

# Understanding God images and God concepts: Towards a pastoral hermeneutics of the God attachment experience

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The author looks at the God image experience as an attachment relationship experience with God. Hence, arguing that the God image experience is borne originally out of a parent–child attachment contagion, in such a way that God is often represented in either secure or insecure attachment patterns. The article points out that insecure God images often develop head-to-head with God concepts in a believer's emotional experience of God. On the other hand, the author describes God concepts as indicators of a religious faith and metaphorical standards for regulating insecure attachment patterns. The goals of this article, however, is to highlight the relationship between God images and God concepts, and to provide a hermeneutical process for interpreting and surviving the God image experience.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Given that most scholars within the discipline of Practical Theology discuss the subject of God images from cultural and theological perspectives, this article has discussed God images from an attachment perspective, which is a popular framework in psychology of religion. This is rare. The study is therefore interdisciplinary in this regards. The article further helps the reader to understand the intrapsychic process of the God image experience, and thus provides us with hermeneutical answers for dealing with the God image experience from methodologies grounded in Practical Theology and pastoral care.

## Introduction

In the recent years, studies on God images have been of great importance in the field of pastoral counselling, Practical Theology, missiology, religion, gender and psychology (Counted 2015; Davis 2010; Janssen, De Hart & Gerardts 1994; Janssen & Prins 2000; Knight 2011). Although these studies merely emphasise and re-emphasise the arguments of classic psychoanalytic development (Freud 1913) and object relations (Bowlby 1969; Rizzuto 1979) theories, they are still in some way relevant for understanding the God images. These theories have formed the foundational basis for attachment theory (Ainsworth 1989; Bowlby 1969), from which most psychologists of religion now study the God images (Davis 2010; Davis, Moriarty & Mauch 2013; Hall & Brokaw 1995; Moriarty, Hoffman & Grimes 2006). Although Bowlby (1969) has been recognised as the chief proponent of the attachment theory, it has been described in the recent years as the joint-work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bowlby 1991). Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) describe the development of the God image encoding in their attachment theory as an early contact relationship with a caregiver, especially a parent. This, according to Rizzuto (1970), is formed through 'bodily sensations, behavioural impulses, emotional surges, and perceptions' (Badenoch 2008:4). Bowlby (1969) acknowledges that early interactions with caregivers develop into representations that may last for a long period between individuals and their close *others* – especially their Divine Attachment Figures (DAFs) (e.g. God, Jesus, Mary, Allah, Buddha, etc.). These mental representations, which are also called internal working models by attachment theorists, keep individuals connected to their DAFs, depending on the attachment-related needs they have that can be met by the DAF. Accordingly, the concept of the God image in light of the attachment perspective is seen as the way an individual unconsciously socialises with God at an 'emotional, physiological, relational, largely nonverbal, or usually implicit level' (Noffke & Hall 2007:147).

In contrast, based on Muck (1998) and Dykstra's (1986) propositions, God concepts are often used to down-regulate God images. God concepts are indicators of a relationship experience with God. It plays around with the attachment language categories, as the individual tries to *experiment* or *socialise* with God, in relation to their contextual and emotional situation. For example, if someone says, 'God is the pillar of my strength', it suggests a relationship with a DAF, which portrays God in this sense as 'someone stronger' and therefore a target for proximity. This socialisation confirms Granqvist and Kirkpatrick's (2008) attachment language criteria, where a strong and enduring attachment bond sees attachment figures characterised as targets for proximity, safe

haven, secure base, response to separation and loss, and perceived as stronger or wiser.

Theological literatures have looked mostly at *God concepts* – intellectual, theological, Sunday school, mental-dictionary definition of the word ‘God’ (Rizzuto 1970), and barely reflect on *God images* as experiential, emotional representations of the sort of person an individual imagines God to be (Hoffman 2000; Rizzuto 1970). Whilst there appears to be a scarcity in academic theology specifically discussing God images from a theological cauldron (Hoffman 2000), I have attempted in this article to theologially deal with the issues of God images and God concepts in relation to relevant discussions in pastoral care and counselling. Mostly, arguing that an individual’s God image, on one hand, can be fruitfully described as an attachment bond (Kickpatrick 1986), whereas God concepts, on the other hand, are simply indicators of *journeys* of an individual’s religious faith or theological knowledge of God. God concepts are linguistic and verbal *indicators* that suggest a relationship with God and therefore not necessarily how an individual experience God, as will be seen from here.

## Theological and cultural schemas of the God image

Over the years, Louw (2000, 2008, 2011) has written meritoriously on the subject of God images but from a cultural and theological angle within the history of Christian doctrine. Louw (2000) gave several interpretations on the meaning of suffering in relation to God image experiences. Louw (2000) contends that God images, to a vast extent, are influenced by culture. According to Louw (2000:5), ‘[i]n our postmodern culture many experience God as indifferent to suffering and evil and as an abuser’. Such cultural interpretation of the God experience, though influenced by context, often suggests God’s omnipotence as an imperialistic force, and sometimes, a vulnerable identification of God’s solidarity with our human predicament and history (Louw 2000:6).

Louw (2000) provides us with different theological and cultural hermeneutics for understanding God images on a broader level. The different interpretations for understanding the God image, according to Louw (2000:6), ‘reveal the interaction of faith with culture and contemporary philosophy’. Such interaction with culture and philosophy has made it possible to utilise positive versus negatives labels of people’s understanding of God. Characterisations such as ‘nurturing versus disciplining, masculine versus feminine, benevolent versus wrathful, loving versus punishing, loving versus controlling, and healer versus king are most common’ (Findlay 2009:6).

Louw (2000) highlighted the following God image schemas in his book, *Meaning in Suffering*.

### The Hellenistic schema

According to Louw (2000:6), ‘God is interpreted in terms of a causal and logical principle’. Hence, as the cause and

originator of all things, God is seen in this model in terms of immutability and apathy. Within the Hellenistic schema, God is seen as indifferent to people’s emotional experiences as it does not affect God at all. Inbody (1997:139) describes God in this context as the ‘unmoved mover’; a notion derived from a monotheistic concept of *primum movens* advanced by Aristotle himself.

### The metaphysical schema

In this model, the transcendence of God is understood as being distant from historical events. In other words, God’s revelation to humanity implies ‘God’s concealment’ (Louw 2000:6). Hence, behind every revelation is ‘another God’. This otherness of God, according to Louw (2000:6–7), ‘introduces an ontological schism between God and our human existence’, allowing people to experience *God as the ultimate Being*.

### The imperialistic schema

Drawing from a Constantine perspective of militant power and supremacy, God is here fashioned in the image of the ‘cultural gods’ – the imperial rulers of the Ancient empires (Louw 2000). Louw (2000:7) further describes the *imperialistic schema* as a Caesarian understanding of God, where ‘God reigns as a Caesar and therefore determines [all aspects of] life’. According to Louw (2011), in a quest to understand divine power, two things can happen. On the one hand, our God image can become ‘too small’, or ‘too big’. If God is empathised with the human experience and does nothing about it, then God is too small. On the other hand, if God is associated as a God who can do ‘just anything’ in his omnipotence, then God is too big. As it has been for years, the church has given God such theistic attribute of omnipotence, which has ideally portrayed God as the ‘official Head of a powerful establishment’ (Louw 2000:7); therefore representing God’s kingdom in terms of an empire. Within this context, Louw (2000) argues that God becomes merely a Hellenistic *Pantokrator* – a God that is powerful because of his authority and physical strength in relation to the church establishment.

### The patriarchal schema

In this model, God is understood as one acting as a Patriarch and therefore dominates his creatures with moral obedience. As Patriarch, negative God images are sustained because of the moral demands of a very stern, patriarchal God whose actions are regarded in terms of purification, edification and retribution. Louw describes God here as ‘an authoritarian Father’ (Louw 2000:7).

### The hierarchical schema

This model emphasises how life is viewed in hierarchy of system, position and differentiation. At stake here, are frictions over status, importance and position along the lines of class differences (Louw 2000). In such a model, people’s understanding of God is influenced by the clash between an

ordered system, especially the tension between superiority and inferiority. God therefore is seen here as royal King, Lord and ruling Judge (Louw 2000:7).

### The economic and materialistic schema

An understanding of God in this model is drawn from the perspectives of wealth, achievement, and affluence. Louw (2000:7) describes God here as a 'public idol: a God who safeguards prosperity'. This God image model sees God as one who serves our selfish needs. Hence, the kingdom in the words of Louw (2000:7) becomes a 'good investment to bypass tragedy'. Within this context, God is understood as a stock exchange manager who gives back and attends to those who invest in his *kingdom shares*.

### The political and societal schema

Liberation theology plays much of the role here, as individuals within a liberation struggle begin to see God as one who sides with their struggle against marginalisation. Hence, God becomes a 'liberating God who sides with the oppressed [and] takes care of the underdog as well as those discriminated against' (Louw 2000:7). Within this context of justice, God is seen as playing a role in the human *dreams* of freedom and intervention. According to Louw (2000:7), 'the kingdom of God is interpreted in terms of the exodus theme, this images God as a Liberator and a Freedom Fighter'.

However, Louw's understanding of God images seems limiting and somewhat restrictive, as it does not explain the intrapsychic and inductive processes leading to the development of a God image schema. The challenge with the theological and cultural schemas of God images presented by Louw (2000) has to do with its emphasis on sociopolitical theory rather than the interpersonal emotional understanding of God, which results when an individual socialises with God on a personal level as an attachment figure. Louw's interpretation of the God image from such paradigm model therefore seems too restrictive.

Bosch warns against using a paradigm model in discussing identity crisis because of its complexity. The idea of paradigm is very intriguing and often times confusing. This is because the goal of a paradigm is 'to understand the dynamics of relationships between the knowledge/meaning, power, and identity' (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford 2001:46) and not necessarily its processes. To understand the nature of these relationships, Rizzuto (1979) advises us to look at how individuals experience God, which according to her, is a 'relationally and experientially constructed phenomenon [that is] organic [in nature] and can be cast and recast throughout the life cycle' (Rizzuto 1979 cited in Frawley-O'Dea 2015:169). Regardless of its organic nature, God images should also reflect the 'relevant historical, cultural, political, religious and spiritual, communal, and personal experiences and relationships' (Frawley-O'Dea 2015:169). A paradigm approach to God images would consider the God image experience of members of a 'scientific community'

within their relevant historical and cultural contexts. Such a *paradigm* would be what members of a scientific community, and they alone, share and therefore do not necessarily reflect the *individuality* and *peculiarity* of their experience (Kuhn 1974:470). Such an approach is a 'secondary step' and only serves to 'confirm and legitimize the idea or principle' (Bosch 1991:421). Kahn also argues that in order to understand the nature of an experience of any scientific community in a paradigm model, such community needs to be first isolated and studied, in order to understand the inter-relationships and processes of their experience.

The processes of the internal interactions of the God image dynamics are important. Therefore, an interpretative approach to the understanding of human experiences would help us understand the interpersonal nature of the God image experience. Such an approach would also help us focus analytically on the God image experience, as we disclose and show how those meaning-making practices shape the observable God image outcomes.

Bosch advises, '[i]nstead of starting from classically derived principles and theories' one has to start 'with observation' (Bosch 1991:421) in order to shift and coexist 'peacefully with one another' and move away from debate that 'no longer centre around what was *true*, but around what were *practically* [more specifically, pragmatically] the right things to do' (Bosch 1991:422).

In order to recommend a God image theology of healing that would be 'manifestly the best' (Bosch 1991:422), it is important to come to grips with how the God image dynamics really works. There is therefore an urgent need to understand the 'ugly ditch' (Bosch 1991:422), given that the Christian church, in the words of Bosch (1991:422), 'is always in the process of *becoming*' and as a result 'theology is a reflection on the church's own life and experience'.

Interpreting the observable outcomes of our human experience would help us understand the content of our internal conflict and our God image because every human experience is a product of the seed of the past, according to psychoanalytic and object relations theorists (Bowlby 1988; Rizzuto 1979). Louw's (2000) cultural and theological schemas seem to lack such interpretative elaboration and do not inspire such *historical* retrospect. An elaboration about the product of the past as the seed of the future in relation to Louw's God image hermeneutics is much needed to better understand the observable God image outcomes theologically and culturally.

This is not to undermine the great work done by Louw in contributing theologically to the God image argument. In my opinion, I feel there is a need to revise theologically the God image hermeneutics; thus elaborating on how each of the suggested God image schemas really works. Studies that would contribute to such scholarship would bring Louw's great contribution to pastoral care to *perfection*.

Regardless, Louw's model seems appropriate in discussing the God image as a phenomenon but on a general, deductive level. The psychoanalytic approach of attachment theory seems to be more robust and realistic for understanding how the God image contagion works from *cradle to the grave*.

## Attachment theory and the God image

One of the aims of this article is to use attachment theory as the explanatory framework for understanding the God image contagion (Davis 2010; Granqvist & Kickpatrick 2008). Attachment theorists argue generally that the mental representations of the self in relation to close *others*, developed from a parent-child relationship, are actively reflected in a child's social relationships even in to adulthood (Bowlby 1988; Davis 2010; Pietromonaco & Feldman Barrett 2000). This mental representation of self in relation to close *others* is what Bowlby (1988) calls the internal working model (IWM). The IWMs, according to Bowlby (1969), initially develop through early childhood experiences with a parent or caregiver, but remain open to modification and specification across a life time through contact and dealings with attachment figures or close *others* such as friends, parents, partners, divine attachment figures and so on (Bowlby 1988; Davis 2010; Siegel 1999).

Bowlby (1973) understood IWMs as the image of self, others, and self-with-others since the IWMs of a person inform how the individual relate with others. IWMs influence an individual's behaviour in social relationships, particularly an attachment figure (AF). The nature of one's IWMs also determines how an individual responds to the availability of an AF to impulses of support, security and protection.

Attachment theory shows us how the attachment structure impels the caregiver to function as a secure base, a safe haven, and a target for proximity from where the infant engages the world in exploration (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978). However, the quality of such a relationship, according to Bowlby (1988), is determined by the history of interactions and the extent to which a person depends on an attachment figure as a source of security and comfort (Bowlby 1988).

Real life events and situations such as divorce, separation, loss, betrayal, abandonment, illness or the inability to practice affection, according to attachment theorists (Davis 2010; Granqvist & Kickpatrick 2008), can interfere with the natural bonding process between the child and his or her caregiver. Such kind of inconsistencies or difficulty experienced during an early bonding process disrupt the attachment process, from where the toddler grows to develop a coping style – a way to deal with a difficult experience – that serves as a defence mechanism to down-regulate their God attachment and God image crisis. Certainly, this depends on which coping style has been most effective for healing the severity of abandonment they experienced during childhood (Gardner & Stevens 1982).

From the early beginnings, such coping styles might transmute into an insecure attachment tendency of self-reliance and distrusting of others. Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) expatiate on the insecure or negative attachment styles such as anxious and avoidant insecure styles. The former tends to develop a child's dysfunctional perceptions of their self and close others, which often is caused by an inconsistent parental upbringing. Usually, individuals under this category feel unloved and desire to be loved by their AFs. Although they are generally attention seekers, but often would reject affection from others due to the unreliable nature of relationship they had with their early caregivers (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978). This negative neural functioning creates anxiety and uncertainty for the child in novel encounters with close others. Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) also acknowledge that this pattern of attachment mostly activates when the child perceives the caregiver as inaccessible. The consequence of such an experience is an anxious interaction behaviour with others, especially an AF, or a DAF. Thus, the child becomes prone to what Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) call a pervasive fear of abandonment, which also pilots their avoidant tendencies. An anxious attachment style is demonstrated by feelings of unworthiness and a need for self-approval from others. This means that an anxious person will score high level of anxiety and low level of avoidance in his or her relationship with close others or AFs when measured with attachment scales.

Avoidance is the second style of insecure attachment. People characterised as avoidant tend to avoid closeness or interaction with close others. In the study of Ainsworth *et al.* (1978), avoidant behaviours are portrayed when a child ignores a mother's presence or turns away from her bodily and/or eye contact. People in this category are usually behaviourally independent of their attachment figures because of their lack of trust in others, which often depletes their self-confidence. As the insecure anxious attachment style, an insecure avoidant-attachment is caused by unreliability and inaccessibility of a caregiver to a child; the consequence of which often results to a lack of concern for attachment figures, (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978). This also falls under Main and Solomon's (1986) fourth attachment style, which is labelled *disorganised* due to its 'fearful' and 'dismissing' nature. Fearful in the sense that the child is suspicious of others, and dismissing because the child expresses a feeling of self-reliance whilst avoiding close others. Avoidant individuals when assessed on an attachment scale measure low levels of anxiety but high levels of avoidance.

Taken together, Ainsworth *et al.*'s (1978) attachment styles have implications for the development of a person's self-esteem and interpersonal relationships, especially in a relationship experience with God, which shapes a person's God image (Collins & Read 1990:644–663). Insecure attachment styles may negatively affect an individual to exude aggressive, suspicious, and impulsive behavioural characteristics (Simons & Shore 2001) towards his or her DAF. This demonstration of distrust and antisocial behaviours may also lead to the display of defensive or detached behaviours towards a DAF-like God (Ainsworth & Bowlby 1991).

Ultimately, attachment scholars contend that a child adopts attachment anxiety, attachment-avoidant, or a disorganised attachment style during their early contact experience with a caregiver (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978; Main & Solomon 1986). On the other hand, if the child had a positive attachment relationship with his or her early caregiver, a case where access and proximity to a caregiver was consistent, a secure attachment system is developed in relation to close others, especially with God.

Consequently, when a parent does not respond with affection to a child's emotional needs and fears, the child will grow up eventually with either one of the three insecure attachment orientations. In a bid to re-embrace what was missed during childhood, a child with an insecure attachment orientation may grow up even as an adult seeking the attachment affection he or she missed during childhood in a Substitute Attachment Figure (SAF) or in some other places. As a result, they embrace either an extreme self-reliant tendency or high distrusting tendency towards such AF, which indicates a disturbingly rich fear of reliance on close 'others'.

Early abandonment and parent-child inconsistency in the formation stages of an attachment bonding experience tempt young adults into wanting to *compensate* for the relationship they did not experience with their early caregivers, with a relationship with a SAF in the person of God, who serves as their DAF. Alternatively, some tend to *correspond* their early attachment experience on to their relationship experience with God, who is acting in proxy as their SAF.

Attachment theorists dissever the God image experience into four main propositions that uniquely explain the God image dynamics from an attachment-based framework, namely:

- the internal working model correspondence model (Kirkpatrick 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1992:25–62)
- the emotional compensation model (Kirkpatrick 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990)
- the socialised correspondence model (Granqvist 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull 1999)
- the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model (Hall 2004; Hall *et al.* 2009).

### Compensating model

**The emotional compensation model:** The emotional compensation model proposed by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) simply shows how extended experiences with early caregivers who are farfetched, unavailable, insensitive or inconsistent in their attachment relation lead to the development of negative *internal working models* of the self and attachment figures (cf. Davis 2010; Kirkpatrick 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1990). In relation to God attachment, Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990:315) contend that the consequence of this attachment orientation is a manifestation of intense attachment or God image insecurity in one's relationship experience with God, who is now serving as a SAF. The SAF here is 'functionally used as an affect-regulation tool' (Davis 2010; Kirkpatrick 1998) to *compensate*

for an unavailable or inaccessible Human Attachment Figure (HAF) (such as caregivers, or parents). Depending on necessity, God here substitutes and makes up for the much needed emotional expectations, and therefrom satiate the attachment-related crisis of the individual, in a way that reassures security and safety.

### Corresponding model

The correspondence model proposes that an individual's attachment orientation with close *others*, usually caregivers or parents, serves as a model for their God image experience and attachment relationship with God.

**The internal working model correspondence model:** This proposition was led by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) who describe the condition of an entire *internal working model* to correspond to a relationship experience with God. In other words, individuals determine their relationship experience towards God by the nature of their attachment relationship with early caregivers, on a correspondence level. Therefore, if Mr. A had a secure, stable and healthy relationship with his caregiver, for example, Mr. A consequently will assume a similar orientation in his relationship with God. By contrast, having an insecure, unreliable, inaccessible and unhealthy human attachment, relationships may mirror a person's imaging and experience of God. Simply put, the way you relate with close 'others' is the way you relate with God.

**The socialised correspondence model:** The third proposition is the *socialised correspondence model* by Granqvist (1998, 2002). Pehr Granqvist argues that extensive experiences with parents who are available, sensitive, responsive and religious as opposed to those who are inaccessible and unreliable often lead to the development of positive internal working models of the self in relation to close *others*. This attachment posture often leads to a positive relationship experience with God (Granqvist 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull 1999). The role played by God here is that of a security-enhancing attachment figure, according to Mikulincer and Shaver (2004:174).

**The implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model:** This last model proposed by Hall (2004) took a conciliatory approach. This model is an outcome of the continuous, consistent mixed results that have emerged from studies on both the compensation and correspondence models. Implicit-relational-knowing gives a substantial research support for all the three previous models (Davis 2010). Whilst reconciling the IWM correspondence model, emotional compensation model and socialised correspondence model, Hall (2004) together with his colleagues (Hall *et al.* 2009) proposed an all-in-one *correspondence* framework known as the implicit-relational-knowing model. This framework unifies the earlier discrepant positions.

Hall and his colleagues argue for the need for discretion in order to recognise how or when not to identify with close *others*. Hall *et al.* (2009) reason that experiences with HAFs help individuals develop a *gut-level* knowledge on how to interact

with other close *others* or with specific relational partners, like God (Lyons-Ruth *et al.* 1998). Therefore, this knowledge skill allows an individual to develop a corresponding *implicit-relational-knowing* in regards to socialising with God. In other words, the relational bent is on an *implicit* level as opposed to an explicit religious-related functioning such as church participation, religious commitment and so on, which does not possess an intrinsic loyalty. An individual within this category for example, tends to relate with God regardless of their positive or negative relational experience with an attachment figure. Such individuals image God in either secure or insecure ways at an *implicit* level without necessarily devoting to an explicit religious or spiritual symbol.

Regardless of the early childhood experience, Hall *et al.* (1998) contend that empirical foundations that are used to support the emotional compensation model could as well be potential empirical examples for understanding his implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model. For example, if Mr. B had an abusive attachment relationship with his caregiver, and at some point in his life decided to report a sudden religious conversion following his early-child emotional crisis, suggests a gut-level decision to relate with a DAF, which supports the implicit-relational-knowing model.

Against this background, one can conclude then that God images are part of the internal working models that develop through the affectionate and emotional bonding in parent-child interactions. A *strange situation* believed to be a gradual value-incorporation process that propels individuals to experience God in relation to their attachment experience with their early caregivers (Moriarity 2006). Such a process allows a person's God experiences to *submit* to an inner attachment regulation, which informs a person's actual emotional and relational images of God (Schafer 1968).

## God concepts as religious language: The cognitive understanding of God

It is important to start discussing God concepts with a short note on religious language. The concept of religious language, according to Craig Dykstra (1986), is an indication of a religious faith, a certain level of connectedness or identification with God within a community of faith. Dykstra (1986:170) puts it this way: 'Religious faith as a way of life is borne, necessarily, by language and each distinct way of life necessarily has a language of its own'. This somewhat *connectedness* though expressed through language, indicates a relationship experience with God. Within this language are cognitive themes and metaphors learned about God through teaching and reasoning within the context of a faith community. God concepts show a transcendent connection of some kind. Muck (1998:116) calls this a 'multidirectional, never-ending journeying', which is a 'dynamic element of personality'. Muck sees the usage of God concepts in socialising with self and God as *journeys* easily symbolised in metaphors of a particular state of experience.

However, God concepts are not mere emotional signals but rather are cognitive insights about God, which indicate an individual's cognitive bearing or relationship with a Supreme Being. Such socialisation is often made possible through the agency of language. The language used makes claim of a religious faith within a community, one that is often expressed using concepts (or biblical descriptions) of God. These God concepts indicate the degree of closeness, betweenness, or connection with God. It represents the status of an individual's relationship experience with God. Such that these symbolic indicators of religiosity are often taken out of context from sacred books such as the Bible or Quran, for example.

It is therefore established here that God concepts are a form of religious language that indicate a relationship with God within the context of a faith community. The God concept theology is a symbolic practice from which an individual verbally regulates the God image experience.

Against this background, we then argue that God images refer to the emotional or experiential understanding of God – a nonverbal orientation of God that mirrors the actions of early caregivers. In contrast, God concepts are an individual's cognitive and verbal understanding of God. They are forms of language used to signal the degree of closeness with God, and does not necessarily presage an attachment experience with God.

## On the borderline between God images and God concepts

A meaningful pastoral response that takes into cognizance how to deal with the God image experience shaped out of an insecure attachment system is therefore in order. The challenge for pastoral care is that of interpretation and response (Thesnaar 2010). A pastoral care practice that seeks to understand the God image experience of individuals is one that would bring about a healthy change for hurting people. But before we contemplate on what this practice should look like, let us further examine the relationship between God images and God concepts.

With a fair degree of sympathy with each other's position, Thesnaar (2010:6–7) and Louw (2008:99) discuss the goal of pastoral care as a hermeneutical compassion that understands the often *frictional* relationship between God and humans in light of a confronting effect of God's love, presence and identification with the human needs and crisis. A robust pastoral care practice that interprets this confrontation in a way that reveals God's love irrespective of the errors of the authorities of the past in relation to God attachment and God images is therefore in order.

In order to come to grips with the best pastoral care practice in relation to God images, it is important to do the following: first, to understand the nature of the relationship between God images and God concepts. Secondly, to become a

hermeneutical figure that both interprets and down-regulates the encounters of negative God image experiences.

From here, we seek to address the first concern by painting a picture of the relationship between God images and God concepts and then address the task of the hermeneutical figure following.

It is important to restate here that God images and God concepts do not mean the same thing. The *God image* is a person's 'experiential understanding of God' (Hoffman 2000) and has more to do with emotions and often nonverbal. Whereas on the other hand, the *God concept* is a person's cognitive understanding of God – a linguistic or verbal action used to signal one's knowledge of God (Lawrence 1997). Although different in their merits, Hoffman (2000) believes that both constructs develop adjacent to one another, but through different patterns. The difference, however, is in the way they are developed: the God image is through what we feel in our attachment experience with God, whereas the God concept is through what we are taught through our linguistic practice and knowledge of God.

God concepts, according to Dykstra (1986), are 'not just to enable mutual interactions to take place in constant reference to the believers' way of life', rather:

It functions to provide the [faith] community as a whole a means both to maintain itself over time and to test its actual life over against what is most essential to it. (p. 170)

Dykstra sees God concepts as means by which an individual socialises with God and reinforces the self of God's place as an *Attachment Role Model* in the face of negative God image experiences; given that, God concepts power head-to-head with God images.

In the place of a relationship anxiety with God, I argue that God concepts would enable the self to regulate itself in such situations. A loaded cognitive understanding of God would compel an individual to see God in light of the attachment language criteria as specified by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008). Such cognitive reminder of the God of the Bible who confronts his creation with love and proximity reinforces God as an epitome of safety and security. Biblical God concepts that present or remind us of God as an *Attachment Role Model*, for example, a God that is a safe haven, a secure base, the response to separation or loss, stronger and wiser, can help down-regulate the hurting effects of a God image crisis. Such linguistic efforts can serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with anxiety and other attachment-related crisis in an interpersonal relationship experience with God, as one refreshes the mind to remind self of who God truly is the biblical way. God concepts and religious language can serve as defence against what is harmful to self (Dykstra 1986). It upholds internal poise and calmness, or regulates the opposite: conflict and insecurity (Moriarty 2006; Moriarty & Davis 2008; Sroufe & Waters 1977).

Dykstra (1986) asks:

Is there anything especially powerful and truthful about biblical images [and concepts] from a faith tradition which, when gathered into language and used in our speech, forms [and heals] us particularly well as persons? (p. 173)

Apparently! Just like any way of life is marked by some kind of language of its own, God concepts as a form of language or a way of socialising with God is borne out of a religious faith to convey a sense of hope, identification and security in a way that regulate negative God image experiences and fascinates God into action.

On the contrary, God concepts have been considered to be unrealistic and impersonal, on the basis that it does not describe reality (Russo 1986). Russo (1986:191) believes therefore that 'there is no relationship between language and action'. Without doubt, it would be difficult to say whether God concepts actually do describe reality or whether it does not. The main concern, however, should be whether we see reality and interpret it through the *filter* of religion.

If we apply Wittgenstein's (2001) understanding of religious experience as a *language-game*, Russo's argument stands no chance. The way an individual socialises with God (using metaphors and concepts about God) is indeed the background against which the claim of the redemptive power of the *God concepts* makes sense. Socialising with God via linguistic conventions and channels 'give the words [concepts, metaphors or language] their sense' (Wittgenstein 2001:653). It is on this note, that Wittgenstein (2001:653) writes that the mistake most people make 'is to look for an explanation where we should see the facts as primary phenomena. That is where we should say: this language game is played'. Therefore, if the believer accepts the authority of a religious *voice* then such God concepts might exert power in any conflict between God concepts and God images.

God concepts, verbally represented in metaphors, symbols or language, reveal God as an *Attachment Role Model* and suggest religious *journeys* that describe a religious experience. Dan Stiver (2001:111) sees metaphors as a way of life and argues that in metaphors we live by (George & Johnson 2003). Stiver (2001) believes alongside with Ricoeur (1972) that metaphors naturally help us to understand the nature of narratives, as one of the tasks of understanding a narrative is to understand the language used by the narrators. Hence, everyday experiences are entrenched within symbolic languages, metaphors or concepts from which people live, think and engage the world around them in exploration. On this ground, we then argue that God concepts are transcendent signals that convey a sense of a relationship tie with God (Muck 1998). An understanding of the God concept fragments can bring together a complete, holistic God image narrative. Such polysemic nature of language provides relative meanings that disclose *a world*. According to Capps (1984:24–25), such ostensive order of metaphorical thinking

helps in 'providing a model for the understanding of life and what happens in the world of human action'.

Against this background, I choose to respond to the issues raised in this article so far from an awareness perspective that takes into account the nature of the relationship between God images and God concepts, in order to inspire a fusion of horizons acting as hope against the tragedy of anxiety in a God image experience.

## The hermeneutical figure: Prospects, postures and practices

There are so many pastoral care postures and practices for dealing with the God image crisis but there is no agreement as to which one works best. If we are to deal effectively with the God image problem, our attention should be first drawn to the following hermeneutical prospects.

Meanwhile, before we look at these prospects, it is important to address what I mean by a *hermeneutical figure*. This term was used in order to simultaneously refer to both the *reader* and the *read*, as agents of a hermeneutical task. The *reader* in this context can be the pastor or pastoral care worker, whilst the *read* is the individual or client undergoing the actual God image experience. In both scenarios, I see both the *reader* and the *read* figures as agents playing similar roles in addressing the God image crisis. This is because if an effective pastoral care practice must take place, the pastoral care *figure* must immerse himself or herself in the *lived world* of the client, and therefore allow the self to experience the crisis of the other. On the contrary, in order for the labour of the *reader* to pay off, the *read* must be willing to trust and share his or her story with the *reader*. Without such trust and relationship, the hermeneutical process is only but a waste of time.

In what follows, I will discuss the responsibilities and postures of both hermeneutical figures in three prospects, citing most of Louw's responses to the God image crisis. Although Louw's interpretation of the God image dynamics is somehow restrictive, I believe, however, that his pastoral response to the issue of God image crisis is profound and timely for our digest.

### Self-coping as an art

Louw (2008) reminds us that the first task to an effective pastoral care practice by a hermeneutical figure (the *reader* or the *read*) in relation to emotional crisis is to *prepare* and *prevent*. He urges, 'We must learn to help people know "how to be sick" before illness actually befalls them, and "how to die" before death strikes' (Louw 2008:10). The task of *preparation* and *prevention* in pastoral care practice stirs around the 'creative powers in life and faith, and not on pathology' (Louw 2008:10).

Hermeneutical figures are not pathologists. Unlike in psychotherapy where the procedure to healing is pathological in itself, the liberative nature of pastoral care practice lies in its

ability to both *prepare* and *prevent* an experience of suffering (Friedman 1985; Louw 2008). As the experience of suffering becomes overwhelming, different people relate with such experience in different ways depending on what is most available to them. It is in such state of suffering that finding *meaning* in our God image *questions* often starts (Louw 2000, 2008).

In such a condition of attachment anxiety and emotional *suffering* with God, the affected person may submit to his or her God image experience in bitterness (as a destiny of affliction). As the individual involved assumes an attachment anxiety tendency in his or her relationship with God, they tend to see life as 'meaningless: no more can be expected of life, and pessimism and despair darken their outlook on existence' (Louw 2008:10).

In contrast, some totally assume an attachment-avoidant disposition in their God image experience. Their *avoidant* tendency occurs in their 'denial and the playing of games: the patient pretends to feel no sorrow, withdrawing totally' (Louw 2008:10) from their relationship with God. This withdrawing and Attachment-to-God avoidance, suggest that such individual has 'in fact lost all hope and joy' (Louw 2008:10) in their relationship experience with God. This attachment withdrawal from God often affects their religious commitments and social relationships. They internalise a somewhat self-dependent grudge that mumbles: 'If God cannot help me who will?' Louw (2008:11) starts by blocking such meaninglessness and thus saw self-coping as an art that deports such thoughts by adopting a Christian approach that asks the basic theological questions: what is the nature of the link between God and God images? How do we understand the purpose of the God of the God images?

Such questions point to a quest to comprehend the presence of God amidst an acute God image crisis. It suggests a serious insecurity question: '*why this God?*' Louw (2000) encourages hermeneutical figures to change this '*why*' question into the '*what*' question. The very essential '*what*' questions are:

- What is the purpose and meaning of God images and does my God image affect my human person?
- Does my God image experience help me build up my character in the image of God?
- What is the purpose of God in my experience?

The deep longing for security and safety in the context of a relationship with God can be addressed by asking the self the '*what*' question. The '*what*' question help us to transform our God image understanding into a different frame of meaning that interprets our attachment crisis with God as a transformative process for spiritual maturity and purification.

Asking the '*what*' question advances our knowledge as to how to deal with and relate to our insecurities. Practicing self-coping as an art in relation to our God image experiences allows us to see our God image crisis as a transformative process for growth and maturity. Such a mental shift helps us



to address the early abandonment and attachment-betrayal difficulties we had growing up with our early caregivers, which had triggered our negative God images.

Asking the 'what' question regulates an insecure God image tendency to a secure God image identity by stirring an identity shift from 'ego obsession [*the depleted, abandoned self*] to ego transcendence [*the transcendent self*]' (Louw 2008:12).

It is on this ground that I argue, therefore, that asking the 'what' question can be the first hermeneutical task in pastoral care practice.

However, merely asking the 'what' question does not resolve the God image crisis in toto. Rather it leads to a self-awareness that points to an understanding of the theology of the cross and resurrection, which paves the way to the inhabitation of the language of the cross and resurrection in the context of suffering. By seeing our God image experience as a transformation process for growth and purification, we can grow into the character and image of God. It is from this position that Louw (2008) argues that *coping is an art*. Hence, the God image becomes a necessary challenge, an important one at that, which leads us to a new understanding of God. And without such necessary 'equipment and preparation, patients [*may*] experience [*their God image*] as an unbearable burden and this influences their coping skills very negatively' (Louw 2008:9).

### Self-awareness: A deflection to the suffering God and the theology of the cross

Duval and Wicklund (1972) came up with a theory on objective self-awareness, where they propose that focussing attention on *self* enables us to evaluate our standards of understanding and perception in relation to how we should think, feel and behave in a given situation. Such process of examination with standards of correctness and identification inspires a change within the behaviour of an individual that enables the self to experience God more positively and securely in relation to its internal conflict. It is against this backdrop that Duval and Wicklund (1972) argue that self-awareness can serve as a coping mechanism and a necessary step for a hermeneutical figure.

Self-awareness starts with asking the 'why?' question. Self-awareness in the context of our study identifies the God image experience with the *suffering* of God. An understanding of the theology of the cross and the theology of resurrection is important for this task. Such awareness in relation to Christ's character and personality on the cross allows the hermeneutical figure to have a *refined* perception of the God image reality. Self-awareness takes away the speck out from the eyes, as one interprets and sees the God image experience as a hermeneutical mandate: 'the task to interpret and to understand; to enhance the courage to be and to foster growth and hope' (Louw 2000:17).

God images draw our attention then to the 'why?' question – as we 'struggle to express to God [*our*] experience of injustice'

with him (Louw 2000:21). Such a question is often posed to God as we try to comprehend the meaning behind our experience in an attempt to find hope in dystopia.

As we become aware of the 'why' question, our attention is then drawn to the 'suffering God and the theology of the cross', which 'constitute the framework for a new paradigm' (Louw 2000:66). A deflection away from the internal crisis to focus on the meaning of 'God's omnipotent presence and power interpreted as vulnerable faithfulness and overwhelming pathos' (Louw 2000:66) can give a new meaning to our understanding of a God image crisis.

Moltmann (1995) saw how Luther's (1959) theological anthropology centres on the nature of the *suffering God* and *Theologia Crucis*. Luther (1959) saw Christ's (God image) experience on the cross as a fundamental experience that reveals the nature of our relationship with God. Louw (2000) believes:

[T]hat the cross of Christ, in which God is found to be revealed and yet paradoxically hidden in that revelation, becomes the sole authentic *locus* of the human knowledge of God. (p. 67)

Louw (2000) further argues that Christ's (God image) experience on the cross shows God's power within the context of his vulnerability and his wisdom in folly.

It is my conviction that a deflection away from the crisis of the God image experience to the crisis of the suffering God on the cross of Calvary is a necessarily mental journey in order to understand our experience in terms of God's personality. A *theologia crucis* can help us rid the self of its Attachment-to-God anxieties and self-misconceptions about the meaning of God's presence in our God image experiences. Therefore, if God can abandon his own son on the cross in his (God image) crisis with the intention of achieving a higher purpose, what does that mean for us?

God's omnipotence and strength should not only be interpreted against the backdrop of Louw's theological and cultural schemas in terms of a Roman Caesar or a Patriarchal figure. Rather, God's omnipotence also suggests a dimension of 'suffering and our social [*attachment or God image*] reality' (Louw 2000:69).

If God's power is 'interpreted and perceived in terms of grace, mercy, servanthood, and sacrifice', it also reveals God on the borderline between 'faithfulness and vulnerability' (Louw 2000:70). More so, it shows God as One who can control our God images and yet allow those emotional or existential experiences to shape us into his purpose as it did for Jesus on the cross.

The implication of self-awareness as a healing process for the God image experience is that it helps us to envision 'the why-question, as such, [*as a*] meaningful [*one*] without finding a logical answer or rational solution' (Louw 2000:72). The therapeutic nature of self-awareness in terms of the

meaningfulness of the 'Why-question resides in the fact that it is posed in relation to a God who accepts this question as his own' (Louw 2000:72). This *Theo*-logical awareness of the God image crisis brings us to the 'how' question, which reveals God as a cosufferer and shows how God is involved in our experience as we envision him in the process of our crisis as faithful and trustworthy.

The 'how' question justifies the 'why' question as we relate to our experiences in God's terms, just as Jesus did at the cross by yielding to it in order that he may be justified as the Son. This approach disabuses every attempt to see God as merely being involved or remote to our crisis but reveals how God is immune to our attachment and God image crisis. Hence, the appropriate question is not 'why is God doing that?' but 'where is God in this?' (Eyer 1994:29). Indeed, this is a challenging question to answer and the only *Theo*-logical action to take in order to find answers would be to *deflect* our attention to the way of the cross. This is why Eyer (1994) contends that:

[T]he goal of pastoral care under the cross is not to try to eliminate suffering [or a negative God image experience], but to point the parishioner to God in the midst of suffering. (p. 33)

Pointing to the way of the cross reveals the 'mode in which God deals with suffering: weakness' (Louw 2000:74).

It is from this posture of self-awareness that an understanding of the theology of the cross 'becomes a resource of comprehension and understanding' (Louw 2000:75), as we become more aware of the nature of our relationship with God. This *Theo*-logical understanding of the *suffering* God would eventually help us respond to our negative God image crisis as Jesus did on the cross as he battled with his God image in humiliation, in order to be justified.

The next topic section discusses the nature of the 'how' question as we become more aware of God's position on our God image experience.

### Self-regulation: Immersing self with prophetic God concepts to down-regulate God images

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, at the peak of his God image experience, he voices what seems to be his insecurity in relation to his DAF, God the Father, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' It is arguable, however, that Jesus himself was struggling with his relationship with God, the Father, at this point. The very four words that speak of Christ's God image vulnerability points to his emotional experience with God, the Father. But at the same time, as Christ became aware of God's presence and identification in his suffering on the cross and of the nature of his relationship with God, the Father, he submitted to the experience and was glorified in God's covenantal promise of resurrection.

It appears that as the crucifixion of Jesus drew near, Christ foresaw his suffering on the cross, and in response, he communicates this metaphorically, as he identifies with God

in these words: 'My Father (God), if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me. Yet, not as I will, but as you will' (Lk 22:42). Although Christ spoke in metaphor as he relates with his DAF in this text, it is clear that the authority of the *God concept* used to socialise with God the Father in this text and even whilst at the cross, exert some kind of power.

The response of Jesus in the text above suggests a regulation of his God image anxiety with prophetic words that are most essential to it. These words perhaps reminded him of the glory that is to come from his predicament. Self-regulation enables us to *live* in the prophetic. The idea is to live within the linguistic confines of a redemptive, prophetic language that frees self from any guilt, fear, or doubt in an attachment relationship with God.

Louw (2008) refers to this as finding God's *home address*. Masterson (1976) on the other hand sees self-regulation as a self-defence against traumatic eruptions of abandonment distress at a grieving process, as the individual expresses certain 'signs of health emerging in the decreasingly polarized, increasingly nuanced self' (Dykstra 1997:33). Finding God concepts as the self becomes aware of its experience, in response to the God image experience, can transform and regulate self to overcome its internal and external confliction.

Self-regulation enables us to equip self with the necessary prophetic vocabularies that will stretch the limitations of our hope to look beyond our God image crisis and see God's providence and guidance. Rather than see our God image experience as an indication of God's absence, self-regulation reminds us of God's presence and answers the '*where-question*'. In addition, self-regulation also addresses the problem of *polarisation* and *intention*. The problem of polarisation, Louw (2000) reasons:

[R]efers to a possible conflict between the content of faith (what we believe about God's presence and his identification with our suffering) and what we actually experience in our daily life. (p. 118)

Polarisation becomes a God image challenge when the magnitude of our emotional crisis in our relationship with God exceeds its normal (coping) parameters.

When insecure God image tendencies set in, chances are that one becomes desperate and feels overwhelmed by the supposed unavailability of God, which is contrary to what we expect from our DAF. In such conditions, 'instead of identification with God, one feels rejected by Him and one fears further alienation' (Louw 2000:118). When God image anxiety develops and it feels as though God has abandoned us and does not care about us, we can practice what Christ did in Matthew 26 by searching 'for evidence of the Lord's presence in order to determine his purpose, plan and will' (Louw 2000:118) in our God image experiences.

According to Louw (2000:119), 'God's purpose and guidance are revealed in his acts and deeds of salvation'. This purpose,

Louw (2000:119) reasons, 'is all about God's place and presence in the whole of creation'. Locating God's *hand* in our experience requires having a cognitive insight about God; an awareness perspective that can help us relate and interpret our experience. By using God concepts in this process of interpretation or understanding of the God image, we can endure the process and accept the challenge of transformation.

Therefore, the first step towards an effective self-regulation is to find *prophetic* vocabularies that can interpret our experience. This approach, I believe, would sometimes challenge the conventional norms of understanding since prophecy does sometimes come across as folly and operates beyond the requirements of reason.

However, the failure of an individual to provide a concrete vocabulary to grasp the nature of their God image experience and relate it to their contextual crisis might generate into the problem of evil (Inbody 1997:18). This especially happens when insecure God images set in where the human power to provide meaningful God concepts to relate to their experience is limited (Louw 2000:17). When we fail to provide meaningful vocabularies to grasp the nature of our experience, we gradually torment the stock of our soul with feeling of hopelessness and insecurity.

Using the right *Theo*-logical and prophetic vocabularies (God concepts) to relate our agony to God's *order is a necessary practice that might help us down-regulate our emotional experience*, especially when our insight to come to grips with our condition becomes increasingly weak and insufficient. Such promissory, prophetic, or *Theo*-logical concepts about God must have the redemptive power to confront our fears with the effect of God's love and presence (Louw 2000). An understanding of God's position over our God images as we practice self-regulation reveals 'comprehensively and meaningfully, the unknown (revelation) in terms of the known (creation)' (Louw 2000:49).

Louw (2000:49) describes the concept of self-regulation as an aspect of 'metaphorical theology', which is a conscious attempt to 'take the meaning-dimension of God-languages [*God concepts*] and contexts seriously'. Metaphorical theology understands the process of naming God in human existential experiences. It is from here that Louw (2000) guides us in his discussion of metaphorical theology in relation to God images. He opens up on four metaphors or God concepts from the Scripture that depict God in terms of identification with our God image and Attachment-to-God crisis. These God concepts (*shepherd*, *servant*, *wisdom* and *paraclete*), according to Louw (2000:50), convey the 'meaning of compassion, help, and consolation in terms of God's involvement' in our experience.

As I round up this writing, I will briefly discuss the four known God concepts within the landscape of pastoral theology and Campbell's (1986) three pastoral self-images: shepherd, wounded healer and the wise fool.

## God concepts of shepherdhood

The Hebrew origin for the word 'shepherd' came from the word to 'rule over the earth' (Gn 1:26), even though not in terms of exploitation. Shepherding is a more subtle form of rulership that implies 'sensitive and compassionate caring' (Louw 2000:50). This was man's mandate over the earth, to care and shepherd it. This instruction also corresponds to God's likeness as he cares and shepherds his own creation. Psalm 23 speaks of this: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'. The text reveals God as a *Shepherd* in our experience and thus feeds the void of protection and direction in terms of God's faithfulness and grace (Louw 2000). It is within this context of the *God concept of shepherdhood* that the Old Testament people experienced a secure relationship 'within God's shepherding care' (Louw 2000:50). The concept of God as a *Shepherd* reveals God to a *sufferer* as someone who is faithful to his covenantal promise to shepherd over his creation. To prove this, God communicates his compassion and mercy by laying down his own Son for the *sheep* on the cross (cf. Mt 26:31; Jn 10:11). Having a God concept that interprets God in concrete terms as a *Shepherd* in relation to our God image experience injects an eschatological understanding to our experience, as we begin to relate with our condition from the purview of God's love and mercy. A *God concept of shepherdhood* in pastoral practice would concretely represent God as a compassionate Supporter of those in need of emotional meaning (Louw 2000). God image crisis can also be accommodated within this shepherding function of 'human sympathy ... and the compassion of the covenantal God Himself' (Louw 2000:51-52).

## God concepts of servanthood

The *wounded healer* is another pastoral self-image concept (Campbell 1986) that can be used to describe the concept of God in which an individual relates to God as a *Servant* within the extensions of their God image placements. It reveals God's identification with our experience in a very unique way. Christ brings to fore this concept in his 'vicarious suffering' on the cross (Louw 2000:52), as he takes the place of suffering for others as a 'Servant of God's redeeming work' (Louw 2000:52) in relation to our abandonment betrayal or abuse, sin, loss and illness. The implication of the *servant* concept in the pastoral practice of a hermeneutical figure is that of conveying 'the idea of sacrifice and identification with suffering human beings in need' (Louw 2000:52). A *God concept of servanthood* in relation to our God image experience shows how identifying and communicating with Christ's 'vicarious suffering' (Louw 2000:52) as a *Servant* leads to healing and recovery. Such concept would therefore require the disposition of *woundedness* to prompt healing. However, this practice does not necessarily take away the God image anxiety but rather 'deepens the pain to a level where it can be shared' (Nouwen 1979:92) within an atmosphere of hope and vision with the crucified and *wounded* Christ.

## God concepts of folly

The *wise fool* model is an insightful way of addressing the God image crisis by looking at the experience from an unusual, new God concept. Perhaps we have been seeing our God image experience from a wrong angle and as a result, we are unable to deal with the crisis effectively. By allowing ourselves to see our experiences in a radical new way, using God concepts that give meaning to our experience, 'we discern, through this very seeing, how it may be resolved or that it is not a problem after all' (Capps 1990:169).

Wisdom 'embraces practical skills and is linked to human creativity', and focusses on questions:

[A]bout the art of life (how must I live?), morality (how should I act and deal with my neighbour?), as well as piety (how should I act in the presence of God?). (Louw 2000:55)

The importance of the wisdom model in pastoral practice lies in the fact that it helps us to imagine how God views the God image problem, and therefore compels us to consider viewing the situation from God's angle of vision and be reminded of 'God's active involvement' in our experience (Louw 2000:56). This model is often humbling and paradoxical in nature because it brings our anxiety and stupidity to light, and equally helps us to overcome our folly and down-regulate our experience (Capps 1990). The *wise fool* concept 'unmasks reality with the aid of an apparent contradiction: a crucified and suffering God is the power of our salvation' (Louw 2000:56).

## God concepts of paraclete

The word 'paraclete' is often used for the Hebrew *naham*, which means 'sympathy' and 'comfort' (Louw 2000:56). In other words, emphasis is made here to use concepts of God that express sympathy, compassion, and caring. The concept of *paraclete* in relation to God is often used to encourage, strengthen and guide self towards healing and finding meaning in its God image experience (Braumann 1978). Louw (2000:56) also refers to this as 'parakaleo', which means 'to call', 'to address', or 'speak to', even though by way of exhortation, entreaty, or comfort. Pastoral practice should encourage comforting and supporting *acts* that reveal God in our anxieties as a compassionate Father and Comforter.

Taken together, the different acts of self-regulation as discussed above enable self to immerse itself in an understanding of who God truly is, in relation to his promise of love, safety, security, and identification with his creation. The God concept models suggested above influence a regulation of *self* in relation to the character and *direction* of God.

After a *Theo*-logical understanding of God's omnipotence and solidarity in our experience through our self-awareness, a *deflection* is then made towards a *vertically* meaningful redemption. This act of self-regulation enables the human system to find itself within the character of God on the basis

that the 'structure of thought and the structure of reality mirror each other' (Grenz 2007:26). As the God concept encounters the God image reality, the self realises itself in the world process in accordance with a movement that corresponds to dialectical logic (Grenz 2007). Such movement of self 'creates the various stages of its own history as it passes through them' (Grenz 2007:27). This makes it possible to see God as an *Attachment Role Model*, one who is ever loving and present, and whose affection truly provides safety and security.

## Conclusion

In this study, the writer has shown that God images develop from the *internal working models* of a parent-child relationship, whilst God concepts on the other hand, are evidences of a relationship with the Transcendent within a faith community, and does play an important self-regulatory role in the human experience.

Given the reality of the God image experience amongst Christians, hermeneutical figures have a responsibility to address God-image-related cases in a constructive way. A hermeneutical figure needs to believe that he or she has a role to play in addressing the problem of the God image either as the *reader* or as the *read*. I have given a pastoral response that is deeply transformative in this process. This is a response that put to use the understanding of God images and God concepts in a way that is meaningful and redemptive to the conflicted *other*. The practice replaces the God image fears and anxieties with prophetic and redemptive concepts of God that see God as a *shepherd*, *servant*, *wise fool*, or *paraclete*. Hence, guiding the vision and perspective of the conflicted *other* towards the enigma of a suffering and loving God.

I have also drawn the attention of the reader to a cruciform, self-integrative approach to God images that works with the conflicted to recover self from the conflicting *jaws* of anxiety and fear in a relationship experience with God. This is a necessary practice required to modify and create an identity *ego* renewed by the comforting effect of God's identity.

Perhaps requiring further empirical scrutiny, but so far, I have left the reader with a proposition that approaches the God image experience as a *creative tension* (Bosch 1991), a necessary and important one at that, that submits to what is most essential to it: God concepts.

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