

WHAT IS THE CHARACTER OF YOUR GOD?:
HOW OUR PERSONAL IMAGES OF THE DIVINE
CAN IMPACT OUR LIVES

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The renowned bible scholar, Marcus J. Borg, writes, “Tell me your image of God, and I will tell you your theology.”¹ In other words, he believes he can accurately describe much about a person’s larger religious outlook simply by knowing some of the attributes and qualities of character they assume about the Divine. As presumptuous as Dr. Borg’s assertion might sound, my experiences as a mental health professional have given some credence to a psychological version of his claim. I have found that individuals who suffer from specific types of psychiatric difficulties tend to hold certain images of God in common. While it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know which came first—the god-image or the emotional disturbance—it has been nonetheless meaningful to me in my attempts to assist those with such problems to take note of their images of God’s character, as such images are often diagnostic. The more disturbed my clients’ image of God, the more emotionally dysfunctional their lives are likely to be, and vice-versa. Moreover, my experiences at BYU-Idaho have shown me that not only do unhealthy god-images have a detrimental impact on students, including their abilities to learn in the classroom, but unhealthy god-images also influence some of us employees in terms of our own psychological equanimity and life-outlook. Becoming more aware of our god-images can empower us to make choices about them which can affect for good not only our own lives, but our students’ lives as well.

While Latter-day Saint doctrine spells out for us some of the general attributes of the Supreme Being, it is we who fill in the nuances of God’s character and personality. Church members will likely agree upon basics of God’s person: that he is an exalted man. However, if we were to take the time to interview members of the Church in depth, asking questions such as, “What is God’s character or personality like? What does God care about?” we would likely be surprised at the wide divergence of views held. For example, some would see God as easily disappointed, swift to take offense, prone to anger, conditionally loving, strict and harsh in meting out punishments, and most concerned with the purity of humankind, while others would see God as patient, tolerant, understanding, unconditionally loving, not easily upset or offended, and most concerned about human beings living together in love and compassion. Still others would likely have images blending these and other characteristics. How do we explain this diversity in perception? How do we come to our various views of

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God, and how might such images impact our life experience? Pursuing these questions, I will consider certain human tendencies thought to be basic and universal by experts in human behavior which shape our evolving perceptions and beliefs about the nature of reality, including the character and personality of God. Finally, I assert that we as a faculty will be well-served in becoming more aware of not only our students' god-images, but our own as well. I advocate the promotion of a more charitable god-image in our campus classrooms and in our individual lives not only because I believe it is the most hopeful view of the divine available to us, but also because I believe it is the image of the divine most likely to be accurate.

In discussing these issues, I am not attributing anything to God; rather, I am attempting to clarify how different concepts of God's character occur to individuals because of their own attributions. I am also discussing some of the therapeutic implications of these concepts of Deity as people fashion them for themselves.

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

In his 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*,² cultural anthropologist Becker goes to great lengths to articulate realities of the human condition in stark existential terms. Becker's primary thesis is that the uniquely human awareness of death underlies the more superficial motivations for all of our mental and physical activity.

As a foundation for his argument, Becker relies upon the thought of the 19th Century Danish theologian/philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who made the observation, "It is both *awesome* and *dreadful* to be alive."³ Kierkegaard realized that human nature is a union of opposites: we are both symbolic self (mind), and creature (body). On the *awesome* side, Kierkegaard noted that our mind is capable of both self-awareness and abstract thought. As a result, we "know" that we exist in a way that no other animal does, which in turn makes possible uniquely human transcendent experiences, such as unbridled joy, awe, wonder, and rapture. Because of the uniqueness of our minds, we have the capacity to contemplate the vastness of the universe as well as the minuteness of the atom. We can imagine ourselves at any place in time and space. While reading these words, for example, we can imagine ourselves looking out of the torch at the top of the Statue of Liberty on a balmy, summer afternoon in New York City contemplating what it might be like to walk on the surface of the moon. We can also imagine objects and images which don't yet exist and then work to bring them into existence. As Becker puts it, "This immense expansion...this ethereality, this self consciousness gives to [humankind] literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew."⁴

Yet, on the *dreadful* side, because of these same mental abilities, we know in a way no other animal does that our existence on Earth is finite. Despite the fact that our daily conscious perceptions and feelings suggest to us that we are in fact immortal, we know at a deeper, less accessible level that this is not true. We bear the unique burden of the explicit awareness that our god-like minds are housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body which is subject to decay and death. We are, in this very real and important sense, no different from a worm, and will eventually be “food for worms.”⁵ But this is not all. As human beings, we’re also concurrently aware of the fact that death can occur at any time for reasons that no one could ever anticipate or control.⁶ Just within the last six months, for example, three friends of mine, all in their late thirties to late forties, have faced permanent, life-altering circumstances: paraplegia resulting from a horseback riding accident, loss of the ability to speak or walk as the result of a massive brain aneurism, and death resulting from a glider crash. While I’ve never flown in a glider and rarely ride horses, it is true that similarly drastic occurrences could happen to me on any given day—just as none of my friends saw these incidents coming or they would have taken steps far in advance to prevent them. Becker’s point is that the on-going awareness of the human condition—that we have a symbolic, seemingly immortal sense of self, but also an awareness of our constant vulnerability as mortals—does not sit well with the average human being. In fact, Becker asserts that we would literally be paralyzed with abject terror if the reality of our situation was all we ever thought about.⁷ All of this creates a tremendous cognitive problem for us. In order to resolve some of the existential tension, we engage in considerable “mental gymnastics” in order to alter reality into a form which we can manage.

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OUR NEED TO BOTH CREATE AND REPRESS REALITY

Drawing upon the best conclusions from some of the most insightful and astute observers of the human predicament,⁸ Becker asserts that human beings solve the problem of mortality by relying on three processes: *culture*, *repression*, and *transference*. According to Becker, we manage our basic death anxiety by investing in our society’s worldview and symbols (thus creating for ourselves a reality where we are “persons of value in a universe of meaning”⁹), by successfully pushing out of consciousness those aspects of our situation which remind us of our eventual demise, and by investing ourselves—as children—in the powerful adults who surround us in order to feel more secure. These three mechanisms work together to create a bulwark against ongoing, conscious, mortality awareness.

Culture: The Creation of Reality

Through building our cultures, we create certain realities. Becker makes the point that every culture offers its members numerous death-denying properties. First, all cultures are human constructions organized around beliefs about the nature of reality that are shared by their members in order to minimize the collective anxiety engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death.¹⁰ In other words, each culture provides its members with answers to universal, cosmological questions about the nature of life, such as, “Where do I come from? Why am I here? What happens to me after I die?” Second, each culture further allays death anxiety by providing its constituents with engaging “heroic” activities and social roles to participate in. These activities, whether hunting and gathering, investment banking, mothering, or mining, take up our time and help us feel like important, contributing individuals. Third, each culture provides prescriptions of acceptable conduct for these roles, the satisfaction of which allows the members of the community to perceive themselves as persons of value in a purposive universe. In short, culture’s ability to *lend meaning* and *confer significance* to its members is what gives it death denying properties.¹¹ However, culture by itself doesn’t possess the power to cause us to simply forget about or deny the realities of our situation. For that, we rely on our in-born capacity to become selectively oblivious to reality.

Repression: The Denial of Reality

Through repression, we deny certain realities. Repression is the forceful ejection from consciousness of impulses, memories, experiences, or realizations that are threatening, painful, shameful, and anxiety-provoking, such that they can no longer be consciously remembered.¹² Repression (which was *the* great discovery of Sigmund Freud) is considered by secular experts to be an adaptive response or self-protective “defense” of the psyche, hard-wired into us over millennia, giving us a better chance of survival and perpetuation as a species. It consists, in essence, of a selective narrowing or paring down of conscious experience into manageable portions, allowing certain aspects or “versions” of one’s thoughts and perceptions to remain accessible to consciousness, while banishing out of awareness those aspects of life which prove to be too threatening or overwhelming.¹³ And what is it that human beings find threatening or overwhelming? First and foremost is the incongruity of our symbolic, seemingly immortal sense of self with the fact that our corporeal bodies are perpetually vulnerable. Repression allows us to go on with life, attending to the multitudinous and often trivial tasks of existence without being overcome by the knowledge of our mortality. Dr. Gregory Zillboorg of the New York Medical College puts it this way:

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In normal times, we move about without ever believing in our own death, as if we believed in our own corporeal immortality.... If this fear were constantly conscious, we should be unable to function normally. It must be repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort.... A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, that he does not really care. He is having a good time with living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it—but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed.¹⁴

But in addition to this most basic concern, life presents us with a plethora of other problems. And here again, Becker is instructive.¹⁵ He notes that human beings do not come into life with a ready-made sense of inner value and basic security. While nature lends such support to the other forms of life on the planet by imbuing them with automatic instinctive programming, human beings have to build and earn inner value and security. As children, we must repress our smallness in the adult world, our failures to live up to adult commands and codes. Throughout our lives, we must repress our own feelings of physical and moral inadequacy, not only the inadequacy of our good intentions, but also our guilt and our evil intentions: the death wishes and hatreds that result from being frustrated and blocked by others. We must repress our parents' inadequacy, their anxieties and terrors, because these make it difficult for us to feel secure and strong. We must repress our own compromising bodily functions that symbolize our mortality, our fundamental expendability in nature. What all this means is that all human beings have their own unique versions of what constitutes reality, as each of us have idiosyncratically "selected in" and "selected out" aspects of what our lives have presented to us. This contributes to the extraordinary variability in the breadth and sophistication of our understanding of what life is all about, including what God is like.

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While we as Latter-day Saints will reject Becker's notions that our beliefs about the existence of God, the plan of salvation, and so forth are merely man-made cultural constructions created to help us deal with the reality of our own mortality, Becker's ideas about repression and humankind's ability to "create one's own reality" have some explanatory utility with respect to our highly idiosyncratic and personalized images of Divinity's personality.

Transference: Projecting Our Past Into Our Present

As children, we find great safety in the presence of our parents who are so much larger, more powerful, and seemingly all-knowing. Parental approval and affection become for us the currency of our very existence. In our desires to win and maintain approval from them, and thus to feel safe and protected in the world, we come to view our parental figures as

ideals. Our highest ambition is to obey the all-powerful mother or father, to believe him or her, to imitate him or her. If we are taken care of well enough by our parental figures, we will most likely come to have a sense of basic trust in the world as a nurturing, life-sustaining place where we can begin to venture out in new ways, provided these same parental figures are close at hand to give us comfort, guidance, and reassurance. On the other hand, if the care we receive isn't good enough, it is unlikely that such perceptions will take hold. Instead, we will come to mistrust the intentions of others and lack faith in life's capacity to reward our efforts with desirable outcomes. It will also be hard to believe ourselves to be essentially lovable.

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Regardless of our parents' adequacy or inadequacy, over time we imprint upon them, coming to see them as representing "the way the world really is." In this process, our patterns of relating with them become archetypes for our modes of perceiving and relating to others, often for the remainder of our lives. Psychologists have referred to these relational "modes" as *transference*: set ways of perceiving and responding to the world which are developed via our early childhood relationships with primary caregivers. Such relational patterns are typically appropriate for our childhood environments but are often inappropriately transferred into our adult environment.¹⁶ Again, Sigmund Freud first noted the phenomenon of transference when he realized that some of his patients reacted to him as though he were a parent, and that female patients often tended to "fall in love" with him. Freud concluded that, during therapy sessions, patients were unconsciously transferring onto him the feelings and attitudes they had toward early significant figures in their lives. Initially, he simply noted the phenomenon but did not see it as being important. With time, however, he came to realize that transference was the engine driving his patients' problems in the present. Thus, he came to believe that understanding and addressing the transference relationship between the patient and the therapist was the curative factor in psychoanalysis.

For a more concrete example, take the case of a husband and wife having an argument about the general upkeep of their house. The wife has unresolved traumatic incidents from her past in which she was beaten by her father for leaving clothing on her bedroom floor and for other minor transgressions. The husband (who has no history of behaving in a violent fashion but does have a temper) raises his voice and begins to vent at his wife for leaving some of her clothing on their bedroom floor, thus re-stimulating traumatic memories. She proceeds to curl up into a fetal position, crying, "Please don't hit me!" This couple may indeed have some relational problems which need attention, but in this situation, it is clear the wife is transferring her mode of responding to her father in the past onto her husband in the present. In this sense, the transference

portion of their relationship is projected from the past and is thus “unreal” because such responses are informed by the past impacting a circumstance in the present for which they may or may not be appropriate.

Transference not only works in the context of all types of human relations,¹⁷ but also in almost any ambiguous situation we face. Once Freud realized the significance of transference in understanding core aspects of his patients’ problems, he began to tailor his psychotherapeutic approach to further encourage or enhance transference reactions. He believed that by providing as little therapeutic structure as possible in his sessions—sitting out of view behind his reclining patient, encouraging them to “free associate,” or in other words, to talk about whatever came to mind, no matter how seemingly absurd or unimportant—the ambiguousness of the situation would work to bring forth the patients’ transferences. He could then assist the patients in making these transferences conscious, interpreting them, and ultimately resolving them.

Whether or not we see utility in Freud’s therapeutic approach or larger system of thought, he was the first to understand in a systematic way that when humans are faced with an ambiguous stimulus, we will project upon that stimulus our own idiosyncratic modes of perceiving the world and behaving in it. This idea has come to be known as *the projective hypothesis*. Freud’s discoveries of transference and the projective hypothesis have profound implications for our understanding of why we perceive and behave as we do, including our assumptions about the character of the God.

“THE BIRTH OF THE LIVING GOD”

Neo-Freudian Anna Maria Rizzuto centered her career around attempting to understand the formation of what she calls the “god representation” during childhood and its modifications and uses during the entire course of life. This process she calls the “birth of the living God.”¹⁸ Although the formation of the god-image is complex, Rizzuto, along with most other specialists who study the phenomenon, sees that a child’s relationship with his parental figures—including his experiences with parents’ attitudes, values, and overall life-outlook—has a significant impact upon his emerging images of God. In a concise summary, Dr. Rizzuto states:

People possess a complex and highly personalized image of God that is derived from early parental experiences, fantasies about the parents, evolving self-representations, and formal and informal religious instruction. Although established early on, this God representation commonly undergoes repeated revision in response to the individual’s increasing capacities and the challenges of each successive life crisis.¹⁹

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In other words, our god-image is a sort of amalgam or *gestalt* of a variety of life experiences including:

1. Our relational experiences with parents and other family members;
2. The images of the divine nature imparted to us by our particular religious tradition (which, of course, is imbedded within a particular cultural worldview and is peopled by individuals who have had their own upbringings and transferences to deal with), and;
3. Personal realizations stemming from the variety of “life-crises” we may have confronted.

Thus, if we are of European decent, we are likely to perceive of God as a white male, and if we are African, as a black male. If one is an Indian born in Bombay, one is likely to become a Hindu and possess what has been described as a pessimistic religious worldview. If one is a white American, born and raised in Nevada, one is more likely to become a Christian than a Hindu and to possess a somewhat more optimistic religious worldview. We tend to believe what the people around us believe, and we tend to accept as truth what these people tell us of the nature of the world and God as we listen and interact with them during our formative years.²⁰

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For many, as they grow in discipline and love and life experience, their understanding of the nature of God’s character naturally grows in tandem. However, others seem to experience little change in their image of the divine character during the course of their lives; the God of their adolescence continues to be the God who reigns for the entirety of their adult lives, in other words. Take, for example, recent statements made by former Republican presidential candidate and founder of the Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson, in response to the town of Dover, Pennsylvania, not voting into office school board members who wanted to include *intelligent design* as part of the regular science curriculum. Robertson said:

I’d like to say to the good citizens of Dover: if there’s a disaster in our area, don’t turn to God. You just rejected him from your city. And don’t wonder why he hasn’t helped you when problems begin, if they begin. I’m not saying that they will, but if they do, just remember, you just voted God out of your city. And if that’s the case, don’t ask for his help because he might not be there.²¹

I would submit that these comments do not portray the reality of God’s nature and character as disclosed by Jesus, but rather, the reality of Pat Robertson’s own projections and assumptions about God. These projections not only give us a potential window into Pat Robertson’s own

conditionally loving parenting style, but perhaps also a glimpse of what it was like for him to grow up in his parents' house.

Why is it that for some, images of the divine nature stay relatively static throughout life, whereas others' views change and evolve? Is a changing god-image necessarily preferable to an unchanging one? These are difficult questions. The way we choose to respond likely has to do with how we understand and define "spiritual growth."

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THE MICROCOSM, THE MACROCOSM, AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A useful definition of spiritual growth is offered by M. Scott Peck in his best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, where he talks about the *microcosm* and the *macrocosm*,²² and how these relate to one's image of God. Peck argues in convincing manner that spiritual growth is a journey out of the microcosm (literally "little world") of the family—with its unique cluster of assumptions, relationship patterns, and transferences—into an ever greater macrocosm²³ (literally, "big world"). In order to escape the microcosm of our previous experience and free ourselves from transferences, including some of our more child-like assumptions about the divine character, it is necessary that we *learn*. Peck asserts that we must continually expand our realm of knowledge and our field of vision through the digestion and incorporation of new information about ourselves, the world, and the universe. He sees "learning something new" as involving the giving up of the old self and the death of outworn knowledge. Developing a broader, more accurate vision requires us to be willing to forsake our narrower vision. Peck acknowledges that in the short run, it is more comfortable to stay where we are, to keep using the same microcosmic map, to avoid suffering the death of cherished notions, including our notions about God's character. But the road to spiritual growth lies in the opposite direction.²⁴ Peck concludes by stating:

There is no such thing as a good "hand-me-down" religion. To be vital, to be the best of which we are currently capable, our religion must be a wholly personal one, forged entirely through the fire of our questions and in the crucible of our own experience of reality.²⁵

Recently re-reading *The Road Less Traveled*, I realized that Peck's understanding of spiritual growth is in many ways analogous to the classical hero myth so often advanced in the world's enduring literature. From Dostoevsky to Hesse, Tolkien to Hardy, Shakespeare to Steinbeck in the West, and from the story of the Buddha to the life of Mohandas Gandhi in the East, hero figures tend to follow the same pattern of leaving the microcosm of the family to enter the macrocosm of the larger, more diverse, more complex world in order to make an authentic contribution to life.²⁶ The essence of their heroism derives from their successfully

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integrating—rather than repressing or disavowing—the new information about themselves and the world which they absorb from their experiences. But how are we to know if the God-images we currently possess, learned through our lived experiences, are healthy, much less, “the best of which we are currently capable”?

“BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM”

As contained in the Gospels, Jesus offered a simple, pragmatic key for discerning truth.²⁷ He encouraged his listeners to focus on the outcomes which flow from differing life approaches in order to determine truth from error. God-like ways of thinking and living eventually lead to peaceful, desirable outcomes, while un-godlike ways of living and thinking ultimately lead to undesirable, negative outcomes. The apostle Paul went on to specifically define some of the positive outcomes resulting from embracing godly worldviews and behaviors. He called these the “fruits of the spirit” which include *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, and temperance*.²⁸ Subsumed in these “fruits” is a God-image which allows us to see ourselves and others as persons of unconditional worth in a universe of meaning, increases our overall psychological equanimity, and enhances our ability to relate with others in an attitude of peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and compassion. On the other hand, God-images that encourage us to experience ourselves and others as individuals of conditional worth, which negatively affect our overall emotional well-being, which impede our ability to be compassionate, peace-loving, or functional in our lives are likely to produce a fair amount of static or “dirty bathwater” around our personal concept of God’s character.

TWO CONTRASTING IMAGES OF GOD: THE
“MONARCHICAL” & “LOVING GOD” MODELS

*How we image God matters because it shapes not only what we think God is like,
but what we think the Christian life is about.*— Marcus J. Borg

The scriptures provide us a myriad of differing and often conflicting perspectives of the divine character. Integrating these into a cohesive picture or image of Deity can indeed be challenging. Because our unique impressions of God’s character are not formed on the basis of God granting us a face-to-face interview, I have often thought of God as *the ultimate ambiguous stimulus*. I say this because the character attributes of God seem so wide open to interpretation based upon cultural influences, family experiences, personal emotional stability, and so forth. Like the example from Pat Robertson above, we often project upon God all manner of our own assumptions, preferences, or “issues” in such a way that they become reality for us.

Biblical scholar Marcus J. Borg notes the wide-ranging metaphors for the image of God from the Old and New Testaments. He has delineated two primary, contrasting images of God endorsed within the Christian world: the “monarchical model” and the “the loving model.”²⁹

He notes that both models of the Christian life are found throughout all periods of Christian history. From roughly the fourth century—when Christianity became the dominant religion of Western culture—to the present, the monarchical model has dominated. But alongside it, as an alternative voice, the loving model has also persisted.³⁰ Many Latter-day Saints typically image God as “Heavenly Father”; thus the perception of their relationship with the divine is as child to parent. Dr. Borg points out that in his many years’ experience as an Anglican minister, the monarchical model:

is softened somewhat when parental imagery is substituted for king imagery, but not too much. When the monarchical God is imaged as a parent rather than as a king, God is primarily seen as the critical parent: God as the disappointed parent, the parent who loves us, yes, but on the whole, isn’t very pleased with how we’ve turned out. In this model, God does love us, but it is conditional love.³¹

While not descriptive of all Latter-day Saints, Dr. Borg’s assertions do seem to be true for at least some. Table A briefly summarizes these two ways of imaging God. One way to self-test might be to ask yourself which of the two contrasting models described most closely approximates your own image of God.

Like any metaphor of God rooted in experience, these two will of necessity contain aspects of truth, but be woefully inadequate to capture the totality of God. The basic point Dr. Borg seems to be making is that both models center around a type of experienced relationship between human beings and God. The primary difference between the two has to do with *what kind* of relationship is perceived to be basic or primary. In the monarchical model, the relationship is based upon human performance measuring up to God’s standards; in the loving model, the relationship is based upon God’s ever-present love for human beings and human beings’ awareness of, and decision about, whether to return that love to God. Another less obvious difference between the two models has to do with what Dr. Borg calls the *politics of purity* versus the *politics of compassion*.³² The monarchical model is more in line with a life-outlook which centers its spiritual life around the quest for personal purity, whereas the loving model is more in line with a life-outlook which centers its spiritual life around the quest to be compassionate. Of course, the ideal is to live a life where our desires for personal purity are in the service of us developing the spiritual strength necessary to be genuinely inclusive and

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compassionate, as Jesus encouraged.³³ However, which view we choose to endorse, according to Borg, Rizzuto, Peck, and others, has less to do with which view is supported by holy writ (as both models are attested to in the scriptures) as it does with which view we have learned, both explicitly, through our formal and informal religious instruction, our culture, family, etc., and implicitly through the unique relational climate which existed between ourselves and our primary caregivers.

Table A. Summary of Contrasting God Images

	Monarchical Model of God	Loving Model of God
Image of Deity	God as King: all-powerful, physically-distant, male figure; God as lawgiver & judge; God of requirements	Jesus as the embodiment—the incarnation—of the love of God; God is forever “in love with us”; God loves all human beings equally; God of compassion
Image of Human Beings	We are subjects who owe the king loyalty & obedience (but we are not good at this); we are defendants on trial to be judged	We are precious in God’s eyes; we are the beloved of God; God is passionate about us, yearns to be in relationship with us
Inherent Metaphors & Logic	Legal/accounting	Relational/romantic
Effects on the Christian Life	Dynamics of obedience, purity, sin, guilt, forgiveness, and meeting requirements become the central Christian ethic; heightened awareness of thoughts, feelings, & behaviors; tendency towards “conditional worth” of human beings; hyper-focus on personal salvation; in-group/out-group emphasis; “God of vengeance” for those who don’t measure up	Compassion as the central Christian ethic; tendency towards “unconditional worth” of human beings; sin & guilt understood as betrayal of relationship and absence of compassion; greater awareness/concern about social justice for all human beings; like God, we are to be concerned about all creatures & creation
Central Problem of Human Life	Sin and guilt; not doing or believing the right things	Estrangement and separation; unfaithfulness (chasing other gods = idolatry)
Ethical Imperative implied by the Model	Be righteous because you will be called to account	Love that which God loves; love in the way God loves

BECOMING CONSCIOUS AND MAKING CHOICES ABOUT GOD

But God hath revealed them unto us by his spirit; for the spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God. — 1 Corinthians 2:10

In addition to the implicit and explicit sources mentioned above, I believe that there is a third source available to us: namely, our personal, conscious choice about what kind of God we are going to worship, based upon the best thinking and feeling we are capable of. Again, the doctrines of our faith may spell out aspects of God's composition for us, but it is we who fill in nuances of God's personality and character.

People are empowered when they become more aware of the hidden assumptions that underlie their perceptions and behaviors. This is because only by becoming conscious of our assumptions can we actually make choices about them. Until consciousness ensues, our underlying assumptions act as a sort of lens, coloring practically everything we experience without our knowledge. So it often takes a "jolt" from life to jar our repressions loose or bring our unconscious assumptions into light. For example, how many Americans became conscious of their own deeply seated prejudice and racism as a result of the lengthy Civil Rights Movement and the inspiring speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.? Though we as a nation still have a long way to go toward becoming more "color blind," as a result of that new awareness, many have re-evaluated their previous beliefs, which has led to a more tolerant and equitable American society. How many U.S. citizens, especially those living in the Northeast, were suddenly jolted into consciousness, becoming acutely aware of the things which mattered most, such as gratitude for life itself and the quality of central relationships, as a result of the events of September 11, 2001? Whether or not the benefits of such "jolts" remain with us for any length of time depends upon how deeply we internalize the new insights.

I have known individuals who endorse what I would call a "hard" version of the monarchical model, and as a result, they live lives of almost daily paralyzing guilt for even the most minor of perceived inadequacies, internal conflicts, or questionable motives (most often having to do with sexuality, it seems). Indeed, in my work as a psychologist, I have not yet met an active, young adult, Latter-day Saint suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) who did not endorse a hard form of the monarchical model where God is imaged as an intolerant, puritanical, quickly offended, and difficult to appease father figure. It doesn't have to be this way.

Becoming more cognizant of the religious impressions we formulated in childhood can be interesting, illuminating, and liberating. Providing answers to the following list of questions can assist in this process:³⁴

The doctrines of our faith may spell out aspects of God's composition for us, but it is we who fill in nuances of God's personality and character.

1. What are my earliest childhood memories associated with God, and with what are these memories associated (church, family, etc.)?
2. Do any particular church lessons or hymns stand out in my memory?
3. When I was a child, did I visualize God? If so, how?
4. What impression did I get about what God wanted from me?
5. By the end of childhood, what “package understanding” of God and Christianity had formed in my mind?
6. What happened to my notion of God and religion during my teen years?
7. During my twenties?
8. Is there a period in my life when my thinking about God changed significantly?
9. How do I think of God now?
10. How satisfied am I with my current thinking?
11. Do I have any perplexities or unsolved conundrums?

Since none of us knows very deeply what God is like, we can make a conscious choice to form a concept of divine personality which “works” for us.

Since none of us knows very deeply what God is like, we can make a conscious choice to form a concept of divine personality which “works” for us; that is, an image of God that both comforts and nurtures us in profound ways, but also motivates us to eschew complacency. What would work for my clients struggling with OCD, for example, would be a more compassionate, grace-full, accepting image of God to counterbalance tendencies to see God as lacking the capacity to understand, empathize with, or tolerate in the slightest degree the nuances of our flawed, imperfect, fallible humanity. What would work for some of my past clients who were inmates at a federal prison would be an image of God who has lofty desires and expectations for his children to counterbalance their tendencies to view God as uncaring or unconcerned about their behavior. My own personal journey has included coming face-to-face, as it were, with the God of my adolescence—who just happened to bear a striking personality resemblance to my father, whom I love and respect very much—and then working to replace this image with one much more in line with my adult life experiences and sensibilities. What I have found works for me is an image of God who loves me and all other human beings unconditionally; a God who is ever-ready to renew a weak or severed tie, or to enrich an already strong bond; but also a God who desires that I grow and continue to improve, who desires that I not become complacent in my search for truth or in my capacity and willingness to love others, that I not grow complacent in my relationship with him.

CHARITY AS THE LITMUS TEST
FOR THE HEALTHINESS OF OUR GOD IMAGE

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

— 1 Corinthians 13:13

Wherefore cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all. — Moroni 7:46

I have come to see great wisdom in the belief that God’s ultimate will for us, indeed the goal for the workings of the Spirit within us, is for us to become more *compassionate, loving, charitable beings*.³⁵ In attempting to portray for his disciples the character of God, Jesus shared two of his most memorable parables: the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. In each story, Jesus depicted a remarkable, central figure whose love and compassion seemed to know no bounds. He encouraged his disciples to “go and do . . . likewise.” In doing so, Jesus turned on its head the conventional wisdom of the day which said that the best way to imitate God was by achieving holiness through purity. In contrast, Jesus insisted that the best way to imitate God was by achieving purity through compassion.³⁶ I believe one of the main reasons he told such parables is that he wanted his disciples to begin to internalize this fuller image of the divine—one which emphasized radical love and compassion, what we Latter-day Saints typically refer to as *charity*.

**Jesus insisted
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If our perceptions of God’s personality do not catalyze in a powerful way our ability to experience and act upon these god-like emotions, then we may have considerable static or misperception in our concept of God. Our behaviors, and the attitudes which inform them, can’t help but reflect the image of God we hold. In order for us to become more charitable beings, we need to internalize an image of a God who not only delights charity, but is himself the epitome of love in action, as was Jesus. Just as a Jihadist, in order to carry out his acts of destruction, needs an image of the divine that approves of human vengeance, violence, and righteous indignation against those deemed impure, we as Christians—those who profess to follow Jesus Christ—need to possess a compassionate, charitable, inclusive image of God to lead the way for us. Somehow, such an image has been very difficult for some among us to internalize.³⁷

Imaging a genuinely charitable God, in other words, a God who loves all of his children unconditionally, does not mean that there is no judgment, that God isn’t more pleased with the lives of some of his children than others, and that God isn’t better able to bless the lives of the obedient than the disobedient. But like the Good Samaritan, it means that God continues to extend himself, even to those who, like the injured Jew, previously rejected him; like the prodigal’s father, it means that God’s love for his children is omnipresent and eternal. A god-image which reflects these characteristics will make us more able

to imitate the peaceful Christ, as he imitated the peaceful, charitable, God of All. ☪

NOTES

1. See Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion To A More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 57.
2. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1974).
3. Sheldon Solomon, "General Introduction to Becker," an address given April 1994 (emphasis added). A cassette tape of his presentation is made available by the Ernest Becker Foundation (Tape #00-0003-A) and can be purchased at: <http://faculty.washington.edu/nelge/literature/default.htm>.
4. Becker, 26.
5. Ibid., 26.
6. Solomon, "General Introduction to Becker."
7. Ibid.
8. Becker's influences are many given his interdisciplinary approach to understanding the motivational underpinnings of human behavior, but some of the most influential include Soren Kierkegaard, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Norman Brown.
9. Solomon.
10. Ibid. This idea is also the basic thesis of Becker's final book, *Escape From Evil*.
11. Ibid.
12. From the definition of *repression* found in *Dictionary of Psychology*, Second Revised Edition (1985), 394-395.
13. *Repression* is not to be confused with *suppression*. Repression is currently understood as a defensive mechanism engaged in on an unconscious level (i.e., a person is not aware that he or she has repressed a memory), whereas suppression is considered to be a conscious, willful, defense mechanism.
14. See G. Zilboorg, "Fear of Death," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 12 (1943): 465-475.
15. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 52.
16. This definition of transference was borrowed directly from M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 46.
17. M. Scott Peck said it well when he noted that "the problem of transference is not simply a problem between psychotherapists and patients, husbands and wives, or parents and children. It is a problem between employees and employers, between friends, between groups, and even between nations. It is interesting to speculate, for instance, on the role transference issues play in international affairs." (*The Road Less Traveled*, 50).
18. See Anna Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
19. Ibid.
20. Peck, 189.
21. See CNN.com's article "Robertson warns Pennsylvania voters of God's wrath: Eight 'intelligent design' school board members lost election" (Thursday, 10 November 2005).
22. See the entirety of "Section Three: Growth and Religion" in Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*.

23. Ibid., 193.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 194.
26. In his classic work, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press, 1949), Joseph Campbell alleges the same sort of idea: that the hero figures from the world's great mythologies, regardless of era or culture, all go through similar processes and experiences.
27. See Matthew 7:16.
28. See Galatians 5: 22-23.
29. See Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion To A More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 61. Dr. Borg refers to this second model as "God as Divine Lover." I have chosen to use the title, "The Loving Model of God" because of my concern that some Latter-day-Saints might not be comfortable with the image of God as a "divine lover," though I personally think Dr. Borg's title is meaningful and even beautiful.
30. Ibid., 61.
31. See Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, 2-3 (found at www.explorefaith.org).
32. See "Jesus, Compassion, and Politics," in Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).
33. See Eloise Bell's wonderful Marcus J. Borg-inspired presentation at the Sunstone Symposium, Fall 2001, entitled, "Our Hands are Clean, Our Hearts are Pure: Are We Too Anal Retentive to Care for the Poor?"
34. See Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, 30.
35. See Matthew 19:19, 22:29; John 13:34, 35; 15:12,17, and 1 Corinthians 13 for just a few scriptural supports for this idea. Dr. Borg also speaks quite eloquently and articulately about this assertion in *The God We Never Knew* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.
36. See Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, especially chapter three, "Jesus, Compassion, and Politics."
37. Some would argue that this difficulty stems from the many legitimate images of a seemingly conditional God portrayed in the scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament. Others would argue that such images are themselves likely to be human projections onto the divine of our own profound difficulty in truly accepting ourselves and others as flawed, imperfect, fallible human beings.