

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Does submission to a deity relieve depression? Illustrations from the book of Job and the Bhagavad Gita

J. S. Price<sup>1\*</sup> and R. Gardner, Jr<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Consultant Psychiatrist, Sussex NHS Partnership Trust, Brighton General Hospital, Elm Grove, Brighton BN2 3EW, UK.

<sup>2</sup>Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of Wisconsin Medical School Madison WI, USA.

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**Two ancient texts feature a hero who does not submit completely to his deity. One, Arjuna, depicted in the Bhagavad Gita, decided not to fight in defiance of his mentor and deity Krishna. The other, Job of the Old Testament, complained bitterly that his god treated him unfairly. Both suffer affective disturbance. Arjuna, dejected, displays a panic attack, Job shows severe depression. After each interacts with his god and actually sees the divine form, each submits totally and then experiences symptom relief. These old texts support the claim of some contemporary religious congregations that submission to their respective gods relieves depression and anxiety to bring peace and joy. We pursue two implications: (1) Might psychotherapy learn from this and explore secular equivalents of submission to supernatural being(s)? (2) By what mechanism does submission to a god relieve depression? We call on longstanding evolutionary theories to which we have contributed about the relation of submission to depression. From this we tentatively conclude that whereas belief in a god may alleviate existential anxiety about the meaning of life and what happens after death, submission to such a supernatural figure is required for the relief of depressed mood.**

**Key words:** Arjuna, Book of Job, Bhagavad Gita, depression, dejection, triune brain, submission, incomplete submission, deities.

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the major religions of the world offer peace and joy along with relief of depression and fear in return for submission to the deity. It is not surprising that joyful surrender to a loving and all-powerful deity gives peace of mind and relief of anxiety and guilt, particularly if the experience is shared with others who have similar beliefs. The feelings aroused are likely to echo those of the child with the good parent, the pupil with the wise mentor, and the hero-worshipping youth with an idolized leader.

In contrast, psychiatry treats depression and anxiety with medication and psychotherapy. Well researched effective current therapies include cognitive behavioral, cognitive analytic and interpersonal varieties amongst many others (Wampold, 2001). These support the person, deal with grief and anger, assist in the giving up of unreali-

zable goals, promote conflict resolution, acceptance of the inevitable and encourage the development of realistic self-esteem. But none suggest submission to any person or entity (except possibly to the therapist). The fact that psychiatry and clinical psychology mostly ignore religion allows a recent editorial to state, "Studies of psychiatrists in the UK, Canada and the USA suggest that there remains widespread prejudice against religion and little integration of it into the assessment and care of patients" (Koenig, 2008). Comment on this editorial stated, "Religion and psychiatry are usually considered as two totally different ways of healing" (Mushtaq and Hafeez, 2008). There is a trend for psychiatrists to become more interested in and accepting of the patient's spiritual experience, for instance there is Section of the World Psychiatric Association devoted to spiritual matters, but it is not addressing the particular problems we are dealing with here.

Consequently, a paper like this must suffer from widely

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [johnscottprice@hotmail.com](mailto:johnscottprice@hotmail.com).

divergent views about the fundamentally important issue of the existence or otherwise of a deity, and if such exists, did the deity create mankind through the process of evolution by natural selection. This paper will only make sense to those who believe that, if a deity created man, such a deity created man through the process of natural selection first described by Charles Darwin. Even for these readers, there are still important divergences of belief.

A basic problem is whether the joyful surrender to the deity is using a newly evolved mechanism, or whether the surrender to the deity is using the same brain mechanisms which have evolved over hundreds of millions of years to subserve the submission of one individual to another individual of the same sex and the same species – a form of submission that figured as a necessary feature for the evolution of vertebrate social life (Fernald, 2002).

Opinions are likely to be divided over this, even among those such as Dowd (2007) and Rolston (2002) who believe that God created man by the process of evolution through natural selection. We clearly cannot contribute to this problem which is outside our sphere of competence, let alone solve it. For the purposes of this paper we assume that the brain mechanisms involved in joyful surrender to the deity have evolved from ancient mechanisms that arose because they mediated the submission of one human being to another. We believe that nature works as a tinkerer and builds on what is already there, rather than a designer who starts a new project from scratch. Of course, during the many years in which submission to a deity has functioned as part of human life, mechanisms of submission have been modified by cultural influences and even, possibly, through genetic change, so that submission to a deity now may be quite different from submitting to another human being.

For many years we have theorized about the relation between mood, social competition and submission (Price et al., 1994, 2004, 2007). We proposed that depressed mood represented an involuntary form of submission, which could be pre-empted or terminated by voluntary submission. More specifically, we suggested that the evolution of the capacity for mood change relates to an agonistic strategy set operating at the reptilian level of the forebrain and that this predates in evolutionary terms the very clear clinical connection between depression and separation (Bowlby, 1980). We say more about this theory later in the paper. As psychiatrists we like to base our theories on the histories of our patients, but in this case we have two problems: one, that people who have benefited from a joyful surrender to a deity do not readily come to psychiatrists; the other hinges on rules of confidentiality that prevent us from publishing the histories of our patients – rules made stricter in recent years.

In searching for ways to illustrate our theory, we were astonished to find that two famous sacred texts described the very phenomena we were addressing. One was the

situation of Arjuna in the Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita (Mitchell, 2002), the other was Job in the biblical Book of Job (Mitchell, 1994). In each of these two texts, the hero was in a very difficult situation and became depressed. Both were spoken to by their deity but had difficulty in submitting. Arjuna could not accept the advice of Krishna that he should join battle and kill many of his relatives and mentors. Job could not accept that God was behaving justly in killing off his ten children and all his livestock and then afflicting him with boils from head to toe. The deity spoke to both Arjuna and Job, but although they had no problem with belief in the deity, they had a problem with submitting and accepting situations which they had not been brought up to accept. Only when, in each case, the deity appeared in divine form to Arjuna and Job and they actually saw their god, did they then make a complete submission and accepted their deity's dispensation. They then both recovered from their depressions. We acknowledge that numerous interpretations of religious texts exist as do many complex features of the relationship of an individual and a deity or deities (Buddhism, for example, specifically disavows a godhead). Religious persuasions differ greatly, depending on the history and traditions, the specifics of creed and other factors. But despite this variance, all peoples throughout human existence seem to express worship to higher beings and social rank hierarchical phenomena pervade the forms of worship (Feierman, 2009a, 2009b).

We note that parallel phenomena show up in two widely disparate religions that originated in different parts of the world within very different cultures. We do not review the vast learned literature of commentary that each ancient poem has generated, but rather rely primarily on translated texts both by Stephen Mitchell, because these provide the story components that bear on our illustrated points. Difficulties arise in many religious people who desire total submission to their particular god, but cannot easily accomplish it. A person, for instance, may believe in such a deity (or designated human religious authority) but feel reservations about the apparent reluctance of an omnipotent deity to relieve suffering. Ability to say with total sincerity, "Thy will be done," seems to occur rarely. Rather, many experience states of spiritual struggle, often with accompanying depression (McConnell et al., 2006; Flannelly et al., 2007). The stories of Arjuna and Job therefore represent paradigms for the problems encountered by many people today. With these considerations in mind, we now describe the respective situations of Arjuna and Job.

## **EXTRACTS FROM THE STORIES OF ARJUNA AND JOB**

### **The story of Arjuna**

The Bhagavad Gita occupies a small part of a long Hindu epic poem, The Mahabharata, said to take place in the

once kingdom of Hastinapura North of Delhi. An early king, Bharat, decided that succession should be based on merit not birth order and passed over his nine sons for the role of Crown Prince, offending family members, particularly his mother. A later Crown Prince (Bhishma in the Gita) was maneuvered out of his position by his father's second wife. Succession among the grandsons was complicated by the fact that the elder was blind and so the younger became king. The elder had 100 sons, called the Kauravas and the younger had five sons, called the Pandavas. Because the younger died early in strange circumstances, the blind elder became king. But the succession between the two sets of cousins, who had in fact grown up in the same household and had been trained by the same teachers of warrior caste martial arts, was never satisfactorily resolved and the main part of the Mahabharata describes the conflict between the two sets of cousins, culminating in the epic battle of Kurukshetra, in which most of the male population was killed.

The Gita starts with warriors blowing conches and beating drums with two armies drawn up for battle (Mitchell, 2002). Arjuna, a younger brother on the Pandava side renowned as an archer, rode his chariot between the armies to assess the opposition. His charioteer, Krishna, drove him. An old comrade in arms and Arjuna's cousin and brother-in-law, Krishna was also a prince of a neighboring kingdom. Additionally, as an avatar, he embodied the eighth incarnation of the God Vishnu. Arjuna viewed the superior enemy army and saw in its ranks relatives and mentors he knew very well.

"Arjuna saw them standing there: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, fathers-in-law and friends, kinsmen on both sides, each side arrayed against the other. In despair, overwhelmed with pity, he said: "As I see my own kinsmen, gathered here, eager to fight, my legs weaken, my mouth dries, my body trembles, my hair stands on end, my skin burns, the bow Gandiva drops from my hand, I am beside myself, my mind reels. I see evil omens, Krishna; no good can come from killing my own kinsmen in battle. I have no desire for victory or for the pleasures of kingship" ... Arjuna sank down into the chariot and dropped his arrows and bow, his mind heavy with grief..." (Mitchell, 2002).

As Arjuna sat there, overwhelmed with pity, desperate, tears streaming from his eyes, Krishna spoke these words to him:

- "Why this timidity, Arjuna, at a time of crisis? It is unworthy of a noble mind; it is shameful and does not lead to heaven. This cowardice is beneath you, Arjuna; do not give in to it. Shake off your weakness. Stand up now like a man."

- Arjuna said: "When the battle begins, how can I shoot arrows through Bhishma and Drona, who deserve my reverence? ..... I am weighted down by pity, Krishna; my

mind is utterly confused. Tell me where my duty lies, which path I should take. I am your pupil; I beg you for your instruction. For I cannot imagine how any victory – even if I were to gain the kingship of the whole earth or of all the gods in heaven – could drive away this grief that is withering my senses."

- Having spoken thus to Krishna, Arjuna said: "I will not fight," and fell silent. As Arjuna sat there, downcast, between the two armies, Krishna smiled at him then spoke [at length]..( Mitchell, 2002).

To focus our approach to this text, the last part of the quote features Arjuna asking for help but he then clearly stated his decision without waiting for the help. He felt "downcast" and in conflict between his pity for his relatives and his duty as a warrior. From the early part of the quote, we know he displayed physical signs of panic and fear. The deity indulgently and kindly took Arjuna's mildly stated defiance as a teaching opportunity so that the Gita then detailed a long dialog between the two.

In it, Krishna explained the difference between the body and the soul, such that one can rightly kill the body because this does not affect the passage of the soul from one life to another in reincarnation. He also told how he had himself already in fact killed the rival cousins in a divine way, so that Arjuna in killing them physically would merely finish them off. Krishna distinguished between action and the fruits of action: action should be engaged in, but the fruits of action should be relinquished. Finally, Krishna adopted his divine form so that Arjuna could see clearly that he was a God. Arjuna then submitted to Krishna and took his advice to fight. In the 18 day battle, all warriors on both sides died except for Arjuna and his brothers, but even their sons were killed so that the only surviving male issue was Arjuna's grandson (Krishna's grand-nephew) who then eventually ruled without competition.

The text does not specifically reveal that Arjuna knows at first that Krishna is an incarnated God, although previously in the larger Mahabharata, Krishna performs several miracles. Nevertheless, in appointing Krishna his mentor, Arjuna adopts a role in which he should take advice rather than make the decision himself. The original cause of Arjuna's mental turmoil stems clearly from his conflict between his duty as a warrior and reluctance to kill friends and relatives, especially Bhishma, revered grandsire of the family and regent of the kingdom for many years. His submission to Krishna is not sufficient to tip the scales towards acting according to Krishna's advice and getting on with the fight. It takes another 16 chapters of dialogue and the sight of Krishna in his divine form before Arjuna submits.

This is not Arjuna's first (or last) problem with submission. Earlier in the Mahabharata he turns to his elder brother Yudhistira for advice, asking him whether they should accept their mother's injunction (given by mistake) that they should all five brothers marry Draupadi, whom

Arjuna has just won by a feat of arms; he says to Yudhistira, “we will abide by your advice, but bear in mind that it is not right for five brothers to marry one woman”, thus pre-empting the very advice he has asked for (Narayan, 1978). And even after the theophany, when he knows only too well that Krishna is an all-powerful god, he rejects Krishna’s advice to use an underhand trick to kill an important enemy (Drona), even though his elder brother, known for his uprightness, goes along with it. Thus Arjuna is presented in the poem as someone with a problem with submission, explaining perhaps why it takes nearly eighteen chapters of dialogue for Krishna to persuade him to take his advice to fight and making Arjuna a good role model for those whose own ideas make submission to the will of god difficult.

### The story of Job in the Abrahamic Bible

Job, a leading citizen in the land of Uz, pleased his god with his piety, who boasted of it to Satan, who replied that Job had not been tested (Mitchell, 1994). Challenged, the Old Testament God gave Satan permission to test Job, whereupon Satan killed off Job’s ten children and arranged loss of livestock. Job passed this test, saying:

“Naked came I from my mother’s womb, and naked I will return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken; may the name of the Lord be blessed”.

Then his god gave Satan permission to afflict Job with disease, so that boils covered him from head to toe. This was too much for Job, who then sat on an ash-heap outside the city gates. Three comforters visited him to whom he would not speak for seven days. Then they explained that Job must have sinned and should therefore repent, according to doctrines then current. Job refused to accept this view and in a series of magnificent speeches he maintained his innocence, accused his god of injustice and even proposed to argue his case against his god as in a court, as follows:

If only there was an arbiter  
who could lay his hand on us both,  
who could make you put down your club  
and hold back your terrible arm.  
Then, without fear, I would say,  
You have not treated me justly (Mitchell, 1994).

Although Job unquestionably believed in his deity, he felt determined to not submit to him:

I swear by God, who has wronged me  
and filled my cup with despair,  
that while there is life in this body  
and as long as I can breathe,  
I will never let you convict me;

I will never give up my claim.  
I will hold tight to my innocence;  
my mind will never submit (Mitchell, 1994).

A young Elihu then came along and told Job that he made a mistake in thinking that he was in the same category as God and even more just. Therefore he sinned in his pride. But Job still did not submit. Then his god spoke to Job out of a whirlwind; he reinforced what Elihu had said and then actually appeared to Job, who finally did after all submit. He said:

I have heard of you with my ears;  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore I will be quiet,  
comforted that I am dust (Mitchell, 1994).

God then restored Job’s children to him and returned his livestock increased twofold, so Job ended his days better off than before the test.

### Similarities in the two poems

In addition to their status as masterpieces of literature, the Book of Job and the Bhagavad Gita share the following features:

A hero or leading citizen encountered a major difficulty. Arjuna, renowned warrior, faced his rivals who include relatives and mentors so he felt scruples about killing them. He stated, “I will not fight.” Job lost his children, livestock and health.

Both reacted affectively. Arjuna, dejected, experienced the physical concomitants of panic. Job showed clinical depression. Although many other diagnoses have been suggested for Job’s condition, Kapusta and Solomon assert he fulfils exacting criteria for the diagnosis of depressive illness (Kapusta and Solomon, 1977).

Each had a prolonged dialogue with his God and both expressed incomplete submission. Arjuna said he will take Krishna’s advice, but before Krishna can give advice, Arjuna definitively made his “I will not fight” announcement. Job accused God of being unjust and even presented himself as more just than God; he manifested stubborn self-righteousness:

“I will never give up my claim...my mind will never submit” (Mitchell, 1994).

If Job claimed to be more just than God, Arjuna appeared more merciful than Krishna, since he had reservations about killing his relatives, whereas Krishna expressed no such scruples.

Their respective Gods then dramatically spoke to each.

Krishna, in a fantastic setting between two great armies, explained patiently to Arjuna the various types of Yoga and disclosed to innumerable devotees the basis of Hindu religion along the way, in the course of which he told Arjuna how he must completely submit to his god's will. The Abrahamic God spoke to Job from the whirlwind and repeated the point of Elihu that Job was not in the same category as God.

Arjuna and Job both found God's appearance overwhelming and then made a total submission to God. Job said simply,

"I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust" (Mitchell, 1994)  
Arjuna said:

"Krishna. I see the truth now,  
by your immeasurable kindness.  
I have no more doubts. I will act  
according to your command" (Mitchell, 2002).

They then each recovered from their affective disturbance and found rewards. Arjuna fought heroically and defeated his cousins in a battle which lasted 18 days and nearly everyone was killed except Arjuna himself and a few others. Job with new health found his children and his livestock not only returned to him but amplified in number.

Both likely represent later interpolations into an existing epic. The Mahabharata tells the story of the rulers of Hastinapura and The Gita appears inserted in it: how could detached philosophers sustain a long discourse about the purpose of life between two armies that thirsted for battle as they blew conches and beat drums? Moreover, Job remained patient without complaint in the original story of Job that dated from Sumerian times around four thousand years ago (Hartley, 1988). A later poet likely inserted the speeches of Job, his three comforters, Elihu and God.

Another similarity hinges on the speeches of Krishna in Chapters 7 - 10 of the Gita that compare with the speeches of the Lord from the whirlwind in the Book of Job. Both are marvelous statements of total divine omnipotence, putting man firmly in his place as not being in the same category as God.

For us in this paper, however, both poems depict the transformation of an individual from a state of incomplete submission associated with affective disturbance, to one of total submission with relief of that affective disturbance.

### Job's diagnosis

In the preface to the second edition of his book on Job, Kahn reports that a woman wrote to him and suggested that the evils Job suffered were all in his mind; she repor-

ted on her own depressive illness in which she suffered the delusion that her children were dead. She pointed out that the way Job's children were returned to him was more like recovery from delusion than a fathering of a new family (Kahn, 1986). It is also significant that none of Job's comforters offer him condolence on the deaths of his children, an omission which is consistent with their still being alive.

We agree that Job's illness may resemble such a delusional state. Sir Martin Roth, former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, described severe depression as follows:

"Everything that occurs to the [depressed] patient is interpreted in the light of the overmastering delusion. He feels himself universally despised and avoided; his sins are bruited abroad and are the subject of the contemptuous conversations of others; doctors and nurses draw aside their clothing to avoid infection as they pass his bed. Delusional ideas spring from the breeding-ground of a dominant anxiety; permanent breakdown of health, incapacity ever to work again, exclusion from all decent society, cancer, tuberculosis, death, damnation and hell stand like specters round the bed. It is hopeless to argue with the patients about these ideas; they cannot be convinced nor more than momentarily comforted, though sometimes they apparently welcome an opposition that permits an endless repetition of their ideas" (Slater and Roth, 1969).

Patients with severe depression often have one or more delusional ideas. Depressive delusions Job may have had include:

- Poverty (he lost all his livestock).
- Infestation (maggots crawled all over his skin – Ekbom's syndrome).
- Disease (covered in boils from head to foot).
- Nihilism (children were killed – Cotard's syndrome).
- Delusions of reference (even the dregs of society despised him and put him down).

Common depressive delusions Job did not have include:

- Guilt (instead he felt a strong conviction of righteousness).
- Former low rank (he looked back on former high status).
- Low self-esteem (he complained not about himself but about his situation).
- No future (he looked forward to reconciliation with his god).

But the absence of some depressive delusions does not exclude a diagnosis of delusional (psychotic) depression. Moreover, Job stayed silent for seven days after the arrival of his comforters, consistent with depressive stupor which may occur in psychotic depression.

Our point persists in either case, whether the author of Job portrayed a depression reactive to real calamity versus a psychotic depression in which the calamities were delusional. The story as told fits either possibility and this illustrates a mutual interaction between mood and cognition: knowledge of calamity can produce depressed mood and/or depressed mood can cause similar calamities to occur in the patient's mind.

## THE ETHOLOGY OF SUBMISSION AND ITS RELATION TO MOOD

### The ritualisation of submissive behavior

Submission has a long phylogeny going back at least to our common ancestor with reptiles some 250 million years ago. It has been described as the most important type of social behavior, without which living in groups would have been impossible for our ancestors (MacLean, 1990). Over the past century, a great achievement of comparative ethology has been the demonstration that agonistic (fighting) behavior between conspecifics (members of the same species) takes on a ritualized form in nearly all vertebrate species examined (MacLean, 1990). Thus, territorial animals typically require only brief submission because flight from a superior individual often suffices to ensure separation between competing animals of the same species of the same sex. Almost all vertebrate species that live in groups exhibit social hierarchies; these require for subordinates a capacity for prolonged submission and adoption of a lower status social role. But before this, to determine position, individuals fight or engage in agonistic behavior.

Most fighting, however, uses symbolic gestures rather than harmful bites or blows. Disputes typically settle from threats that replace physical punishment; show of lethal teeth reduces need to harm compared to actual biting. What has not been so generally realized is that the death or physical incapacity of defeat must also have been ritualized, so that we must look for a ritual or psychological incapacity to ensure a continuance of defeat after the initial gestures of submission have been made. Such ritualisation, we suggest, forms a determining factor in the evolution of depressed mood. We could thus call an episode of depression a form of ritualised incapacity or ritual death.

### Advantages of ritual over lethal fighting

1. Serious fights occur only between animals evenly matched. Thus, for each contestant a fifty percent chance for death or severe incapacity could result from physical combat.
2. Conflicts usually take place in groups of related members, so to kill one's adversary means loss of a brother or a cousin whose genes resemble one's own; thus, the

death of the adversary reduces the "inclusive fitness" – basically loss of shared genes – of the winner.

3. Since adversaries represent worthy opponents, they are likely to contribute to group defense against predators or enemy groups of the same species. To kill them means loss of potentially useful allies.

Likewise, the following advantages depend on language so that *Homo sapiens* therefore exhibits them uniquely.

4. The adversary may be able to obey the instructions of the winner and to carry out work for him; to kill him therefore would mean loss of a valuable helper.
5. If the opponent is killed or severely wounded, there may well be a revenge killing, which may initiate a blood feud with considerable loss of life to the social group. Rosen outlined the importance of revenge killing in myth and fable and suggests it as an important cause of death in human pre-history (Rosen, 2007). Revenge killing is frequent in recent simple hunter-gatherer bands and may have been an important factor in human social life over the last few million years (Fry and Douglas, 2007). The incapacity of severe depression appears like physical illness without apparent cause and is therefore not likely to give rise to revenge killing.

### Three levels of submission

Submission is a fighting strategy and has as its alternative the strategy of fighting harder. Submission is one of various de-escalating behaviors such as flight and freezing and is an alternative to the escalating strategy of fighting harder and escalating to a more dangerous level of fighting.

Escalation increases the chances of winning, but increases the cost of losing; de-escalation reduces the chances of winning, but also reduces the costs of losing. Our model sees submission (de-escalation) or escalation as relational decisions that occur relatively independently at three levels of the forebrain more or less as MacLean formulated a half-century ago (MacLean, 1990).

At a highest (neomammalian) level an individual consciously chooses voluntary submission as opposed to fighting harder. Both Job and Arjuna appear to be escalating at this level, Job because he wants to take God to court, Arjuna because he reserves to himself the right to decide whether or not to fight, in spite of having appointed Krishna his mentor. Both finally switch to voluntary submission.

At a middle (paleomammalian) level, emotions mediate submission that includes sorrow, sadness, grief, guilt and shame. As an object stimulates these feelings, they respond to environmental change and affect only a portion of mental functioning. For example, if a loved one apparently died so that a person sorrows, but then when it turns out the loved one survived, the sorrow immediately vanishes. The alternative to de-escalation at this

level is the deployment of escalating emotions such as anger, self-confidence and the exhilaration of battle.

We think that Job was escalating at this paleomammalian level (he was angry with God) whereas Arjuna was de-escalating (he had fearful and dejected emotion); we think Arjuna had depressed emotion rather than depressed mood because he was aware of the cause of his dejection and if the cause was removed (say, the opposing army laid down its arms and sued for peace) it seems likely that he would have made a rapid recovery. Arjuna feels pity and anticipatory grief and sorrow and we would agree with Pies (Pies, 2008) that sadness as a depressed emotion is different from depressed mood.

At a lowest (reptilian) level depressed mood mediates submission. Here no apparent object stimulates the feeling, the body state does not respond to the environment and it pervasively affects all aspects of mental functioning. It is likely that Job was de-escalating at this level. The escalatory alternative is elevated mood, which provides the increase in self-confidence, motivation and sense of entitlement which is likely to lead to success in fighting. How does the severe incapacity of this lowest level state of depression assist adaptation? The brief answer elaborated below lies in the mentality of our species that entails a win-at-all-costs strategy. This may have ensured survival over countless generations of competition, so the adaptive challenge includes the need to put a break on this almost irresistible force. What appears to have evolved is the fail-safe mechanism of depression mediated by the most ancient level of MacLean's triune brain.

The triune brain concept has been criticized, but we feel that the criticisms have been adequately answered (Wilson, In press; Wilson and Cory, 2007) and it gives a neuroanatomical basis to ideas of a triune mind which have been found useful in western philosophy for more than two millennia. Our own finding that there are three levels of escalation and de-escalation lends further support.

### **What type of depression is relieved by voluntary submission?**

Many types of depression have been described. There are neurotic, endogenous, reactive, psychotic, bipolar, melancholic, involuntal, seasonal, etc. We cannot predict which kind of depression would be most likely to respond to submission to God. Probably those depressions which are reactive to interpersonal problems would be more likely to respond than seasonal affective disorder. Arjuna and Job have different types of depression and both appeared to respond. We have pointed out before that some depressions serve to facilitate the switching from a high to a low status position (Price et al., 2007). Indeed, in these cases there is likely to be marked change of personality and delusional downgrading of for-

mer rank (so reducing the motivation to regain lost rank), whereas other depressions maintain a person in a subordinate role and in these depressions there is no great change of personality and cognition about former rank is not affected; one type of depression subserves social change while the other type subserves social homeostasis (Price, 1991).

Our use of MacLean's triune brain model also predicts that depression may occur at both the paleomammalian and reptilian levels of the forebrain; the former might be called depressed emotion and is sensitive to environmental change, whereas the latter might be called depressed mood and is not sensitive to the environment. These classifications based on evolutionary considerations do not fit closely with current clinical classifications, although the depressions associated with maintenance of low rank and those mediated by the paleomammalian brain would come more into the reactive or neurotic category, whereas those involving loss of rank and those mediated by the reptilian brain would come into the endogenous/ psychotic category. Karl Abraham and Sigmund Freud both conceptualized depression as aggression redirected against the self, with the object of preserving a love object; this is similar to our idea of the choice of a de-escalating strategy, characterized by depressed mood, as opposed to the choice of an escalating strategy of raised mood which might destroy (ritually) the love object or effect a separation.

We might add that other theories of the evolutionary function of depression have been proposed (Stein, 2006; Nesse, 2006) Our own theory could be regarded as a sub-set of Nesse's classification in which he proposed that moods of elation and depression monitor the propitiousness of the environment, determining how much investment the individual risks at any given time (Nesse, 2000). Escalation is risky and occurs when the situation appears propitious; de-escalation is not risky and occurs when the situation is unpropitious.

We favor a more specific version of Nesse's hypothesis, and relate propitiousness to the opportunities for active social competition in the form of ritual agonistic behavior, which has been a driving force in evolution for hundreds of millions of years. Social competition has changed enormously during hominid evolution, such that ritual agonistic behavior which was thought to be a specifically male activity is now most prevalent between husbands and wives and between wives and mothers-in-law, to such an extent that depressed mood is now more common in women than in men. Other theories relate depression to the relinquishing of unachievable goals, to escape from a bad situation, to cries for help and to threats to withdraw labor and these theories certainly seem plausible, but we think they relate to depressed emotion rather than depressed mood and are mediated by the middle level of the forebrain described in the previous section. The alternative strategies of escalation and de-escalation for each of MacLean's three levels of

**Table 1.** Escalating and de-escalating strategies at three brain levels: agonistic competition.

<b>The triune model for escalation/de-escalation</b>	<b>Escalate</b>		<b>De-escalate</b>
Rational, neomammalian level (isocortex)	Decide to fight on (stubbornness or courage)	or	Decide to back off (submission or escape).
Emotional, paleomammalian level (limbic system)	Feel assertive, angry or hostile	or	Feel inferior (anxiety, depressed emotion).
Instinctive, reptilian level (basal ganglia)	Elevated mood	or	Depressed mood Involuntary de-escalating strategy (IDS).

of the forebrain are illustrated in Table 1.

### Different decisions at the three levels

Normally a “resource challenge” or “ranking stress” will activate only one or two of the three levels, and then, if anger accompanies rational escalation, the individual is likely to win the conflict and the resource challenge is dealt with. Or, if chastened mood accompanies rational submission, the individual loses the conflict and becomes reconciled to the loss of whatever was at stake. However, two very human tendencies may lead to trouble. Our often implacable ambition and stubbornness may lead to prolonged escalation at the rational level in situations in which victory is extremely unlikely and then the anticipation of losing may activate the reptilian level strategy set and select for de-escalation at that level. The resulting incapacitating depression makes winning even less likely and a chronic situation results in which there is continued escalation at the rational level and continued de-escalation at the instinctive level. This is a common manifestation of depressed mood as seen in the clinic. We think this is the situation in which Job found himself. If he had selected escalation at this lowest level, he might have shown leadership qualities and become the prophet of a more just god.

The other human tendency is our desire to see fair play and our intolerance of injustice - this manifests at the emotional, limbic level, which seems finely tuned to evaluate the fairness of events and particularly of other people’s actions. If we feel we have been treated unfairly we feel angry and if this anger is ineffective in righting the situation, we may switch to depressed emotion. Arjuna may well have felt unjustly treated by his relatives and mentors, who had sided with the Kauravas, even though they knew how disgracefully the Kauravas had behaved.

### Assessment followed by engagement

The ritual agonistic encounter occurs in stages, as follows:

In a stage of assessment, two rivals compare the other to

themselves and make an assessment of their relative fighting capacity or resource holding potential (RHP). This depends on size, strength, previous successes or failures, availability of allies and anything else likely to influence a fight’s outcome. Each rival assesses relative RHP (that is, each compares a sense of personal RHP with things seen and known about the other). If one of the two estimates an “unfavorable relative RHP” that rival backs off so no fight ensues.

If, on the other hand, both contestants assess themselves as possessing a “favorable relative RHP” – that is, one’s own larger than the rival’s, then they move to the next stage of engagement. The actions during engagement vary enormously from species to species, and may consist of direct gaze, display of teeth, erection of gills, push-ups, head butting, lashing with the tail, parallel walking, locking of horns, singing, roaring and croaking and many other displays. Escalation may go from lesser to more expensive displays. Some agonistic displays resemble real fighting so little that observers initially mistook them for courtship. The stage of engagement may break into bouts between which only inaction, or displacement activity, occurs. This may function to withhold agonistic signaling while making serial calculations of relative RHP. Human language allows an infinite variety of verbal conflict before escalation to physical threat and violence and verbal exchanges may be regarded as a human species-specific form of agonistic behavior, in which females function as competently as males.

At some unpredictable time one contestant gives in, ceases to make agonistic signals and instead makes submissive signals. Well described by ethologists, these may take the form of metaphor, as in wolves who behave like a puppy as if to say, “I am like a weak little puppy to your strong adult,” or in monkeys who adopt female sexual behavior, as if to say, “I am like a weak female to your strong male” (Stevens and Price, 2000a). In most species, the defeated animal makes itself lower, smaller and more vulnerable, showing what Feierman has called “LSV behaviour”, an adaptation which has a long phylogenetic history and shows itself in its most advanced form as the non-vocal component of petitioning prayer (Feierman, 2009).

The successful rival then accepts the submission by stopping the attack and may acknowledge the metaphor by licking the other as a parent wolf does a puppy, or ritually mounting the other as a male monkey does with a female. Then their relationship continues with the defeated animal as subordinate who gives way to the dominant in resource distribution. But a problem persists in that the still alive ritually defeated animal remains unharmed and therefore in a position to recontest the issue, especially if having a good day or for some other reason estimates the odds to have tilted favorably. To settle this in human ritual contests a referee often ensures that the loser continues to behave like one. In other animal groups a more senior animal may referee to stop further aggression. But this does not always remain so, especially if the contest involves the group's alpha position. We have therefore suggested, as outlined above, that there has evolved a form of ritual incapacity that replaces the death or physical incapacity that results from real fighting. This ritual incapacity can be conceptualized as an internal referee that ensures that the loser behaves like a loser. The ritual incapacity clearly possesses a psychological rather than a physical form.

We have postulated that the loser is constrained by the ritual to adopt an "involuntary de-escalating strategy" (IDS), the ritual equivalent of death or severe physical incapacity. If severe or prolonged, the IDS may be experienced as depression.

### **The assessment stage of ritual agonistic behavior in the Book of Job and the Bhagavad Gita**

This archetypal situation of the ritual agonistic encounter may have been activated in both Job and Arjuna when for the first time they came face-to-face with their deities. Although Job does not describe the appearance of his god, Arjuna gives a vivid description of an overwhelming force, giving him such an intense experience that he begged Krishna to resume his human form. The vast difference in RHP between god and man would ensure submission by the man.

These eyeball-to-eyeball encounters between deity and man were preceded by the most powerful verbal dominance displays ever to have been written. In the Book of Job, the Lord's speeches out of the whirlwind make it clear to Job that he is not only less powerful than God, but he is not even in the same category. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna's speeches in Chapters 7 (verses 6 - 11), 9 (verses 16 - 19) and 10 (verses 19 - 41) make clear that he is the most powerful force in the whole universe and his splendid disregard of logical distinctions enforces, as in the case of Job, the inevitable conclusion that man is not in the same category as God. What recipient of either of these speeches would not be impelled to prostrate himself before the deity in the most profound state of submission?

Then, remarkably, Krishna (and perhaps Job) is invited to enter into a totally symmetrical mystical union with the deity, in which "I am in you and you are in me". How can the puny man be in a state of symmetrical mutual devotion with an all-powerful God? The answer to this apparent conundrum lies, we think, in the concept of the two modes, agonistic and hedonic (Chance, 1996; Price, 1992; Kortmulder and Robbers 2005).

Sophisticated group-living animals, including man, chimpanzees and cape hunting dogs, have evolved the ability to switch from one mode to the other, so that the agenda of the other mode is banished from awareness. Thus, during the stage of assessment in which the gods make their powerful speeches and then appear in all their majesty to the human, both pairs of participants are in the agonistic mode in which rank differences are sorted out.

The interaction between God and man is so effective that the business of the agonistic mode is completed in the stage of assessment and so there is no need to proceed to the stage of engagement.

When the humans have submitted to the deities, the business of the agonistic mode has been completed and then they all switch to the hedonic mode, which is one of mutuality and co-operation and differences of rank are ignored as irrelevant. Thus Arjuna is able to enjoy a mystical union with Krishna in which neither is aware of any rank difference between them. It is only when there is some disequilibrium such as the threat of sin or the appearance of human ego that there is a danger of switching back into the agonistic mode, in which event the human confesses, receives punishment and forgiveness and the way is then open for a return to the hedonic mode. Frans De Waal (de Waal, 1985) has described the switch from the agonistic to the hedonic mode in chimpanzees

After a fight, in which a rank difference is confirmed or reversed, the animals reconcile with the former rival in an intense display of hugging and kissing; remarkably, the loser seeks comfort not from relatives or friends, but from the former rival, thus confirming the switch of mode in their relationship. In the cape hunting dog (Postanowicz, 2008), the rigid social hierarchy of the agonistic mode (between the alpha male and female and the remainder of the pack) is so invisible in the hedonic mode that social relations appear symmetrical. In humans, very real differences in social rank are ignored on many hedonic social occasions, thus making friendly social interaction not only possible but also pleasurable.

It is not therefore surprising, given that the man/deity relationship has used the evolved social capacities of the species, that in the relationship between man and deity we should be able to switch easily from one mode to the other and thus ensure man's submission and obedience to God while at the same time allowing him to achieve a mystical union with the deity on a basis of interpersonal symmetry. Such an invitation by Krishna to Arjuna is the basis for Bhaktia (devotional) yoga.

### **Components of the involuntary de-escalating strategy (IDS)**

The IDS term of involuntary de-escalatory strategy (also involuntary defeat strategy) emphasizes (1) its involuntary nature and (2) its forming an alternative to an involuntary escalating strategy, as in a fighting response. This strategy set (of escalation and de-escalation) may happen in what MacLean conceptualized as the reptilian forebrain (roughly the basal ganglia) and the individual experiences elevated or depressed mood in correlation with the implementation of the escalating or de-escalating strategy.

In previous publications we have described the choice between escalating and de-escalating strategies at all three levels of the triune brain (Price et al., 2007; Price et al., 2004). The IDS has at least five functions, three of them social and two intrapersonal.

First, the intrapersonal functions of the involuntary de-escalatory strategy (IDS) follow:

The IDS incapacitates the individual (like non-ritual death). Therefore, the person does not fight back or retaliate; he or she lacks the psychological equipment for this. Technically, there is a reduction of the variables that make for successful fighting, such as RHP, resource value and sense of ownership. If the person entered into an assessment stage with the former rival, he could come up with a conclusion of "unfavorable relative RHP" and so remain submissive and not re-engage in conflict.

The IDS inclines the higher levels of the brain towards de-escalation. It generates pessimistic thinking, lowers self-confidence, reduces reinforcer effectiveness and reduces any sense of entitlement.

The social functions of the IDS include:

The IDS reassures the winner about any likelihood that the loser will try a come-back. The dominant can ignore the loser without anxiety. Rather than submission, the message communicates incapacity, saying, in effect, "I am too incapacitated even to put on a display of submission."

The IDS sends a message to supporters, saying, "Do not push me into the arena to fight on your behalf." Aggressive vocalizations of supporters otherwise might undermine the message of incapacity being signaled by the depressed protagonist.

It facilitates reconciliation with the former rival. A mood of anxiety often accompanies depression and may assist this. Anxiety orients the anxious person toward a goal of safety, comfort and reassurance whereas depression as an affect typically has no object or goal. Reconciling with the former rival happens via a process Frans de Waal

labeled conditional reconciliation (conditional on a new power differential between the two) (De Waal, 1985). For social reasons, this reconciliation is seen more in chimpanzee groups than in human society, in which rivals are not often available for reconciliation. On the other hand, human hierarchies are more often based on attraction than intimidation (Stevens and Price, 2000a). In a successful resolution of conflict, subordination comes to be based on respect rather than fear.

### **Prestige competition overtakes agonistic competition**

Methods of competition have become more complex over the course of evolution. Group living lengthened the duration of contests, so that even in apes a struggle for dominance may take several months to be resolved. And, instead of fleeing as happens in territorial species, the loser could remain in the group with the winner of the contest and this gave rise to appeasement or submissive behaviour, which reflects the capacity to live in a subordinate social role. Anxiety and fear of the dominant individual, together with relatively low self-esteem and lowered mood, enabled the social hierarchy to maintain stability and prevent rebellion. At some stage in evolution, this stabilising anxiety gave rise to a new way of relating to a higher-ranking individual: respect.

The leaders of the group made themselves attractive to the group members instead of (or in addition to) intimidating them (McNamara and Trumbull, 2007). Social rank was then determined by the choice of the group rather than by agonistic dyadic encounters. The new self-concept of Social Attention Holding Power (SAHP) (Gilbert, 2006) began to replace RHP, as group members evaluated themselves according to their power to attract interest and investment (such as votes or other forms of political support). Related to SAHP is the concept of prestige, which is the extent to which the group is prepared to invest in the individual. Prestige competition was added to, but did not entirely replace, agonistic competition (Barkow, 1991).

The capacity for escalation and de-escalation appears to have survived the switch to prestige competition, but takes different forms, at least at the upper two forebrain levels. At the highest level, pursuit of goals replaces the decision to attack, so that escalation consists in the adoption of new goals and de-escalation consist of giving up goals. The goals are usually ones that lead to prestige, if achieved. Also, on social occasions, escalation takes the form of self-assertion, such as standing up to speak and promoting one's own goals, whereas de-escalation takes the form of self-effacement and allowing other people's goals to take precedence in the group.

At the emotional level, escalation is less dramatic than the anger of agonistic competition; it takes the form of exhilaration, enthusiasm and self-confidence. De-escalation reflects the fact that punishment comes from

**Table 2.** Escalating and de-escalating strategies at three brain levels: prestige competition.

<b>The Triune Model for Escalation/De-escalation</b>	<b>Escalate</b>		<b>e-escalate</b>
Rational level (isocortex)	Adopt new goals, actively pursue existing goals, assert oneself	or	Give up goals, efface oneself.
Emotional level (limbic system)	Feel assertive, exhilarated and enthusiastic	or	Feel inferior (shame/guilt/sense of failure, social anxiety)
Instinctive level (basal ganglia)	Elevated mood	or	Depressed mood Involuntary de-escalating strategy (IDS).

the group rather than from a dominant individual, so there is social anxiety, guilt and shame. This is an appeasement display to the group, expressing contrition for breaking group rules, or for failing to come up to group standards. At the instinctive, reptilian level of the forebrain, little seems to have changed: elevation of mood represents escalation and depression of mood de-escalation.

However, the information which leads to the activation of the strategy set is clearly different. Instead of measuring punishment received from the rival, the reptilian brain in some way monitors social standing in the group and is sensitive to group approbation and disapprobation, to comparison of self with other group members and with one's own aspirations and to the knowledge of having failed the group in some way by not living up to its standards, or, having broken the group's rules, to the likelihood of being found out. Note that depressed and elevated mood are "all or none" things; whereas at the higher levels it is possible to escalate in some areas of life and de-escalate in others, in the reptilian brain the mood change is pervasive and affects all aspects of life – it is not situation dependent. This may reflect the pervasive change in the defeated reptile, which often loses his gaudy adult colouring and reverts to the dull brown or green of the adolescent colouration (Greenberg and Crews, 1983).

The manifestation of escalation and de-escalation at the three brain levels are shown for agonistic competition in Table 1 and for prestige competition in Table 2.

### **Management of the RHP gap**

In any asymmetrical relationship, resource holding potential (RHP) differs in the two individuals (absolute level of RHP has relevance only to help that calculation). In the involuntary de-escalating strategy (IDS), the loser suffers an RHP reduction, so the RHP gap between the two increases. But does a similar gap result from raising the winner's RHP (in the minds of both winner and loser)? The winner's RHP may be raised by signals of respect, praise, adoration or hero-worship expressed from the lower ranking to the higher ranking member of the pair. If the winner's RHP rises sufficiently, the loser's RHP does

not need to lower. The IDS no longer needs to function. We suggest that the brain somehow calculates this so that when the lower ranker joyfully surrenders to the higher ranker, then the redundant IDS resolves itself. This happens, we believe, with a joyful surrender to a higher deity in which one believes.

### **SUBMISSION TO A DEITY**

#### **Submission to a higher power – king or deity**

In humans, thanks to language and a developed culture, submission is more complex than in animals. It involves obedience from the subordinate to the dominant, a phenomenon seen only vestigially in other primates. It involves promises of future loyalty and good behavior. It involves remorse and repentance for disobedience and disloyalty in the past. It usually involves the belief that the superior person possesses more intrinsic worth than the person who submits.

When we submit to a god, our state of mind involves all of those aspects which have evolved to express subordination to other human beings, plus some more. And, as in the case of submission to a spouse or a parent, the submission is associated with more positive feelings, such as love and respect and, in the case of the deity, awe, reverence, worship and many other complex attributions which are not the subject of this paper. In the Gita there is talk of mutual interaction between deity and human which sounds like equality rather than submissiveness; for instance, it has been pointed out to us (by an anonymous reviewer) that the Sanskrit word *Bhakti* means to "inhere in", "participate in" or "share in" which suggests mutuality between human and god, which is also implied by Krishna's declaration that for those who come to him, "I am in them and they are in me." This loving mutuality also occurs in other religions.

But we would maintain that loving mutuality occurs after submission has already occurred; when the problem of submission has been sorted out, there can be mutuality between an all-powerful deity and a frail human being, a phenomenon similar to that which Frans De Waal has observed in chimpanzees and which he calls "conditional reconciliation" (De Waal, 1985). Similar is the mutual lov-

**Table 3.** Features of submission to a king or a God.

<b>Submission to the King</b>	<b>Submission to God</b>
Believe king a superior being	Believe in God
Believe in Divine Right of Kings	Believe in scriptures
Acceptance of unequal rewards	Accept suffering and injustice
Obey laws and commands	Obey dictates of scripture
Regret past disobedience	Confess past sins
Promise future obedience	Promise future obedience
Ritually submit (e.g., kneeling)	Ritually submit (e.g., kneeling)
Expect favors	Expect divine intervention

ing between parent and child after an episode of disobedience.

In Table 3 we list aspects of submission to king or feudal lord, compared to submission to God

### **Submission to God**

Submission to God constitutes a fundamental aspect of most religions, certainly Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and “Islam” which translates as “submission”. Does submission to a God occupy a different category than submission to other human beings, particularly when it takes the form of a joyful loving surrender? As delineated above, we suggest that when submission to God-figures first occurred, the behavior used brain machinery evolved previously over hundreds of millions of years to regulate submission to conspecifics.

Therefore, this technically can be labelled an exaptation. Exaptations are evolved mechanisms that find new applications in new environs. What worked for a previous use is now taken over for another use, here spiritual. The fact that depressed emotion and mood associate with incomplete submission to a God suggests that the depressed states which we have described as being associated with incomplete submission to humans represent part of the machinery of submission now taken over for use in the worship of a higher being.

Gods come in many forms and sizes. Thomas B. Ellis has suggested that some Gods are based on tribal superiors, whereas other is based on attachment figures (Ellis, 2009). We would anticipate that submission would be more relevant to the tribal superior type of God and this is the type that Job was relating to. Other Gods are based on predators and human enemies and in these cases submission would not occur, as submission to a predator would not be adaptive, nor, in most cases, to a human enemy. A final type of God may be based on the coalitional partner, with whom affiliation would be at least as important as submission. This might well be the basis of Krishna, who, after all, was an old comrade-in-arms of

Arjuna, as well as being his cousin and brother-in-law. This might explain the lesser emphasis on submission in the Gita than the Book of Job, but a reading of the Gita does not leave one with the impression that, by the end of the dialogue, the relation between Arjuna and Krishna is one of symmetry.

### **Difficulties with submission**

Many years ago C.S.Lewis wrote “The problem of pain” that we find remarkable on two counts (Lewis, 1940). First, Lewis clarified how difficult the person finds it to make a full submission to God. Little residues of “my will be done”, and various “ifs” and “yes, buts” interfere with submission. Secondly he told that the difficulty of submission to God means that God needed to create the appalling condition of depression, of which Lewis had personal experience, in order to reduce man’s self-esteem to a level such that he could submit to God. This assertion felt remarkable to us because we had independently explored the idea that depression had evolved as a form of involuntary submission to fellow human beings. This could substitute functionally for voluntary submission, and also incline the brain towards voluntary submission.

We as human beings experience fewer opportunities for reconciliation with our fellows than do chimpanzees. If a person fights with someone during the day, the opponent has likely disappeared by evening so direct reconciliation can’t take place. Plus, most of human competition is competition for prestige and no rival to reconcile with exists. If a book one writes gets a bad review, we have to suffer in silence. Book fairs do not feature sights of writers and critics hugging and kissing. On the other hand, humans do have an advantage over chimpanzees. Our rivals do not take exception to our making an affiliative approach to the most powerful of all individuals of our group as we seek comfort from Him and hope for reconciliation with Him. If a chimpanzee seeks comfort from the alpha male of the group, his rival is likely to interpret that as soliciting agonistic support and so continue the punishment.

### **Religion, mental health, and pastoral counseling**

There is an enormous literature on religion and mental health. John Schumaker (1992) cites a dozen reasons why religious people should have better mental health than non-religious people and then cites as many reasons why they should have worse mental health. Our own theory might suggest that religious people are more likely to submit to God than non-religious people and so should have better mental health; on the other hand, they are more likely to have conflict between the will of God and their own desires and so get into a state of incom-

plete submission, which may well equate with “spiritual struggles” which are associated with depression and anxiety (Flannelly et al., 2007). On balance, the evidence favours religious people as having less mental illness, drug problems and suicide, although the studies are correlational and no one has been able to manipulate religion as an independent variable.

Koenig et al. comment on the fact that much counseling of mental health problems is carried out by clergy (Koenig et al., 1998), and McMinn et al. state: “As many as 40% of potential counseling clients seek help from clergy and only a small fraction of these are referred to mental health professionals” (McMinn et al., 2006). But such counseling by clergy may not focus on enhancing submission to God. A group of Pentecostal Christians when asked their preferred treatment for depression disclosed a first choice of “memorizing Scripture” (Trice and Bjork, 2006). Perhaps pastoral care aimed at achieving a greater degree of submission to God would more effectively relieve states of depression.

For the believer, treatment may stem from two contrasting strategies. In a clinical treatment scheme, such as cognitive behavior therapy, the therapist attempts to increase self-esteem both by discussion and by getting the patient to make small but significant and realistic achievements. On the other hand, if a believer goes for pastoral care, an opposite approach would entail lowering self-esteem to facilitate submission. The worthless sinner, totally annihilating the self, would be so bathed in the love of God that personal self-esteem would become redundant (Grou, 1892). The Christian Thomas á Kempis describes it thus:

“I will presume to speak to my Lord, though I am but dust and ashes. If I esteem myself to be anything more, you confront me and my sins bear a true witness against me ... But if I humble myself and acknowledge my nothingness; if I cast away all my self-esteem and reduce myself to the dust that I really am, then your grace will come to me” (A Kempis, 1952).

This choice between therapeutic raising versus lowering of self-esteem seems a case where both extremes may likely benefit the person, but anything in the middle will not work. Self-abnegation as a component of submission to God may be an Abrahamic phenomenon. Job was reduced to “dust”. But there is no element of self-abnegation in Arjuna’s submission to Krishna. As we have already pointed out, what is important is the gap in status between the human and the god and if the god is sufficiently awe-inspiring, as Krishna was in his theophany, there is no need for the human to lower himself. Krishna tells Arjuna that he is unique in being allowed to see his divine form and the god of the Old Testament was sparing in his appearances, so the believer who has a problem with submission might well complain that, if it took the sight of the deity to get Job and Arjuna to

submit, what hope is there for the mortal who not only is not permitted to see his God, but also in most cases has no two-way verbal communication with Him. Identification of the reader with the heroes of our two tales may help reduce this problem.

### **Belief in God**

Belief in God can relieve existential pessimism and give meaning to an otherwise confusing and unknowable environment. Irvin Yalom summed up the situation for the unbeliever: “We are meaning-seeking creatures who must deal with the inconvenience of being hurled into a universe that intrinsically has no meaning” (Yalom, 1999). Belief in God solves this problem and therefore likely benefits mental health. However, belief can involve only more recently evolved brain systems, stretching back only a brief time compared with the hundreds of millions of years that our ancestors have benefited from the capacity for submission and during which we estimate that the brain mechanisms subserving depression evolved. Therefore those investigators who study the relation of mood changes to religious belief might measure also the degree of submission to God associated with that belief.

## **ALTERNATIVE SUBMISSIVE STRATEGIES**

### **Who else to submit to?**

If we regard depressed emotion and depressed mood as involuntary submissive strategies, several options are available to the patient and therapist, including voluntary submission, reframing, negotiation, leaving the field and even winning (with the help of allies, thought and planning) (Gardner and Wilson, 2003). An open question asks whether submission to God can relieve a depression caused by conflict with someone other than God. Likely, submission to God can trump other conflicts, as submission to God then renders it God’s conflict rather than the patient’s. But how do we help the non-believer?

Submission to cult leaders reportedly improves mental health and so submission to any powerful figure may produce a parallel effect (Galanter, 1989; Stevens and Price, 2000b). Part of the benefit of psychoanalysis may stem from the patient’s submission to the analyst and the correlated doctrine. Alcoholics anonymous treatment encourages the addict to admit that the person cannot control drinking alone and so should ask the help of a higher power, either God or an emergent property of the group. But, in general, for the skeptic, the agnostic and the atheist, therapy based on submission is not currently available. Yet this relatively novel idea for the mental health disciplines may challenge therapists and research workers for other rationales for our therapies and connec-

tions with depressed people.

## Afterward

The translator Steven Mitchell articulates the following; we conclude similarly:

The Gita is usually thought of as a great philosophical poem. It is that, of course. It is also an instruction manual for spiritual practice and a guide to peace of heart. But essentially it is, as its title implies, a love song to God. However powerful its thinking, its intention is not to be a treatise but a psalm. The Gita is a love song to reality, a hymn in praise of everything excellent and beautiful and brave. It is a love song to both the darkness and the light, to our own true Self in the depths of being, the core from which all the glories and horrors of the universe unfold.

The poetry of Job expresses the pain, anger and despair of Man confronting the apparent injustice and unknowability of God. By expressing these feelings in such beautiful language, the poetry may help to achieve some catharsis of the emotions and to make them a shared experience of mankind instead of an individual burden.

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