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, *Sigmund Freud's Christian*

Unconscious, Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks and numerous articles in professional and popular journals.

While this "template" of the roots of atheism will not be a one-size-fits-all paradigm, it does go along way in explaining much of the observable functional atheism occurring in every day life in contemporary society. As the family has been ravaged by multiple forces of modernism, the role of father has been minimized, under-valued, desecrated, abandoned, violated, vilified, underestimated, etc. It doesn't take great powers of observation to watch young children long for a "good" father. They want to be loved, affirmed, reared, and nurtured in development by a person who places priority on their growth, their development, and their well-being. When a void exists instead of this encircling involvement, or worse yet, the anti-thesis happens, children naturally respond in a self-protective manner. My personal observation is that most men who are poor fathers were poorly fathered themselves. This brokenness has profound theological roots. Men carry a double responsibility before God. Since they share masculinity with God, they are doubly responsible to correctly portray His person, character and work. Men who love and sacrifice themselves for their family show that part of God. When they fail to do so, at any degree, they tell a lie about God. Children generally believe what they are told, whether in word or deed. A child's natural inclination toward God is to then turn away from God, as they respond to poor parenting by their father. The father has cast a shadow of what the child will understand God to be. That may one day later be corrected, but not necessarily. Vitz has analyzed for us the portion of history which formalized atheism. Bad fathers have always existed, no doubt. People kept God at arms length. After the advent of intellectual atheism into modern thought people now have a "respectable" avenue to live out their distance with God, often seeded in their lives by defective fathers whom Vitz has uncovered.

Dr. Vitz is a rare and brilliant thinker. He is a New Yorker, in the best sense of the word. I have found that New York cultivates the arts and sciences like nowhere else. He is not afraid to be unpopular, as long as he is true. For decades he has fearlessly revered and proclaimed the scientific truth of his pro life profession, where so many have been afraid to dwell. I can't say I have ever heard this thesis from any psychologist in the popular media, but that is no surprise. It is a jewel of psychological truth for a very low cost that all may read and enjoy. Dear God, please send us at least one like Dr. Vitz for my children and grandchildren to enjoy.

Paul Vita contends that many atheists become so due to what he terms "defective father" syndrome. This predisposes many men and some women to develop an insecurity regarding fatherhood. Additional attributes of atheist predisposition include ambition, resentment, and envy. But ultimately it comes down to free will. This of course wouldn't be in keeping with strict naturalistic views where our free will is seen as an illusion and that people are "hardwired" to make the choices they do. Quite an interesting read.

In response to those who view religious belief as pathological or little better than a crutch, Dr. Vitz notes that "there is now much more research showing that a serious religious life is associated with greater physical health and psychological well being" (p. 10). Yet, exactly what does that mean? Can I simply make up a belief system as I go along or is there a role for truth? This and other statements from Dr. Vitz need to be enormously better qualified. I suspect that Dr. Vitz could have offered much more, than what he puts forward in *A Faith of the Fatherless*. At the close of what is a provocative work, Dr. Vitz tells us that his "ultimate interpretation of atheists is that they are a product of their 1. historical period, 2. interpersonal trauma with attachment insecurity (e.g., the defective father) and/or in many cases, interpersonal incompetence (e.g., autistic mental characteristics), 3. above-average intelligence, 4. ambition and resentment and sometimes envy - and last but far from least - 5. their own free choice" (pp. 194, 195). To illustrate his "defective father" position, Dr. Vitz offers VERY brief biographical sketches of assumed atheists and theists, contrasting their supposedly unsatisfying and satisfying relationships with a father or a father surrogate (Unfortunately, some seem like little more than ad hominem attacks.). Though he offers disclaimers and ultimately talks about free choice, he often writes as though one's relationship with an earthly father will fully determine one's orientation toward the Heavenly Father. His discussion of how some may be "neurologically predisposed to atheism" (p. 180) is EXTREMELY poorly developed. Again, I suspect that Dr. Vitz could have offered enormously more, than what he puts forward in *A Faith of the Fatherless*. This is NOT the book that I had hoped it would be.

Much of atheism today suggests that mankind was afraid and felt alone and needed to create a super father figure to protect it and offer it security - and gods were born then, of men. Vitz's research lays out just the opposite argument based on the dysfunction and fatherless lives of the key atheists of the past 400 years. He suggests that rather than mankind having created God because of some need for a father figure, atheists have rejected God because of their own biases against their fathers - nearly all of whom were absent or abusive. Fascinating reading.

Good book. I agree with his thesis wholeheartedly. I only gave it three stars because he didn't prove the thesis satisfactorily, especially by pointing to evidence of a strong relationship between father and son for believing sons. Otherwise excellent.

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