The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion

Richard Dayringer, ThD
David Oler, PhD
Editors

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The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion, edited by Richard Dayringer, ThD, and David Oler, PhD (Vol. 7, No. 2, 2004). *"It is my hope that this anthology will open the door to further research on God-images, particularly investigating the implications of God-images for issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and racial oppression. It makes new inroads into empirical research about Godimages, mental health, and clinical psychotherapy. Multiple religious traditions and perspectives, and the impact of both personified and non-anthropomorphic divine images, are sensitively presented in clients' own words." (Pamela Cooper-White, PhD, Professor of Pastoral Theology, Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia*)

International Perspectives on Pastoral Counseling, edited by James Reaves Farris, PhD (Vol. 5, No. (1/2)(3/4), 2002). *Explores pastoral care as practiced in Africa, India, Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Central America, South America, Germany, and the United Kingdom.*

Pastoral Care and Counseling in Sexual Diversity, edited by H. Newton Malony, MDiv, PhD (Vol. 3, No. 3/4, 2001). *"A balanced and reasoned presentation of viewpoints." (Orlo Christopher Strunk, Jr., PhD, Professor Emeritus, Boston University; Managing Editor, The Journal of Pastoral Care)*

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Foreword: From Anthropopathism to Transformational Religious Behavior

Anthropopathism, the projection onto the God image of human affective qualities, is much more at the heart of understanding human perception of God than is anthropomorphism, the projection onto God of human physical attributes. The latter is generally rationalized as metaphoric, scripture "speaking in the language of man," to help humans be able to conceptualize about God. Much more significant is the presentation of God as having human feelings, such as anger, jealousy, love, compassion, and regret. While some of these have caused considerable consternation and further rationalization and justification, ultimately any characterization of divine personality by projection of human affective qualities is a diminution of the divine by the human. The notion of a relationship with God is of necessity both anthropomorphic and anthropopathic.

Heschel's (1951) concept of having a sense of wonder and his related idea about radical amazement regarding that mental capacity is focused ultimately on human recognition of the awesomeness of the very mystery of God. However, numinous sensation tends to be particularized and, therefore, diminished by human projections. Emotional development involves

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becoming aware of subjective projections and moving beyond transferential stances. The same is true for spiritual development.

Wellhausen's (1894) documentary hypothesis concerning scriptures, explaining how differing names of God are at the core of distinguishing different segments of the Pentateuch, is a crystallization of earlier rabbinic teaching concerning the differing qualities or characteristics of God conveyed by the various names of God. Perhaps the various tribes or biblical authors had differing perceptions of God's affective qualities.

Religions tend to anthropopathically project onto God or other "divine human figures" ideal human qualities such as compassion. The adherents of these faiths are then encouraged to emulate those qualities. Such is the case with Jesus in Christianity, Buddha in Buddhism and with God in Judaism. An example from the Midrash:

> These are the ways of the Holy One: 'gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon. . .' (Exodus 34:6-7). This means that just as God is gracious and compassionate, you too must be gracious and compassionate. (Sifre Deuteronomy, Ekev)

We conceive of God in "our image," in idealized human terms, as the epitome of what we can possibly surmise God's qualities to be, and we are instructed then to imitate God.

Many religious teachings intending moral enhancement are based on human efforts to make sense of the mystery of God through a specific set of anthropopathisms and the related myths in which they are couched.

Process theology, like other more natural, rational, humanistic religious ideologies, is a great stride in evolving beyond the unexamined traditional religious practice of delimiting the concept of God by the projection that God is a "being." Seeing the "process" exclusively as a human endeavor, utilizing the high ideals one can conceptualize for the purpose of aspiring toward holiness, involves a deconstruction of anthropopathic projections. In this context holiness can be understood as moral aspiration, character development and human individuation. Any conceptualization of God's reality other than in such terms is, of necessity, of human making and is idolatrous in an ultimate sense.

Merle Jordan (1986) defined an idol as "anything that is raised to an absolute, the finite elevated to the level of the infinite or the transitory given the status of the permanent." The concept of operational theology refers to an individual's deepest feelings about God, as opposed to cognitive theology, which is really learning about someone else's operational theology that has often been articulated as a revelation. Thus, operational theology concerns an individual's personal idolatrous notions stemming from his or her anthropopathic projections.

Rizzutto (1979) proposed understanding the perceived image of God in the context of object relations theory. My doctoral dissertation (1999) researched perceived image of God from an affective perspective through the prism of attachment theory. One's object relations or attachment style is understood to reflect one's Weltanschauung, or worldview, and is, thus, related to one's perception of God. Both object relations theory and attachment theory focus on the relationship with one's primary caregiver in childhood as determinative of one's approach to or style in subsequent relationships. These relationships would logically include one's "operational theology," that is, one's relationship with or perception of God.

Attachment theory differentiates individuals on the basis of their approach to the seeking of personal security. The theory provides for four attachment styles, involving a positive or negative view of self and other and, thus, can be used to understand the different possible combinations of self and other perceptions that can also be utilized in understanding relationship with God. For example, the Preoccupied style of attachment involves a negative view of self and a positive view of other. This might lead to the seeking of external affirmation in relationships. From this perspective, one could understand prayer and other ritual observance as an effort to elicit acceptance and affirmation from God.

My dissertation utilizes Gorsuch's (1968) Wrathfulness scale, which is a measure of God's perceived affective qualities ranging from wrathful to kind. This appears to be akin to the qualities of justice and compassion conveyed by the divine names of Elohim and Adonai, respectively, in Hebrew scripture. One's style of attachment includes one's perception of the other's affective attitude toward oneself. The perception of God's attitude toward the self, whether it be wrathful or kind, is at the core of operational theology as anthropopathically derived.

Early psychoanalytical theorists addressed the concept of God in the context of their respective conceptualizations of the development of the human psyche. Freud (1910) understood God to be an illusion, an

imago of one's father. While Jung (1913) differed from Freud in this regard, he did not commit to the reality of God as a living being. Jung (1936) suggested that the archetype of God is an inherited construct, the content of which develops individually in the human mind. Ultimately, Jung is positing a deeper source in the unconscious, the collective unconscious, for the construct God, and it is possible to interpret him as intending that its specific archetypal expression is the individual's anthropopathic projection of the perceived image of that construct.

Freud suggests that human development involves a transition toward a rational, i.e., non-theistic, perception of the world. Recognizing that religion helped shape human character and morality, he intimates that it would be better to be moral for intrinsic reasons rather than for fear of divine punishment, and construes religion as a representation of the super-ego. Both psychology and religion have a place in fostering the empowerment of the individual in terms of intrinsic character development without the intimidation of denigrating, infantilizing threats of punishment, including that of exclusion from ultimate redemption.

A theology of extrinsic salvation places authority over the individual's destiny with God, while a theology of intrinsic salvation empowers the individual to strive toward holiness without projecting the authority to judge his or her life onto an anthropopathic God. One way to conceptualize spiritual development would be as the movement toward an autonomous, self-actualized stance of intrinsic salvation theology devoid of anthropopathic projections of demanding, jealous, punitive, or rewarding qualities onto the God image. Both psychology and religion have the responsibility to provide the resources to enable such human spiritual evolution.

Such progress is stymied by chauvinistic and other deleterious attitudes fostered by various religious communities. An understanding of the origin of such notions may serve to deconstruct them. For example, the particularistic concept of being part of a chosen people is likely stimulated and sustained by sibling rivalry that emanates from the insecure Preoccupied attachment style perception of God, involving an anthropopathically projected conception of God's nature in making such a choice. This is a denigration of the concept of God, resulting from the emotional need for self-aggrandizement by various religious groups. Resolution of such needs has the potential to help foster a more universalistic, pluralistic outlook, for in the final analysis each human being faces the same ultimate mystery of God. Particularistic notions and the historical anthropopathisms of individual faith communities are stumbling blocks on the path to accepting the modest circumstance of the human being in the context of eternity and limited capacity to com-

prehend the mystery of existence. As the Talmud teaches (Avot IV: 4): "Be exceedingly humble, for a mortal's hope is but the grave."

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, traditional religious observances, including prayer, which often involves the adulation of God, such as through the frequent use of appellations such as "King," coupled with self-denigration, reinforce dependency, disempowerment, shame and anxiety about how one is "seen" by God. Enlightened religion, by definition, entails helping people transcend such notions. It is rare to experience traditional liturgies that express a yearning by the individual to be more kind and compassionate or more whole.

Ken Wilbur (1997) suggests that the most meaningful religious experiences are those that are transformational, i.e., leading to significant change in the spiritual and emotional functioning of the individual and of one's way of being in the world, as opposed to religious experiences that involve the seeking of comfort, affiliation and acceptance from others, including God. Transformation requires a giving up of external dependencies based on an honest recognition and acceptance of one's mortality and finiteness.

Religion and psychology have the responsibility to help shatter the complacency stemming from anthropopathic idolatrous notions that offer misguided comfort in the face of human fragility in the world. Religion and psychology can help people achieve detachment from religion's dependencies motivated by the search for security. Instead, a rational approach to religious resources and the serious pursuit of understanding through religious and psychological introspection can facilitate a new worldview freed of dependency on supernatural extrinsic salvation. The development of this capacity for emotional and religious independence is itself a transformational experience that can empower human beings to pursue holiness and progress toward intrinsic salvation.

David Oler, PhD

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