

Healing Dysfunctional Images of God

by

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Introduction

In this research topic I will reflect on ‘how to identify and work with a directee who has a dysfunctional image of God – ‘an image that is negatively impacting their relationship with God, self and others.’ Through this reflection I hope the reader will gain a practical understanding of: factors influencing one’s image of God; signs of dysfunctional images of God; ways [for both the director and directee] to approach the work of healing false images of God; a brief description of the blocks or hindrances faced in this task; and resources for this work in the practice of spiritual direction. As part of this research I have consulted a group of spiritual directors to gain an appreciation of what is currently happening in New Zealand in addressing this issue, and will provide a reflection on their responses to the questionnaire. [See Appendix 1 for the questionnaire.]

The dilemma I have noticed as a ‘spiritual director in formation’, is there are people who have difficulty in perceiving God as loving, faithful and at work to bring them blessing and ‘abundant’ life. The difficulty in perceiving God in a healing, life giving way can be due to many factors, some of which are distorted self image, traumatic life experience with associated difficulty in interpreting meaning of this, dysfunctional family background, various forms of abuse and /or distorted Christian education and incorrect theology. They see God as tolerant of and uncaring about their suffering, punishing and unpredictable. It is difficult to trust God, and it appears that they feel unsafe or vulnerable, in drawing close to God. Blocks have arisen as they seek God – these blocks may become visible in the form of emotional reactions at work carried over from past and present events, or thinking and actions that are based on serving a God of ‘conditional’ love. How can we, as Spiritual directors, help people to become increasingly open to healing of their God –image?

One major block that some readers of this project and some of our directees will experience in drawing close to God is the language we use to address and refer to God. I refer to using the male pronoun for God; Father, he, and his. In ‘Making Sense of Religion’ Donald Reeves discusses the traditional views of God held by the protestant white middle classes based on the following ideas: monarchical model of God as King, Omnipotent and Omnipresent God who is Almighty and All powerful – all controlling. As he reflects on his own childhood image of God which comes from these ideas of God, he saw God as the stern, elderly relative whom he was regularly and unwillingly forced to love and placate. Reeves states that the Patriarchal portrayal of God through scripture and the cultures through which God’s revelation and relationship came reinforce the paternal, male expression of God.

“This picture of God the Father is unsatisfactory. Firstly because the traditional views about God are strongest among the Protestant white middle classes, it excludes women, black, brown and yellow people. This exclusion cannot be limited by just swapping ancient names for God with new ones. For to put a new name to God is to explore the relationship between God and the world in a different way...”¹

People who have had more negative and destructive [rather than loving and positive] relationships with their earthly father or man in a similar role, are likely to have considerable negative associations with the term ‘Father’ which are unconsciously transferred to their perception and approach to God as father and male. It is unfortunate that the common, traditional ways of referring to God in religious circles, may reinforce negative perceptions and feelings about God as father and male. In consideration of these issues I will avoid referring to God using the male pronoun in the project, and encourage readers to consider how they might respond to the issue in their own use of language in how they refer to God in the practice of spiritual direction.

¹ Reeves, Donald: Making Sense of Religion; BBC Books, London, 1989. p29.

What factors influence our image of God?

The factors fall into two groups – those over which we have no control, and those we do control. In the first category are biological and psychological inheritance, our geographical and cultural environment, the accidents and other misfortunes of life and our own sinful nature. The factors we do have control over – are our responses to God, others, and ourselves as we encounter life in all of its diversity.

The influence of evil is one that falls into both categories – in some instances we have some control over evil through correct choices, in other instances we are victims of evil, because of the choices of others and the nature of life – e.g. presence of disease and suffering.

Who Is God?

The very nature of God – being as immense and superior to us as God is, means that we are not able to know or understand God fully and accurately. In seeking to comprehend God, we are dealing with mystery. None of our images of God are God, they are likenesses used to construct a concept of God. The Bible and the revelation of God, through Jesus is the primary reference for identifying God, God's nature, action and will.

So the question arises 'how do we identify a functional image of God?' The simplest answer is: by it's action: a life-giving image of God draws the directee toward God with evidence of the fruit of the Spirit.² A directee with a life-giving image of God will increasingly show signs of becoming Christ like. A healthy image of God will transform the person through self surrender to God's love, drawing his/her focus away from him/herself and outward to others and God. This process effects a greater sense of true self, freedom and harmony with God.

² NIV Study Bible: Galatians 5:22 –25 : "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Development of Images of God

As the created, we come to some understanding of who God is, [and who God isn't,] within the limitations of our minds, hearts, bodies and communities – using pictures, images and faith experience. We construct an image of God, when interacting with our environment and the people in it. From the beginning of life onwards, some of these images or ways of knowing remain, while others are replaced.

We come to knowledge of God through contemplating God, in the myriad of ways that are available, as a loving relationship through all of life. The use of critical thinking /discernment^{3, 4} is an integral part of coming to true knowledge of God.

Gerald May states

“regardless of what images are presented by parents, most young children develop a sense of God as being active in their lives. They see God as a person or force that influences their daily activities, brings good things or abandons them to bad things, and they attempt to appease God in much the same way that primitive religions do – or as we sophisticated adults do when we are truly frightened or despairing.”⁵

Observe here, that most children recognise a greater power than themselves, at work in their lives, with whom they assume relationship. Ignacio Larranaga⁶, when discussing how God is commonly imaged says

“the image of God is often dressed up in various attire: our fears and insecurities, our interests and systems, our ambitions, our weaknesses, ignorance, and limitations; for many, God is the magic solution for the impossible, the explanation for everything we do not know, the refuge for the confused and the weak.”⁷

³ Green, Thomas. H, S.J. “Weeds Among the Wheat; Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet”; Ave Maria Press, Indiana, 2000.

⁴ Barry, William.A.; “Discernment in Prayer; Paying Attention to God”; (Ave Maria Press, Indiana) 1990. “God and You – prayer as a personal relationship” (1987)

⁵ May, Gerald G: ‘Care of Mind, Care of Spirit; Harper, San Francisco, USA, 1992, p74

⁶ Ignacio Larranaga O.F.M Cap. Was born 1928, a Spanish missionary to Chile. He worked in the Centre of Franciscan and Pastoral Studies for Latin America. He began a series of retreats called ‘Encounters with God’ for clergy, which spread through South and Central America to the U.S.A.

⁷ Larranaga, Ignacio, O.F.M. CAP; ‘Sensing Your Hidden Presence / Toward Intimacy with God’: Image Books /Doubleday, New York, 1987: p11

These images reflect how God is experienced and are comprised of a projection of our own unexamined self-image and experience, our gut reaction to life and mystery. Kelsey, when discussing the spirituality of the West, and its world view states:

“inner images can relate to and refer to a real, non physical or spiritual realm, just as sense experience and sense images bring us into touch with a real physical world. We need to develop a capacity for critical thinking in order to deal with each realm. Then we will not be so easily deceived by appearances.”⁸

These comments highlight the mystical nature of constructing images of God, and the need for discernment. Images adopted in childhood are likely to be simple and limited, with the potential to be harmful when traumatic events occur to children, or if these images are held without being readdressed as one matures.

Ignacio Larranaga’s image of God is like this:

“the God of the Bible is a God who asks questions, intervenes, and challenges. He does not answer, but questions. He does not solve problems, but causes conflicts. He does not make things easy, but makes them difficult. He does not explain, but complicates. He engenders not children, but adults. The God of the Bible is God the Liberator, the one who pulls us from our insecurities, ignorance and injustice, not avoiding them, but confronting them and overcoming them.”⁹

It can be observed in this image, that not all aspects of God are described, and the image itself reflects the experience, interpretation and faith of a mature individual.

Self Image /Self Knowledge

How an individual views him or herself¹⁰ is of primary concern in this issue because the physical body is our ‘panel’ for giving and receiving communication to /from God and the world. Building accurate self- knowledge is a complex process and involves encountering mystery. The processes are comprised of the individual’s ability to perceive, accurately

⁸ Kelsey, Morton T; Companions on the Inner Way; Crossroad, New York,1989, p22.

⁹Op cit, Larranaga, Ignacio, p12

¹⁰ In this project I will use the feminine third person singular pronoun alternative for reasons of expediency; actually it refers to both he and she.

interpret action from inner and outer sources, [people and events], evaluate the effect of one's own choices, and respond and draw conclusions. The process is imaginative and comparative in nature, and dynamic through time. Kelsey says

“to facilitate the integration of the total psyche, ego consciousness is necessary. It interacts with the depth of the psyche, to unify the personality and create a new being. This integration requires scorching self-honesty in self-examination, love relationships and spiritual struggle. Ultimately it is achieved only through the action of divine grace.”¹¹

The development of self- image begins in childhood, primarily through early family relationships and experience. For more information on psychological pre-conditioning and spiritual growth, refer to, e.g. Gerald May.¹² One of life's greatest challenges is to increase one's self knowledge by attending to the undeveloped, 'less preferred' or hidden side of our nature and personality, by reflecting on our 'known self' and accepting challenges in order to extend this knowledge and mature.

Self-knowledge is also said to be one of the primary tasks in developing discernment and being purified – we cannot come to a deep knowledge of God without, at the same time, coming to a profound realisation of who we ourselves really are.¹³ As Christian spiritual directors, the premise that God, our creator, does know each person completely,¹⁴ means that we can encourage our directees in prayer, where they will discover the truth about themselves, as they intentionally open up to communication with God. Scripture states that God planned for us to be in a parent – child relationship with God¹⁵, and to be conformed to the image of God's Son¹⁶. As the directee's self image or knowledge is deepened, she will see herself more as God sees her.

¹¹ Op cit: Kelsey, p22

¹² Op cit: May, Gerald G: pp64 -82

¹³ St Teresa has an excellent discussion of the continuing need of self-knowledge, see “The Interior Castle, First Mansions”, chapter two.

¹⁴ NIV Bible :Psalm 139

¹⁵ Ibid. Romans 8:16

The directee's personal history

The earlier in one's life that trauma occurs or basic needs were not met, the less ability the individual had to correctly interpret what happened and what that meant. Even without early traumatic experience, many if not all of us partly misinterpret the inter-relationship of events and realities in our life and the nature, action, power, will and love of God. These distorted misrepresentations lead to dysfunctional interaction with self, others, creation and God. The implication is that these painful memories and interpretations need to be attended to by reinterpreting them with mature cognition and faith processes. The spiritual director can create an environment for healing by listening to and noticing the directee's felt reaction or body language as she shares her story or issues, and by inviting creative expression and interaction. Discernment is required in recognising the directee's unsettled memories or relationships needing more attention. Referral to counselling may be indicated. For further consideration of the inter relationship of our spiritual and psychological development refer to Linn, Fabricant and Linn¹⁷, May,¹⁸ and for attending to loss and grief, Joyce Rupp.¹⁹ For discernment about healing of memories, David Seamands.²⁰

Evil Influences

The work of evil is a dynamic that negatively impacts one's image of God, an unseen supernatural power²¹, the work of the devil, our adversary,²² who works to counteract the revelation of a loving God. The enemy tempts, deceives, falsely accuses, [the brethren]²³ and destroys.²⁴ Discernment is being able to distinguish between sinful desires and what the Holy

¹⁶ Romans 8:29

¹⁷ Matthew Lin, Sheila Fabricant, Dennis Linn "Healing the Eight Stages of Life"; Paulist Press, New York, 1987

¹⁸ Op Cit :May, G; ch 4

¹⁹ Rupp, Joyce: 'Praying Your Goodbyes'

²⁰ Seamands D A: "Healing of Memories", Scripture Press Foundation, New York 1985

²¹ Life Application Bible, NIV: Ephesians 6: 12: 'For our struggles is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'

²² The Discovery Bible: New American Standard New Testament; Moody Press, Chicago, 1987. 1Peter 5:8 "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

²³ Ibid: Revelation 12:10b "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night."

²⁴ White, John: 'The Fight': Intervarsity Press, Britain, 1977: chapter 12, p93

Spirit desires.²⁵ As Christians, we believe that we can overcome this evil with God's empowering, using the armour of God²⁶ and by faith in Jesus' power, by our truthful words, and obedience even to death - Revelation 12:11.²⁷

The directee's social environment

When a directee has an under developed or false self-identity, it mars her relationships with others and diminishes her ability to recognise God's revelation through groups of people. The use of defence mechanisms²⁸, masks, various attachments and disobedience to God indicate the directee is not engaging well with herself, others, and God. These mechanisms are used to preserve, protect and promulgate one's self image and self- importance in the face of spiritual truth. The directee may use these defences in the spiritual direction relationship, and block healing. May believes that it is more important for directors to know that such defences can take place than to be able to label them precisely, and it is better to try to determine what it is that is being threatened in the directee, and attempt to reassure and support the person in that area. Refer to May's chapter on 'Encounter'.²⁹

The directee's family are also reacting and responding to her. May states when discussing the directee's environment of encounter with God that "the director does not see the directee clearly if the vision is only of the directee's private journey with God or of the directee as part of an identified group of spiritual pilgrims. The directee has other relationships, very important ones, that are bound to be affected and that must be taken into consideration."³⁰

²⁵ Ibid: Galatians 5: 16-26

²⁶ Op cit: Ephesians 6: 10 - 18

²⁷ Ibid: "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death."

²⁸ e.g. repression, denial and projection, rationalization, intellectualisation, isolation, displacement.

²⁹ Op cit; May: Chapter 5.

³⁰ Op cit. May, p 96

Signs of a dysfunctional Images of God

The signs are as many and varied as there are people and their life experiences. To generalise, the alerting signs will fall into the following categories:

History:

- dysfunctional family history,
- trauma and /or abuse,
- poor or absentee parental role modelling, ['workaholic' or parents consistently distracted],
- alcoholic/ substance dependences,
- emotional disturbance,
- false self image,
- distorted teaching /role modelling in: religious or relational outworking;
- presence of deception.

Prayer and discernment:

- resistance: reluctance to share what happens,
- belief that God is absent,
- 'distancing' God,
- preoccupation with God's anger and judgement,
- restricted perception of God's indwelling presence.

Emotional:

- lack of the fruit of the Spirit, or opposites of the fruit of the Spirit.

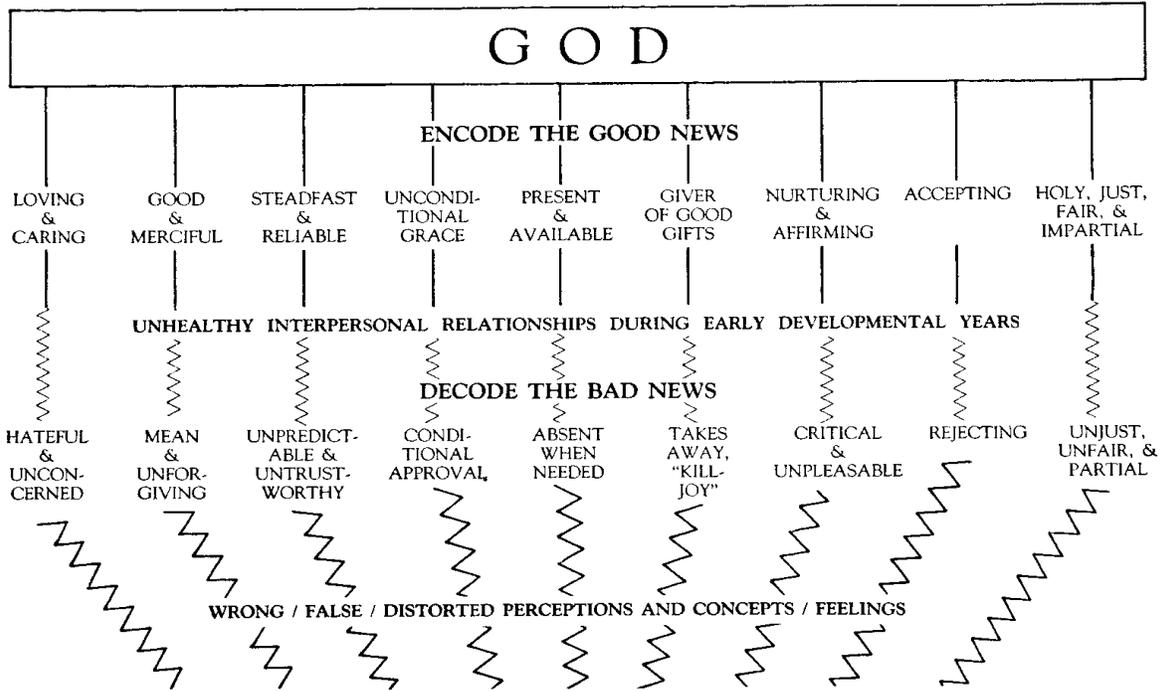
Personality:

- the directee is operating wholly toward her preferred mode of functioning
- little or no integration of the shadow has occurred.

The following chart, taken from Seamond's book "Healing of Memories" illustrates how a 'life giving' image of God can become distorted by chosen and un-chosen factors in a person's life. The straight lines represent their truthfulness [as revealed in Christ], and the jagged lines represent the distortions that occur through unhealthy inter-personal relationships.³¹

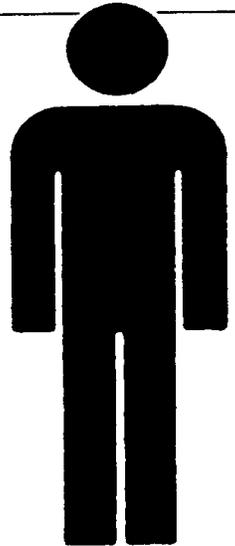
³¹ Seamands, D.A "Healing of Memories", Scripture Press Foundation (UK) Ltd, USA, 1986 p 98

HOW THE GOOD NEWS BECOMES THE BAD NEWS



DAMAGED LOVE RECEPTORS

P E R S O N



UNCHOSEN

- ORIGINAL SIN (FALLENNESS)
- INHERITANCE ENVIRONMENT
- ACCIDENTS
- TRAGEDIES
- INFIRMITIES

CHOSEN

- WRONG RESPONSES, SINFUL CHOICES & FEAR, GUILT, RESENTMENT, REBELLION WHICH REINFORCE THE MISPERCEPTIONS & MISCONCEPTIONS/FEELINGS

WHY THE HOLY SPIRIT SOMETIMES NEEDS A TEMPORARY ASSISTANT
(LIKE A PASTORAL COUNSELOR)

Note that a traumatic or problematic history does not always suggest a dysfunctional image of God – as spiritual directors we must resist unvalidated assumptions, but carefully listen to the facts.

The markers that have alerted some New Zealand Spiritual Directors to the presence of distorted image of God in their directees include:

Prayer markers:

- any difficulties and restrictions in praying and discussing it
- fear of intimacy with God
- reluctance to share what happens in prayer.

Description of God markers:

- comments/ideas that are inconsistent with God's loving, creative and freeing nature
- descriptions of God that are inconsistent with scripture.

Emotional markers:

- presence of dominating emotion such as fear
- anger
- guilt

Attitudinal markers

- attitudes that restrict their own and others freedom,
- compulsions to do or be certain things
- intolerance
- resistance

- defence mechanisms e.g. compartmentalism or avoidance

Historical markers:

- dysfunctional relationship with one or both parents
- difficulty in giving self-care
- perfectionism
- distorted beliefs

Self- concept markers:

- an inability to value themselves

Non- verbal markers:

- noticing emotion by tone of voice
- reluctance indicated by arriving late or cancelling appointments

[Refer to Appendix 2 for more detail.]

Approaches to the work of healing and Resources

The first approach to consider is that of the spiritual director. We must identify, interpret, adjust and evaluate our own images of God, and develop our own self- knowledge as an ongoing task to heighten our discernment. In his book ‘Soul Friend’ Leech states, “it is because a priest has time for prayer, study and reflection that his guidance of those in the world’s hurly–burly is likely to be worth having.”³²

³² Ibid: Leech; Kenneth: p 35

The same is true for spiritual directors. Three practical ways to provide a therapeutic environment for the directee are:

1. provision of an accepting, encouraging and discerning atmosphere through appropriate body language, words and thinking
2. trusting God is at work and praying for the directee
3. attending regular supervision.

Refer to Leech for a summary of the director's role.³³

The director and directee have several approaches to choose from in attending to the directee's self-knowledge. She may explore her personal history in detail. To identify the directee's view of God, we invite her to identify her current concept of God and explore how this affects her relationship with God. Work the directee does reflecting on her spiritual pilgrimage and the effect on the present, interpreting and evaluating her interaction with God, others and self is necessary. Sheila Pritchard's *Spiritual Formation Workbook*³⁴ is an excellent resource for this work. Also see 'Church Resource Ministries: Perspectives' Time Line.³⁵

The spiritual director listens while keeping in mind, the images of God that the Bible and Jesus present. Contrasts can be identified between past and present images, and head and 'gut' knowledge, to gain insight into both God's revelation and the directee's responses. Root causes of dysfunctional images of God may be identified depending on the directee's courage and ability to trust the director with sensitive information.

³³ Leech, Kenneth: 'Soul Friend, A Study of Spirituality' (Sheldon Press London, 1977) p62
(a) evaluation of the person's prayer potential, and guidance in finding the right forms of prayer;
(b) assessment of the person's progress and help in evolving new ways of prayer;
(c) identification of aids and obstacles in the person's spiritual life;
(d) enabling the person to become more open to God and less dependant on the human director.'

³⁴ Pritchard, Sheila: *Extension Studies Department Spiritual Formation, Part One*; Bible College of New Zealand; 1996: *Journeying with God*; chapters 2 & 3

³⁵ Church Resource Ministries New Zealand' "Perspectives" – {includes an in depth Symbol Time Line} contact Mike Brantley, crm@crm.org.nz ph (04) 477 9410

Remember that the Holy Spirit reveals who God is to us, John 15: 26³⁶; and reveals the truth to us, John 16:13.³⁷

For work with memories, Seamands states that indicators for healing are “recurring mental pictures, scenes or dreams which bring disturbance and disruption to the emotional and spiritual life.”³⁸ Resources for this work include : Seamands, Savary, Berne and Williams³⁹ for dream and symbol work.

Kathleen Fischer says

“because insight into the self comes initially in the poetry of the imagination, reflection on our Christian existence or the sharing of our life of faith with others requires close attention to the images that arise within us.”⁴⁰

This process involves awareness of the image, which may start as an emotion or hunch, lingering with the image to allow it to speak to us, and expression of the insight gained and incorporation into our life. Note here the connection between personal history, images and recognising emotion.

Emotion drastically colours ideas about God and interpretation of biblical revelation, so the directee is invited to notice body sensation and felt states, to invite acceptance of these and explore their meaning. This may lead to work with images and the imagination. Resources for this include: listening, creative activities such as drawing, story telling, focusing, use of music and art. This focus on emotion also suggests development of discernment, reference to scripture, classical Christian works e.g. Ignatius and development of correct theology.

³⁶ The Discovery Bible, “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness to Me.”

³⁷ Ibid. “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and will disclose to you what is to come.”

³⁸ Op Cit, Seamands, p79

³⁹ Savary, Berne and Williams “Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Judeo- Christian way of Dreamwork”; Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1984

Work done by the directee understanding her personality type is a helpful resource. The director may suggest workshops on the Enneagram or Myer's Briggs Personality Indicators, and reading or activities to extend the directee's knowledge of her shadow. Suggesting a combination of solitary and inter-personal activities will extend the directee's self awareness. Attention to prayer and theology is crucial – by asking questions to discern what prayer style may be supportive and may extend the directee, and encouraging her to notice God's action toward herself and others. Resources for this include: Bible, Richard Foster's "Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home", Halpin's "Imagine That!" and the 'Exploring Prayer' series of eight books, edited by Joyce Huggett.⁴¹

Carolyn Thomas's "Will the Real God Please Stand Up – Healing Our Dysfunctional Images of God" approach is biblical, as she believes this provides the basic foundation with which to convey God's fidelity. She suggests that along with counselling (where a person's experiences have been psychologically crippling), and with human companionship and resources, suggesting alternative prayerful images to replace the symbols of God that no longer work in a personal way is the way forward. Using biblical examples God can be discovered in a true light.

Dennis Keller's book "A Prayer Journal for Today's Seeker – The Many Faces of God" provides a meditative, contemplative approach. It is a devotional tool for exploring biblical images of God, in the style of Lectio Divina; including parental metaphors, occupational metaphors, metaphors of word, wisdom and Spirit.

⁴⁰ Fischer K "The Inner Rainbow – The imagination in Christian Life"; Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1983, p93

⁴¹ Tiltles include: 'Patterns not Padlocks', 'Coming to God', 'Finding God in the Fast Lane', 'Spiritual Friendship', 'The Sounds of God', 'Finding the Still Point', 'Praying Our Goodbyes', and 'Streams in Dry Land.'

Ignacio Larranaga's book "Sensing Your Hidden Presence" suggests that the process of secularisation, rather than undermining faith, could be compared to the dark night of the senses, a radical purification of the image of God. His book addresses: prayer concerns; explores the nature of faith; intellectual, existential, scientific difficulties; and the tension between confusion and self-surrender. He says "we need peace. Anyone loaded down with aggression, inner resistance and deep seated rejection is not able to enter peace with God."⁴² He explains that calm and interior unity are needed to achieve a transforming union with God, and sets out practical exercises to open oneself to purification and surrender.⁴³

Here is a reflection on the Spiritual Directors' responses to the following question – "**what approach do you take when you sense a directee is in need of significant healing of her dysfunctional image of God?**" [Refer to Appendix 3 for more detail.]

Part of the approach is in 'being' – an accompanier, a clarifier, who focuses on God's love and acceptance of the directee. The director respects the directee's beliefs and freedom to choose and learn. The director trusts God to be active in the directee's struggle.

Creative direction skills are used to help the directee explore personal history up to the present, discern the quality of images of God and source of distorted images. Other skills mentioned were questioning, offering scripture and alternate ways of praying, and educating the directee.

⁴² Op cit Larranaga, pp 66-67

⁴³ Ibid. The exercises include: 1. acceptance of family, the body, health, aging and death, personality, others and our past. 2. Achieving inner calm, emptying, relaxing, concentrating and listening. 3. Exercises for entering contemplation, silence and presence.

Challenges in the task: blocks, defences, difficulties

Resistance and the perceived absence of God [absence of love] are two chief difficulties that may be [protectively, subconsciously] hidden by the directee. Resources for working with this include: identifying root causes, the director's self-awareness, a good working alliance, gentle questioning and attending to the approaches mentioned in the previous section. Guided biblical meditations that are linked to resistance or on God's healing grace may help.

Such blocks [possibilities of these are many] may include: incorrect Christian thought or belief. For example, Thomas⁴⁴ states

“Ellis and Harper⁴⁵ have identified ten irrational beliefs that severely hinder our effectiveness as human beings. One of those incorrect beliefs is that a person's past remains all- important. Because something once strongly influenced one's life, it remains forever the determining factor in feelings and behaviour. We cannot un-condition ourselves and change even if we want to.”⁴⁶

Emotions that are blocking healing need to be identified and the next step then formulated, e.g. where fear or repulsion at the idea of God as a particular gender is a block, the alternative of finding and using a life giving, perhaps gender neutral image is a way forward.

On discussing a common false image of God ‘the paradoxical judging yet self sacrificing and loving God’ adopted by victims of abuse, David Riddell raises the question “has He, or has he not, renounced the use of force to achieve His ends?” This question needs to be answered by the directee who clings to this image, before trust can grow.⁴⁷ Other blocks are: fear of intimacy with God; a reluctance in the directee to give up cherished ways of being; fear of the

⁴⁴ Thomas, Carolyn: is a Sister of Charity of Nazareth, who is a professor of Biblical Studies at Brescia College, Kentucky.

⁴⁵ Albert Ellis and Robert Harper, ‘A New Guide to Rational Living’ (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975) pp88-195

⁴⁶ Thomas Carolyn: “Will the Real God Please Stand Up” Healing our dysfunctional Images of God; Paulist Press, New York, 1991, p 5

⁴⁷ Riddell D: Nelson, N.Z. d.riddell@clear.net.nz in his ‘Living Wisdom and Counselling Skills’ work, has written a helpful article on “‘Toxic Religion’ in New Zealand Churches Today”. When commenting on the image of the “Vindictive God” he states “that God in Christ in fact judges no-one directly, is not understood, for the scriptures that teach that our wrong choices determine our destiny, and therefore we determine and deliver our own judgement, have not been grasped by evangelical leaders. Our alienation, anger and self hatred is our judgement, and is repeatedly self-chosen to the point where we lose the power to choose any other.”

unknown or of rejection etc, absence of hope, the use of defences which are providing a ‘pay-off’, dependency on others or substances and various attachments.

Dealing with these blocks causes the directee great pain, vulnerability and risk, e.g. altering how a painful memory is viewed, trying to forgive where a great injustice has been encountered, and processing grief, disappointment and betrayal. Pride and fear are hard to give up. As directors, we keep at the forefront of our minds the directee’s free will about when and how to face these difficult blocks, while seeking for God’s provision about timing and procedure. To provide a balanced approach with the directee, we attend to the difficulties while also identifying God’s healing work and provision in the directee’s life.

The group of spiritual directors responded to the question “**what blocks or hindrances do you observe in your directees as they are invited to change their images of God?**” in the following categories:

Self-image;

- that shows inability to accept and love the self,
- inability to receive love and forgiveness from God.

Emotions:

- suffering that could not be rationalised
- fear, that limits self-development
- anger
- guilt.

Resistance:

- evasion
- unbelief
- outright refusal to change.

Social and theological blocks

- originating from family
- originating from church
- originating from Christian culture.

[Refer to appendix 4 for more detail.]

Resources for the work; reference points and tools

The tools for this work are all those tools we draw on in the work of spiritual direction, many of which have already been mentioned. It seems that every subject encountered in spiritual direction seems to overlap with this issue of how a person views God. Therefore any of the areas addressed will potentially positively impact a directee's image of God. As a 'director in formation', I drew extensively from the Spiritual Growth Ministries Course Spiritual Director's Formation Manual and bibliography, and the Mercy Centre, Epsom for high quality, current resources and workshops.

Spiritual Director's answer to the question **“what are the 3 most helpful books or resources, or tools you use for reference in this issue?”**

- books –[see Appendix 5],
- direction skills: questioning, listening, reflecting, dream work, use of imagination, use of drawing, pictures, and music as part of reflection

- the director's personal testimony of moving away from unhelpful image to life giving one
- exploration and development of prayer
- use of stories.

Conclusion

My impression of New Zealand Spiritual Directors' work in healing dysfunctional images of God is of proficiency. They recognise the alerting signs of this complex issue and implement a multi-dimensional approach to the work. Their responses to their directees demonstrate creativity, loving respect, faith in God and a broad range of skills and resources. I conclude from the high level of response to the questionnaire, and range of thoughtful answers they gave, they also view this as a central and sensitive issue – one that demands great care and wisdom in addressing it.

In exploring this topic, I have been 'struck' by the centrality of the issue of how we view God. This is the heart of Spiritual Direction – our comprehension of God and our reaction to God. I was unaware of the importance of self-awareness, the more we know ourselves and align ourselves with God, while recognising God's presence and action within ourselves – the greater the connection with God. Discernment – 'prayer in action' is the dynamic that is developed through out life for bringing clarity and healing. For the directee with a distorted God-image, [and all of us have this to some extent] there is great hope for change and healing as personal history, self-image, inter-personal relationships and God's action in these are explored, with the companionship of a spiritual director. The spiritual director, with much patience and gentleness, has the opportunity to embody a 'human' Christ and provide a place of healing and growth, as much as he or she is able to address her/his own life and state with God.

Appendix 1: This is the questionnaire that was distributed to Spiritual Directors in New Zealand.

I am a participant in the Spiritual Directors Formation Programme with Spiritual Growth Ministries, in the second year. I am researching the issue of ‘**how to identify and work with a directee who has a disturbed or dysfunctional image of God**’, [i.e. an image that is negatively impacting their relationship with God, self and others]. As part of my research, I am asking spiritual directors if they would take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire, in order to gain a practical understanding of this issue as is found in the practice of spiritual direction. The data gathered from the questionnaire will become part of the basis of a reflection on the issue, together with some suggestions and resources for work in ‘healing dysfunctional images of God.’

Please feel free to answer this questionnaire [as soon as you are able up until September 30th] as generally or fully as you feel able, and be assured that your personal identity will be kept confidential. Once this research is completed, the answered questionnaires will be destroyed/deleted. Please indicate if you would like to read the report before it is submitted for assessment.

The completed questionnaire can be returned by email cochran@maxnet.co.nz or by post to :
Mrs Gay Cochran
6a Hillsdale Road
Hillsborough
Auckland
Ph (09) 625 0099

Questionnaire

1. In your practice as a spiritual director, what signs or markers alert you to the fact your directee has a distorted image of God?
2. What approach do you take with a directee when you sense significant development or healing is needed in her/his image of God?
3. What blocks or hindrances do you observe in your directees as they are invited to change their image/s of God?
4. What are the 3 most helpful books, resources or tools you use for this issue?
5. Have you worked with images of God that come particularly from this land or the races and cultures here?

Please give examples of such images and how you would work with them.

6. What question or mystery do you encounter in this area that would be great to explore further?

Are there any other comments, questions or observations you would like to make?

Thank you for your thoughts, time and attention, I really appreciate it.

Appendix 2: Signs Of Dysfunctional Image Of God

Prayer: must be victorious, prayer that is motivated by fear, fear of intimacy with God, reluctance to share what actually happens in prayer.

Image of God: God is seen as demanding, punishing, God takes sides, God is seen as angry, vengeful and changes His mind; any statements that oppose the idea of a loving God who gave up His son, the need to be perfect in one's approach to God, where God is not viewed as Mystery and beyond our understanding, a view that God could be an exaggerated sense of self, of being able to manipulate God or a view of God limited to a very narrow aspect of life.

Emotions: fear; fear of own mortality, holds back in fear, hiding /repressing feelings, especially anger and resentment, expressions of guilt and remorse that are inappropriate, overwhelming and lasting anger.

Attitude: unforgiveness, inflexible to other views, busy-ness, excessive use of 'should' and 'ought' – dutiful words, feels overly responsible for others, judgemental attitudes, intolerance of difference, emphasising law over love.

Resistance / defence mechanisms: sidestepping, compartmentalism [not integrating their life with God with the whole of life].

History: absentee parent or parents when the child needed them, guilt feelings when self care is pursued, being out of kilter with effective maps of human living, behaviour that cramps the person's freedom to be more fully human, perfectionism,

Self-concept: Sense of not being good enough, inability to value themselves e.g. do something purely for personal pleasure.

Non-verbal signs: tone of voice may indicate a problem in how they view God, when they are describing Him, cancelling appointments or arriving late.

Beliefs: superstition, cargo – cult expectations, biblical literalism.

Appendix 3: Approach To The Work Of Healing

Part of the approach is ‘being’ the role of the director – the accompanier, one who slowly, lovingly and patiently helps clarify, walks as if ‘on eggshells’, is trustworthy, focuses on God’s love for the directee and a model of God’s love. The director respects the directee’s belief, no matter how ‘distorted’ it may be, and resists making connections for the directee, allowing the directee time for reflection on the dichotomy between head and heart. Believe that God is constantly in the process, allowing the person to ‘grow through’ the struggle – this is the path of healing.

The director’s skills: Help the directee to discover and compare who God is, historically and now. Name or describe God using word pictures, explore feelings, draw, notice how dearly an image of God is held, and focus on an appealing member of the Trinity.

Ask questions, listening skills – reflect words and feelings, and clarify. Affirm the directee, explore childhood recognition and teachings about God, offer scripture, educate about images of God, use humour with care to encourage a lighter attitude, and address practical issues [referral]. Introduce other prayer styles: simple prayer, prayer styles to engage the directee with God’s creativity, mystery, beauty and compassion – prayer that invites worship and awe. Explore story telling and it’s interpretation, reflect on the person’s own life and self –image, confront reliance on idols and past conditioning and offer a contrary view of God note their reaction.

Attempt to find the source of the distorted image and explore how God operates in present life with the directee.

Appendix 4: Spiritual Directors responded in this way to the question “*what blocks or hindrances do you observe in your directees as they are invited to change their image/s of God?*”

Blocks cited came into the following categories:

Self image /personality issues e.g. non self-acceptance; unbelief about being forgiven and unconditionally loved by God, fear of loving themselves; painful childhood experiences which have damaged self esteem; lack of ego strength, defining self as a victim, personality traits, e.g. a two [enneagram – unable to receive care and approval]. An indicator of a block might be e.g. a quiet person becoming quieter and an extrovert, noisier.

Suffering that cannot be rationalised by the directee was mentioned.

Resistance and use of defences: e.g. evasion, busy-ness, late or cancelled appointments, distractions, disbelief, and outright refusal.

Social and theological blocks such as conditioning in families, churches and Christian culture were mentioned.

Emotions: Fears were mentioned the most: e.g. of loving him/herself, of change, of making mistakes, of diminished support if they ‘let go’, anger at injustice and deception, guilt, sense of disloyalty to peers, family and friends.

Observations:

1. the dysfunctional images of God are generally self reinforcing
2. the blocks to change /healing are often related to gains from clinging to the previous image e.g. an unforgiving God means I don’t have to forgive.

Appendix 5: Resources:

Books: [♦ Mentioned more than once]

Sheila Pritchard's Distance Learning Course from BCNZ – Spiritual Formation Part 1 Ch's 2 & 3 – prayer as relationship ♦

Will the Real God Please Stand Up: Healing Our Dysfunctional Images Of God Carolyn Thomas Paulist Press, 1991) ♦♦

The Many Faces of God, Dennis Keller (Ave Maria Press 1991)♦

The Smile of Love, Joyce Huggett

Noon to Nightfall, Mary d'Apice

Working With Fear Of Masculine God

Scripture ♦♦ e.g. reflect God's love, John 10.10 ♦

Is Your God Too Small? [author not stated]

Finding God in all Things, Margaret Hebblethwaite

Paper by Joyce Hugget 'Inaccurate Images of God' March 1998

God and You, William Barry

Holy Invitations, Jeannette A Bakke

Good Goats, Linn brothers

Texts for healing the inner child ♦

Handout with names /pictures of scriptural images of God

Books: Experience of the mystics, prayer, scriptural interpretation and meaning, enneagram.

Contemplative literature: Main, Freeman, Chittister, Merton, Bruteau – [for self-reference].

Referral

When there has been a history of abuse, recommend counselling, concurrent with spiritual direction.

Skills the Director Uses

- working questions such as ‘discovering who God is for the directee.’
- Dream work
- Drawing: Interactive Drawing Therapy, to explore images of God, means of understanding unconscious activities and tensions
- friendly, non judging support
- asking questions e.g. ‘where does this lead to?; ‘where is this taking you?’ ‘who in the Godhead do you relate to most easily at this time?’
- explore and develop prayer
- stories of other people; struggles of saints who are normally imagined to be rather inhuman in their perfection

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