God Concept vs. God Image

God concept is a more intellectual understanding of God, based on what one has been taught, but also based on what one has explored through reading and other forms of thought-based input. The God concept is more objective and abstract, even if one holds strong opinions or passionate views on who God is.

God image is the emotional and subjective experience of God, involving the dynamics of personal relationship. Initially this image is shaped by the relationship that we have with our parents. This is the God we relate to through our feelings, our heart.

Here is a simple example of how God concept and God image differ:

If asked, “Write a paragraph about you and God,” the directions would probably trigger your habitual, learned response (God concept) in contrast to a highly personal response shaped by your lived experience.

However, “Draw a picture of how you feel you and God look after you have really messed up” would tap into your into your feelings and life experience, revealing more of your personal, affective religious experience (God image).

The picture of the God image should be no different from the written description of the God concept. We know theologically that God is not surprised when people make mistakes. God does not pull way and love us less at those times. Yet we forget these beautiful truths when strong emotions, such as those of self-blame, rise up.

That question of how the deeper God image arises when our guard is down has been answered in many different ways beginning with Freud. Some modern theorists have gone beyond looking at the divine as the sum total of psychological drives, memories and current relationships. Dr. Moshe Spero, a Jewish psychiatrist, believes that a real God exists apart from our perceptions, a God who wants to be in relationship with us. He also suggests that a religious patient’s belief in God should be included in the process of psychotherapy.

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1 Adapted from Glendon Moriarty, Pastoral Care of Depression: Helping Clients Heal Their Relationship with God, pp. 42-43