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Impacting the Orienting System: The Role of Theological Education in Influencing Socio-cultural Images of God

Abstract

Theological educational has classically been associated with educating pastors for local church ministries, non-pastoral ministries and theologians for higher education. In this article I postulate that the role of theological education goes beyond these practical ministry perception to the shaping of societal images of God expressed through the orienting system.

In the first part of the article I argue that one’s faith formation is closely related to one’s development of God’s image. This is not an isolated process, but an appropriation of God’s image disseminated through nurture by one’s immediate family and society at large. The proliferation of all these experiences are what I refer to as the orienting system—the context which presents God’s image through all forms of life expressions including art, music, oral stories and proverbs, sermons, written opinions, nature, observed events, and shared experiences. It is these that are integrated into one’s life experiences to form an image of God. And it is one’s God image that determines how one interprets and circumvents life experiences, as manifest in critical situations. The question explored in this paper is the role that theological education plays in the formation of God’s image expressed through the Orienting system.

Key words: Theological education, God’s image, orienting system, individual’s faith, life experiences.

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Introduction

In this paper I postulate that the Orienting System warrants attention of theological education because human worldview and faith formation is an integrated appropriation of God’s image through the integration of one’s life experiences with the Orienting system. I begin by defining the term orienting system. Using the works of psychologist and theologians like Anna Maria Rizutto, Donald Winnicott, Mbiti and Burton Z. Cooper and other cognitive psychologists, I demonstrate how humans form the image of God developmentally through the Orienting system. I then conclude by briefly describing the role of image of God in human life and how theological education can impact the orienting system from which such image is formed.

Orienting system is a term I have coined to capture the totality of all that is in our human medium, including what we hear, see, sense, experience. It is the unseen system that defies our claim for being self-made persons, calling us to acknowledge that our behaviors, perceptions, ideologies and even creativity do not spring from a vacuum. Even if we might hesitate embracing Mbiti’s claim for collective context that, “I am because you are and since you are, therefore I am” and might say with Descartes, “I think therefore I am,” the orienting system is a salient reminder that my thinking must interact with the things I hear, the people I interact with, the ideas I read about, the pictures I see, and the universe I live in.

The orienting system encompasses the traditions, mores, beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions expressed through unlimited media, including, sayings, music, art, worship, preaching, testimonies, poems, books, speeches, and even the nonverbal, nontangible media. In our age the media have expanded to include TV, the Internet, Twitter, and Facebook. In other words, our orienting system can no longer be defined by the boundaries set by anthropologists and ethnographers of culture and a people’s traditions.

One may ask, “Why does the orienting system warrant the attention of theological education?” As a theological educator, pastoral counselor and pastor, I posit that the orienting system warrants attention in theological education because the human worldview is a function of people’s appropriation of God’s image in their individual psyche and corporate expression — an image that is formed from the orienting system. The worldview includes but is not limited to perceptions, relationships, hopes and endeavors, discouragements and helplessness—in short, people’s whole livelihood. This is a sweeping statement that could elicit some very strong criticism, so do allow me to anticipate some of the possible criticisms.

The first regards my proposition that the image of God is a most powerful agency in our human livelihood. One might ask: What about the atheist, who does not believe in God and does not have a God image?
What about the non-believer, who has turned away from God? What about the various religions in the world: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism—whose God are we talking about?

Rather than offer rote answers to each of these pertinent questions, let me suggest a life scenario that will get us thinking about many of these questions. During the 9/11 attack, or during the deadly tremors in Haiti, or for the people in Asia during the tsunami, or currently for the families who have lost everything to hurricane Irene, or in Somalia and East Africa where mothers are watching their children die from disease and lack of food, what is going on in their minds? I doubt the atheist said, right in the midst of these critical events, “Phew! At least I did not get hurt when my whole family died, so all is well,” or that the Buddhist said, “I will just sit and say my mantra and all will be well.” Critical events raise for all of us existential questions which, depending on how we can make meaning for ourselves, will either confirm for the atheist that there is no God, or cause the Christian to wonder, “Where is God in this?”

Believing in the existence of a deity is the acknowledgement of human fallibility. Similarly, to not believe can be seen as the renunciation of any acknowledgement of a power beyond oneself. I submit that in times of critical events, when the core of our humanity is shattered, even the unbeliever or the atheist is bound to ask existential questions. When people cannot find satisfactory answers that begin to give meaning to their situations, their hearts become hardened against God or any religion. They then have a likely reason to be an atheist, or to be inclined to the conviction of superiority of one religion or philosophical conviction over all others. The pertinent question here is not whose God or which religion, but the fact that people do engage and re-engage in existential questions about the cosmos and human life, in which God does become a subject.

The second question I would anticipate from my postulation is, “How can we think in terms of a corporate beholding the image of God?” I believe the best answer lies in our understanding of religion and its role in corporate and individual human life. So let me invite you to think briefly about what religion is, what are its origins, and how people become religious.

Religion is the totality of media through which people try to make meaning of the world and cosmos we live in. In fact, it has been said that psychology and religion are very similar in that they both are concerned with making sense of the human life—only one does so by engaging science while the other deals with matters of faith and spirituality. Most religious philosophies imply the existence of a personified image that could be related to with some special significance. To be religious is to experience a highly personalized being that emanates from a deep-seated and developmentally engendered representation of a power that is acknowledged and experienced
beyond ourselves. For some religions, the power is attributed to animate characteristics, while for others there is no animate deity. This power finds expression in cultural and social symbolism of our context. Engaging in communal religious rituals and ceremonies is an expression of this acknowledgment.

Acknowledgement of a power beyond ourselves and one to whom we can turn in our search for meaning in life experiences provides us with a perspective through which we view and experience the world. According to Clifford Geertz (1973, 90), 'religion has the power to color our external worldviews and experiences. Geertz points out that through expression in external cultural patterns and symbolism, religion elicits powerful and pervasive moods and motivations within the person. It generates powerful psychological realities for individuals, giving meaning to human experience within the culture.

Object relations theorists and cognitive psychologists provide a positive framework from which religious influence on human behavior can be understood. Donald Winnicott, for instance, perceives religion as a transitory area that aids human beings to make sense of the inner and outer realities (Winnicott 1953, 14). Discussing Winnicott's theory, David Wulff notes that religion is one of the diverse ways we access a lens to human life. He states that just as the infant ventures out and assimilates outer reality through the help of transitional objects, so does the adult continue to make sense of the outer reality through diverse forms of systems available to him/her (Wulff 2001, 23). Religion, and may I suggest one's image of God, is the most powerful force in helping us organize our perception of the world.

Having established that our image of God, expressed through corporate religion, is the greatest contender in human livelihood, I will now turn around and state that our personal image of God, which finds expression in corporate ritualistic practices, is not so private because it is garnered from corporate expression in what I call the orienting system. Yes. We express our privatized image of God through corporate religion, but we simultaneously acquire our image of God and continue to expand it from the orienting system.

Long before we are introduced to the Christian faith, for instance – either by encountering Christ or by making a cognitive decision to become a follower of Christ – we already have acquired an image of God. The image we have at this point, though, is what we may call a societal or public image. It is not yet appropriated as a private elaboration of a God we can say we are in relationship with. John Mbiti, one of the African philosophers, tries to capture the essence of humans having some form of elaboration of God when he states "to be human is to be religious (Mbiti, 1991, 108)."
In *The Birth of the Living God*, Ana-Maria Rizzuto put forward a credible theory that people begin forming a God representation or image right from infancy and continue throughout adulthood. She states that people go to great lengths to organize their world in a coherent manner. She observes that in the course of the life cycle, an individual produces a “highly personalized representation of God” begun in infancy as object relations (Rizzuto 1979, 90). Her work, interestingly, stems from Freudian psychoanalysis, which discredits religion as an article of faith in mature human beings and asserts that with respect to the value of life, the other two great achievements of man, art and science, can satisfactorily replace religion. Indeed, in Freud’s arguments, religion belongs to the common man who does not have the luxury to possess art or science (Freud 1961, 23-24). Freud’s general claim on origins of the image of God and therefore religion may be found in his popular and humorous reversal of the Genesis text “God created man in his own image” to “Man created God in his own image” (Freud 1910, 19). For Freud, the whole idea of super beings, both good (God) and evil (devil), originates at an anthropological level, from the human mind. He states,

Thus we recognize the roots of the need for religion are in the parental complex; the almighty and just God, and kindly Nature, appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother, or rather as revivals and restorations of the young child’s ideas of them (Freud 1910, 123).

This position suggests that God is nothing but a figurative “exaltation of the father” or “mother,” — in other words a figure that we regress to with infantile ideations.

Rizzuto notes that according to Freud, man’s creation of God pivoted on the Oedipus complex and is provided by the image of the father, thus accounting for the societal male God image (Rizzuto 1979, 15). Hence, when Freud talks about the God representation, he uses several terms in his various works that indicate a transformation of the paternal image into a God. He talks of an “exalted father,” “a transfiguration of,” “a likeness of,” “a sublimation of,” “a surrogate of,” “a copy of,” to the ultimate conclusion that “God is really the father” (Rizzuto 1979, 31). Rizzuto also notes that although Freud later offers an explanation of how women acquire religion as a cultural inheritance through men, he was not concerned with the possibility that religion might form through other object relations that every child developmentally engages in. She states:

In the placing of the formation of the inner God image in the context of the father-son relationship alone, Freud excludes other possible early object relations: son-mother,
daughter-father, daughter-mother. This exclusion obliged him to find further explanation for the cultural transmission of religion. Inheritance is for Freud, the explanation: “The male sex seems to have taken the lead in all these moral acquisitions; and they seem to have been transmitted to women by cross inheritance” (Rizzuto 1979, 15; citing Freud 1923b).

Rizzuto discredits Freud’s lack of concern with the question of how some people come to really believe in the existence of a God beyond having God representation (Rizzuto 1979, 15). She also underlines the practical aspect that religion, through God’s image, plays in the perceptions and experience of life, a fact that, I might add, cannot be substituted by art or science. She states:

But if my analysis is correct, the God representation is more than the cornerstone upon which it was built. It is a new original representation which, because it is new, may have the varied components to soothe and comfort, provide inspiration and courage-or terror and dread-far beyond that inspired by the actual parents. This reasoning also provides an explanation for belief in God by people who are neither infantile nor so regressed as to make us suspect that they constantly reactivate their childhood drama or cling to a parental divinity (Rizzuto 1979, 46).

Rizzuto’s claims bring women into direct participation in the origination of a God image and therefore religion. Her assertions also open an avenue to the possibility of a very mature relationship between humans and their God. Hence, “Those who are capable of mature religious belief renew their God representation to make it compatible with their emotional conscious and unconscious situation, as well as with their cognitive and object-related development” (Rizzuto 1979, 46). The resulting image of God is not just a private fantasy, as Freud would have it, but a living entity in dynamic interaction with our experiences in life. In this regard, Rizzuto states:

I conclude therefore that formation of the image of God does not depend upon the Oedipal conflict. It is an object related representational process marked by the emotional configuration of the individual prevailing at the moment he forms the representation, at any developmental stage (Rizzuto 1979, 44).

This image evolves over years, from infancy into adulthood, drawing from life experiences and environmental systems or what I call the orienting system. According to Rizzuto, the God representation is one among the many transitional objects with which children populate their “transitional space” (Rizzuto 1979, 190).
The inception of God's image, according to Rizzuto, begins around age three, the age around which the child is differentiating from the parent to develop into a separate person. Rizzuto states:

Around the age of three, the child matures cognitively to the point of becoming concerned with animistic notions of causality. He wants to know the why of everything. Through questioning he tries to arrive at the final answer and is not satisfied with scientific explanation. The child wants to know who moves the clouds and why. If told "The wind," he wants to know who moves the wind, and so on. Finally he is told by parents or adults that God does these things. . . . This ceaseless chaining of causes inevitably ends up in a "superior being" That notion suits the child well because in his mind his parents and adults as "superior beings" of great power and size gifted with a remarkable ability to know the child's intentions. . . . The knowledge that his parents themselves submit to a greater being and that God can do things they cannot do impress the child immensely. But his capacity for admiration of such a great being does not diminish the child's animistic — that is anthropomorphic — understanding of God as being like his parents, only greater (Rizzuto 1979, 45).

Let me give an example of what Rizzuto is alluding to. In our homes, if we are religious, we engage in certain rituals on regular basis. If we are Christians, for instance, we pause to pray, maybe with a sign of reverence like holding our palms together and bowing our heads as we gather before we eat; we give thanks for food that the child saw his mother prepare; in church, we stand as the scriptures are read, we sing and praise, sometimes lifting our hands; we read scriptures in our homes and talk about them, and so on. In all these activities, the young baby, who at this period perceives the parents as the greatest things in life, observes with interest, conjuring up this other unseen person to whom the praise, the songs, the prayers are directed. This is the beginning of the child's formation of a God representation. In her book Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith, Dr. Catherine Stonehouse shares pictures of God's image drawn by children of various ages around the world, showing clearly that the creation of God's image occurs in our formative years.

Soon the God representation acquires special and superior characteristics from the various ritualistic religious practices within the family and the multiple aspects within the cultural and social milieus. Similar aspects of religious rites and socio-cultural practices may pertain to other religions. It is not surprising that Mbiti, writing about the origins of religion for the African people, states that their belief in God may have arisen from their reflections of the cosmos, including the observation of forces of nature,
the wonders of the universe like the galaxy, the mystery of birth, and even the realization of their own limitations, all of which coalesce to an acknowledgment of God as the creator (Mbti, 1975, 32). Hence, God is associated with powers like storms and lightning, as well as with warmth and calamities, and is perceived as one more powerful than people and the observable. The general religious orienting system in the Kenyan context presents God as superhuman, omnipotent and omniscient, through ways that people, right from childhood, are taught to relate to God as an object of worship; through songs and even the names attributed to God, like Mweneeya (the powerful one) and Mwathani (the Lord). These are all associations readily available in the orienting system to influence the shaping of the developmental formation of a God image by the child.

According to Rizzuto, at each developmental stage, the old God representation is brought to a new encounter by ever-dynamic experiences in the person's life, which may lead to repression, refinement, and transformation of the image (Rizzuto 1979, 90). Even children who may have grown up in nonreligious families or without the nurture of families, acquire their God image from the orienting system: the songs on radio and TV, the churches they see as they drive by; the conversations they hear about God and life from their friends, the stories, sayings, and proverbs they hear; the books they read; the fact that businesses remain closed on Sundays (a day associated with worship). Somehow, the child is mentally organizing the world into meanings about these things.

What we derive from Rizzuto's assertions is that all humans have the potential to be religious through their developing God representation. In cognitive psychological language, we may say that all humans have a God-schema, the difference being the elaborate complexity of that schema. And if we are to integrate this psychological perspective with Wesleyan doctrine, this is the approximation of pre-venient grace which seeks us and places us in God's path long before we have cognitively sought God. The level of and claim to be religious, however, is varied by each person's social, cultural, and religious experience and his or her ensuing engagement with the God representation. Rizzuto's statement is most explicit and fills the gap in Freud's position regarding non-believers and its co-relation with maturity. She states that in this context the nonbeliever is a person who has decided consciously or unconsciously for reasons based on his own historical evolution, not to believe in a God whose representation he has. ... Some people cannot believe because they are terrified of their God. Some do not dare to believe because they are afraid of their own regressive wishes. Others do not need to believe because they have created other types of gods that sustain them equally well. Maturity and belief are not related issues.
Only detailed study of each individual can reveal the reason for that person's belief in God (Rizzuto 1979, 47).

Similarly, one may not be a believer because he/she may not have matured the God representation to religious belief because of lack of intentional exposure, or lack of immersion in faith communities. Their God representation may be simply one that has been offered by the socio-cultural system.

In considering Rizzuto's views of the development of God representation and my assertion that such God images offer potential for people to become religious and acquire faith in God, it is important to reiterate that multiple factors beyond the parent-child relationship influence the origination of the God representation. Personalized elaborations about the characteristics of God, God's demeanor and capacity, God's will, and the role God plays in one's life are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and religious system that nurtures the person and through which the person develops a sense of self. In other words, they are rooted in the orienting system.

An important addendum to this discussion is that with every adjustment of God's image brought about by one's experiences in life, there is an alteration of the self-perception. In other words, just as our image of God continues to be dynamic as we engage life, so do our sense of self, self-identity, and worldview. Rizzuto asserts in this regard that if, for instance, a God representation has been transformed over the years to remain a more or less satisfactory transitional object, especially in the absence of major life challenges, a sudden change in the sense of self may strain the reshaping of the God representation or vice versa, and cause internal conflict within the person (Rizzuto 1979, 52).

What has this to do with theological education? My claim is that the image of God originates and gains status as an agency in human life. Theological education is about the quest for understanding God and God's activities in human life. When theological education is housed in a seminary, as in our case, the stakes are even higher, because theological education's concern is not just about a quest to know, but also about having an impact on people's relationship with God. These ongoing interactions between the socio-cultural and religious systems and development of a God representation within the psyche, which find expression through religious and traditional practices as well as cultural symbolism, are important aspects that should capture the attention of communities of people whose concern is to mature the faith of people in God.

This said, a brief discussion of the importance of God's image in human life, and especially in matters of faith, is a good place to briefly explore the importance of the image of God in human life and therefore our role as theological educators. Critical times in human life offer a great lens through which to explore the importance of God's image in human life.
First, as Freud rightly observes (one of the few places I agree with him), although the question of the purpose of human life has never received satisfactory answer, "Some of those who have asked it have added that if it should turn out that life has no purpose, it would lose all value to them" (Freud 1961, 24). When life sends blows our way, disordering our well-ordered lives, we look for answers. According to Janoff-Bulman, critical events threaten our mental, emotional, and spiritual integration by threatening to shatter our assumptive world. Bulman names three main human assumptions as universal assumptions that give us meaning and hope in life: life is benevolent, life is meaningful, and the self is worthy. Without these assumptions in place, life loses meaning and order, and we lose our sense of self-worth. The very effort to regain order, meaning, and sense of self-worth is what plummets us to asking what Burton Z. Cooper calls the "why God?" questions in his book, Why God? In asking the why God questions, we are really engaging our image of God in interaction with the societal image of God offered through religion in the orienting system.

But why do God and religion emerge as the significant place that people turn to? Because, I offer, religion is so readily available in the orienting system. The analysis of my research with domestic violence survivors in Kenya offers a good example of this claim. Without exception, all my respondents engaged religion and their images of God in various ways and at various levels. Religious engagement ran so strongly in my sample that I had to re-examine my data to determine the randomness of the choice of my informants. I found that my data were not questionable. It was a fact that people do turn to religion as a readily available resource in the orienting system.

However, comforting and encouraging as this might sound for those of us concerned with people's faith, it raises real concerns regarding what kinds of God image are out there in the orienting system. Whether people will react or respond to God and religion with sentiments of anger or with thankfulness, or with ambivalence of being somewhere in between, will depend on their own image of God. Rizzuto offers some guidelines that may help us understand the categories of people that turn to the orienting system in search of answers:

The positions encountered are four: (1) those who have a God whose existence they do not doubt; (2) those wondering whether or not to believe in a God they are not sure exists; (3) those amazed, angered, or quietly surprised to see others invested in a God who does not interest them; (4) those who struggle with a demanding God they would like to get rid of if they were not convinced of His existence and power (Rizzuto 1979, 91).
Although the categories of people turning to the orienting system are important, more crucial is the kind of God image prevalent in the orienting system. Any society varies with respect to social, cultural and religious practices, as well as effects of other human organized life and aspects of civilization like laws and technology. For instance, there are major differences between the prevalence of God’s image as well as the types of God in the Kenyan context compared to the Western context. I attribute the differences to the fact that in many places in Kenya, people can still mention and talk about God even in the public sphere. Also, fewer restrictions on public religion and private rights exist there. It is not uncommon to hear a passenger in a matatu (public vehicle), for instance, sharing a testimony of how they have experienced God in their life. Furthermore, the image of God is most likely of an omnipotent, yet caring, a shepherd that walks alongside the hurting, the hungry, and the sick, and one who is able to change circumstances miraculously. God is discerned and resourced in all circumstances, good and bad. These perceptions of God are overwhelmingly pervasive and very powerful, eliciting moods and feelings that persuade the realities of the people. They will be found and expressed in the music, lyrics, and testimonies of people. An outsider looking in may wonder how one can see God in such circumstances. Consider the following lyrics of a song that became very popular immediately after the 1998 twin American Embassy terrorist bombings in Nairobi and Tanzania:

Hakuna Mungu Kama wewe (There is no God like You)
Hakuna Upendo Kama wako (There is no love like yours)
Hakuna Uwezo kama wako (There is no ability like yours)
Wewe ni alfa na Omega (You are the Alpha and Omega)
Tawazungo Asante (We come to say, Thank you)
Pokea Sifa zetu bwana (Receive all our praise, oh God)
And it goes on and on speaking of the attributes of God.

When I was first confronted by the song, my immediate reaction was to say this is not the kind of song to sing in such grief – they must be in denial. I had seen people with blown out faces, severed limbs, lost families. To me they were people beyond hope. Even I as a counselor did not have the skill to help restore hope. Then as I attended prayer and family meetings, as I visited with people in the hospitals, the song confronted me over and over again. It had emerged as a thematic song of the faithfulness and the omnipotence of God who was still in total control despite what seemed like a bleak situation. It was people’s way of seeking the reassurance in the image of God. From this image of God, they could regain hope, restore a sense of self in community, and cling to the benevolence that God would restore.

In the West, on the other hand, religion and claims about God have
been privatized mainly to those who are seeking. This poses a challenge in diversifying the media with which we populate God's image for the non-seeker, who may never turn to religion until circumstances have pushed him/her between a rock and a hard place.

It has been said that life without a test has no testimony. This is not to say that testing and pain and suffering are essential to growth in faith. However, they point to the likely growth and stability of the image of God for one who has experienced adversity in comparison to one who has not. What we so often forget as we make this claim, though, is that the impetus for growth is positively correlated to our theological foundations — in other words, the understanding and image we have of God. Indeed, the pain and suffering experienced by one who does not have any capacity to engage God may have the adverse effect of resorting to meaningless and randomness of life.

The greater question is, when life happens, what image of God will they find in the orienting system? Will it be Burton Cooper's "vulnerable God," who experiences the pain we feel with us? Or will it be Pat Francis' wrathful and judgmental God, who must be judging people with every act of natural calamity — even for their forefather's sins various generations ago? Will they find Philip Yancey's Trinitarian God, who as the Father is omnipotent and able to lift them from their trenches, who as the Son can identify with their pain and suffering, and who as the Spirit can comfort them and pray when they cannot? Cooper's suggestion to mine the seams of our scriptures and life experience so that we can move beyond an "either/ or" God image might be a place to begin shaping the kind of image that would affect the orienting system. Cooper states, "When we allow the ideas of love and justice to form our basic images of God we come up with two contradictory images: the ruthlessly impartial judge and the tender hearted parent" (Cooper 1988, 51).

These questions, I hope, help us to clearly see the noble work we, as theological educators, have in affecting the orienting system through our classrooms, scholarship, and lectureships. We cannot control all that comprises the orienting system, but it is our called responsibility to be intentional about ensuring that such a readily available resource is populated with considerable God images that articulate the true and continually revealed nature of our God.

Second, people will turn to religion for answers to life situations because, like psychology, religion is in the business of searching for a meaning of human life. It is also a significant moral and psychic regulating agency in the face of anxiety brought about by disorder and randomness. People use their image of God to maintain their psychic equilibrium. It is their image of God that sustains them during these critically stressful times when their faith is tried and, as Geertz
puts it, they have reached their human analytical capacity (Geertz, 1971, 101-108).

Transformation and/or sustainability of a person's faith in God resides in recapturing what Bulman claims to have been threatened—human worth and integrity in a meaningful world that has the hope of benevolence. With a sense of hope, self, and order, one can count on a tomorrow that rests in the benevolence of the world she is a part of. For some, religion is the way of life and therefore the lens through which they view and make meaning of their circumstances. For these, danger would arise only if their elaborate images of God are insufficient to restore hope, meaning, and self-worth. Those for whom engagement with religion is not a daily and regular default in perceiving life circumstances may first engage all other forms of coping resources. When these fail, religion, and its appropriation of God image, is usually the last resort. Such people may not have a sufficiently elaborate God image, even though they may never have doubted the existence of God. If they cannot find a readily available image of God that is sufficient to enable healing, they may never be able to re-integrate meaningfulness and worth. What would have been a happy ending of healing becomes in this case a disastrous alienation from God and faith. Helplessness, cynicism, and malevolence may fill the ensuing vacuum.

On the other hand, if they are to find an image of God in the orienting system that coincides with their own image, however simple, there is the likelihood that faith begins to take on greater significance. Through religion, they have been able to account for the circumstances in their life through attribution—however mystical such attributions might sound to a third party. In either of these cases and as Geertz states, “What matters is that they can account for the elusiveness of the events?” (1973, 99). If they can use religion to come to this advantageous position that alleviates their anxiety, what happens is not only the re-settling to a pre-crisis level that enables them to now rationally handle whatever critical event is at hand, but also a regeneration of their image of God. They have experienced God in a personally intimate way and God now takes on a very personalized relational image that they can resource on a regular basis of perceiving the world. It is for this reason that Howard Stone emphasizes that crisis offers an impetus for growth or disintegration (Stone, 2009).

A number of women in my research seem to have gone through this process of elaborating their God image to a point of redefining their identity. One such woman, Angela, in the face of a husband who beat her daily, took a stand by taking him to court. Empowered, she confidently said to me, “He [husband] has no idea who he is playing with, I am now a child of God!” This was a new-found identity!
Third is the claim by Rizutto that as we transform God's image, so we too get transformed. Our sense of self or self-identity is directly correlated with our personalized elaboration of God's image. One of the students in my crisis intervention class articulated this correlation well in a profound statement in her paper. She wrote, "I sensed, as I drew closer to God during the crisis, that I was indeed deeply lost." An encounter with our God image in the face of a crisis does not leave us the same person. Yet there is no assurance that our sense of self or identity will be transformed positively. On the one hand is the possibility that our sense of self-worth will be lost. Helplessness, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts are very much associated with that kind of loss. On the other hand is the re-defining of oneself by finding identity through Christ.

Fourth, as we continue to reform and transform our God image and in the process get transformed ourselves, we in a practical sense become the living image of God. I am reminded of the numerous times our Asbury President Dr. Tennent has challenged us, stating that we (as professors) are the curriculum in our classes. In similar ways, the students we send out are the image of God that stands in the gap of distorted images in the orienting system. They interpret the Bible, teach scriptures, create music, create ministries, and care for people all from their values, morals and beliefs, coalesced around their images of God. Who God has been to them is the testimony they will give through their preaching and various ministries.

Yet more and more theological schools, including seminaries, are receiving students who are seekers of faith, or who are very new to the faith. From my foregoing argument, we can assume that they have a God image, but the question is, is this image elaborate enough to sustain their new-found faith, or to offer the seeker the opportunity for sound faith through the theological education experience? Indeed, theological education has in certain cases done the exact reverse, in that a student's faith gets challenged by learning historical truths and exegetical views that seem to run contrary to the student's image of God.

Must one of our crucial roles, then, be spiritual formation of students in our communities through offering them opportunities to refine and regenerate and evolve their images of God to enable deeper relationship with the adherent?

I offer these assertions as challenges for us educators to wrestle with and be more intentional in the impact we have on the orienting system. As we wrestle with these concerns, let us be reminded of Jesus's answer to the question about the greatest commandment of all: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength" Mark 12: —— This clearly suggests moving away from dichotomization of theology and practice to an integration of theology
with life experiences. It is a mandate for us as a community to create a safe space that opens opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to encounter God at gut level; an opportunity for us theologians to impact the indispensable orienting system.

References

Endnotes
1 Although writing from an anthropological view, Geertz expressed his perception of relation between religion and symbols well in his statement that religion is, "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, long lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1973, 90).