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The New Indices of God Images (NIGI) differentiating between God of Law and God of Grace: A study in personality theory among Baptist youth and their leaders

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Abstract

This study explored the connection between the New Indices of God Images (NIGI) and personality as assessed by the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales (FPTETSA) among a sample of 188 Baptist youth and their leaders. NIGI differentiates between two God images conceptualised as God of Grace and God of Law. The theoretical and biblical roots for this differentiation hypothesise that the God of Law is associated with a more anxious worldview, while the God of Grace is associated with a more optimistic worldview. The data support this hypothesis. After controlling for individual differences in sex and age, scores on the index for the God of Grace are associated with lower anxiety, while scores on the index for the God of Law are associated with higher anxiety.

Keywords: God images, psychological type theory, anxiety, psychology of religion, empirical theology, Baptist

Introduction

God images, God concepts, and God representations have had a prominent role in the psychology of religion (Hegy, 2007), in terms both of measurement (Hill & Hood, 1999; Gibson, 2007) and theory (Hall & Fujikawa, 2013). Among the range of instruments developed to measure God images the classic measure proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973) has gained prominence through consistent use (wholly or in part) by researchers over more than four decades, including studies by Spilka et al. (1975), Chartier and Goehner (1976), Jolley and Taulbee (1986), Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990, 1992), Brokaw and Edwards (1994), Kirkpatrick (1998), Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002), Webb et al. (2005), Granqvist et al. (2007), Reinert and Edwards (2009), Krentzman et al. (2011), Soenens et al. (2012), Gebauer and Maio (2012), Meisenhelder et al. (2013), Vonk and Pitzen (2016), and Whicker et al. (2017). In their original conceptualisation and operationalisation, Benson and Spilka (1973) developed a ten-item semantic differential grid with a seven-point space between the opposing poles (see Osgood et al., 1957). From this grid they proposed two separate five-item scales: the 'loving God' index (rejecting – accepting, loving – hating, damning – saving, unforgiving – forgiving, and approving – disapproving) and the 'controlling God' index (demanding – not demanding, freeing – restricting, controlling – non-controlling, strict – lenient, and permissive – rigid). In their original study, Benson and Spilka (1973) reported a significant negative correlation between the two measures ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$), indicating clear overlap between them. Subsequent studies reported higher correlations between the two measures, including: $r = -.43$ by Webb et al. (2005); $r = -.59$ by Reinert and Edwards (2009); $r = -.63$ by Vonk and Pitzen (2016), and $r = -.72$ by Wicker et al. (2017). Clearly Benson and Spilka's (1973) distinction between the loving God and the controlling God had not identified clear orthogonal factors.

Continuing to work with the ten-item semantic differential grid proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973), Francis et al. (2006) tested its factor structure, removed two of the ten items, and re-interpreted the new eight-item measure as defining unidimensional semantic space relating to God images ranging from positive affect to negative affect. In this semantic space positive affect was defined by the descriptors: saving, accepting, not-demanding, loving, freeing, forgiving, approving, and lenient. Negative affect was defined by the descriptors: damning, rejecting, demanding, hating, restricting, unforgiving, disapproving, and strict.

In a subsequent study, Francis et al. (2025) suggested that the reconceptualisation of the semantic space as distinguishing between God images ranging from positive affect to negative affect raises issues for both psychological and theological investigation. From a psychological perspective, the notion of locating positive affect and negative affect as opposite poles of a continuum runs counter to the well-established psychological notion, rooted in Bradburn's (1969) model of balanced affect, that negative affect and positive affect operate as partly independent systems. According to this understanding it should be possible to measure the two systems independently and not to see one as the mirror image of the other. This basic psychological insight suggests that the bipolar model of the semantic differential grid may not be the best way to measure God images that reflect positive affect and negative affect. As a consequence, Francis et al. (2025) proposed taking key descriptors from the original scales proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973) and presenting them in the classic Likert format.

From a theological perspective, the descriptors that have clustered to define God images to the negative affect pole of the scale may confuse a range of categories. Theologically, a God who is hating and rejecting may be very different from a God who is demanding and strict. Alongside the insights generated from a psychology of religion

approach, additional insight may be generated from an empirical theology approach to help to reconceptualise the measurement of God images. As a consequence, Francis et al. (2025) turned attention to the two potentially contrasting images of God that may be characterised as God of Grace and God of Law. In so doing, Francis et al. (2025) changed the language in which God images are discussed from psychological discourse, as evidenced by the notions of 'loving God' and 'controlling God' proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973), to theological discourse. Drawing on the earlier analysis reported by Holdsworth (2024), they argued that a discernible and consistent theological difference may be sustained differentiating between the image of God of Law and the image of God of Grace, and that this difference can be traced through the Old Testament and through the New Testament.

Holdsworth (2024) argued that this distinction between the contrasting images of God of Grace and God of Law emerges in both the Old Testament and the New Testament through theological reflection on significant crises experienced in the historical trajectory of faith in God. From the perspective of the Old Testament, the crisis of faith was brought about by the experience of exile when God appeared to have reneged on promises made to God's chosen people. From the perspective of the New Testament, the crisis of faith was brought about by the experience of crucifixion when God appeared to have reneged on promises made to God's chosen people through the Messiah.

Holdsworth (2024) argued that underpinning the image of God of Law is the worldview which is essentially pessimistic and anxious, and which believes that God's good intentions in creation stand in danger of being subverted by human sinfulness. Law is all that stands between chaos and the maintenance of life in peace and enjoyment. In its fullest expression, it is a central theme of Deuteronomy, which itself is the manifesto of a group with a particular understanding of God in a postexilic setting. They believe that the Exile was in fact a terrible reminder of what happens when human agency is set against divine will, and

law is disregarded. Underpinning the image of God of Grace is the worldview which is essentially optimistic and hopeful and which believes that human corruption and sin will be overcome by God's grace. While the Deuteronomist theology is essentially political and concentrates on the political and historical act of liberation as the setting for the establishment of the nation, Priestly (P) theology, which holds the optimistic view, is based on the concept of creation, and the sure belief that God has promised that life on the whole earth will persist, sin notwithstanding, as set out at Genesis 9: 7-17. It is a sacramental theology which sees God's purposes in the interconnectedness of creation, rather than the persistence of a state.

Psychological factors

Of particular interest for the psychology of religion is the suggestion advanced by Holdsworth (2024) that the worldview favouring the God of Law is essentially anxious, while the worldview favouring the God of Grace is essentially optimistic. This distinction leads to the hypothesis that support for these two worldviews should be correlated with established personality measures like the neuroticism scale included in the major three dimension model of personality proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck (1991), the neuroticism scale included in the big five factors model of personality proposed by Costa and McCrae (1985), and the scale of emotionality included in the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales (Village & Francis, 2023a, 2023b).

Working with the Index of Positive Images of God (IPIG) proposed by Francis et al. (2006), Francis et al. (2023b) advanced the following theoretical positions regarding the connections between a positive God image (conceptualised theologically as reflecting the image of a salvific God of Mercy, construed in relational terms) and the components of psychological type theory as conceptualised by Jung (1971) and developed and operationalised by instruments like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005; Francis et al., 2017).

Within psychological type theory, the orientations are concerned with identifying the source of psychological energy. According to the theory, extraverts are energised by engaging with the external world of people and of things, while introverts are energised by engaging with the internal world of ideas and reflection. Extraverts tend to find social isolation draining, while introverts tend to find social engagement draining. This distinction does not easily give rise to hypotheses relevant to endorsing images of God conceptualised theologically as a salvific God of Mercy construed in relational terms. The hypothesis was, therefore, that there will be no significant correlation between scores of introversion or extraversion and scores recorded on the IPIG.

Within psychological type theory, the perceiving process is concerned with the ways in which the world is perceived, the ways in which information is received. According to the theory, sensing types begin with the details and move toward the bigger picture, while intuitive types begin with the bigger picture and move toward selecting the details. Sensing types tend to find abstract ideas and too many theories frustrating, while intuitive types tend to find facts and too many details frustrating. This distinction does not easily give rise to hypotheses relevant to endorsing images of God conceptualised theologically as a salvific God of Mercy construed in relational terms. The hypothesis was, therefore, that there will be no significant correlation between scores of sensing or intuition and scores recorded on the IPIG.

Within psychological type theory, the judging process is concerned with the ways in which the perceptions received by the perceiving process are evaluated and judgements about them made. According to the theory, thinking types are concerned with objective evaluation and logical analysis, while feeling types are concerned with subjective evaluation and concern for personal values and interpersonal relationships. Thinking types may tend to overlook the implications of logic-based judgements for human participants, while feeling

types may tend to overlook the implications of value-based judgements for systems and structure. Now this distinction gives rise to hypotheses relevant to endorsing images of God conceptualised theologically as a salvific God of Mercy construed in relational terms. The hypotheses were, therefore, that there will be a significant positive correlation between scores of feeling and scores recorded on the IPIG and that there will be a significant negative correlation between scores of thinking and scores recorded on the IPIG.

Within psychological type theory, the attitudes toward the external world are concerned with identifying the preferred process for engaging with the external world. According to the theory, judging types extravert their preferred judging function (thinking or feeling) to operate in the external world, with the consequence that their external world is structured and organised, while perceiving types extravert their preferred perceiving function (sensing or intuition) to operate in the external world, with the consequence that their external world is open and flexible. This distinction does not easily give rise to hypotheses relevant to endorsing images of God conceptualised theologically as a salvific God of Mercy construed in relational terms. The hypothesis was, therefore, that there will be no significant correlation between scores of judging or perceiving and scores recorded on the IPIG.

Francis et al. (2023b) tested these theoretical positions on data provided by 602 participants drawn from an online community concerned with Celtic Christianity. These data confirmed a significant correlation with the feeling function ($r = .23$, $p < .001$) and an additional small significant correlation with the intuitive function ($r = .08$, $p < .05$).

Research objective

Against this background, the present study has three primary research aims. The first aim is to examine the factor structure of the New Indices of God Images (NIGI) within a different population from the one in which it was developed. The second aim is to test the validity of the claim that the two God images assessed by NIGI reflect worldviews that differ

significantly in terms of anxiety and optimism. The hypothesis is that scores on the Index of the God of Grace will be correlated significantly with emotional stability, while scores on the Index of the God of Law will be correlated significantly with emotional instability. The third aim is to test the association between these two God images and the constructs proposed by psychological type theory. Following the finding by Francis et al. (2023b), the hypothesis is that the judging process will carry the strongest association with God images with a significant correlation between feeling and the God of Grace and a significant correlation between thinking and the God of Law.

Method

Procedure

All the young people attending the week-long Tidal Impact summer youth mission and service programme sponsored by the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, held in 2023 were invited to complete a detailed questionnaire following a contemporary-style worship event. Following an explanation of the nature of the survey and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants who signalled consent to take part in the survey. A total of 188 questionnaires were returned that provided data fully completed for the analyses reported in the present study (that means with no missing data).

Measures

Sex was assessed by the following question. Are you: male (1), female (2), other (please specify) (3), prefer not to say (4).

Age was assessed by the following question. How old are you? 12 (1), 13 (2), 14 (3), 15 (4), 16 (5), 17 (6), 18 (7), 19 (8), 20-24 (9), 25-29 (10), 30-39 (11), and 40 and over (12).

Psychological factors were assessed by the Adolescent form of the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales (FPTETSA; Francis et al., 2023a). This is a 50-item instrument comprising five sets of 10 forced-choice items related to each of

the four components of psychological type theory: orientation (introversion and extraversion), perceiving process (sensing and intuition), judging process (thinking and feeling), and attitude toward the external world (judging and perceiving) and augmented by emotionality (calm and volatile). In the foundation paper, Francis et al. (2023a) reported the following alpha coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) for these scales: orientation, α = .78; perceiving process, α = .71; judging process, α = .73; attitude toward the external world, α = .74; emotionality, α = .75. In the present study the following alpha coefficients were reported: orientation, α = .80; perceiving process, α = .59; judging process, α = .70; attitude toward the external world, α = .63; emotionality, α = .75.

God images were assessed by the New Indices of God Images (NIGI) proposed by Francis et al. (2025). This instrument contains three items reflecting the God of Grace, and three items reflecting the God of Law, derived from the original conceptualisation proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973). Each item is assessed on a five-point scale: agree strongly (5), agree (4), not certain (3), disagree (2), and disagree strongly (1). In the foundation paper, Francis et al. (2025) reported the following alpha coefficients (Cronbach, 1951) for these two studies: God of Grace, α = .90; God of Law, α = .80. In the present study the following alpha coefficients were reported: God of Grace, α = .76; God of Law, α = .77

Participants

Of the 188 participants who provided full data, 81 were male and 107 female; 22 were 12 years of age, 28 were 13, 21 were 14, 19 were 15, 15 were 16, 12 were 17, 6 were 18, 4 were 19, 25 were in their twenties, 15 in their thirties, and 21 were aged 40 and over.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by the SPSS package using the frequency, factor, reliability, correlation, and regression routines.

Results

- insert table 1 about here -

The first step in data analysis explored the factor structure of the two scales proposed by the New Indices of God Images. The two-factor solution explained 71% of the variance. Table 1 presents the varimax rotated solution with Kaiser normalisation, demonstrating the clear separation of these two factors.

- insert tables 2 and 3 about here -

The second step in data analysis employed stepwise regression to explore the effect of personal and psychological factors on the two God image scales: God of Grace (table 2) and God of Law (table 3). In each case the predictor variables were entered in three steps: personal factors (sex and age), emotionality, and psychological type (extraversion, sensing, thinking, and judging).

Individual differences in scores recorded on the Index of the God of Grace were related to emotionality and to one component of psychological type theory (judging) but were independent of both sex and age. Higher commitment to the God of Grace was associated with greater emotional stability and a preference for an organised external world managed by a judging function (thinking or feeling).

Individual differences recorded on the Index of the God of Law were related to age, emotionality, and two components of psychological type theory (thinking and extraversion) but were unrelated to sex. Higher commitment to the God of Law was associated with greater emotional instability, with older participants, with a preference for extraversion, and with a preference for thinking.

Discussion and conclusion

Building on a theological analysis rooted in biblical studies, Holdsworth (2024) distinguished between two images of God forged both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament at times of theological crisis. Holdsworth's analysis aligned these two contrasting images of

God with contrasting worldviews. According to this analysis, the God of Law was associated with a more anxious worldview, while the God of Grace was associated with a more optimistic worldview. Subsequently, Francis et al. (2025) proposed the New Indices of God Images as a measure distinguishing between the God of Grace and the God of Law. Against this background, the present study was designed to address three primary research aims and did so on data derived from a sample of 188 Baptist youth and their leaders.

The first research aim was to examine the factor structure of the New Indices of God Images within a different population from the one in which it was developed. Within this second population the two-factor structure was recovered by the varimax rotated solution with Kaiser normalisation. These data provide further support for the clarity of the two-factor model. Additional studies are still needed to test the factor structure of the New Indices of God Images within other populations.

The second research aim was to test the validity of the claim that the God images assessed by the New Indices of God Images reflect worldviews that differ significantly in terms of anxiety and optimism. The hypothesis was that scores on the Index of God of Grace will be correlated significantly with emotional stability, while scores on the Index of God of Law will be correlated significantly with emotional instability. This hypothesis was supported by correlations with the emotionality scale proposed by the Adolescent form of the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scale. Here is a good example of a theoretical position identified by theological analysis rooted in biblical studies being tested and supported by a project rooted in empirical theology and being informed by the empirical psychology of religion. Additional studies are now needed to test this hypothesis using other psychological instruments designed to assess the broad construct of anxiety, emotionality, and neuroticism.

The third research aim was to test the association between the two measures proposed by the New Indices of God Images (God of Grace and God of Law) and the constructs proposed by psychological type theory. The data demonstrated that the God of Grace and the God of Law related to individual differences in psychological type in different ways. This basic finding provides further support for the independence of these two conceptualisations and measures of God images. In other words, the data support the construct validity for treating these two measures differently.

Within the context of psychological type theory, the God of Grace was associated more with judging than with perceiving. In Jungian theory the preference for judging means applying a judging function (either thinking and feeling) in the external world. For judging types their external world is organised and predictable. This preference is consistent with the view that the God of Grace too is predictable and dependable. Here is a God who remains faithful to the people of God. God's relationship with the people of God is rooted in the divine covenant and remains consistent in contrast with the more volatile worldview reliant on compliance with the Law.

Within the context of psychological type theory, the God of Law was associated with preferences for extraversion and for thinking. In Jungian theory the preference for thinking is concerned with the quest for justice, truth, and logical analysis. Thinking is contrasted with feeling that is concerned with personal and interpersonal values and relationships. This preference for thinking is consistent with a wider worldview attracted more to the justice of being held to account and rewarded for keeping the law than to the divine generosity of grace. In Jungian theory the preference for extraversion is concerned with being energised by engagement with the external world. Extraversion is contrasted with introversion that is concerned with being energised by the internal world. Extraverts tend to be more active, while introverts tend to be more passive. Salvation for the extravert may need active

engagement and the God of Law provides the rationale for such engagement. Salvation for the introvert may be more passive and the God of Grace provides the rationale for God taking the primary initiative.

Overall, the ways in which the God of Grace and the God of Law are situated differently within psychological type theory provides further construct validation for those two distinctive measures of God images. Additional studies including psychological type measures are now needed to test and to refine these findings among a variety of populations.

There are, nonetheless, important conceptual and empirical limitations with the present study and with the parent study on which it builds reported by Francis et al. (2025). The empirical limitation concerns the reliance on two scales of only three items each. However, the clear recovery of the two-factor structure produced by these six items in both studies, one among 5,269 students between the ages of 13 and 15 years and the other among 188 Baptist youth and their leaders, offers encouragement for further research to develop more substantial measures. The conceptual limitations concern the derivation of the six items from the original descriptors proposed by Benson and Spilka (1973) and then mapped retrospectively onto the distinction between God of Grace and God of Law. However, the construct validity of these items, as demonstrated by the present study, offers encouragement for theological analysis of these two contrasting images of God, and their respective contrasting worldview, to propose additional items to be tested in future studies.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Ethical approval

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Crandall University on 31 May 2023, including the requirement for appropriate informed consent.

Informed consent

All participants gave informed consent by participation in the project.

Declaration of generative use of AI

The authors report generative AI was not used in their research or preparation of this manuscript.

Data availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Table 1

New Indices of God Images: Factor structure

	Factors	
	1	2
I think of God as loving	.90	
I think of God as forgiving	.91	
I think of God as accepting	.71	
I think of God as strict		.81
I think of God as disapproving		.82
I think of God as demanding		.80

Note: Factor loadings below .22 have been suppressed for clarity of presentation

Table 2

Regression on God of Grace

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Personal factors			
Sex	-.03	.11	.02
Age	.05	-.05	-.05
Emotionality			
Emotionality		-.32***	-.29***
Psychological factors			
Extraversion			-.05
Sensing			-.07
Thinking			-.08
Judging			.20**
r^2	.003	.077	.127
Δ	.003	.074***	.050*

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Regression on God of Law

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Personal factors			
Sex	-.03	-.14	-.03
Age	.20**	-.28***	.29***
Emotionality			
Emotionality		.24**	.23**
Psychological factors			
Extraversion			.16*
Sensing			.08
Thinking			.21**
Judging			-.07
r^2	.041	.083	.161
Δ	.041*	.041**	.078**

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$