CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUPEREGO GOD

The God that is related to by an adolescing self with its fettered imaging is a Superego God. This God is—and really could only be—a God not yet fully formed, a God still incomplete, a God not yet whole. From one perspective, this God can take any number of configurations as it comes to be imaged by each of us. This should not be surprising. The Superego God is a product of each adolescing self, each with his or her particular fantasy needs, each with his or her particular transference patterns of relating, and each with his or her particular version of the logic of objective knowing. The Superego God comes to us in any number of shapes and guises. One size does not fit all. At the same time, however, this God has some rather definite characteristics that can be fairly accurately described, and this, I believe, is somewhat surprising. Five such characteristics are offered here, each one reflecting some aspect of how, with fettered imaging, an adolescing self finds a Superego God:

1. The Superego God is a Supreme Being.
2. The Superego God is a God of Law.
3. The Superego God is a God of Belief.
4. The Superego God is a God of Dependency and Control.
5. The Superego God is a God of the Group.
In each of these five characteristics, there is a common dynamic at play between the adolescing self and the Superego God. To begin with, each characteristic is a definite statement that captures the perception of what this God actually is for someone at the superego level. Along with this definite statement about what this God is, often there is, for the adolescing self, a promise of security, which is very comforting. This promise of security is had, however, on condition that the adolescing self conforms to what the Superego God expects.

As the relationship between the adolescing self and the Superego God continues to develop, often this God is seen to have a contradiction at its very core. It is variously caring and not caring, affirming and not affirming, protecting and not protecting, helpful and not helpful. This contradiction—which in time and especially with further education is often hard to avoid—tends to elicit ambivalent feelings and a certain amount of conflict in the mind of the adolescing self. Consequently, as long as fantasy, relating in transference, and the logic of objective knowing are still being negotiated, there is usually some kind of modus vivendi adopted by the adolescing self in relating to the Superego God.

Finally, with each of these characteristics of the Superego God, two points need to be kept in mind. First, these characteristics are not completely static. There is limited development within each of one of them from the time of their birth in us around the age of three or four until the advent of adult religious development. Second, these characteristics are not, as some persons seem to think, inherently negative. These characteristics of the Superego God are inherently developmental. They become negative or dysfunctional for us to the degree that they actually impede our adult religious development.

1. The Superego God is a Supreme Being. Perhaps the most basic of all the related characteristics of the Superego God is the perception that this God exists as a very elevated personal object, a God of Superlatives, a Supreme Being. This God, as Thomas Merton describes it, is "a God who is simply 'a being' among other beings, part of a series of beings, an 'object' which can be discovered and demonstrated." However distant from us at the other end of the continuum of existence, this Supreme Being is within what many thinkers call the "subject-object dichotomy." This God is "a being beside others and as such a part of the whole of reality." Although an immensely powerful object that is "over against" us, the Supreme Being is part of an ordered system that is ultimately logical, objective, and contained.

Although "up there" and spatially "outside" the world, this Supreme Being still has complete power over the world. Although thought to be eternal, this God is intensely involved in the workings of time. And although thought to exist as an object, this God cannot be located or seen. The Supreme Being is really a contradiction within itself. It is an immensely powerful object, but not really an object. It is an immensely powerful person, but not really a person. It is both, but it is also neither. And although it is an unchangeable reality, which is utterly different from who we are, at the same time this powerful Supreme Being is often quite human and parental—able to protect, to legislate, and to approve or disapprove as needed.

In its beginnings, the Supreme Being often appears to be a very exalted person, who may at times be loving, or uncaring, or quite interested in conformity, control, and punishment. Later, this Supreme Being usually evolves into something less obviously parental, something more like an abstract source of immense power related to causality and the laws of nature. Throughout the whole time of its tenure, however, this Supreme Being promises security from harm and evil—on condition that we can stand in proper relation to it and respect its authority. This promise of security of the Supreme Being is, as Freud attests, often enormously reassuring. Over time, however, we may develop some ambivalent feelings about this Supreme Being, this God that is so incredibly powerful and that is laced with so many contradictions. In trying to find a way of accommodation with this God, we may experience a great deal of confusion and conflict. In dealing with this God, the adolescing self may adopt a modus vivendi that goes back and forth on a continuum of trust, anxiety, fear, lack of engagement, and complete rejection.

2. The Superego God is a God of Law. In what is possibly its most prominent characteristic, this God is perceived to be an absolute authority commanding what must and must not be done.Commenting on the moral power of this God, Gordon Kaufman says, "if God has
spoken, how can we lowly humans raise any questions, or why should we want to? If the Superego God is divine law, then the adolescing self relates to this God through obedience to the law. It is as if, as Nicholas Harvey puts it, "morality has become God." Morality and religion go together. The God of Law is a God of Obedience because the essence of morality consists of carrying out all the commands the God of Law imposes. At the superego level, in fact, religion is always in the context of morality, and this morality is, in Lawrence Kohlberg's framework, always either conventional or preconventional, having to do primarily with either conformity to societal rules or with avoiding punishment.

While usually patient and acting with considerable restraint, the God of Law is often found to be a God of Guilt, evoking terrifying fear and capable of unleashing tremendous judgment and powerful condemnation if we should disobey. Over time, however, this God of Law is often seen to be a contradiction. On the one hand, this God is presented as kindly and benevolent, but on the other hand, this God is an all-seeing judge from whose scrutiny it is impossible for us to hide our shame and guilt. On the one hand, this God is supposed to be quite loving, but on the other hand, this God can be quite coercive, willing to employ whatever external or internal force may be required for us to mend our ways. Moreover, this God of Law is also supposed to reward the good and to punish the wicked. Often, however, it seems to work out just the opposite. In fact, the God of Law often appears to be two Gods, a God of Good and a God of Evil. This divided deity stands over against the adolescing self, mirroring this self’s own dividedness and moral failure. And because the God of Law holds us in "credit-debit bondage," this God is always a God of Conditional Acceptance.

In its beginnings, the God of Law is often what John Glaser describes as a "hot and cold arbitrary tyrant"; that is, this God rewards what it sees as good and punishes what it sees as bad. Later on, this God is seen as issuing a whole set of laws and rules and obligations, which become the substance of conventional morality. Throughout the whole time of its authority, however, the God of Law holds out the promise of security. This God will protect us from harm, will hold us in good standing, and will even relieve us of our guilt—on condition, of course, that we can faithfully carry out all that it commands, or, when moral failure does occur, that we can make appropriate amends. The promise of security of the God of Law is often enormously reassuring to us. Over time, however, the adolescing self may develop ambivalent feelings about this God of Law, which stands so often as God of Perfection, as an "impossible judge of obedience and rigid standards." We may experience a great deal of conflict in trying to find a way of accommodation with this God whose commands are such a constant reminder of our personal weakness and inadequacy. In dealing with this God, the adolescing self often adopts a modus vivendi that, in addition to the use of a variety of guilt-relieving strategies, goes back and forth between proper compliance and isolating disobedience.

3. The Superego God is a God of Belief. This God is thought to exist in any number of beliefs, beliefs that have two essential components. First, there are facts we know about the Supreme Being, and these facts are objective. Second, the facts we know about the Supreme Being are held with at least some amount of emotional loyalty to the authority that supports and conveys them. "Religious ideas are," as Freud puts it, "teachings and assertions about facts," and the "believer is bound to the teachings of religion by certain ties of affection." Often this God of Belief turns into a God of Orthodoxy. The right beliefs easily become the essence of religion, and, therefore, the adolescing self possesses the Superego God by holding the right beliefs. Often this God of Belief is also a God of the Mind, because this God is grasped by rational thinking and can be defined with the carefully nuanced logic of objective knowing. We "become convinced," says Mark Taylor, "that the essence of religious faith can be objectively defined in formal doctrines and discursive teaching presented by priests and professors. From this perspective, the task of the believer involves, at most, the mastery of objective doctrine and teaching."

Although it seems very important to grasp the God of Belief in just the right propositions, we often find a great deal of contradiction in this God of Belief. This God, which is the object of fact, is also, as we have seen, the object of fantasy. Over time, propositions which those
in authority say must be accepted may have little if anything to do with satisfying the needs of our fettered imaging. Moreover, some of the propositions about this God of Belief may convey ideas that seem to be directly opposed to the ideas of other propositions. Some propositions, which are said to be objective and easily verifiable, do not seem to get satisfactorily verified at all. The religious authorities often cannot agree among themselves as to what would count as proper evidence. While statements about God purport to have a common meaning for all, their meanings often vary significantly from individual to individual and from group to group.

In the beginning, the God of Belief seems very parental. "Beliefs," as Pruyser says, "are derived love and hate objects, behind which stand real human love and hate objects of flesh and blood." Later, this God of Belief often becomes more abstract, more logically coherent, and more propositional—although not necessarily less emotionally powerful. Throughout the whole time of its authority, however, this God of Belief promises us protection from a terrible wasteland of confusion, idolatry, and abandonment—on condition, of course, that the adolescing self is unquestioning in holding the proper beliefs. This promise of protection is often enormously reassuring to us. We may have ambivalent feelings, however, about this God of Belief who must be understood in just the right way and whose actions must not be doubted, and we may experience a great deal of conflict in finding out which group has the truth and which facts must be believed. In dealing with this God, the adolescing self often adopts a modus vivendi that goes back and forth on a continuum of trust, confusion, doubt, and disbelief.

4. The Superego God is a God of Dependency and Control. It is the God of Dependency and Control—this Supreme Being with all its power, this God of Law with its commands of what must and must not be done, this God of Belief with its propositions about what must and must not be accepted as true—that the adolescing self both depends on and is controlled by. In the economy of the subject-object dichotomy, the adolescing self finds that the God of Dependency provides all the things that the adolescing self needs for its own growth and development, while the God of Control, with all of its immense power and authority, seems to leave little room for the adolescing self for any use of its own power and authority. The God of Dependency and Control is at once a God of Providence and a God of Domination. It is this latter God that Paul Tillich characterizes when he says, "God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity. He is equated with the recent tyrants who with the help of terror try to transform everything into a mere object, a thing among things, a cog in the machine they control."

Ultimately, it seems, the issue with the God of Dependency and Control comes down to the question, who will write the script for my life? Is it God's life to sustain and to control, or is it my life? In actual fact, the God of Dependency and Control is already a contradiction. On the one hand, this God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing, offers its whole self for us and for our well-being; on the other hand, this God allows us no autonomy at all. On the one hand, this God appears to be calling us to more and more freedom and responsibility; on the other hand, this God seems to be demanding that we remain in a position of absolute dependence.

In its beginnings, the God of Dependency and Control often appears to be a wonderful and benignly protective parent, a God of Providence. Later, the adolescing self may come to experience this God more as an impersonal, uncaring power, a God of Domination. Throughout the whole time of its authority, however, the God of Dependency and Control promises to protect us from the pain of inner struggle and from having to make responsible life choices, on condition, of course, that we surrender any serious striving toward real freedom or autonomy. This promise of protection, which means that we are loved and cared for by God, is often enormously comforting and attractive to us. There may be ambivalent feelings, however, about this God of Dependency and Control—a God that offers protection at the price of freedom—and the individual may experience a great deal of conflict over who will have control over his or her life. In dealing with the God of Dependency and Control, the adolescing self may adopt a modus vivendi that goes back and forth on a continuum of gratitude, acceptance, questioning, and outright rebellion.
5. The Superego God is a God of the Group. The place where the Superego God lives, moves, and has its being is in the group. As described here, the God of the Group is, for all practical purposes, a gathering of adolescing selves around the all-powerful Supreme Being as its unseen center. The authority of the God of the Group lies with certain individuals who apparently are directly appointed for this task by the Supreme Being. Only those who have this authority can speak, and only those who have this authority can be heard. This authority makes clear to the group the dictates of the God of Law; this authority prescribes for the group the nature of the God of Belief; this authority sets forth the conditions of the God of Dependency and Control for being included or excluded from the group. The God of the Group is a powerful, hierarchical, and closed system. Only in and through the group can the adolescing self find how to know and to follow the Superego God.

The contradiction in the God of the Group lies essentially around the issue of belonging or not belonging, inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or nonacceptance. In the beginning, this God of the Group is often very loving, welcoming, nurturing, and affirming, and with this God, we can find wonderful solidarity, support, and strength. Later, however, the God of the Group may reveal itself as unbelievably heartless and uncaring, often leaving us feeling tremendous rejection and terrible isolation. The God of the Group is a God of Convention and a God of Conformity, and its scepter is a two-edged sword, at times seeming to have the power of life and death over us.

In its beginnings, the God of the Group appears as an extension of parental authority and care. Later, this God evolves into a corporate entity with clearly identifiable rules and an organizational structure. Throughout the whole time of its tenure, however, the God of the Group promises us safety and a divinely sanctioned place to belong—on condition that we are willing to adhere to the rules and precepts held by the group. This promise of safety is often enormously powerful and reassuring to us. Over time, however, we may develop ambivalent feelings about this God of the Group with its fixed moral laws, its set beliefs, and its demands of dependency and control. Considerable conflict may arise with this God. In dealing with this God, the adolescing self may find itself adopting a modus vivendi that goes back and forth among conforming to the God of the Group, rebelling against this God, and venturing away from this God on the basis of personal judgment and experience.

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2. Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 184. Himes, Doing the Truth in Love, 18, observes, "The notion of a supreme being belittles God. Calling someone or something the supreme being presumes that there is a class of beings, and that one of those beings is the number one being in the class, the supreme one."


ADOLESCING RELIGION AND FORMAL RELIGION

Religion, as we have seen, is about “the self and God together.” Religion, therefore, is relational and developmental. Adolescing religion—fettered as it is by fantasy, relating in transference, and the logic of objective knowing—is, of course, about the adolescing self and the Superego God together. At this point, we are in a position to describe the nature of adolescing religion in more detail by looking directly at the interaction of the self and God as it is in the early form of this “together.” How does the adolescing self hear and communicate with the Superego God?

HEARING THE SUPEREGO GOD

The voice of the Superego God that the adolescing self hears is the all-powerful voice of the Supreme Being. It is the voice of the God of Law, commanding the self to do what is good and to avoid what is evil. It is the voice of the God of Belief, telling the adolescing self what he or she must believe in order to be acceptable. It is the voice of the God of Dependency and Control, on the one hand, establishing order and stability, and on the other hand, demanding that the adolescing self think and act in a number of circumscribed ways. And finally, it is the voice of the God of the Group, speaking to the adolescing self through the leaders of the group on whom authority has been conferred.
The voice of the Superego God is a voice that plays in the thoughts of the adolescents. It is a parental voice that, however varying in tone, is often bent on having the adolescents conform to the commands of the Superego God. Often this voice freezes the adolescents in a sense of inadequacy, or guilt, or shame. Often this voice condemns the self for what it has done wrong or for what it is thinking of doing wrong. Often this voice is critical, harsh, and attacking, trying to get the adolescents to see the error of its ways. Often this voice speaks with threatening, unassailable authority. And because this voice is so powerful and because it comes from such a distance, it may be a voice, as John Glaser notes, which comes to us as “cosmic, vast, and mysterious.” But distant or not, mysterious or not, often this voice is immediately there in our thinking. It tends to flood the head with ample measures of guilt along with dire scenarios and consequences, often before the adolescents are able even to think its own thoughts.

Although we may not be aware of it, at least at first, often there is a great deal of contradiction to be heard in the voice of the Superego God. It is an external voice, but it is also an internal voice. It is not really my voice, but it also is my voice. It is a voice that appears to be concerned for me and to be in my best interest, but it also is a voice that belittles me and puts me down. It is a voice that seems to be quite rational, but it also is a voice that is often quite irrational as well. The voice of the Superego God is, in fact, a still-forming, still-dependent voice, a fettered voice of ambiguity and of the different meanings others have found. Quite simply, the voice of the Superego God is a superego voice. It is a voice of external authority now internalized, a voice in the service of controlling—usually either through praise or through punishment—the still-forming, still-dependent adolescents.

**SPEAKING ABOUT AND TO THE SUPEREGO GOD**

When speaking about the Superego God, the adolescents use terms that are apparently clear and objective. Reflecting the logic of objective knowing, our language about the Superego God is literal, that is, the words we use are presumed to have fixed, agreed upon, objective meanings. “Literal language,” says June Singer, “is that in which words correspond exactly to objects, and the meaning conveyed by the words reflects the one-to-one correspondence.” There is a one-to-one correlation, therefore, between the words we use and the objectlike Supreme Being we represent with them. Moreover, the words mean what the adolescents know they mean, and apparently they mean what others mean when they use the same words. The Superego God is thought to be understood without ambiguity or confusion, because in a logic of objective knowing, the reality of God is contained in the meaning of the very words we use to speak of God. The words convey reality with black-and-white clarity; there is no gray.

It is possible to speak of the Superego God in literal terms, of course, because this Supreme Being is thought to be opposite the adolescents in the closed world system of the subject-object split. Although this God is personal and parental, this God is also an object, and although as adolescents selves we are persons, we are also objectlike as well. At the superego level, our language about God reflects this inherent contradiction. Made confusing by fantasy, relating in transference, and the logic of objective knowing, our language about God is somehow personal and at the same time somehow literal and objective. “God is our father,” for example, may be understood as personally descriptive and literally true. When the adolescents speak about the Superego God, the language often tends to be objective. There are facts to be known about the Superego God, and literal language is our way of capturing these facts. When the adolescents speak to the Superego God, that is, when we address the Superego God directly in prayer and petition, our language tends to be personal; we are, in fact, very much like children who are expressing their needs to their parents.

This description of adolescents religion is important for several reasons. First, it shows concretely how adolescents religion as the early relationship between the self and God is actually experienced and expressed. Second, it shows clearly the nature of the contradiction and the conflict that may arise between the adolescent self and the Superego God. Third, and perhaps most important, this description
of adolescing religion is what religion is commonly understood to be. Although adolescing religion is only the early form of "the self and God together," it is, for all practical purposes, the normative understanding of religion that exists in society and in the culture.

FORMAL RELIGION

Although it may not be accurate to say that formal religion is the same thing as adolescing religion, it is important to observe that the structure of adolescing religion is usually what gives formal religion its distinctive character. If the voice we hear in adolescing religion is the voice of the Superego God, the voice we hear in formal religion is often the voice of the Superego God as well. The voice of adolescing religion is external; it comes from other people and from other sources outside of ourselves, and we are asked to internalize this voice, to take it inside and to make it our own. Likewise, the voice of formal religion is external and comes from other people and from sources outside of ourselves. It is the voice of the religious authority that we hear, and we are asked to take this voice inside and to make it our own. Formal religion is a voice of the God of the Group telling us who God is and how God must be understood and related to if we are to be a member of that religion.

In formal religion there are statements that describe the nature of God as the Supreme Being, and there are statements about the God of Law that tell the follower how he or she must act. There are statements about the God of Belief that tell the follower what he or she must adhere to, and there are statements that are meant to relate the follower to the God of Dependency and Control. And, of course, all these statements are made by the authorities who speak for the Superego God as the God of the Group. Moreover, in formal religion the meaning of all these statements is thought to be impersonal and objective.

"God is all just," for example, might be a statement of formal religion that is objective and literally true. But if, for example, you or I were to say, "You know, I don't find that God always acts justly at all," this kind of statement would have no place in formal religion. Objective meaning and formal religion go hand in hand, but personal meaning, which is the kind of meaning that we find in our own experience and the kind of meaning that becomes more and more important to us as we approach adulthood, has no necessary connection with formal religion at all. Although many people are able to find a great deal of personal meaning in formal religion, the validity of formal religion itself does not depend at all on anyone finding personal meaning in it. In formal religion, statements about God need not be verified by personal experience in order to be true.

If fantasy, relating in transference, and the logic of objective knowing are what inform adolescing religion, it might be expected that they would play a part in formal religion as well. Fantasy and relating in transference are handed down through the fettered imaging of those who have gone before us and can easily become part of the fabric of formal religion. We might want to trust the thinking of our ancestors, but as Freud cautions, "They believed in things we could not possible accept to-day; and the possibility occurs to us that the doctrines of religion may belong to that class too."34

The logic of objective knowing, along with its literal understanding of language, also comes into play. In fact, for many people the logic of objective knowing appears to be the very touchstone of what formal religion is. Rarely is formal religion understood as the collective experience of the faithful of a given place and time; the collective experience of those who have gone before us is not what gives it form. Rather, formal religion is presumed to be an impersonal and objective reality, a reality that we are able to capture in statements that are literally true. As Carl Jung reminds us, "Creeds are codified and dogmatized forms of original religious experience. The contents of the experience have become sanctified and usually congealed in a rigid, often elaborate, structure."35 Dogma, he observes, "has become a tenet to be accepted in and for itself, with no basis in any experience that would demonstrate its truth."36

Just as there is a contradiction to be found in adolescing religion, there is usually a contradiction to be found in formal religion—at least in the way formal religion is commonly understood. On the one hand, statements about God may be the result of fantasy and relating in
transference; on the other hand, these statements are supposed to be literally and objectively true. Often, however, this contradiction in formal religion is not so readily apparent. What comes from fantasy, from relating in transference in the teaching of the tradition tends to take on an objective quality with the passage of time. Therefore, what comes from the logic of objective knowing easily becomes the "form" of religion, and this logic is what allows us to understand religious statements as objectively and literally true.

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