



# Back to basics: The 'Almighty Father' revisited

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The article focused on the questions of how male dominance came about in theology and the church, what makes it so persistent and what can be done. It argued that patriarchy is based on androcentric ways of thinking, feeling and acting that colour all of culture and society. Patriarchy and androcentrism perpetuate the status quo through language. They provide a template for attributing meaning to reality. They still have a profound effect on theology and ecclesial institutions. This can be seen clearly in the concept of God, the 'Almighty Father'. The article made a case for a theology that has the courage to analyse how and where it idolises the patriarchal template and that imagines a God other than the patriarchal 'Almighty Father': a God who walks with Her or His friends in gracious, empowering love, not 'almighty' but honouring the responsibility She or He gave them. The article concludes that the life of Jesus as the human being who mirrors God's love, friendship and passion for justice inspires a different way of how God could be imagined.

## In the house of mainstream theology

Let us imagine mainstream theology, that theology that dominates the important confessions of faith, as a very dignified house with many rooms, each inhabited by people of a particular theological discipline. In the biggest room, called 'Dogmatics', the systematic theologians have their abode. The furniture is beautiful, most of it real antiques. The big hall, where one enters the house, is called 'Scripture'. The walls and furniture are inscribed with texts from the Bible. On top of this House of Mainstream Theology is a dome that dominates the whole house. This is the dwelling place of a most important man, called the 'Almighty Father'. He lives there without a wife, rather lonely. Everybody knows He has a son. Some inhabitants of the House of Mainstream Theology assume that this son lives mostly in the exalted high room; others meet him often roaming through the house, even going out into the harsh climate of the densely populated world outside. Often a dove is seen flying in and out of the dome. Although most of the inhabitants contemplate this dove and the son even more, the One who dominates their thoughts is the Most High, the Almighty Father. Until recently the House of Mainstream Theology was for men only. Upstairs in the High Place, downstairs in the various rooms: men only.

The world outside the House changed. Women went to school, touched at last by a ray of the Enlightenment. Some women knocked on the door of the House of Mainstream Theology, asked to be let in. That caused indignation in the whole House. Some inhabitants quoted the texts on the wall of the Hall and stated that the Most High and Powerful, the Almighty Father upstairs, could not allow women to enter the House of Mainstream Theology. But the women persisted. Some were single women, some were married, some were lesbian, some were not university educated – which had been until then another condition for being let in – and some were not white. What could be done? There were meetings... Some revered inhabitants, mostly the ones who sometimes went outside into the busy and even multicultural world, were of the opinion that an extension could be built at the back of the house. An extension for women only, called 'the Room of Feminist Theology'. If that would happen, the men in the rest of the House could go on with their own business. Others even proposed that the women could be let inside the whole House, mingle with the men, as long as they acknowledged the Power of the Almighty Father Upstairs and were willing to read the texts in the Hall according to the meanings given to them by the men. But alas, most of the women knocking at the door did not accept these proposals. They shouted, some rather undignified thought some men, that they wanted another House. The most outrageous thing was that they wanted to talk personally to the Almighty Father and ask Him what He thought of a new House of Theologies, for women *and* men.

The unexpected happened, to the angry astonishment of some of the men: The Almighty Father, whom the women visited personally, let them in and said:

Actually I am so glad you came and asked. For contrary to the thoughts of the men in this House, I am to be thought of as Father/Mother, not just male or just female or neither male nor female but male/female. And I am not almighty in the sense that I am powerful to do just what I want. My power is a power of



love and consideration. That means that I sometimes have to let go when the Power of Evil is too strong and when acting with power would mean to overrule the will of humans. For didn't I give them responsibility? So, my dear daughters, I am so glad you came, for now it can be acknowledged that I am not the Lonely Powerful Male, shut up in this high room by the thoughts of so many theologians.... I will dwell among you all, men, women, poor, rich, with or without an university education, in the new House of Theologies, with its many windows and doors, open to the world.

But it took many years before the inhabitants of the House of Mainstream Theology entered this House of Theologies, for it was beyond their imagination that on top of everything there was no Almighty Father, all alone.

## Is feminist theology still needed?

When in church I, a woman, have to refer to myself, whilst confessing and singing hymns, as a man, a servant, a son and numerous other male terms. I know that I can assume that I, female, am included in all these male terms, but I do not feel the appeal of the text as directly as when I am spoken to as the woman I am. God is still dominantly male: He and His Son. Even the Holy Spirit, female in the Old Testament and neutral in the New, is mostly referred to as a 'He'. Just a few years ago and the debate is still going on, a new translation of the Bible was made by Dutch and Flemish Christian and Jewish theologians, resulting in *De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (2004) and *Tanach* (2007). Although the women amongst these translators, all of the Jewish theologians and a few of the other men opted for the 'translation' of JHWH using 'The Eternal One', 'The One' and other non-gendered terms, most of the men opted for 'The Lord', 'de Heer' in the *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* and won. Their main argument: It would fit better in the Christian tradition. In the separate publication of the *Tanach*, however, JHWH is 'translated' as 'de Eeuwige' [The Eternal One], at the instigation of Jewish scholars.

My colleague Andries van Aarde is one of a few male theologians who acknowledges that something has to change, that some persons have to change. In the literature of the last decades, the basic questions of feminist theology have not often been addressed. But I think this is still needed. In honour of Andries van Aarde I shall concentrate in this article on the questions of how this male-dominated situation in theology and churches came about, what makes it so persistent and what can be done about it.

## The rule of the father, the absence of the mother

Patriarchy, the rule of the father, refers to a system based on the imagination of a hierarchical order in culture and society with a father, who is as such almighty, at the top of the ladder of power. The father owns, controls and dominates all there is: He is all-knowing. As striking and actually unexpected is that there is no place for the mother next to the father. Persons are imagined higher on the ladder and as such more

powerful, inasmuch as they are like the almighty father and can identify with him. What determines whether one can act and speak from a certain rung on the patriarchal power ladder and as such can have a certain amount of credibility and authority is the number of 'fatherly' features one has. Such features are in the first place being male but also not being poor and having acknowledged knowledge and also being white. The 'second in command' in this hierarchical system is the son, the heir, who has the potential to become just like the father and who contains the promise of continuity of the father power. The father-son dyad is the most important relationship in patriarchy.

According to Rebecca Chopp (1993):

patriarchy is a systematic fault that runs through the small capillaries and the large vessels of power, wreaking havoc and destruction through institutions, metaphysics, popular narratives, laws, economic practices, and even the representative and performative functions of language.

(Chopp 1993:48)

One of the basic ideas of the still influential cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) is that every culture has a 'template' that moulds the process of making meaning. A template is the elaboration of basic ideas people have about the meanings of the world and their life and death, making a cohesive and, to them, plausible story. A cultural template can also be understood as the underlying ideology of a culture that mostly unconsciously directs and colours the value system and its corresponding norms. A cultural template finds its imaginative expression in the myths that people in that culture live by. Marc Gopin (2002) uses the concept 'myth' in his book about the role of religion in conflicts. According to him, a myth can be seen as 'a story that contains some ultimate and enduring truth, and in a way makes sense of amorphous reality, for those who believe it' (Gopin 2002:8). Patriarchy is the template for making meaning in our culture and many other cultures in the world. People who, according to this template, are able to develop their potential – *in casu* non-poor, well-educated, preferably white men (and women who try to identify with men) – will not feel the restrictions this template puts on their personalities. They even can deny that patriarchy exists. The people who are held by this system on the lower rungs of the power ladder become frustrated and angry or fall into apathy.

'Power' in general can be understood as the ability a person is supposed to have to influence or to direct the feelings, thoughts, motivations, words and acts of others. Power can be used to help people to use their potential in a positive way. Power in a negative sense is used to influence or direct others into the 'place' (on the ladder) where a 'higher placed person' wants them to be. Patriarchal power is restrictive power.

Patriarchy is mirrored in an androcentric way of thinking, feeling and acting. Androcentrism colours our whole culture and society. Activities that are deemed important, decisive and prestigious are preferably entrusted to men. Patriarchy



and androcentrism show themselves *and* confirm the status quo in and through the language we use. A word, a name, a symbol, a manner of speaking gives reality to something that is imagined, thought or longed for.

## The nebulous dawn of patriarchy

Patriarchy has its roots in our nebulous past, at the dawn of the written word. Causes for the patriarchal hierarchy tend to be presented from a perspective that is coloured by wishful thinking. But radiocarbon analysis and dendrochronology have fixed the origin of the oldest little statues at 7000–6000 years BC and the vast majority of those are of women. These women are sturdy, strongly built. They are often found holding eggs, a butterfly or a snake: symbols of new life and the renewal of life. The abundance of these findings gives the idea that they were important and supposedly image powers that could guide and help people in life: ‘goddesses’. In the fifth millennium BC images of a pair are found, a woman and a man. Gradually these images made place for only male statues. The old goddesses are usually associated with fertility, but one has to keep in mind that fertility, in those times but also nowadays, can be associated with political power. This does not mean that there was matriarchy before patriarchy because there are no findings that speak of a fixed social hierarchy. But it is plausible that in those times gone by culture and society were more gynocentric.

Patriarchy grew stronger, gradually dominating many cultures. However, in our time some things have changed. One can rejoice in these changes, some women becoming professors, pastors and ministers of state, but these changes can also fool us. The patriarchal template stays in place. A woman said to me, ‘I have a wonderful husband. He allows me to study and have a wonderful job’. It is necessary to recapture what is thought about the background of patriarchy, in order to hasten its demolition and build a world of equality for women and men.

Peggy Reeves Sanday (1987) wrote a well-researched and much-quoted book, *Female power and male dominance: On the origins of sexual inequality*. She analysed the (im)balance of power between women and men in 150 societies all over the world. The oldest images of women speak of their life-force and their ability to create life. Sanday’s main conclusion after researching societies with and without a patriarchal template is that the creation symbolism alive in a society determines the division of power and prestige in that society. In societies where a woman is seen as the main creatrix, women have power, mostly power used to cherish life and protect it. When there is a male creator, the power of life is in the hands of males and they defend it. There are societies where women and men cooperate in creation and this results in equality of power between the sexes. In societies that were long secluded from Western civilisation, equality between the sexes can still be found. Catherine H. Berndt (1989), looking back on 50 years of researching indigenous women’s lives in Australia, interpreted the relationship between men and women amongst indigenous people as

‘interdependent independence’. Women have their own respected role in society, equal to and not inferior to the role of men. They are seen as cocreators and sustainers of new life. They are also guardians and transmitters of cultural and religious knowledge. This nonpatriarchal relationship between men and women is based, according to the authors in the book edited by Peggy Brock (1989), on the indigenous attitude to paternity, pregnancy and birth, which is different from Western ideology. Indigenous people believe that impregnation by a man can cause pregnancy, but they are convinced that a mystical intervention from the side of the woman is necessary for the actual start of pregnancy. A woman has the power to invoke this intervention or withhold it.

Everybody can see that new life comes from the womb of a woman. For a very long time, before physiological knowledge made clear the way of the sperm towards the womb and the fusion of sperm and egg, the role of a man in creating new life was a mystery. It is a relatively short time ago in the history of humankind that the actual link between impregnation and pregnancy was understood.

Paternity cannot be proved and is only based on the testimony of a woman. The origin of male-dominated creation imagery is commonly understood as ‘womb envy’ (Horney 1999). Since Freud’s publications, ‘penis envy’ has been considered a plausible, even self-evident datum. Seen from a different perspective it can at least be considered plausible that ‘womb envy’ can be an important factor in the development of men and their attitude to women. The birth of new life is very important in every society: It guarantees the survival of the tribe, the (ethnic) group, the nation. Whoever is understood as the creator of this new life has power over life and death. The emerging patriarchal view that the seed contained the new baby in miniature – as Aristotle contended – reduced woman to a shell for the womb, fertile but passive soil where the seed could develop. Sexuality, men’s potency – and their fear of impotence – and women’s capability to bear children are hot issues in patriarchy. The cultural template of patriarchy, so often unconscious, is based on repression and fear, fear of the obvious sexual and reproductive capacities of women. Androcentrism is actually phallocentrism. The creation imagery with the father as primary life-giver had to be maintained by force, glorifying ‘the seed’ – as we see in many places in the Old Testament, for instance – and keeping women in their place, the place where a male could control their womb or their sexual body and its attractiveness: a marriage contract and a family with its *pater familias*.

Sanday (1987:55ff) contends that the intensity of womb envy depends on the environmental context. In agricultural societies women were doing important life-sustaining work and were considered important. They could work the land together with the men, near their homes, also whilst being pregnant and nursing little ones. In hunting and pastoral societies, however, where one had to roam far from home and the going was often too rough for pregnant and nursing women, men were apt to defend their life-sustaining role. Where the population increased and tribes had to fight for





their territories, men were the fighters, as women were hampered by pregnancies and little children that had to be breastfed. This hastened the victory of a patriarchal template.

Important in all this is the general idea, based on old artefacts and on comparative research, that men have to maintain, by force, the most prestigious role in society: to be proclaimed as the main creator and preserver of life. Over the millennia the basics of patriarchy are internalised. However, the rule of the father at the top of the hierarchy and the rule of persons that can identify with him is still the mainstay of the template of our culture and society. Many persons, men and women, living by patriarchal myths have a vested interest in the continuation of patriarchy.

## The patriarchal template in our theologies

It is very difficult for many Christians to refer to God as 'Mother'. 'God the Mother' calls into existence a world of meanings totally different from the meanings attached to 'God the Father'. God the Father sits on top of the power ladder. He can be called 'Lord', in Dutch 'de Allerhoogste'. As such He is almighty, Lord of everything. Most people do not easily associate these qualifications with a woman, a mother. Once a man said to me that he felt he was insulting God, calling 'Him' a Mother, as if he were robbing God of His power and reducing God to a fertility deity. Carol P. Christ states, 'Religions centered on the worship of a male God create "moods and motivations" that keep women in a state of psychological dependency on men and male authority.' A woman can never have her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the likeness of God, an experience freely available to every man and boy of her culture (Christ 1979: 274) (although many men are not aware of this fact). Not many male theologians rebel against 'Barth's adoption of phallogocentric notions of sexual difference, particularly as it appears in his infamous account of the hierarchical relation between men and women' (Jones 1993:126; cf. Barth 1961:157). Deep longings for security and the affirmation of their male identity and the fear of the affections of women (all mostly unconscious) keep the thinking of many male theologians inside the boundaries of the patriarchal template. Freud's success as a psychologist and therapist is only very weakly based on scientific research and is also deeply anchored in phallogocentric myths. Antoon Vergote, who was and is an influential Roman Catholic psychologist of religion in the Netherlands and Belgium, founded his argument in his main publication *Religie, geloof en ongeloof* on some for him unshakable assumptions: The mother is always affectively available, she is tender, serving and always waiting (Vergote 1984:198–199). The father is the Law, the norm, the one who liberates the child from the ties that bind it to the mother (Vergote 1984:201). God is the Father *par excellence*. More recently Leonardo Boff wrote that God is undoubtedly a father figure, because the father is necessary to give a child a sense of order, duty and boundaries; he is the symbolic representation of all these things. He is the bridge from the mother, representative of a life of emotional fusions and

emotional ties, to the world of adult life and mature faith (Boff 2004).

According to a patriarchal template, relations amongst persons are nearly always power relations. Burton L. Mack writes, 'It is time to recognize that the Bible is not a document calling for equality. The Christian myth calls for conversion and obedience' (Mack 2003:191). Indeed, the highest virtue is to know one's place and to be obedient to higher placed persons. Hence hubris is a very great sin. The Lord, God the Almighty Father, sets the rules. He cannot condone disobedience. What is called 'grace' in patriarchal theology is actually not grace at all. Grace would mean that a trespasser, a sinner, would be forgiven without paying a price, out of the boundless and unconditional love of God. But God the Almighty Father is confined to His highest place, supposed to defend His 'honour'. For what would happen if all His subordinates or children would not be bound to Him by obedience? So God is made 'gracious' by the myth of the patriarchal soteriological drama: God cannot allow disobedience and He needs satisfaction; punishing His own Son, He let Him be tortured to death. Now the blood-price is paid and relations between Father and 'children' are repaired. Although a sophisticated soteriology exists, this cruel story is its unmistakable core. The dominant Christian soteriological myth is a human-made story, composed in a patriarchal time to make the relations between the Divine and this world meaningful and to image the mysterious love of God. This soteriological story was and is, however, unacceptable for many women. Gracious love is for them unconditional love that cannot be tied to hurting somebody, much less one's own son! Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, writing about the link between Christianity, patriarchy and abuse, contend that Christianity is a religion that glorifies suffering because that is demanded by a God who cannot let sinners go free without a price. But, they write:

Jesus was not an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, because God does not need to be appeased and demands not sacrifice but justice. To know God is to do justice (Jer. 22:13–16). ... Suffering is never redemptive and suffering cannot be redeemed.... The cross is a sign of tragedy.

(Carlson Brown & Bohn 1990:226–227)

In my research about the life and faith stories of older women it became clear that many women in their hearts do not accept the traditional soteriological story. They long to believe in a God who is truly loving, unconditionally. They want to stay acceptable in their church community, so they sing the songs of Lent and say the words of the traditional confessions of faith, but they have problems, mostly not voiced aloud (Bons-Storm 2000). Is faith in an unconditionally loving God possible, or must there always be fear that the Father would fall from His highest rung of the ladder, His pedestal?

The average woman has an idea of love different from that of men. Many men suppose that it is possible to love from a distance. Many earthly fathers will maintain that they love their wife and children whilst they only see them a small part of their time, being otherwise engaged with important business. Women, on the whole, associate love with nearness,



being there. They are trained to accept as their role to be there for children, husbands, (elderly) parents, friends and whoever needs care. Hence they long for a God who loves them in the sense of being near them, who accompanies them on their way through life, who accepts fully their weaknesses, who condones their sins and who is always there to accept them anew, lock, stock and barrel. This does not mean that women as (potential) mothers always long to be fused with their loved ones. Just like the average man, a woman knows to create distance between herself and the other, according to the dictates of a particular situation. A woman knows to choose values and norms; she is able to order the world. She can share God's passion for justice. Many women long for a God who rejoices in their strengths, like a parent who is proud of her or his adult daughters and sons, even if they turn out not to be like their parent.

In society as a whole and in most churches, women and men on the lower rungs have raised their voice, shaking the ladder. But in some Christian churches it is still difficult to acknowledge women fully as pastors and priests, although these women testify in faith that they feel 'called' by God, the Holy Spirit. The word of a woman is still in many places in society *and* churches not as authoritative as a man's word.

## Faith without the patriarchal leader

Traditional theology stands or falls by the basic ideology or template of patriarchy. If one leaves out God the Almighty Father and accepts a God who walks with Her or His friends through life and death, always near them in gracious and inspiring, empowering love, not almighty but honouring the responsibility She or He gave them, what is left? Did not the traditional soteriological myth of Cross and Redeeming Blood become identical with the only truth about the relation between God and the world? Did the story composed in times gone by, in other cultural and political contexts, not become the only possible gospel?

People from the lower rungs, especially many women from all rungs (except the highest), try to be heard and be taken seriously, which is very difficult inside the traditional template. They try to image the mysterious relation between God and world, God and themselves, in a different way. Their point of departure is the belief, the hope, that God is indeed gracious and longing to be near them, never abandoning them even when they do not live in total obedience: a God who always longs to start anew. They need in their life in this tumultuous world a Strength, a Source of what is Good, comfort when needed, affirmation of their identity of Woman. This identity is more than 'mother' or 'wife'. It is not only made for the use and pleasure of men, for instance in heterosexual relations. Many women long to be affirmed, by God and by people, in their identity as full human beings, with their own personalities, curiously not very different from men in many respects. The personality traits acquired during the hegemony of the patriarchal template and by their ability to feel a growing child in their body, releasing it to the world, cutting the umbilical cord but still being able to nurse,

cuddle and send the child on its way are useful in the imaging of a loving and just God and God's relationship to the world. God can be imaged as the nursing Parent who is tender and strong, upholding the value of justice, being protective where needed and putting the child on its own two feet when it grows into adulthood, without abandoning it. God can also be imaged as the Friend who rejoices in friendship, inspiring Her or His friends to develop all their potential for justice and urging them to abandon their urge to hurt others. This God is always eager to create new possibilities, to repair what is broken. She or He leads people towards each other in friendship and love, not necessarily to heterosexual relationships but also to homosexual relationships. For it is not the kind of relation and sex that is important to Her or Him but the quality of relationship and sex: full of pleasure and making each other into fuller human beings.

Jesus could be seen as the human being recognised and acknowledged by many as mirroring God's love, friendship and passion for justice in a uniquely inspiring way. His life gave people an idea of how God could be imagined. His way of life and the manner in which he innocently suffered the torture inflicted upon him by people who could not stand his way of life inspire people till this day. He knows what suffering is and he can understand people who suffer. But this suffering is not to be glorified. It is just plain horrible. He reappears all the time, although he died, in people, women and men, who mirror God's love, friendship and passion for justice.

Do theologians have the courage to analyse how and where they idolise the patriarchal template in their thinking? When will the 'Master's' tools dismantle the 'Master's' house?

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