

ICON OR IDOL?

AN OBJECT RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE OF THE GOD IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Some contributions of object relations theory provide valuable insight into the study of spiritual development and religious experience, especially as they pertain to the nature and role of the representation of God in the psyche. These insights offer valuable aid to both ministers and counselors in helping others. Object relations theory, as a revision of psychoanalytic theory that views human development as always occurring in a relational context, provides insight into some basic spiritual questions. Drawing on object relations theory, we will explore the importance and role of the God representation in human development: how God is imaged, where the contents of the image come from, how the image influences behavior, how some images of God are outgrown, how the God image both mediates and distorts the person's relations with God, self and others, and the role of this representation in the life of prayer. We will also discuss how the God image can serve both healthy development and pathology, and suggest ways to help another heal a wounded or deformed representation.

METHODOLOGY

The emerging dialogue between psychology and theology benefits from a "constructive-relational" methodology that is currently being used by some psychologists [and theologians] to explore the faith, moral, relational, and contemplative dimensions of religious development in a nonreductive manner. A constructive-relational methodology allows both the theological and the psychological perspectives to speak to the primary data of religious development without either discipline subsuming the other. This nonreductive dialogue allows for a fuller, synthetic understanding of the data addressed. This methodology, therefore, permits a fuller exploration of the God image in human development.

Some basic questions emerge: How do I identify the idols or false gods in my life? How do

I know God is present to me? Why do I sometimes feel that God does not love me or that God withdraws from me? These and similar questions do not have easy answers. It is the position of this article that psychodynamic psychology, in particular the contributions from psychoanalytic object relations theory, can provide a fuller understanding of the God representation--that mental image of who God is for us.

INTRODUCTION

In any theistic religion, there is a tendency to anthropomorphize God, which is necessary, to some degree, in order to "talk about" God in a concrete way. Anthropomorphism is defined as "the attribution or ascription of human characteristics, form, or other features to any deity, being, or thing that is not human." In spite of the Old Testament's denial that God can be likened to any creature and its *prohibition* of any images of God, it nonetheless mentions the "human attributes" of God:

- Yahweh has eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, and feet.
- Yahweh sees, hears, smells, speaks, strikes down, and walks.
- Yahweh experiences disgust, delight, anger, hatred, and love.

Other Semitic groups of the Old Testament period also gave their gods such anthropomorphisms. However, there were certain conceptual restrictions that Yahweh's people held that were not held in common with other Semites:

- God is SPIRIT, not flesh.
- God is ELOHIM (Divine God), not human.
- God is TRANSCENDENT, beyond any analogy or conception.

There is then this paradox the OT since Yahweh is transcendent, yet with human attributes (at least by analogy, theologically-speaking).

In order for us to understand God at all, there is a necessary recourse to images, symbols, concepts, description, and analogy. How does one describe God? Someone may say: "God is good."
-- OK, but what is *good*? -- We only know what "good" is through comparison to human relationship. Yet, God is *also* "perfectly good, beyond all good, and even 'not good'" [in the sense that GOOD is not an inclusive enough term to describe what God is.]

Nevertheless, God is beyond all symbols, images, concepts, ideas, or feelings that we have.

Someone might say: "I know God is present." We ask them how they know, and they answer: "Because *I feel* God is present!" But, in fact, no "feeling" can be God. At best, the feeling is merely a reverberation of God's Presence to us. God is beyond all feeling. Further, our feelings are unreliable and deceptive. So, we might ask: WHO is God? WHAT is God? How we answer this question reveals something about who and what WE are! It says something about ourselves because it forces us to draw upon our own experience to make the analogy: Who/what is God *for us*? How does God give life and being *to us*?

OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

Classical psychoanalytic theory, as articulated by Freud and his loyal disciples, does not look favorably upon religious belief and practice. The reductionistic and dualistic positions in classical theory, which negatively regard contemplative experience as a regression to primary narcissism and infantile wish-fulfillment, now contrast with more open positions in psychoanalysis. One of the most important contributions is psychoanalytic object relations theory, which is a broad revision of Freudian psychology.¹⁰

The concept of object relations was implicit in Freud's thought, but as a theory, it has gradually evolved beyond the classical position. It is not an integrated or comprehensive system, and perhaps for this reason is found operating within various psychoanalytic schools of thought and is used by analysts from diverse theoretical backgrounds. These two perspectives, the classical and the object relational, "are different models that characterize psychoanalytic thought . . . not simply organizational devices, but reflect different visions of reality."¹¹

As an ongoing revision of psychoanalytic psychology, object relations theory departs significantly from the classical position precisely in some areas which previously hampered dialogue with theology. Instead of focusing primarily on drives as the impetus for growth, object relations theory stresses the importance of personal relations for healthy development throughout life. It provides a much less reductionistic model of the person which refuses to bifurcate experience into potentially autonomous spheres of inner and outer worlds. Rather, these two worlds are joined by a "third world" of mutually constructed meanings and values. This third world is the world of culture and religion.¹²

The term "object" was first used in psychoanalysis by Freud himself to designate a person or thing as the object, or recipient, of a libidinal (or aggressive) drive.¹³ The object, therefore, is not simply any thing in the external world, but is specifically "the target of a drive."¹⁴ Freud did not limit objects to persons or things existing outside the psyche. In fact, his understanding of what an object is grew out of the concept of introjection which describes the internalization of attractive aspects of the outer world (persons or things) into one's own ego structure. In this way, objects or their components are internalized or introjected in the psyche. On this basis, Freud proceeded to write of both external and internal objects.¹⁵

Karl Abraham first coined the term "object relations" in 1924 and it was not long before other theorists began developing various interpretations of this concept. Melanie Klein, among others, expanded the meaning of the "object" to describe those internal representations that mediate interpersonal relations in psychic functioning.¹⁶ Raymond Studzinski explains:

The "objects" with which this theory is concerned may be parts of persons (e.g., a mother's eyes) but are ultimately and ideally whole persons with whom a relationship is established. Various memories of interpersonal experience with objects are built up in the mind by a process of internalization to form an inner world of mental representations of objects and self. These mental representations are complex memorial processes which are not carbon copies but subjective, sometimes quite distorted, renderings of affective experience of others and self in interaction. The internal world functions as a "theater" of the mind, where "actors" (mental representations) from the past are used in varying degrees by a person in relating to self and others in the present. Throughout the course of life self and object representations are in dynamic interaction and can be reworked or reelaborated on the basis of ongoing experience and reinterpretations of past experience.¹⁷

All functioning human beings have object representations of the significant others in their lives, including God. These representations mediate one's communication to another by acting as internal dialogue partners, and these representations keep these others memorially present even when they are physically absent. More important than what one "thinks" or says about these internal

objects is how they unconsciously affect one's sense of self and one's interpersonal relations. For instance, all individuals who have had fathers (biological or foster) carry internal representations of them that have conscious, preconscious, and unconscious components.¹⁸

Often the unconscious components of these representations are very influential in a person's life since they affect many diverse aspects of the personality with little or no conscious recognition of their influence. In this way, hatred of one's father, which seems to be incompatible with love, can remain repressed and yet covertly influence not only one's relations with one's father but one's relations with all father figures. At the same time, one might love this same father very much and readily admit this consciously. Most, if not all, relationships contain such ambivalence, although this may be denied since the admission to consciousness of ambivalence would be experienced as a threat to the relationship.

An object representation of one's father is clearly not one's father, but neither does the real father remain unaffected by this representation. The memories, feelings, attitudes, and images of another that, in part, make up the object representation are constantly in flux as new experiences feed the image. In turn, this image acts as an internal presence through which dialogue and action with the person are filtered.

THE GOD REPRESENTATION

There is a growing body of research within psychoanalytic theory that concerns the formation and development of the God representation. While this representation is not itself God, it provides for every believer an important psychic link, conscious as well as unconscious, to that ultimate, transcendent Mystery called God.¹⁹

In those cultures where theistic religions make an imprint on each person's life, whether or not they themselves are believers, children inevitably encounter some talk about God and consequently form some conception, positive or negative, about a supreme being. In theistic religions, a person's relationship with God is the most fundamental element of religious faith. This relationship is undeniably conditioned by the particular religious institution or community in which an individual practices his or her faith. God is not simply one other being in an individual's complex sphere of personal relations. God is not tangibly present as are the bodily others one interacts with

in day to day living. For this reason, a person's image of who God is radically formed by what God is not--by the relations, images, experiences, religious doctrines, and knowledge one has from the world of finite, particular reality.

Research indicates that the formation of the God representation is rooted in the earliest interaction of the infant with the nurturing parents or primary care persons who provide an environment which informs the child that the world can (or perhaps cannot) be trusted to provide his or her most basic needs. This nurturing environment expands to include the larger family and significant others who continue to support the basic trustworthiness of life.

The child's parents themselves, however, provide the most significant early content of the God representation. The child's experiences, both positive and negative, of the parents as powerful beings who can be both good and bad (loving as well as punishing or neglectful) become the initial raw material for the representation. Children under the age of three tend to view their parents as godlike, all-powerful beings. Around three years of age they begin to realize that their parents are not like this, but are, in actuality, limited in knowledge and power. The godlike qualities then "split off" from the representations that the child has formed of the parents, and these provide major content to the developing God representation.

Formed initially from the stored memories, attitudes, feelings, and images of these powerful primordial persons, the God representation is further elaborated upon, as the child grows, through the stories, prayers, rituals, and answers to his or her questions concerning God and the world. This elaboration adds cognitive, symbolic dimensions to the growing existential sense of trust as well as provides description of the supreme being that is said to be the providential source of all things.

As the person continues to grow, the God representation may or may not keep pace developmentally depending on the adequacy of early parental care and the child's own emerging sense of self-esteem--that is how the child values herself in relation to the others of her world, including God. What becomes critical in this developmental process is the balance between formative and deformative content that has become invested or introjected into the God representation: self-worth and a sense of being lovable and loved stand over against an inadequate sense of self and feelings of lovelessness. If a child invests both positive and negative content in the God representation, and this usually happens to some degree, then God, whose relationship with the

person is mediated through this, can seem to be an overbearing task master, a tyrant, a cruel judge, or the source of unforgiving condemnation and scrupulosity. Since the God representation is largely unconscious, individuals may say nice things about God: "God is loving"; all the while they live as if God were a tyrant: "I am no good and should be punished for who I am."

The God representation is therefore the unconscious reservoir of both positive and negative components of interpersonal experience which have been introjected or internalized into the personality. Various attitudes and directives will filter into consciousness from this source, and individuals may react to these in an attempt to manipulate God through particular moral acts as well as petitionary prayer and supplication so as to curry divine favor or avoid divine wrath. The attempt to manipulate, seduce or coerce God may take the form of any number of defense mechanisms, particularly projection. Consequently, a developmentally immature cycle of introjection-projection (i.e., "make me like God, make God like me") can dominate one's relationship with God via the God representation instead of being conditioned by the give and take of authentic love.

The reality of who God is for any given person is, therefore, inevitably mediated by his or her own unique representation of God. Psychiatrist William Meissner states:

The individual's relationship to God will be cast in the form set by the God-representation, to whatever extent that representation functions at a conscious and/or unconscious level. . . . It is in terms of the God-representation that the individual shapes the pattern of his attitudes toward, feelings about, and the quality of his relationship to God. . . . God is not loved in His essence, but through a medium that translates that love into terms of human experience. The image of God must be anthropomorphized in some fashion in order for the experience of the love of God to become humanly possible.²⁰

Some individuals' growth may outstrip an inadequate development of their God representations. They may consequently stop believing in an apparently infantile or tyrannical "God" they feel is not worthy of mature belief. Nevertheless, a denied representation continues to exert influence within the personality from its repressed or suppressed position. It can later be reawakened, revived, and given new life within the context of some experience that has allowed a

reworking of those reasons for which it was abandoned. For others, the God representation is never denied. These persons take responsibility for their relationship with God which demands an ongoing, creative refashioning of the God representation in the light of learning and experience within an environment of faith.

Not only does the God representation mediate one's relationship with God, but as indicated above, it significantly affects one's relations with oneself and others as well. As necessary as the God representation might be for mediating the divine in one's life, it is nonetheless not God. The God representation is a human creation and, like all human creations, is imperfect and prone to distortion and can, therefore, be not only a forming but a deforming "presence" within the psyche, radiating unnecessary pain and suffering throughout a person's life and relationships.

SYMBOLIC AND DIABOLIC IMAGES OF GOD

Anthropomorphized images and representations of God, including many thought to be reflections of the Gospel's view of Jesus, are often distorted and sometimes pathologically deformed. These images can be so malformed in the psychic life of some people that their real character has virtually nothing to do with the New Testament God of love revealed in Jesus Christ. To say such images are diabolic does not necessarily mean that they have their source in Satan or devils. Strictly speaking, "diabolic" is the antonym of "symbolic." The origin of both words can be found in the Greek root *ballein* which means "to throw" or "to cast."²¹ Diabolic (from *dia-ballein*) literally means "to tear apart," while symbolic (from *sym-ballein*) means "to throw together," or "to unite."²²

Paul J. Philibert points out that symbolic images are integrative in that they join together human experience with those meanings and values that engender life and promote health. They weave together, in a meaningful way, mundane reality and "the experience of transcendence." They provide continuity to life by uniting healing memories of the past with hopeful visions of the future, thus creating the possibility of an authentic experience of present reality. "The symbolic attitude also connects the individual person with the commonwealth of being that is shared with others in trust and hope. Symbolic images are open, contented, and grateful."²³

Diabolic images do the opposite. They break the relation between ordinary reality and the transcendent. They can become subversive tools used "to domesticate transcendence by setting it

apart and [aim] by so doing to placate or control it."²⁴ In this way, they tear apart the fabric of life from the inside out, alienating individuals from each other and from themselves. "The diabolic lacks a meaningful context or fails to respect the difference which meaningful context makes. Diabolic images are divisive, upsetting, and shattering."²⁵

Diabolical images of God, like most other components of the God representation, are largely preconscious, or unconscious. People who have made a commitment to religious belief often have various degrees of diabolic content all the while intellectually denying it and affirming only positive, loving descriptions of God. Philibert believes that it is imperative for each of us to discover "both the diabolic and the symbolic images which express the transformation of our feelings about God."²⁶ He points out that this is not a simple task since both "diabolic/constrictive imagery" and "symbolic/constructive imagery" are fundamentally "Pre-articulate or preformed." Most people, therefore, can be assisted in their self-search through therapy or spiritual direction or other "helping conversation." Philibert contends:

Like John of the Cross, we will become sensitive to the reality that no idea, image, feeling, or desire is itself adequate to the expression of God. There will be a two-fold path of spiritual transformation which opens before the believer who begins to work with God-imagery: (a) to become as alert to the signals of symbolic imagery as we are to those of diabolic imagery, and (b) to move beyond imagery itself into a quiet confidence about God's unconditioned love.²⁷

PRAYER AND THE GOR

What happens to the God-object representation in the life of prayer? The deeper the life of prayer becomes, the more communication flows between the person and God. As the person grows in prayer, the God-object representation also grows, but this communication is still being filtered through some rather deformed images. The REALITY of God begins to move into our focal awareness, under the power of grace. We begin to behold God in prayer, not merely through the object representation of God, but in our focal awareness through the divine gifts of faith, hope and love.

This causes the boundaries of the God-object representation to begin to give way, to yield to the real experience of God, as a loving, healing personal Reality. The power of God through grace starts to transform, in a radical way, all the deformities and diabolical elements still within the God-representation.

What is the nature of these diabolical elements? Our parents and teachers were not perfect and have failed us. Other people throughout our lives have also failed us, hurt us, and wounded us. All these things live within our God-object representation. They all have detracted from an authentic God-object. Under the power of mystical grace, with a burning and consuming fire, all those diabolical elements begin to be annihilated. The contemplation of God is so healing, so wonderful, and so delightful, that when we are pulled out of it--even if we have only had an obscure taste of it--the contrast of life lived apart from it is so very painful! And any diabolical, false, deformed representation of who God is becomes an obstacle, a barrier, and an idol which the person longs to eliminate. The person knows that all of these false, deformed elements are obstacles blocking a fuller experience of God.

Scrupulosity is a good example. Christians determined to do the will of God inevitably battle with scrupulosity. It's inevitable! The battle between false and true humility is fought in the struggle with scrupulosity. The temptation arises to move from "understanding the depth of one's sinfulness before so great a God" [true humility] to "self-condemnation" [false humility]. To adopt such a posture of self-condemnation is to give way to the diabolical elements within the God-object representation. God doesn't want us "to feel bad" about our sins; rather, God calls us to a loving, healing redemption of our affectivity. We are not called by God "to feel shame" for our sins. This is giving into a scrupulous, self-centered, prideful self-examination. God wants us to see our sinfulness in the light of his merciful offer of forgiveness and healing; he wants us to gratefully accept this gift. This is humility: to know who I am before God--a sinner, who is loved and forgiven. [Romans 8]

This whole process is radicalized in the contemplative experience. And the deeper the experience becomes, the more the false representation is annihilated. Every addiction, every idol in our lives is also a part of the constellation. The Reality of God gradually begins to break through these limiting constellations.

Ultimately, the God-object representation is a mega-symbol, an archetype of who God is. And what God is trying to do is communicate clearly to us through all our deformed filters: "I am not that! -- I AM WHO I AM -- and I AM for you." This message can only develop within a deep, loving awareness within our focal awareness--an obscure, loving awareness of FAITH that the mystics write about.

The contemplative has a definitive kind of understanding that their unconscious idols are being assailed and annihilated in their prayer. How can they know this? Because they have been thrown into the sheer emptiness, the nada, the void of God. And they have come to know that emptiness, nada, and void transcends all their deformity; that it permits the experience of the Real God to break through the false God-object representation.

As we continue on the spiritual journey, remaining present to God moment by moment, our past gradually becomes purged of all of its deformative elements. Eventually, the God-object representation is transcended in that one is no longer dominated by the past. One abandons the mere experience of God as mediated through the God object representation and replaces it with the really Real: the authentic, pristine, fresh experience of God who is right here, right now in my life. In the most pure experience the person lives in the continual presence of God in an uninterrupted way.

At the end of the New Seeds of Contemplation, Thomas Merton talks about "the breaking up and burning of idols." They are not consumed all at once, but little by little, in a very painful and slow consumption. All of our deformed and diabolical images of "who we are"--that is, "who we thought we were"--are consumed right along with it. The false self, the autarkic pride form's control over our relationship with God is being totally annihilated [Merton, 1962].

But even here, in transforming union, the shadow of the God-object remains in a vestigial way. The trace of this representation lingers like a footprint in the sand. Why? Because the contemplative does not float off into some transcendent bliss, but is returned to the world. As God's instrument, they are still living in the world where their experience is shared with other people. And they must mediate their ineffable, transcendent experience of God to others through symbol, concepts, and words. This is done most effectively through compassionate and loving action. The vestige shadow of the God-object remains alone as a gift to be used for others.