Working with God Images in Spiritual Care Education

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers distinguish between "God concept" – what we are taught to believe about God—and "God image"—the way in which we actually experience God. Not surprisingly, there is often some kind of connection between our God image and our experiences with early caregivers. Our God image may correspond to our experience of a parent. Alternatively, our God image may compensate for what our parent is perceived to lack. A third alternative is a complex relationship model that combines aspects of both correspondence and compensation.[1] The discovery of such connections in our own theology opens a fascinating arena of introspection and highlights the extent to which our experiences of God involve projective processes.

God images form part of a person's psychological structure and, like schemas or narratives, they can be beneficial or destructive. An appreciation of the variety and limitations of God images is a source of spiritual growth for spiritual care students and provides them with an additional arena for spiritual assessment. In this article, I address some of the ways in which God images can be utilized in spiritual care education. I offer a number of exercises in the teaching of clinical techniques that address God images in spiritual care and conclude with a group activity that challenges students to experience God images other than their own. Examples are taken from my own work as a spiritual care educator in Israel and reflect a Jewish orientation.

CAUTION AND A CAVEAT
First, a word of caution is in order. Addressing students' experience of God images may simultaneously open up early childhood experiences and challenge the objective truth of deeply held theological beliefs. In that sense, it may be a "double whammy" and provoke intense resistance in some people. In one spiritual care workshop, I asked the participants to write down some words that described the ways in which they experienced God. I underestimated the challenge that working with God images can present.

One of my students, P, was comfortable with intellectual discussion of theological doctrine but had great difficulty reflecting on his own God images. He protested the exercise, saying that he didn't understand what was required of him,

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that it was meaningless, that he "just didn't get it," and while the others did the exercise he sat at a table and doodled. The task made him feel frustrated and sad. His protests, and what I interpreted to myself as his resistance to reflection, made me feel that I was failing him as educator. I brought the issue to my own supervision and was guided to remain patient with the student while gently exploring his difficulties in our individual sessions. In a subsequent individual supervision session with P, P suddenly smiled and exclaimed that it seems that his God does not permit him to think for himself!

The very exercise of exploring his personal God image was a violation of the imperative to accept a particular God image as an article of faith. When probed, further P suspected that the prohibiting voice was similar to that of his authoritarian father. While my intervention did not cause P to become completely comfortable with the discussion of God images, the discovery of projective elements in his God image served to open up areas of not knowing and bring home the ultimate inscrutability of a God unmediated by anthropomorphisms. For this participant, the experience was ultimately one of opening. Nevertheless, given the care needed in the examination and dismantling of other psychological structures, work with God images occurs on holy ground and requires an established relationship of safety and trust.

The assessment of God images and the labeling of them by caregivers or educators as, at times, problematic or pathological also raises the question of the legitimacy of rejecting a certain God image just because it makes one uncomfortable. Comfort and the leading of a guilt-free life are not necessarily worthy ethical or spiritual goals. The experience of divine chastisement, while undoubtedly uncomfortable, may also be beneficial in helping a person remain aligned with their deeper values. When, however, a sense of chastisement becomes overwhelming or paralyzing, it is likely a sign of pathology, which can be alleviated through the incorporation of additional elements into one's God image. Great care is needed in the examination and elaboration of a given God image for the inner spiritual conversation it provokes and potential guidance it provides. To return to the example of P, while his God image was authoritarian, it was a source of discipline and structure for P and also contained elements of caring and concern. P was reluctant to open God images as a subject for discussion, but he clearly found his image beneficial.

THE NEGATION OF FALSE GODS

When I participated in an exercise I had devised in which I described my own God image, I wrote that my God was curious, easygoing, playful, caring without being overbearing, and had a fine sense of humor. After reflecting for a few moments on what I'd written, I realized that I was describing an idealized version of myself. I had painted a self-portrait! Clearly, this description had far more to do with me than it did with God. What are the implications of the possibility that all God images are projections, that the God we think we know, pray to, and seek solace in is, in fact, a psychological construct of our own making? Freud, confident in the promise of

modernity, viewed the entire monotheistic enterprise as belonging to an infantile stage in human development and looked forward to the day when an enlightened humanity would cast it off along with the belief in magic, witchcraft, and other primitive notions.[2]

The identification of projective processes in the image of God is, however, not a new theological problem. The impossibility of describing God using any positive attributes is a major topic in Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*, and he regards the attribution of any quality to God as a kind of idolatry.[3] The question is: When one destroys such "idols," what is one left with? Scholars of the *Guide* provide different answers to this question, among them mysticism (direct meta-linguistic experience of the Divine), skepticism, and social action.[4] While it appears that Maimonides was less than completely successful in his iconoclastic quest, the theological model he presents is one in which God images exist only to be dismantled and replaced by an awareness or a commitment that is more profound.

Unlike Maimonides's quest, the work with God images I am discussing here is not a search for philosophical or theological truth. It is, rather, a loosening of the hold of a given image when that image is assessed as being more of a hindrance than a help in the spiritual journey. If a God image is only an image, it is subject to examination and transformation along with the various other images and psychic structures that we carry.

TECHNIQUES IN WORKING WITH GOD IMAGES

Techniques for working with God images span a vast range of psychotherapeutic orientations. I will mention three of my favorites: covenant renewal, empty chair dialogues, and re-storying. Covenant renewal takes its cue from the Hebrew Bible, in which the covenant was renewed on important occasions. If, in the formative stages of a people, the covenant requires renewal, the same could be said for the formative stages in the spiritual life of an individual. Renewal implies an interruption of automatic acceptance, a degree of freedom and a re-examination of the terms to which one is committing. Such a covenantal moment provides an opportunity for a revision of the God image.

The following exercise implicitly invites students to revise or renew their God image in terms of closeness and distance. Students are asked to close their eyes and ponder their answers to two questions: How close is God to you, and how close do you want God to be? After a few minutes, each student is invited to share. R shared that she felt that the kind of closeness expressed in Psalm 139 was intrusive and that a major spiritual project for her was the creation of a space where she would not be "under surveillance." Another student, E, shared that he felt that God was so busy running the world that God was not particularly interested in him. He wanted God to be closer but felt that he was undeserving of such attention. A third student, S, shared that for him God was deliciously close when he stopped to think about it but that life's

distractions often prevented him from doing so. Each student was invited to honor another student's experience as one they could appreciate or wish for.

An advantage of covenantal renewal for religious patients is its resonance with a biblical theme and subsequent tradition. The idea that one's relationship with God becomes stagnant in the absence of renewal is commonly expressed in monotheistic religious literature. An example is the prophetic verse "God said, these people approach me with their mouths and lips while their hearts are distant from me. Their awe of me is merely habitual" (Isaiah 29:13)[5]. Patients can perceive covenant renegotiation as a religious rather than "merely" psychological project and thereby muster a greater range of spiritual energies. Students may be challenged to bring their own God images into greater focus, and this, by itself, may lead to a renewal or a change in spiritual commitment.

The "empty chair" is a therapeutic technique developed first by Gestalt therapy founder Fritz Perls and later adopted enthusiastically by emotionally focused therapy (EFT). One version of the technique involves the client carrying on a dialogue with a physically absent "other" who is imagined to be occupying an adjacent empty chair. The therapist coaches and supports the client in the often-difficult task of expressing their feelings to the "other." The client may speak first as themself, then switch chairs and respond as the imagined other.

Some practitioners have adapted the empty chair technique to dialogues with God.[6] The client is encouraged to express a painful feeling about God to God. While an empty chair can be used to help focus the client's attention on a specific place, some clients may prefer to speak to God as omnipresent without the use of props. After learning some basic EFT theory and viewing a video session, one empty chair exercise I do with students involves dividing them into groups of three. One student plays the role of patient and one the role of spiritual caregiver, and the third is an observer. The student who takes the role of patient is instructed to present a real or imagined complaint that they have about God. The student who plays the role of spiritual caregiver coaches the "patient" to express the complaint to God directly. The observer observes silently and provides feedback and reflection in a post-activity discussion.

[P] (Patient): Sometimes I feel that God is far away.

[SC] (Spiritual Caregiver): So, in this session I want to ask you to do something special. I want you to try to express those feelings directly to God. I'm going to be with you in this, but I want you to talk to God right here, right now. If you want, you can close your eyes. Can you tell God what you're feeling?

[P]: [pauses] I feel like you're far away. I want you to be there for me. I feel that in the past you . . . you were . . .

SC: You can say it. Go ahead. It's okay.

P: In the past, I went through stuff, really hard stuff, and you . . . you weren't there for me.

SC: Tell God how alone you were.

P: I was . . . it was horrible. And you know . . .
SC: You can say it.
P: Why weren't you there? [voice rising] You could have helped me. You could have made it different. I didn't have to fall so damn hard.
SC: That was hard for you to say just now, wasn't it?
P: Yeah.

Like other experiential spiritual care education exercises, the extent to which the "patient" allows themself to become emotionally involved in the exercise is a function of openness and trust. One doesn't need to utilize Gestalt therapy or the empty chair technique to express painful feelings to God. The psalms are full of protestive prayers and gut-wrenching expressions of intense pain caused by the dissonance between religious belief and lived experience. Such is, arguably, the focus of authentic prayer. The novelty of the empty chair technique as applied to prayer is the element of support and coaching that it provides. Patients are often relieved to hear that they can even express to God their complaints about God. While the dominant culture of institutional prayer tends to emphasize more "positive" prayer traditions such as strengthening faith or beseeching God for desired change, prayers of anger and frustration can bring about both catharsis and a restored sense of closeness with God.

A chaplain colleague of mine once exclaimed, "Every hospital should have a screaming room!" As spiritual caregivers, we cannot expect to coach our patients to pray with more emotional involvement than we ourselves are willing or able to invest. The technique of re-storying is from narrative therapy, an orientation that understands meaning as created by mechanisms of internal and societal story-telling. Distress occurs when our stories are misaligned with our deeper values. Therapeutic re-storying is the facilitation of better-aligned stories and more congruent meaning.[7] We construct narratives about God based on our own education and experiences. In a narrative approach to working with God images, the therapist or spiritual caregiver identifies problematic narratives and opens up new narrative possibilities, often through the asking of artful questions. One favorite method is to identify and explore "unique outcomes" in a person's narrative. When a patient's God image is cruel or stingy, a narratively oriented chaplain might ask whether this is the only way they have ever experienced God or whether they have also had different experiences.[8] When unique outcomes are unpacked to reveal values, experiences, and ways of thinking that are alternative to the dominant God-image narrative, an expanded and more nuanced God image is attained.

An interesting co-existence of God-image narratives takes place in the monotheistic religions. God is, on the one hand, a personal deity who tends to the creation and has a special relationship with humankind. On the other hand, God is essentially "other," impersonal and unknowable. Terms such as "Infinite Presence," Eternal One," and "Ground of Being" denote an unknowable metaphysical realm

beyond personality. The personal and impersonal versions of divinity imply different modes of worship. The believer in a personal God reaches out to God through prayer, often beseeching God for some kind of change; the believer in an impersonal God seeks to know God through meditation on the nature of reality. The believer in a personal God embraces a hierarchical theology in which God is the "boss" of creation; the believer in an impersonal God may view the entire creation as God "playing not-God," in which case worship consists of realizing the unity and divinity of all.[9] Traditional monotheism still tends to be dominated by personal God-image narratives, while the metaphysical narratives are reserved for mystics and scholars. Nevertheless, the West has seen a growing tendency away from the traditional belief in a personal God and has become more interested in alternative God images. As one of my colleagues put it most poignantly, "I don't believe in God. But I do believe there is some kind of a something out there somewhere."

A remarkable illustration of re-storying occurs in the theology of Richard Rubenstein, who claimed that, after the Holocaust the only tenable theological position was the "death of God." Yet, rather than reject all manner of God images, Rubenstein choose to retain the idea of the impersonal God of the Kabbala:

I believe there is a conception of God . . . which remains meaningful after the death of the God-who-acts-in-history. It is a very old conception of God with deep roots in both Western and Oriental mysticism. According to this conception God is spoken of as the *Holy Nothingness* [and in Kabbala as the *En-Sof*, that which is without limit and end]. When God is thus designated, he is conceived of as the ground and source of all existence. To speak of God as the Holy Nothingness is not to suggest that he is a void. On the contrary, he is an invisible *plenum* so rich that all existence derives from his very essence. God as Nothing is not the absence of being but the superfluity of being.[10]

The co-existence of radically different God images in a given religious tradition is certainly a fascinating field for theological study, but it also has important ramifications for spiritual care. Spiritual caregivers well versed in theological models are able to assist patients in accessing, assessing, and constructing the God image that is most fitting for their particular inner experience. In their own learning, students of spiritual care can recognize the qualities and limitations of their own God images. Such recognition fosters genuine humility and spiritual openness as students gain greater appreciation of the myriad ways in which God is known and unknown.

THE SIX HATS: AN EXERCISE

In 1985 Edward de Bono published his now famous book *Six Thinking Hats*, which provided both a framework for understanding behavior in organizations and a basis for conducting creative growth-centered activities.[11] Briefly stated, colored hats are used to represent ways of thinking: the white hat represents a focus on information and data, the red hat on feelings, the blue hat on process, the green hat on creativity, the yellow hat on benefits, and the black hat on cautions. People can be designated a

certain "hat" and asked to participate in a problem- or planning-centered discussion. After a time, people are asked to "switch hats" and carry on the discussion. The exercise is useful to liberate participants from habitual ways of thinking and allow them to "try on" alternative approaches to life situations.

Applying the six-hats idea to God images, I suggest an activity wherein people are designated different God images (or, better, images of transcendence). For example:

Punitive: God has high expectations of people. God is not to be questioned, is highly involved, and gives great reward when we are obedient and exacts severe punishment when expectations are not met. While merciful reprieves are occasionally given, they are few and far between.

Compassionate: God is loving and understanding. God is desirous of an intimate relationship and therefore wants us to share with God both our joys and our sorrows.

Distant: God created the world and runs it from afar without too much interest or intervention. Human beings are largely on their own and must simply do their best.

Interconnected: Ultimate reality is the fact of our interconnectedness. Nothing exists independently, just as up cannot exist without down, good without bad, etc. Personal identities are constructed only in relation to other people. Fostering awareness of our intrinsic dependence on and connectedness to other people and all things is the key to well-being.

Monistic: God is the only reality. All things are actually God in disguise. The creation is a kind of divine game, the purpose of which is to uncover and realize the divinity in all things, including ourselves.

Relational: It is impossible to speak about God, only *to* God. God is expressed only through relationships. The only way to know God is to foster meaningful connections with others. Respectful, loving relationships and social action constitute the truest expression of knowledge of God.

Participants can be directed to conduct a discussion around an issue or vignette; they can each compose a prayer or simulate a chaplain visit while wearing a particular "hat." After a time, participants are asked to switch "hats." The experience of using God images other than one's preferred image is a thought-provoking intellectual "stretch" at the very least and can be profoundly transformational.

CONCLUSION

God images are deep psychological constructs that are formed primarily through early childhood experiences. Like other psychological constructs of childhood, they may cease to be helpful when the person matures. Punitive, harsh, or distant God images may cause distress and spiritual impairment. Covenant renewal can be used as a way to renew one's God image. Knowledgeable and skillful counselors can work towards identifying and transforming existing God images through narrative re-storying. Patients suffering distress can be coached to pray their pain to God through the empty-chair technique, effectively making a distant God become accessible.

The Maimonidean tradition of philosophic iconoclasm highlights the projective, and hence imaginary, nature of all God images. While the therapeutic tradition has no claim to objective truth, philosophical iconoclasm is supportive of loosening the hold that one's God image exerts upon one's psyche and replacing it with a more profound sense of the Divine. In this sense, the dismantling of problematic God images, the transformation to broader, more holistic or meaningful God images, and the realization of the plasticity of the entire God-image enterprise are congruent with the iconoclastic tradition.

A precondition for work with God images in both clinical and educational settings is the establishment of an environment of trust and safety. The experience of speaking from different God-image perspectives can be profoundly transformative and may help chaplaincy students develop greater empathy for the various theological perspectives they encounter in clinical work.

NOTES

[1] Glendon L. Moriarty, Louis Hoffman, and Christopher Grimes, "Understanding the God Image through Attachment Theory: Theory, Research, and Practice," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 9, no. 2 (2006), 43–56.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Calgary: Broadview Press, 2012), 15–18.

[3] Michael Friedlander, *The Guide for the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides* (New York: Dover, 1956), 154–55.

[4] Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 354–68. See also Micah Goodman, *Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism: Secrets of the Guide for the Perplexed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 256–58.

[5] Translation by the author.

[6] Louis Hoffman, "Working with the God Image in Therapy: An Experiential Approach," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 29, no. 3 (2010): 268.

[7] See Stephen Madigan, *Narrative Therapy* (Washington DC: APA Press, 2011).

[8] Melissa Elliott Griffith, "Opening Therapy to Conversations with a Personal God," in *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy*, ed. Froma Walsh (New York: Guilford, 1999), 217–18.

[9] See Alan Watts, *Out of Your Mind: Tricksters, Interdependence and the Cosmic Game of Hide-and-Seek* (Chicago: Souvenir Press, 2018).

[10] Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 47.

[11] Edward De Bono, *Six Thinking Hats* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).