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# Credible Fatherhood and Unique Identity: Toward an Existential Concept of Adoption

~ JOACHIM DUYNDAAM ~

**ABSTRACT** *In this article, I argue for the need of a credible concept of fatherhood in present-day Western culture. This claim is based on the belief that fathers and father figures play an important role in constructing unique identities, both in the context of childrearing and in a more general cultural sense. An existential concept of adoption is developed to clarify the notion of credible fatherhood, which is supported, on the one hand, by Dorothee Sölle's analysis of the shift from a religious construction of identity to a post-religious self-construction of identity and, on the other, by Charles Taylor's concept of authenticity.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the position of fathers and the meaning of fatherhood have significantly changed in Western culture. Taking only the *ideal* father into account, one may roughly state that the traditional authoritative father has been replaced by the more “democratic-minded” caring father.<sup>1</sup> Caring fathers are more involved in raising their children, spend more time with them, and are more willing to share household chores than their ancestors were used to.<sup>2</sup> Although this ideal is still far from being fully and universally realized it is extensively hailed not only by feminists, liberal politicians and progressive social scientists, but also by a growing number of actual fathers who have discovered the benefits of a more equal communication with their children on the basis of mutual respect.

At the same time, our present-day culture can be characterized as “fatherless” in several ways. Not only have many children nowadays only a distant or a part-time father because of the increasing divorce rate, but also numerous are the testimonies of otherwise physically or emotionally absent fathers.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it seems that fathers, if not absent, are likely to fail. According to numerous media reports, the formerly respectable father has in recent times turned out to be a workaholic, aggressive, or abusing figure. Sadly enough, many of these reports refer to serious cases of deteriorating fathers. Although this may bear upon only a minority of fathers, it has strongly damaged the image of fatherhood as such. Some critics speak of erosion or even of a crisis of current fatherhood.<sup>4</sup>



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Whether it is a crisis or just image erosion, these two tendencies seem to be intertwined: weakened fatherhood calls for new ideals. But in what sense is fatherhood declining? My position in this debate is that what has actually declined in fatherhood is its credibility.<sup>5</sup> The father has still not found an answer to the loss of his self-evident authority. Since family life has become more and more democratized, the father seems to be confronted with the need to *gain his* authority by achievement rather than being invested with it naturally or by God. Far from nostalgically intending to restore the old patriarch, my aim is to propose a concept of credible fatherhood that could be an answer to the current “crisis” (if it really is a crisis) or abrasion of fatherhood. Although this article treats only real fathers, both biological and non-biological, in relation to their children, I hope that its meaning can be extended to the father figure and the father symbol as such, the implications of which would thus also apply to questions of leadership in Western culture.<sup>6</sup>

### ADOPTION

The criterion of credible fatherhood lies on the side of his children. According to my hypothesis, a credible father is a father who has succeeded in “giving” his children unique identities. By giving I mean that the father maintains a relationship of generosity, recognition, and confirmation with his children, so that the child’s identity can be formed, built or constructed as—or facilitated in growing towards<sup>7</sup>—a unique identity. I shall explain that adoption, understood in its existential sense, is a crucial concept to describe this relationship. But first we have to stress the importance of uniqueness.

By uniqueness I do not mean the distinctiveness of a customer identity or social security number, but the sense of irreplaceability, matchlessness, being one-off, or the-only-one-responsible, as it can and should be experienced by an individual.<sup>8</sup> Uniqueness in this sense is allegedly an important feature, if not the very essence of personal identity and self-experience. In today’s cultural context of globalisation, however, our uniqueness is very much threatened. In an increasingly uniform and seemingly transparent world, namelessness, facelessness and mediocrity come to the fore as the main risks of globalisation: people become anonymous, just numbers. That is why the question whether and how one’s personal identity can be unique, is quite urgent. For the greatest threat to personal identity in a globalizing world is the opposite of uniqueness—that is, superfluity. Being superfluous is one of the worst experiences for a human being. In fact, it is unbearable.

In my view, the father has a decisive role in bestowing uniqueness on his child’s identity. Saying this does not imply that the mother has no part in this, or that she has any less importance with regard to her child’s identity. When I examine the meaning of fatherhood, I am not playing off father and mother against each other. On the contrary, I suppose that both father and mother are of utmost importance in raising their children and in helping them to form their identity. I think, however, that they have a *different* role; that they are not equal; and that a forced similarity between them is not desirable even from the point of view of an emancipation policy. Reducing the father to an assistant-mother—as some caring father ideals seem to imply—makes him, with a variation on Robert Musil’s novel, like a pale “father without qualities,” and weakens

his credibility. Besides, although contemporary mothers face many problems, in combining work and care duties, for instance, they have no credibility problem like fathers have. In western countries, this is doubtlessly due to the women's liberation movements. But even in non-western countries, where the societal position of women is often miserable, the status of mothers and motherhood is still very high.

As stated, adoption is a crucial notion in describing the relationship of recognition and confirmation through which a father bestows uniqueness on his child's identity. Adoption, in its existential sense, is something that both biological and non-biological fathers experience. It means that the child is chosen or elected by the father as his child. The word *adoption* derives from the Latin *ad* and *optare*: to choose as. Adoption is what fathers do—and I repeat—both biological and non-biological fathers, and it is what they should do to become credible fathers. Mothers do not have to adopt their children. Her child is always hers, naturally, born from her own body. Although a mother may have to *accept* her child as her child, she doesn't have to *adopt* it.

Choosing in adoption is more than accepting or acknowledging the child: it is the affirmation that this child is unique, irreplaceable, the most important person in the world. And this applies to all a father's children. Whereas from an external comparative perspective only one can be the most important (or the most beautiful, the greatest, the smallest, etc.), from an internal perspective, seen from within the father-child relationship, all his children can be the most important, which is exactly what makes them irreplaceable or unique.

## IDENTITY

“Being chosen” or “elected” may sound somewhat strange or offensive to a present-day public. The distinction between internal and external perspective may be insufficient in averting the hesitant or allergic reaction of the contemporary reader. The sensitivity about the word *chosen* is possibly caused by its religious connotation. The German liberation theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003), however, indicates some very important consequences of this concept to our modern-day culture. In her *Chapter of Theology after the Death of God* she distinguishes between two constructivist principles of personhood: religious and post-religious identity.<sup>9</sup>

In the religious-metaphysical construction, Sölle says, a person's identity is not determined by the roles he or she plays in society and in private life, but through the unique relationship that they maintain as individual souls with God. Beyond the different roles a person fulfils in life, in which he or she is evidently replaceable, God sees the irreplaceable I to whom He as a casting-director, so to speak, has assigned different roles. In this vision, it is ultimately not the replaceable and transient social functions, positions, statuses, relations or friendships that make up a person's identity, but his or her relation with God—being chosen by God—which assigns a unique and irreplaceable quality to the person behind and beyond any such roles.

Since the so-called death of God in Western culture, according to Sölle, the religious construction of identity has given way to a post-religious self-construction of identity.<sup>10</sup> Individual identity is no longer based upon the relationship with God but derives from what individuals create and produce on their own: work, achievement,

performance, status, hobbies, tastes and preferences—in short, the self-stylizing of one's own life. These aspects show the authentic self of the modern individual. Today, authenticity is man's post-religious assignment. One has to be authentic, and this authenticity is realized via self-construction of the individual identity.<sup>11</sup> In line with Dorothee Sölle and Charles Taylor, I would argue that authenticity seems to have taken the place of uniqueness. Consequently, from the perspective of uniqueness, personal identity has become conditional, for it is in their work, performance and products that people can always be replaced or exchanged; it is in these that no person is indispensable.

Thus, in the transition to a post-religious identity, however understandable and unavoidable from a historical point of view, something valuable has been lost: the individual's self-evident and unconditional aspect of being unique. The significance of this lies in the threat of redundancy or superfluity, the daunting opposite of uniqueness. In our globalizing mass culture, redundancy is a hazard that touches the core of the individual. The state of being redundant is unbearable for a human being, with all that that implies. Nowadays, therefore, the individual must make himself or herself irreplaceable, for authenticity can offer neither weapons against nor shelter from imminent redundancy.

But to return to the question of fatherhood: there is an important parallel between the modern individual no longer being chosen by God and the father's "adopting" or choosing his child, because, as stated, being chosen means the recognition and the affirmation of the chosen one's uniqueness. Thus, to be credible, a father must, so to speak, fill the empty place left by God.

Let us turn to some practical implications of adoptive fatherhood. I defined adoption—in the existential sense used here—as a special kind of recognition, namely, choosing or electing. In a current research project, analyzing several philosophical, psychological and cultural aspects of fatherhood, I discovered that several features habitually attributed to fatherhood in developmental psychology, fit very well my proposed concept of adoption.<sup>12</sup> Adoption includes various fatherly qualities including, among other things, untying the child from the original symbiosis with the mother, being an exemplar, empathizing, being an intermediate between the home and the outside world, and setting limits. These qualities can be effectively illustrated when they are lacking, that is, from the perspective of fatherlessness.

A dramatic example of the consequences of a deficient or fading father was recently reported by the clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Karola Lehnecke working with imprisoned sexual delinquents.<sup>13</sup> Her study shows that almost all the subjects were too strongly—symbiotically—attached to their mother. Because of an absent father, or even if he was still there but was an aggressive father, these sons could not separate themselves from their mothers and could therefore not grow into autonomous individuals. In a few cases the relationship between son and mother acquired an erotic element as the son had to fill the place of the absent father. These cases are characterised by Lehnecke as unmistakably perverse. Nearly every developmental-psychological theory is in line with psychoanalysis regarding the crucial role of the father in the separation of the child, son or daughter, from the mother so as to become an autonomous, self-reliant person.

Another disquieting, though comparatively innocent example of tragic fatherlessness is Peter Trachtenberg's Casanova complex, about the desperate womanizer.<sup>14</sup> In a more popular-scientific genre, one can read about notorious dictators who were brought up

fatherless: Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Joseph Stalin, and the icon of evil, Adolf Hitler. On the other hand, there are also examples of exceptional accomplishments, where a link with fatherlessness is demonstrable. In the world of sport, one can point to some famous Tour de France winners whose fathers disappeared early in their youth: Phil Anderson, Jan Ullrich, Lance Armstrong, and the newly rising star, Thomas Voeckler. Could this be explained as the shift from the destructive reaction to the absence of the “adopting” father to a self-compensating form of identity construction?

These examples indicate that the act of choosing-adopting entails both an element of recognition and of elevation, whereby the child is saved from anonymity or non-existence.

### UNIQUENESS, AUTHENTICITY, FATHERHOOD

This brings us back to Dorothee Sölle’s interpretation of the Death of God in Western culture in terms of being chosen, uniqueness and superfluity. In line with her analysis I argue that our present-day crisis of fatherhood has a similar meaning and importance. The difference may be that God’s death is irreversible, while the crisis of fatherhood may not be. I have connected her view of post-religious modern identity as self-construction with Charles Taylor’s view of authenticity, to suggest that authenticity has actually addressed and replaced our loss of uniqueness.

While authenticity applies to what a person produces or realizes in life, uniqueness concerns the person’s identity independent from or beyond these achievements. Although authenticity may be a valuable ideal, it is neither a shelter nor a weapon against superfluity. In other words, whereas recognition of authenticity is always conditional—under the condition of what a person makes of himself or herself—uniqueness is unconditional. Moreover, recognition of a person as unique is absolute. One cannot be unique in comparison to others.

Yet today, there is a massive urge for authenticity. Both in the media and on the Internet, a steady stream of self-performance and self-praise files past, countless people hoping to be seen and recognized. People are desperately striving to display themselves as authentic personalities, albeit as one-minute celebrities. Their presupposition seems to be that whoever or whatever is not on TV remains unseen and therefore does not count. Social critics have frequently remarked that in present times the eye of the camera has displaced the eye of God.<sup>15</sup> I suspect that at the base of this ostentatious pursuit of authenticity there is a yearning for being unique. It is pitiable to which extent all these ‘authentic’ individuals align their choices and self-styling in order to obtain recognition by others, to fit in, and how this causes people to look increasingly like one another: in choice, in tastes, in life patterns, and most of all in echoing one another. It is quite a paradox that authenticity, so highly appreciated and defended since Heidegger and Sartre, is being turned down to its opposite today. Authenticity is its own disproof.

Today’s massive pursuit of authenticity suggests that Sölle’s analysis is right; it shows the loss of uniqueness as the unconditional election or being chosen. Although I would not go so far as saying that the present-day culture of authenticity is simply and wholly due to fatherlessness, I suggest that fatherly adoption and its cultural embeddedness would prevent people from being left to themselves with the impossible task of making

themselves unique. How would you choose or elect yourself? Unlike authenticity, uniqueness is a relational concept. You are unique and irreplaceable *for someone*—your friends, your parents, your children, and so forth. In my fairly idealistic view, the adopting father is the first to elect us and thus make us unique.

What becomes of a culture that loses this form of “adoption,” where people are left with the empty shell of authenticity? Unlike uniqueness, authenticity is a self-sufficient, non-relational concept. You can be authentic on your own, at least in theory. In practise, however, it paradoxically and desperately seeks to be shown and seen. In fact, it leads only to narcissism. While authenticity cannot protect anyone from a sense of superfluity, it is used by those threatened by it. It is enough to see the self-glorification of TV celebrities and the politicians and top-managers grabbing and enriching themselves; and those, at the other end, especially youngsters, revelling in ostentatious consumerism and violence.

So do we live in a fatherless culture? To some extent, yes. It is not so much the authority that the father had in the past that is lacking, but his credibility. I hope I have demonstrated that credible fatherhood is adoptive and that therefore adoption as the existential act of choosing or electing the child as unique, both in childrearing and in culture, may provide a solution to the anonymity, redundancy, and superfluity that threaten personhood in our globalized mass culture.

## NOTES

1. William Marsiglio, *Fatherhood: Contemporary Theory, Research, and Social Policy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Michael E. Lamb, “The History of Research on Father Involvement: An Overview,” *Marriage & Family Review* 29.2/3 (2000): 23.
2. Vincent Duindam, *Zorgende vaders. Over mannen en ouderschap, zorg, werk en hulpverlening* [Caring Fathers: On Males, Parenthood, Care and Work] (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1997).
3. Jonathan Diamond, *Fatherless Sons: Healing the Legacy of Loss* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006); Anne Skevik, “‘Absent Fathers’ of ‘Reorganized Families’? Variations in Father-Child Contact after Parental Break-up in Norway,” *Sociological Review* 54.1 (2006): 114; Eva Franzén and Bo Vinnerljung, “Foster Children as Young Adults: Many Motherless, Fatherless or Orphaned. A Swedish National Cohort Study,” *Child & Family Social Work* 11.3 (2006): 254–63.
4. Stephen Baskerville, “Is there Really a Fatherhood Crisis?” *Independent Review* 8.4 (2004): 485; David Popenoe, *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
5. Joachim Duyndam, *Twaalf vaders. Over wensdenken en geloofwaardig vaderschap* [Twelve Fathers: On Wishful Thinking and Credible Fatherhood] (Amsterdam: Nieuwezijds, 2004).
6. James Garbarino, “Soul of Fatherhood,” *Marriage & Family Review* 29.2/3 (2000): 11.
7. Constructing or facilitating personal growth, depending on the theory of identity in use, which I will not elaborate on here, as this paper focuses on how an identity (however formed) becomes a unique identity.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, “De l’unicité,” *Archivio di Filosofia* 54.1–3 (1986): 301–7.
9. Dorothee Sölle, *Stellvertretung. Ein Kapitel Theologie nach dem ‘Tode Gottes’* [Substitution: A Chapter of Theology after the ‘Death of God’] (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1965; rpt., 1982): 17–61.
10. The famous statement of Friedrich Nietzsche on the death of God does not, of course, refer to a verifiable historical incident, but to a process occurring over a long period of time in Western culture. It refers to the situation that God has no longer a predominant position in

politics, society, education, art and literature—in our shared self-understanding, that is, in our culture. It remains to be seen whether this is also the case in non-western cultures. Evidently, many people still believe in God, also in Western countries, but I am speaking of God's meaning and position in public culture, where it has clearly diminished.

11. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Don Mills, Ontario: Stoddart, 1991): 62–75.
12. Duyndam, *Twaalf vaders*, 45–52.
13. Karola Lehnecke, *De rol van moeder-zoon symbiose in perversie en zedendelinquentie. Een wetenschappelijke verantwoording over de mogelijke gevolgen van een symbiotische moeder-zoonrelatie die niet door vader wordt beëindigd* [The Meaning of Mother-Son Symbiosis in Perversion and Sexual Delinquency] (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2004).
14. Peter Trachtenberg, *The Casanova Complex: Compulsive Lovers and Their Women* (New York: Poseiden Press, 1988).
15. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären* [Spheres] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998–2004), 393–96.