

God Concept vs. God Image¹

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.

A simple example of how **God concept** and **God image** are different:

If asked to “Draw a picture of you and God,” the directions would 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 done something wrong” would tap into your personal religious experience (**God image**), into your feelings and life experience.

“Theologically, the picture of the **God concept** should be no different from the picture of the **God image**... God is not surprised when people make mistakes. God’s degree of love and acceptance does not decrease when people ‘blow it.’ ... Why is it that people forget these beautiful truths when they are ‘in sin’?”²

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

² *Ibid*, p. 43.