

God: Projection or Reality - The Fun House Mirror God

The title reveals a fact: either God is a projection of human beings (atheistic) or God exists and people recognize Him (theistic).

Regarding the former viewpoint, Sigmund Freud is often quoted: “Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires” (New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis). Karl Marx is regularly quoted for writing “Religion is the opium of the people” (A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right). Atheism certainly is a belief system.

The latter viewpoint is held true and factual for a billion people or so: God exists, always did and always will. Religions promote this view as do many non-religious people.

Genesis 1:27: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” We are *Imago Dei*, in the image of God.

This article affirms God exists as a supreme “being,” immortal, invisible, infinite and immanent among humans on this earth; there is no attempt to disprove or prove either position. The reader has probably decided which alternative, although some agnostics may be open to theistic possibility.

In declaring God exists, does human projection distort the truthful nature of God presented above? Let us find out.

To begin, Alcoholics Anonymous Step Three states, “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*” (Italics are AA’s). In their wisdom this step indicates that everyone has an “understanding” (perception) of God and people can decide for themselves—as long as God is greater, caring, and loving. Period. That is AA’s theology is a nutshell. What matters, however, is one’s understanding of God.

There is a cliché that, behind its familiarity, echoes a profound truth: we make God in our own image. We have the tendency to project on God what is in actuality our own image. In other words, we often project our self-image unto the “God of our understanding” and what we “see” at the bottom of the well is our reflection. Recall that the psychological defense, *projection*, occurs when we project (“throw forth or forward”) what we dislike and avoid about ourselves unto others and are often blinded by the fact. I feel hateful; therefore, I “see” that you are hateful. Recall that Carl Jung called this “projecting the Shadow.”

Metaphorically, the brain is like a movie projector. The mind projects its mental cinema on the projection screen in focus, but superimposes ideas and images on whom or what is viewed. This is akin to seeing someone standing in front of a living-room projection screen when a home movie is running, as the pictures and words flow over the body. Perception is projection, which is why our ideas and images can be inaccurate and illusionary.

Lawrence observed “The map appears to us more real than the land.” The “map” of ideas and images, memories of who said and did what, are permanently recorded and stored—and become self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling. Projection tends to reign.

As a result, we project our self-image upon God. If our self-image is distorted, blurred, or cracked, we assume this also is true of God. God can become our projection screen.

Remember going to a carnival or traveling fair, and gazing into a fun-house mirror? Our image appears ridiculously tall, fat, or warped. This conveys a problem with some of our perceptions and experiences of God. Our “God” may be the God in the fun-house mirror. In my lectures with clients, I call this “The Fun House Mirror God.” Perhaps all that we see is our reflection—darkly. Is the God of our understanding a Fun House Mirror God?

Now we transition into the sources of human images, beliefs, and projections of God. They are based on the following influences: parents, worship backgrounds, peers, media-educational and cultural influences, and life traumas.

1. Our first gods were our caregivers: parents, older siblings, relatives, foster parents, etc. whoever raised us. They were giants and gods who towered over us. They had supernatural powers to make us feel happy or sad, mad or scared, full or empty. Their words were commandments and creeds we better lived by. We had to look upward to see their distant faces. Their wrath petrified us; their voices thundered at us from the heights. As a result, our perceptions of God were colored by our parental gods. If our parent(s) were angry, abusive, critical, and punitive, we tend to project that image unto the God of our understanding. Our fun-house mirror God thundered and sent lightning towards us at our next mistake. If our parent(s) were emotionally distant, cold, and neglectful, our God may also be indifferent, uninvolved, and at best the Deism God, who is caravanning off in some distant universe. Parents who were unpredictable and inconsistent shaped our God as fickle and erratic. Those who gave us steadfast love and discipline, safety and security, compassion, and nurturing enable us to imagine and

understand our God accordingly. This is compounded when different parents displayed various mixtures of these traits.

God wears the face of our parents.

Moreover, if they professed to be faithful to God and worship fellowship (herein limited to Christian influences but the process is identical to other religions), but were critical and perfectionist, we believed the same about God and church—regardless of how often they attended and professed Christ. Children recognize when parents do not practice what they preach. Were they “Do as I say, not as I do?” Did Sunday Christians awake with Monday tirades or hangovers?

If they called us “little devils, Satan’s seeds” and the like, such labels were branded deep within our psyches. How many atheists and agnostics decided upon their beliefs as a result of negative parental and sometimes contradictory religious instruction? How many skeptics unconsciously superimpose Mom and Dad upon God? How many of us have unwittingly projected our parental memories as being indicative of God? In fact, it is illuminating to ask such a client, “How old were you when you first decided that you were an agnostic/atheist?”

2. Next, we can consider church, worship, and preacher/pastor experiences. For those unfortunate individuals who were saturated with sermons, worship schools, and Sacred Writings which emphasized sin, hell, damnation, Satan, demons, and evil, they internalized attitudes and feelings of shame, guilt, fear, anxiety and dread. They often repressed such fearful memories into unconscious depths, away from awareness. How can such legions of hellfire and brimstone sermons by clergy and parents teach that the essence of God is love, care, and compassion? They seem to imply that the powers of darkness are as great as the powers of light. Then, perhaps most importantly, did the clergy live as they preached? We have a knack at discerning hypocrisy in any form—except ours! Jesus criticized “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your eye?” (Matthew 7:1-5). Worst, despite what the media might have us believe, there are a minority of clergy, youth leaders etc. who exploit sexually innocent kids. Could there be a worse betrayal and travesty among church personnel? Those emotional wounds penetrate deeply.

3. Then, we have the influences of our peer relationships. Little needs to be mentioned about the peer group and crowd mentality, especially when adolescence commences. The compulsive teenagers’ need to belong subverts personal beliefs, attitudes, decisions, and

behaviors contrary to the peer-herd majority. Most kids, adolescents, and young adults are mainly interested in buying, entertainment, sensation, and pleasure. Relationships with God are rarely discussed.

4. We are painfully aware how this materialistic culture, through the media of magazines, TV, videos, movies, music, radio, and ads secularizes, satirizes, and scapegoats Christians. The secular media obsesses about and sensationalizes fallen priests and preachers! Most of the media portrayals of the church and clergy have been reduced to absurd caricatures, who at best are farcical and pathetic, and at worst despicable if not diabolical. The nauseating and wicked pedophilic behavior of a minority of priests fuels prejudices against Christianity in general. All ads have at their core “Buy me!” All hand-sized pictorial displays and videos are projections of our secular culture.

5. The last major influence that affects the *God of our understanding* are major life traumas. It is revealing to ask, “Did any event happen that caused you to doubt God, become angry at God, or even made you distrust God?” I have often heard a client in agony cry, “God took my daddy when I was eleven years old.” “Mom’s time came and God took her to live with Him.” We try to make sense out of untimely deaths, spilling tears of bitterness and bewilderment over deaths that may have occurred decades ago—especially deaths that were due to unpredictable sudden factors (accidents, diseases, crime) and innocent or blameless souls suffer wretched consequences. “Grandma was a good Christian woman who never drank and was my real mom, and she died after months from cancer, when I was seven years old. Why did God take her?” When we are in intense and enduring emotional pain, we feel (Psalm 22:1) that God seems absent and distant: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was Jesus’ anguished plea. When such event occurs in childhood (or for that matter, at any time in our lives), we may conclude God was either unable or unwilling to prevent the tragedy from happening. We try to make sense of a God all good and all-powerful, when tragedy strikes (which is called theodicy). This means God does not necessarily will and cause tragedy and trauma to happen, but the universal Christian explanation is that He always wills good to come out of tragic events.

Thus, the major sources and reinforcement for the Fun House Mirror God are parental influences, worship backgrounds, peers, media, educational and cultural influences, and life traumas.

Now what? What is the point of this? The intention is the same as when I present this my clients: to discern what we project from our own images vs. God as He actually is and acts. What follows is a template I use in group exercises.

The following questions are included to help you plumb into your beliefs and relationship with our Lord. You may generate more depth and insight sharing this with some trusted soul. You may need guidance to help deliver you from your distorted and projections of God as both infinite and personal.

What is the nature of God? How do you understand Him? What are God's traits, characteristics, and qualities? Mark those that are applicable to you.

Father	Mother	Judge	Critical
Wrathful	Protector	Power	Distant
Involved	Uninvolved	Above	Within
Punishing	Caring	Indifferent	Merciful

Is God involved in your life? How? How do you know this?

What hinders your relationship with God? Are you stuck? Have unfinished issues? Do you want to make peace with God? You may wish to complete the subsequent open-ended sentences via journaling or sharing with someone.

God:

I doubt You because-

I am disappointed because-

I am angry, resent You because-

I won't forgive You because-

I felt alone, abandoned when-

I wish You would-

I expect You to-

I appreciate You because-

I know that you-

I believe in You because-

What does God expect from you?

What is His purpose for you?

What do you feel God most wants to empower you to do?

Who or what has helped, or will help you to change your negative ideas and images of God?

These questions will guide you into exploring your perceptions and issues with God. You may wish to journal or, better, discuss them with a trusted soul.

In conclusion, perhaps this evocative question gets at the heart of your God understanding: How do you feel about God? Meditate on this deep question. The other question

exposes your basic heart-felt beliefs and is equally worthy of reflection: How does God feel about you?