

God Image as Preparation for Encounter with the Reality of God

Summary of article by Moshe Halevi Spero, "Parallel Dimensions of Experience in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy of the Religious Patient," *Psychotherapy*, Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 1990.

Up until approximately 1960, psychotherapists tended to view religious beliefs as infantile projections of the human psyche. On a more positive note, more recent dialogue between religion and psychology has led, for example, to recognition of the sophisticated psychotherapeutic elements that exist in many religious traditions. Yet the assumption remains that religious experiences ultimately arise from the results of interpersonal relations rather than from any objective relationship between humans and a divine object.

Although the God image has aspects that are psychological in origin, Spero suggests that the "God object" may in fact exist for the patient independent of human perception and language. "At what point... does the purely human contribution to God images and representations cede to some special other contribution that is utterly nonhuman?" (p. 56) In order to answer this question, the author develops a model of parallel dimensions in interpersonal and human-God experiences. On the interpersonal level, a person gradually learns to withdraw images projected onto another human, images which arise from the person's own psyche. This process opens the way for relating to the other as not-me. Spero suggests that in the human-God experience, a person similarly grows in the ability to relate to God-as-other rather than to an image of God that is psychological in origin. Put very simply¹, a person projects his/her parental or other mythic images onto his/her God image. This projection then connects with the real God. The real God, along with the projected images, communicates back with the person. As a result of this communication, the person internalizes a healthier, modified God image.

How does God (the "divine object") communicate? "While a divine object could conceivably present itself to the human mind in some immediately knowable and comprehensible form, it is equally conceivable that the divine object becomes known in a developmental manner, mediated through ... interpersonal experiences and human object representations that are in some way preparatory to the encounter with God." (p. 59) In a very positive way, even if immature, God images prime a person for the discovery of the real God. "Such precursor religious object representations serve crucial bridging functions until more mature God representations are available." (p. 60)

The author contends that the process of psychotherapy may be capable of helping persons experience in partial form certain aspects of the relationship between human beings and God. [Much of this material applies to the role of the spiritual director.] The acceptance shown by the therapist can lead the client to become sensitive to God's love. The therapist's unconditional positive regard and empathy may point a patient towards a relationship with the real God. In addition, since knowledge of the therapist's world is never offered directly and the therapist can never be completely known by the patient, in ceasing to *misidentify* the therapist with projections, the patient tastes real relationship with one who is "other." All of this prepares the patient to engage in a deeper relationship with a God who exists beyond the boundaries of our psychic projections.

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¹ Parts of the rest of this paragraph I owe to Glendon Moriarty, *Pastoral Care of Depression: Helping Clients Heal Their Relationship with God*. New York: Haworth Press, 2006, pp. 48-49.