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Cultural Constructs of the God Image and God Concept:

Implications for Culture, Psychology, and Religion

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The God Concept and God Image as Cultural Constructs:

A Proposed Paradigm for Bridging Psychological and Theological Concepts

Psychologists and theologians have been attempting to integrate their two disciplines almost since psychology first emerged as an independent field of study. The intersection of these fields initiated fruitful production while instigating many problems and conflicts. A consistent problem with these integration attempts entails attempts to integrate aspects of these fields entailing differing levels of sophistication. This paper will attempt to utilize the tools of cultural analysis to bridge the psychological and theological constructs of the God Image and God Concept with academic theology.

This exploration has three primary purposes. First, it will demonstrate the complexity involved in people's understanding and experience of God. This complexity arises through the awareness that beliefs and experiences of God have several distinct, but interrelated levels. Second, this paper acknowledges the limitations of the God Concept and God Image as cultural constructs broadly applied in psychology, theology, and religious studies. Finally, this will be applied to three broad groups of people (gays/lesbians, women, and African Americans) in an attempt to delineate how unique cultural influences impact the experience and understanding of God.

The God Concept and God Image – Introduction and Critique

The psychological construct of the God Image was developed by Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) primarily based on the Freud's conception of religion and God (see Freud 1939; 1951; 1961). Spero (1992) further develop Rizzuto's ideas in the context of Judaism and object relations theory. In the psychoanalytic conception, the God Image is a person's emotional

experience of God. This could also be stated to be the emotional experience one deems to be dependent upon what they consider God. Lawrence (1997) developed the construct of the God Concept as a way to distinguish between different understandings of God. Essentially, the construct of the God Concept refers to a person's cognitive or theological understanding of God.

The development of these two concepts occurs concurrently through different psychological and interpersonal processes. It is common for these to develop in a manner that is largely inconsistent, which creates the possibility of the individual incurring a psychological consequence. In other words, a person's God Concept and God Image may be significantly different, which is likely to create anxiety, guilt, or anger in the individual. The idea of the God Concept's development is more straightforward, though still potentially complex. As our cognitive understanding of God, the God Concept develops largely through what a person is taught and what is learned about God. The complexity emerges when what is taught and what is learned is not internally consistent. This distinction can be made as what is taught about God being what a person is told to believe about God, while what is learned about God happens more through experiential means (what is shown). This is still distinguished from the God Image in that it is a cognitive process or belief. This discussion of the differences in the God Concept is more common than in theology (though different language is generally utilized) than a discussion of the God Image.

Conversely, as the emotional experience a person deems to be God, the content of God Image is primarily affect or emotional based. This affect often remains undifferentiated as an unconscious process, i.e., the person may be largely unaware of their God Image. In the early psychoanalytic and object relations theories, the God Image emerged from a child's relationship with their parent or primary caretaker (Rizzuto, 1977; Spero, 1992). According to Rizzuto,

whether the primary parent figure was the mother or father varied with the child. Contemporary theorists broadened their understanding of what influences the development of the God Image. It is now more commonly recognized that other relationships and experiences also impact the development of the God Image (Hoffman, Grimes, & Mitchell, 2004; Hoffman, Jones, Williams, & Dillard, 2004; Moriarty & Hoffman, 2004). The paper will argue that cultural experiences also need to be considered as an influence upon the God Image.

The God Concept is the more dominant factor in conscious thought. When a person is asked about God, they are likely to talk about their God Concept, or what they believe about God. This is generally true regardless of whether they are consciously aware of their God Image. Within these constructs we can see a complex understanding of God developing.¹ While all of these constructs attempt to make sense of some type of transcendent existence or experience being beyond the self, none of them necessitate that God really exists. Rather, it could be assumed that these are human constructions which, for many, have become a reified object. From a spirituality perspective it could be maintained that these conceptions of God necessarily distort any true understanding of God. Through recognition that these are not real entities, but rather human constructions, there becomes the possibility of a more genuine or authentic faith which embraces God as that which is unknown and unknowable.

Developmentally, it could be argued that the God Image and God Concept develop largely independent with little influence upon each other. However, this would be a grossly oversimplified view of these constructs. Cognitive and emotional, conscious and unconscious

¹ It should be noted that these are not intended to be interpreted as real psychological constructs in the sense that they exist someplace in the brain. Rather the distinction of these constructs is intended to provide a language base for understanding the complex ways we understand and experience God. A comparison could be made with Freud's constructs of the id, ego, and super ego. Initially, many within the psychoanalytic community viewed these as real entities that existed even prior to Freud's discovery of them. However, through time few psychoanalysts would still see the id, ego, and super ego as real. Instead they are seen as a language abstraction that helps provide a framework for understanding complex processes of the unconscious mind.

processes have direct and indirect influences upon each other. They also largely emerge from a different level of processing the same initiating event. This suggests that while there may be varying degrees of independence of these constructs, there will never be a complete separation of them.²

From this initial understanding of these constructs, it becomes possible to formulate some critiques. However, even these analyses become complicated. Critiques can be made of the treatment of these entities in regards to how they are treated and understood from both psychological and theological perspectives. While it may not be as common for theology to recognize or utilize the language outlined in this paper, theologians still deal with these same processes and ideas.

Theology and the God Image/God Concept: A Critique

Theology, particularly academic theology, historically has not dealt adequately with the God Image. Academic theology has created an excess of ideas and concepts of God, many of which are highly esoteric and ambiguous; however, academic theology often shied away from dealing with religious experience in any formal manner. It could be argued that there has even been an active avoidance of dealing with the emotional factors out of fear that this would distort our logical understanding of God, which generally has been seen as preferable.

The introduction of cultural analysis to academic psychology has, in part, remedied this problem. Cultural analysis brought with it an understanding of how cultural and social experience influence the way a group comes to understand and experience God (Tanner, 1997). However, there remains an important distinction between cultural experience, interpersonal

² A parallel could be drawn here to some of the major premises of this paper. I would maintain that people experience cultural and intrapersonal influences on their development. These influences, though in some ways separate, still influence each other. Though beneficial at times, it is always an oversimplification to focus entirely on one influence without taking into context the broader influences.

experience, and intrapersonal experience. While psychology errors to the side of over-reliance on intrapersonal experience, cultural analysis makes the opposite mistake of overemphasizing the cultural. Given this distinction, it could be argued the theology and religious studies are better equipped to examine the God Concept, psychology is more appropriate to examine the God Image, and cultural analysis serves to bridge the two. However, though there may be some truth to this statement, it still remains an oversimplification.

An essential critique of these constructs from a theological perspective is that they do not account for the possibility of *the God beyond God*³ (Tillich, 1951). Stated differently, in the examination of the God Concept and God Image as developing exclusively in non-transcendent realms, they do not account for a possibility of direct influence of God or a transcendent being/reality. While this is a critique many psychologists are comfortable with, for many theologians this incurs a significant problem.

Psychology and the God Image/God Concept

A primary difficulty with the psychological approaches to the God Image and the God Concept entails the narrowness which is common within psychological theory. In many ways the field of psychology has remained isolated from the influences of cultural theory. Psychologists talk about culture, but the approach is generally descriptive, despite some new movements in different directions. Comparisons could be made between psychology and Brown's (2001) discussion of essentialism in the theological context. Psychology generally depends upon "the illusions of sure categories (essentialism) and certain grounds (objectivity)" (p. 44). Similarly,

³ In the current discussion, when using Tillich's concept of "the God beyond God" it is important to avoid automatically going to Tillich's statement of God as being itself. The idea of the God beyond God here is used to make the important distinction between the psychological experience of God in the God Concept and God Image from any transcendent statement about God. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to consider the ontological reality of God which is implicit in the idea of God as being. Rather this paper is concerned with psychological constructs and experiences often perceived as being God.

James and Foster (2003) critique psychology's approach to culture using Geertz's model of thick and thin discourse. Their analysis provides a challenge to the field of psychology to "thicken" their understanding of culture.

The primary object of study in psychology is the individual. This object has generally been defined in a manner that views the individual in isolation (James & Foster, 2003). The goal of psychotherapy has often sought outcomes as "being in control," independence, and individuation. While these outcomes are not inherently bad or destructive, they reflect a set of values in which the healthy individual is seen as being the person who is no longer influenced by their environment or their culture. Maybe the greatest danger of this is the degree to which psychology has bought into the illusion that people are able to succeed at this task. Jourard (2003) both recognizes and critiques this tendency in his article entitled "On Being Persuaded Who You Are." He emphasizes that we are "persuaded" who we are by "agencies of socialization." It is necessary to both be aware of this existential limitation while, at times, seeking to move beyond it. This more balanced perspective accepts our inability to escape our cultural influences, but also recognizes that we are not merely a product of our culture.

The field of psychology has become unaware of its own implicit values. Mainstream psychology still maintains its philosophical foundation in positivist thought. Implicit in positivist thought for psychologists is a bias towards an empirically based epistemology which is applied to the studying of the causes of behavior and affect. What is determined to be caused is thought to be empirically true. Moghaddam and Studer (1997) challenge this conception of psychology as not taking into account issues of power and politics. When this avoidance of power issues is combined with a lack of awareness of implicit values, oppression occurs.

By expressing the norms of their own culture [psychology] as if they were universal laws of human nature, First World psychologists create a powerful impetus for other cultures to adapt their different behavior norms to what they wrongly perceive as the facts of human life. (pp. 187-188)

A further critique could be made of psychological research from the perspective of cultural analysis. It is more common to exclusively use quantitative research to examine cultural issues. Some changes are occurring in this regard; still the majority of research being published is still quantitative. While there is value in quantitative research, when taken in isolation it is often misleading. It is important to balance the quantitative with qualitative. Several authors make the comparison between quantitative research as thin descriptions and qualitative research as thick descriptions. The emphasis on qualitative as thick suggests a recognition of the limitations of method and complexity of issues that is often not a part of quantitative research.

When this is applied to the constructs of the God Image and God Concept, it can be seen that they have generally been described too narrowly. Psychology has not adequately addressed how cultural influences impact the development of the God Concept (“thick” descriptions). This can be examined on two levels. First, psychology, with the notable exception of Sigmund Freud, has largely avoided the question of how the idea of God is developed culturally. This cultural idea of God forms the basis for the taught aspect of the God Concept. Second, psychology has not dealt with how cultural experience impacts what is learned about God or the learned portion of the God Concept. This has important implications for the God Image, too, as these constructs do impact each other.

The God Image also has important cultural components that are left unexamined by psychology. Certainly, it is likely that the experiences of growing up as a homosexual, a woman,

or a person of color within American Christianity is going to lead to different experiences of God. Traditional interpretations of object relations and psychoanalytic approaches suggest these experiences do not influence the God Image. The God Image is seen as derived from early experiences with parents. If the relationship with the parents is sufficiently positive, a positive God Image should emerge regardless of cultural experiences. However, as will be demonstrated in the application portion of this paper, this does not appear to fit with the experience of many people.

A final psychological critique could be applied to the understanding of constructs. The nature and reality of what constructs are often gets distorted over time. For example, Freud's id, ego, and superego often are interpreted as being actual entities located somewhere in the brain. In other words, these constructs were interpreted as absolute realities. The absurdness of this idea has often been used to critique Freud. However, this is a misunderstanding of how these terms are more generally used. The id, ego, and superego are common processes which have been labeled as entities. In other words, they are abstractions of experience.

Similarly, the God Concept and God Image are not actual entities located in the brain. It is not possible to have the God Image portion of the brain removed (though types of brain damage may influence the experience of the God Image). Cobb and Griffin, in discussing process theology, make a statement that parallels this:

Process thought by definition affirms that process is fundamental. It does not assert that *everything* is in process; for that would mean that even the fact that things are in process is subject to change. There are unchanging principles of process and abstract forms. But to be *actual* is to be in process. Anything which is not a process is an abstraction from process, no a full-fledged actuality. (p. 14)

What is dangerous is when these abstractions (constructs) are reified into actualities. This necessarily distorts the processes which the abstractions are taken from. However, it is not possible for us to discuss processes without turning them into abstractions. This makes it important to maintain a constant awareness of our limitations when delving into these levels of dialogue and exploration.

Critique of Cultural Analysis from a Psychological Perspective

The critique of cultural analysis from a psychological perspective has already been alluded to in a previous section. However, a further discussion is warranted. Cultural analysis potentially, though not necessarily, places itself in a position to negate the influence of the particulars in the individual. Cultural psychology, which could be seen as a part of cultural studies, addresses some of these issues. James and Foster (2003) offer a description of cultural psychology:

Cultural psychology then, explores the role that tradition and culture play in shaping the meanings, beliefs and assumptions that constitute a client's intentional world. The therapist's task is to try to understand that world which includes the dialectical relation between the individual client and their culture. What this implies is that 'personal' meaning, or 'intentional' meaning, is never purely subjective. (p. 64)

However, they also offer a balance to this perspective later in the article:

Now this does not mean that these stories entirely determine our self-narratives. We need not thoughtlessly fall into a role in a dominant cultural narrative... We must always maintain a suspicious stance toward such culture-shaping narratives. (p. 73)

This provides a dialectical alternative in which cultural influences are balanced with interpersonal and intrapersonal influences. In general, this takes the strengths of cultural analysis without discounting the contributions of psychology.

Summary of Critiques

The various critiques allow for an approach to understanding the God Concept and God Image which take into account various influences including the intrapersonal (a person's psychological make-up), the interpersonal (relations with parents and other significant figures), and cultural (influences from various forms of culture). At this point, examples from gay/lesbian, female, and Black experiences of God will be used to illustrate these points.

Application with Specific Groups

Gay/Lesbian God Images

Before addressing the development of the God Concept and God Image with gay and lesbian clients, a brief discussion on the relationship between homosexuality and religion needs to be addressed. The majority of the theistic world religions have long maintained that homosexuality is sinful. However, this is beginning to change. Furthermore, what is meant by this statement varies between different religious groups. Religious perspectives on homosexuality can be placed into three broad categories.⁴

The first group would maintain that being homosexual is sinful. Generally this group will maintain that homosexuality is a choice and reflects a pattern of sinful choices in one's life.

Within this group a wide variety of opinions can be maintained with differing viewpoints on the

⁴ It is not the purposes of this paper to promote any particular viewpoint as being right or better. Rather, I will attempt to encourage an exploration of the psychological impacts of all three positions. Furthermore, it is maintained that the changing viewpoints on homosexuality within theistic religious groups does impact the development of the God Concept and God Image among gays and lesbians. It appears that the social reality of this change tends to be in a direction of being more accepting of both homosexuality and homosexual behavior.

conscious awareness of the choice, when the choice occurred, and how easily it is to make a different choice.

A second group, which represents the middle group, believes homosexual behaviors are sinful, but that homosexuality in itself is not a sin. People in this group are likely to align themselves with the statement “love this sinner, hate the sin.” According to this position, it is a viable option to remain a homosexual and lead a life of celibacy. Conversely, many people adhering to the former viewpoint would maintain that celibacy does not fully address the sin and are more likely to promote conversion therapy.

The third group maintains that homosexuality, including homosexual behavior, is not sinful. In general, sexual acts are viewed as not sinful if expressed in the confines of a committed relationship with a partner. For some, in this group, they have taken an approach in which they no longer closely adhere to the scriptures of their religious group. Others maintain a high and sacred view of scriptures, but interpret the verses in a cultural or historical context allowing for an interpretation of relevant verses in a manner that doesn't deem homosexuality or homosexual behavior as a sin.

The concept of God in itself is very troubling for many gays and lesbians. They experience rejection and judgment from many in the church in the midst of being told about God's love and God's grace. This paradoxical message provides an important experiential basis for the God Image which becomes more powerful than the early experiences with parents. Perhaps more than any other example, the experience of gays and lesbians reveal the oversimplification of prior theories which have not taken into account the later experiences. While it is common for many people in the gay and lesbian community to leave organized religion, many continue to wrestle with profoundly painful issues of spirituality and faith. Many

others leave behind any notions of faith in a transcendent other altogether (Bouldrey, 1995; Graham, 1997).

The early parental relation still provides a primordial basis for an experience of God in gays and lesbians; however, this basis often becomes overpowered by pain from experiences with the church. Graham (1997) points out that there are generally two alternatives provided by the church for the gay and lesbian community. First, they can attempt to convert to a heterosexual orientation. Second, they can lead a life of celibacy. Neither of these solutions provides comfort or an answer as to why gays and lesbians must maintain a war with their own natural longings. While Christianity has often maintained a position stating that all humans are at war with their very nature, for heterosexual people there are alternatives for an “acceptable” expression or outlet for their sexual longings.

Psychology has long criticized religion, in particular Christianity, for its approach to sexuality. Freud’s critique of the Victorian era was that repression of sexuality didn’t work. This is one of the great gifts psychoanalysis has given society. It purports that when a basic desire or aspect of our existential nature is repressed it will find an outlet through other means, i.e., the desire or drive will find an expression elsewhere. Generally, this is through more destructive means which the person is unaware of or which they feel they cannot control. Our existence cannot be contained through repression or denial (see Becker, 1973).

The sexual revolution and other changes in society’s view of sexuality have freed people to experience their sexuality more completely. This has greatly diminished many problems which have sexuality embedded in their root.⁵ This freedom has often only been granted to

⁵ This is not to state that we now live in a society which is primarily healthy in regards to our sexuality. There continue to be many problems in regards to sexual repression, as is arguably evidenced by the recent scandals in the Catholic Church. Additionally, the sexual revolution has brought with it new realms of sexual problems. However, as a cultural phenomenon, sexual repression has become much less of a problem than in the Victorian era.

heterosexuals in Christian communities. Gays and lesbians are still expected to repress and deny this basic aspect of their existence. Psychoanalytic theory helps us to understand the various potential implications of this. While some may be able to successfully live a life of celibacy without complications, this should not be expected to be the norm. The majority of gays and lesbians would have no more success containing their sexuality through celibacy than a heterosexual person would. This suggests the individual's sexual impulses will find expression through other means, which often may include anxiety, guilt, depression, and feelings of alienation from God resulting from a distorted God Image.

The meaning and purpose of sex has been constructed and reconstructed throughout history. In an evolutionary perspective, sex originally was solely for the purpose of reproduction and furthering of the species. However, somewhere along the way sex became intimately connected with other aspects of relationships and intimacy. This process has been paralleled in the church's understanding. At times during the history of Christianity, sex was considered to be solely for reproductive purposes, and some in the church still maintain this position. However, gradually the church placed sex in the context of a broader relational understanding. For married couples, sex is often understood to be, and maybe even expected to be, a part of a healthy intimate relationship. A healthy sex life often increases the depth of intimacy and the overall health of the relationship. Often it is suggested that this type of relationship also provides other health and mental health benefits.

As the cultural understanding of our sexual nature has changed, so has the meaning and purpose of sex. While many competing views of sexuality have emerged in today's society, some consistencies have surfaced in Christianity's view of sexuality. Within this context, there is a difference between how sex is talked about amongst the typical Christian and amongst the

Christian leadership or purveyors of values.⁶ The meaning of sex has evolved to be a natural part of a healthy, intimate relationship beyond procreation. Furthermore, there remains a cultural value that being in a committed, sexual relationship is normal, healthy, and beneficial. Yet for many in the gay and lesbian community, they are not given the same access to these benefits. Even within many churches which advertise to be “gay friendly,” many do not feel they have the same privileges as the heterosexual community. They often experience that their lifestyle is tolerated, though not embraced. They may even be told that their behavior is okay as long as they don’t “flaunt it.” Their experience remains that there is something wrong with them or that they have to “hide” their lifestyle.

An additional consideration is the placement of sex in the life of the gay and lesbian. The heterosexual community often defines the homosexual person in terms of sex or their sexual orientation. In other words, sex is seen to be more central to their identity than it is for most heterosexuals. For many, this then becomes internalized and they experience themselves primarily as sexual beings. When this central aspect of themselves is also internalized as something fundamentally wrong with them, they may be likely to experience an alienation from the world.

If the base for the God Image is established with parental relationships, it is likely that later in life God-like objects or representations form a basis for the ongoing development of the God Image. Recent trends in psychoanalysis have de-emphasized, though not discounted, early life influences while paying more attention to later life influences (Mitchell, 1988; Stark, 2000).

⁶ Tanner (*Theories of Culture, 1997*) provides a discussion of changing views of culture across time. She contrasts “high culture” perspectives, from which culture is manufactured by the elites, to a “low culture,” where culture is understood as coming from the people. It could be maintained that in church, at least in regards to some issues, there remains a “high culture” productive of norms and values. However, even if the values are established by the church hierarchy and leadership, these values are interpreted and played out differently by members of the church. Thus, the meaning of the values is changed.

It would be consistent with these trends to extend the influences on the God Image to later life. Cultural analysis suggests that culture, politics, and power issues would need to be included in these later life influences. In considering these factors, it now becomes likely that God-like objects or representations would become more diffuse including churches, popular religion, government, and other political organizations. While these may not be universally impact God Image, they are likely to influence the God Image of some, in particularly those who are politically oppressed, including gays and lesbians.

As God Image influences become more diffuse with gays and lesbians, they become more problematic. Despite great strides in the realm of political rights, there still remain disproportionate rights. Even with increasing openness within the general public at large and the church in particular, there still is a common lack of acceptance. It remains a common message to gays and lesbians that there is something fundamentally wrong with them, which precludes them from experiencing rights the heterosexual community often takes for granted. Similarly, the common phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," reinforces this message that something which is natural in others is wrong in them. In defense of historic Christianity, it can be maintained that throughout its history the message of original sin stated there is something fundamentally wrong with all of us. This claim, however, is a universal. When gays and lesbians are told there is something wrong with them they are told this in the context of saying what is wrong with them is right with others who have the same desires and longings.

The process of "coming out" highlights many of these ambiguities. For gays and lesbians, the initial process of telling their parents is a highly stressful and difficult process. They fear the lack of acceptance of their parents and the many changes that may occur in the relationships. Even when the children have always experienced acceptance from their parents, there remains

the fear of rejection through this process. This provides a basis for how God will be experienced (i.e., the God Image) in regards to their homosexuality. However, even when the process of “coming out” with parents goes well, there generally remains a complex God Image that contains fear and ambivalence. The accounting of this can be explained through the cultural experience. As the shift away from the parents as primary God-representations occurs, gays and lesbians are likely to continue to experience conflicting messages and have conflicting experiences in regards to the sexuality. The God Image generally emerges seeing God as distant, judgmental, or as merely tolerating them. There may be a desire to be close to God, but this occurs in the context of fear. If they become close to God and God truly knows them, then they are likely to experience the negative experiences of being tolerated or of God not wanting to know about “how they really live.”

In summary, the God Image for the gay/lesbian community frequently will be based primarily upon cultural experiences, as opposed to parental influences. This is not to discount the influence of parental influences, but places them secondary to experiences with other God-objects or representations. While there have been positive strides in how the homosexual person experiences the world, it still remains a place where they incur many negative experiences due to their sexual orientation.

Female God Images

This application will focus on three fundamental influences on the God Image in women. First, within the Christian community, God has historically been talked about in masculine terms as opposed to feminine. While it is often stated that both males and females are created in God’s Image, most descriptors tend to suggest that men are made more so in God’s Image than women. Second, many religious texts, including the Christian scriptures, often rely on masculine

terminology and have been interpreted as placing women as second class citizens within the religious community. Third, returning to the topic of sexuality, women have often been taught that this very natural part of the experience of being women is not natural to them, but is to men. In this regard, some comparisons can be drawn between the experience of women and the experience of gays and lesbians. Certainly, there are many other aspects of the female experience which influence the God Image; however, this section will focus on these three realms.

God has not always been perceived in masculine terms as has often been assumed with many within traditional religious groups. Stone offers historical and archeological evidence that God, in history, has also be conceived of as female (Stone, 1978). In recognizing the impact of male depictions of God on women's God Images, two aspects will be discussed. First, the implications of the language should be recognized as having an experiential component. The impact of language should further be considered in the context of culture. It is common for women in western culture to experience language in different ways when describing men and women. Enns (1997), in her introduction to feminist theory and psychotherapy, discusses this in the context of psychological diagnosis. The DSM, the standard in the field of psychology for diagnosing clients, is argued to have a gender bias. A noteworthy example is that there is a bias toward seeing independence as healthy and dependence as pathological. This bias in psychology toward a more masculine, logical approach to what is healthy and what is moral has also been addressed in Carol Gilligan's (1993) classic *In a Different Voice*. Even this language, typical of descriptions of differences in male and women, has an implicit bias. In stating the male cognitive approach is logical, it appears to suggest the more common feminine approach of relational knowing is illogical. This could also be seen in terms of writing style. As feminist writers have maintained, a more embodied, subjective writing style is a more common and authentic

expression of the feminine way of being. The objective, third-person approach is more demonstrative of the masculine approach to knowing and communicating. The maintenance of this objective, third-person style of writing as the only 'appropriate' scholarly writing reflects an inherent bias against women.

Understanding the feminine as that which is not masculine has been a common approach to understanding gender differences in western culture. Within this context, that which is masculine is generally perceived as what is good. Some psychological research supports this. In examining masculine and feminine self-concepts in regards to the ideal self, both men and women desired to be more masculine than they perceived themselves to be (Best & Williams, 2001). If the feminine is implicitly determined, in part, by what is not masculine, and God is identified as masculine, then what is feminine is separated from God. This is a common experience of God for women. The difficulties in this line of thinking have often been overshadowed through parallels to the broader female experience. It has been implied in western culture that women derive their value through men, the more powerful other. If this is true, then it would not seem so unnatural for women to also receive value through the Other that is God; however, the psychological consequences remain. While men are able to derive their value through being made in God's Image and through how they are similar to God, women are placed in a position to derive their value through being different, the other, and dependent.

Theologically, this does sound so troubling from many traditional Christian and Jewish approaches. Psychologically, we can see some more problems emerge. The difference in relationships between husband and wife can be rationalized as complementary. However, when God is the other, what does the woman have to offer to complement God? This creates a

relational bond dependent upon a person's lack of inherent value. The experiential component of this process can lead to a God Image which is based on fear, distance, and insecurity.

A second factor to consider is the place of women in religion and the church within the context of history and culture. Karen Horney (1967), in the first book of psychology devoted to the feminine perspective, typifies the process in which women, through various means, are viewed to be less significant to men. Furthermore, she argues that women are often placed in the role of something to be feared by men. Examples of this fear can be seen throughout religious history. Eve was the temptress who led Adam astray into a life of sin. This cycle was repeated by casting of women in the role of the sexual temptress who led men astray into a life of sin. Christianity frequently constructed views of women in which they again were associated with sin, evil, and temptation. The masculine was constructed as the good and moral leadership that needed to stay pure of the influences of the female. While these statements typify a mode of thinking rarely explicitly expressed today, the remnants of this remain prevalent in many of the cultural practices of Christianity.

Many more examples could easily be included which exemplify the differences in treatment, freedoms, and characterizations of men and women in the church; however, these remain self-evident enough to render this unnecessary. The changes in the church which have brought greater liberty for women do not take away the historical or current impact of these issues on women who often continue to experience the church as a place for men first and women second. Experientially, this reinforces a God Image in which they may perceive God as loving and caring, but also which experiences the self as negative or inferior. While this may emphasize grace, it does so at the cost of the self-worth or self-image. As discussed earlier, theologically this experience is consistent with many approaches to theology which emphasize

God's grace and humanity's sin or fallen state. What remains problematic even within these realms is that for women they remain aware that the same is not true for men who are able to value aspects of themselves. The God Image then is based on a discriminatory process similar to their experience in the world. It is a natural gestalt to fill in the gaps.

A final point of discussion, sexuality has been doubly abusive for women. As discussed previously, historically, women's sexuality was associated with being a temptress leading men into sin. In this sense, women were sexual beings, but their sexuality was associated with sin or evilness. Furthering this process, men frequently projected their sexual desires, which were unacceptable from a religious viewpoint, onto women. In this way, they were able to not own their own discomfort with their sexuality. Women were vilified as a male defense.

In more contemporary times, women's sexuality has been disembodied. This can be seen as a continuation of the process discussed above or a new direction in female sexuality. A pure woman is expected not to be sexual. A commonplace example of this is differing standards on male and female promiscuity. Men's sexuality is seen as natural, healthy, and acceptable, even if at times leading them astray. Conversely, women's sexuality is seen as unnatural, pathological, and unacceptable. While men are encouraged to embrace their sexuality, women are encouraged to hide or suppress it.

A religious symbol of this can be seen in the Virgin Mary. For some Christians, the insistence of Mary's virginity throughout her life, even after the birth of Jesus, is seen as necessary in order to maintain her purity and sinlessness. However, it can also be represented in the ongoing reference to Jesus' mother as "the Virgin Mary" even in reference to her after Jesus' birth. For some women, this insistence on the virginity of Mary represents a need to deny the one's sexual nature.

Sexuality is part of the normal, healthy identity of both men and women. However, in many religious circles, only men have been allowed to embrace this. While the blatant expressions of this double standard are not as common, it is still evident in much of American culture.

Women have been deprived of many of the privileges of men in religious culture. This social reality has psychological consequences for women's experience of God. While religious groups have made many positive changes and recognized many of the detrimental consequences of the historic treatment of women, they have not done an adequate job of dealing with the psychological consequences of this history.

Black God Images

Recent times has brought a proliferation of writing on African American religious experience from theological, social, and anthropological perspectives. Included have been many analyses of slave theology and its importance on African American spirituality. What has not been addressed as thoroughly is the psychological impact of slave theology in the lives of African Americans today.

The unique aspects of slave theology and the black religious tradition emphasized the role of God's divinity and issues of liberation (Hopkins, 1996, 2001; Noel, 1996). This theme in Black culture would appear to have positive implications for the God Image. These must be balanced, however, with other cultural influences which are more suggestive of God as being that which is different.

The positive influences of portraying God as liberator expands the awareness of the role of religion and conceptions of God in the lives of the Black community (Hopkins, 1996, 2001; Noel, 1996). Pinn's discussion of the influences on Black theology brings an awareness of its

complexity. In emphasizing the limitations of our historical knowledge he asserts, “A clear and uncontaminated link between the past and present does not exist” (Pinn, 2001, p. 110). Yet we must not neglect the importance of history in the development of religious concepts and approaches. Pinn recognizes this and states, “Theology, at its best, is dependent upon cultural production as a means to understand the expression and substance of religious experience” (p. 106) An important addition to these recognitions for Black theology is the influence of European and Euro-American theologies. Pinn recognizes that much of Black theology, as with other liberation theologies, is reactive against external influences. In this development, God and religion is experienced as liberating. This is seen in many of the Black cultural expressions of religion which emphasize themes of liberation in the midst of suffering. Furthermore, the form or structure of religion tends to display more freedom than most American or European expression of religion which tend to be more stoic.

Yet, it would be an oversimplification to describe the God Image for Blacks as being solely based on this experience of God as liberator. Don Belton (1995), in his reflection on growing up as a black, gay man, reveals another important aspect of the Black experience of God. His depictions describe how he was drawn to early images of Jesus which he saw as being erotic. As he was drawn and enticed to these images, he was also struck by how this Jesus of middle-eastern descent was portrayed as white. This was true even in the Black homes and churches he became familiar with growing up. Belton discussed his struggle with this depiction of Jesus that was so different than he was. To him, it appeared that Jesus was a white man sent to a nonwhite culture to save them. God, here, is experienced even from within his own culture as being different from himself. Otherness, again, is the basis for salvation. This was even more stringently reinforced by the predominantly white culture which surrounded him. It is interesting

to note that for Belton, growing up Black appears more challenging to his experience of God than growing up as a gay man.

The God Image as discussed throughout this paper reflects the complexity of this psychological construct. Within the example of the Black experience of God, we can see that culture has brought competing emotional influences. While the experience is often of God as liberator, this liberator is one more like a white male than a Black male or female. These competing influences on the God Image for the Black community creates a diversity of experiences of God, most of which are complex integrations of positive and negative experiences.

Similar to the experience of women, gays, and lesbians, God's goodness or grace is based in that which is different from the self. Again, while many theologies highlight that this true for all humanity, within the white male experience God is still portrayed as being more similar. But this is only one aspect of the God Image. The portrayal and experience of God as liberator, and the power of Black spirituality, also contribute to a very complex experience of God within Black culture.

Conclusion

A uniting theme throughout these application sections is that it is predominately white males who are able to relate to God in a direct manner, while gays, lesbians, women, and Blacks are placed in a position in which God is experienced as different. Admittedly, these comments are overstated. The white male does not experience God as wholly the same, nor do these other groups experience God as wholly different. The difference, though a matter of degree, is still very significant. There remains an important experiential base in our culture that is important to taken into consideration.

This has important implications for the fields of psychology and theology. In theology, it becomes important to be aware of these influences in order to take corrective measures. The images of God portrayed should take into consideration their impacts on various different cultural groups. Secondly, it is important to maintain an awareness of how God is taught and how God is learned in individuals. This can lead to the church and various religious groups increasingly being part of a *corrective emotional experience* of disenfranchised groups.

In the realms of psychotherapy, clients experience religious difficulties that overlap with their presenting problems in therapy. Several approaches to therapy are being developed to assist clients heal problematic and distorted God Images (see Moriarty, in press). As these approaches continue to emerge, it will be important for them to take into consideration these essential cultural issues. The emphasis on the individual devoid of the context limits the psychotherapist's ability to understand the aspects of the client's God Image and how it impacts the individual. Integrating an understanding of how diversity issues impact the experience of God could facilitate the therapy process in a culturally sensitive manner.

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