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The Silence of the God Who Speaks

An empirical study on the experienced absence of God

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Since 2004, I have had an increasing desire to understand the complexity and nature of divine absence. This thesis, *The Silence of the God Who Speaks*, is my first attempt at coming to grips with this complex problem. Along the way, many people have been significant.

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Heggedal, 10 August 2016
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SUMMARY – The Silence of the God Who Speaks

Through the ages, saints, poets, and regular people have experienced that their God becomes absent. It is described as darkness, periods of anguish, despair, fear, and sometimes as nothingness. But what – really – is that experience? In this thesis we search for answers that might help to shed some light on the experience of divine absence.

We have asked the following question: *What are the characteristics, effects and understanding of the experience named “God’s absence”, as portrayed in the stories of persons with a personal relation to God?*

I have attempted to answer this set of questions through qualitative in-depth interviews of six persons with a personal relation to God. The information withdrawn from the interviews is analyzed with STC (Systematic Text Condensation), and the empirical findings are read with theory in an abductive, hermeneutic process. I have used two main theoretical perspectives: object relations theory (Ana-Maria Rizzuto) and apophatic theology (Vladimir Lossky), as well as two supplementary perspectives from Christian spirituality traditions, as conveyed to us by Wilfrid Stinissen (and St. John of the Cross) and John Shea, respectively.

When considering our empirical findings in light of such theoretical perspectives, we might conclude as follows:

- 1) The absence experience is connected to ambivalent emotions; a desire for God, and a relief to be without God.
- 2) The experience of a leaving or disappearing God, can be adequately explained neither by reference to God’s essence nor to God’s (supposed) deliberate hiding. The hiding God is most often a rejected or suppressed God representation (that is: our complex inner image of God).
- 3) The absence experience might have its combined cause in concurrence of outer incidents and inner psychic assumptions and dispositions.
- 4) The absence experience might have transformational effects.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

1.	INTRODUCTION	8
1.1	Why focus on divine absence?	8
1.2	Divine absence – an experience through the millennia	9
1.3	The absence experience – a theme of broad scientific interest	11
2.	TOWARDS A RESEARCH QUESTION	13
2.1	An empirical approach	13
2.2	The hermeneutic process and disclosure of pre-understandings	14
2.3	The research question	16
3.	METHODOLOGY	17
3.1	The Empirical material	17
	3.1.1 <i>Selection of informants</i>	17
	3.1.2 <i>The conduction of the interview</i>	19
	3.1.3. <i>The issue of privacy</i>	19
	3.1.4 <i>Data collection</i>	20
	3.1.5. <i>The structure of the interview</i>	20
	3.1.6 <i>The quality of the interview</i>	22
	3.1.7 <i>The Pilot interview</i>	22
3.2	The Empirical Analysis	23
	3.2.1 <i>Transcription of empirical material</i>	23
	3.2.2 <i>The analytical process</i>	24
3.3	Theoretical material	27
	3.3.1 <i>The search for theory on divine absence</i>	27
	3.3.2 <i>Research relevance</i>	28
	3.3.3 <i>Theoretical perspectives</i>	29
	3.3.4 <i>Conceptual clarifications</i>	33
3.4	The theoretical analysis	35
	3.4.1 <i>An hermeneutical approach</i>	35
	3.4.2 <i>The abductive approach</i>	37
3.5	Relevance, validity, reflexivity and reliability	37
3.6	The structure of this thesis	38

PART II: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

4.	EMPIRICAL NARRATIVES	40
4.1	Introduction	40
4.2	Narrative presentations	41
4.2.1	<i>Anna: The returning absence</i>	41
4.2.2	<i>Bea: The resistance of God and self</i>	43
4.2.3	<i>Carl: The new sense of being</i>	45
4.2.4	<i>Dina: The transformed image of God</i>	46
4.2.5	<i>Eve: The God representation and the ambivalence</i>	48
4.2.6	<i>Frank: The coping with anxiety through religious practice</i>	50
5.	EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS	52
5.1	Which God and what presence is absent?	52
5.1.1	<i>Which God did “disappear”?</i>	52
5.1.2	<i>How did they experience God’s presence?</i>	57
5.2	How is God’s absence experienced?.....	59
5.2.1	<i>Absence – loss of emotions</i>	59
5.2.2	<i>Absence – emerging “unwanted” emotions and moods</i>	60
5.2.3	<i>Absence – a condition of relief, liberty and strengthened self</i>	61
5.3	What is God’s absence?	62
5.3.1	<i>Absence – a result of outer incidents</i>	63
5.3.2	<i>Absence – an action of God</i>	66
5.3.3	<i>Absence – an intra-psychic experience</i>	69
5.4	What are the possible effects of absence?	73
5.4.1	<i>God and man – the increased significance of being, not doing</i>	75
5.4.2	<i>God and man – less protection, increasing confidence</i>	77
5.4.3	<i>The omnipresent God and sense of unification</i>	78
5.4.4	<i>The more composed God and strengthened selfhood</i>	79
5.5	A bridge towards theory.....	84
5.5.1	<i>Findings</i>	84
5.5.2	<i>Towards theory</i>	86

PART III: THEORY

6.	THEOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY - ENLIGHTENING THE ABSENCE EXPERIENCE.....	88
6.1	Vladimir Lossky: The absent God – a God Beyond.....	89
6.1.1	<i>An introduction to apophatic theology</i>	89
6.1.2	<i>Apophatic theological perspective; the ineffable and accessible God.....</i>	90
6.1.3	<i>Apophatic anthropological perspective; the desiring man.....</i>	94
6.1.4	<i>What is God’s absence?</i>	98
6.2	Wilfrid Stinissen: The absent God – a God of the night.....	100
6.2.1	<i>The indispensability of the night.....</i>	101
6.2.2	<i>The three coherent nights.....</i>	101
6.2.3	<i>The night, pathology, and psychology.....</i>	104
6.3	Ana-Maria Rizzuto: The absent God – a transformed or regressed representation	105
6.3.1	<i>An introduction to object relations theory.....</i>	105
6.3.2	<i>Object relational “theological” perspective; the inner God</i>	108
6.3.3	<i>Object relational anthropological perspective; the relational self.....</i>	113
6.4	John Shea: The absent God – a necessary loss of the Superego God.....	118
6.4.1	<i>The adolescent self and the Superego-God.....</i>	119
6.4.2	<i>The adult self and the Living God.....</i>	121
6.4.3	<i>The religious experience and transformation.....</i>	124

PART IV: DISCUSSION, SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

7.	THE EXPERIENCED ABSENCE OF GOD - AND ITS EFFECTS.....	126
7.1	Characteristics of the experienced absence.....	126
7.1.1	<i>The darkness of divine absence.....</i>	127
7.1.2	<i>The relief and ambivalence in divine absence.....</i>	128
7.2	Understandings of the experienced absence	130
7.2.1	<i>Absence – a result of God’s actions.....</i>	130
7.2.2	<i>Absence – a result of God’s being.....</i>	133
7.2.3	<i>Absence – a result of outer incidents.....</i>	139
7.2.4	<i>Absence – ambivalent desires and resistance.....</i>	142
7.2.5	<i>Absence – flight, defence or wall.....</i>	152
7.2.6	<i>Absence and significant others.....</i>	155
7.2.7	<i>Absence – anxiety and depression.....</i>	157

7.3	Effects of the experienced absence.....	159
7.3.1	<i>The significant transformation.....</i>	159
7.3.2	<i>Transformations of God representation and self.....</i>	162
7.3.3	<i>Absence as catalyst towards transformation</i>	168
8.	SUMMARIES, REFLECTIONS & PERSPECTIVES.....	169
8.1	Summaries: How do we describe and understand the absence experience and its effects?	169
8.1.1	<i>Descriptions of absence.....</i>	170
8.1.2	<i>Understandings of absence and its effects.....</i>	170
8.1.3	<i>A useful model for the pastoral care.....</i>	172
8.2	Reflections on the research process.....	173
8.2.1	<i>Reflexivity</i>	173
8.2.2	<i>Reliability.....</i>	176
8.2.3	<i>Validity.....</i>	176
8.2.4	<i>Relevance.....</i>	178
8.3	Concluding remarks.....	179
8.4	Perspectives.....	180

APPENDIXES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIXES	183
Appendix A: Letter to the participants.....	183
Appendix B: Interview guide.....	185
Appendix C: Matrix 1, Example – Individual coding and condensation.....	187
Appendix D: Questions for the dialogue with theory.....	189
Appendix E: Affirmation from NSD.....	190
Appendix F: Matrix 2 – Before absence.....	191
Appendix G: Matrix 3 – Experiences of divine absence.....	193
Appendix H: Matrix 4 – Possible transformations after absence.....	195
BIBLIOGRAPHY	197

Silence of God. The noises here below imitate this silence.

They mean nothing.

*It is from the innermost depths of our being we need a sound
which does mean something – when we cry out for an answer
and it is not given us – it is then that we touch
the silence of God.*

Simone Weil¹

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

¹ Weil in D.Z. Philips (1986, p.vi.).

*Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day,
but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.
King David²*

PART I: INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why focus on divine absence?

When the music subsided in the crowded and silent chapel, you could hear a strong, clear, filled voice: «God is dead!» Then he told the attendants at his daughter’s funeral the following story from her childhood: She was four years old and they travelled Downtown by the bus. Suddenly she stood up, and declared loudly to her “congregation”: «God is dead!» The father was a bit embarrassed, but mostly proud: the tiny one already knew her Nietzsche.

«God is dead» resounds together with another sentence; whispered from tired hearts, cried in hiding places, shouted out in wild despair, bitterly uttered in resignation: «God is absent!» God is hiding, God has disappeared, God is no longer caring for me, God is silent – and I am abandoned.

One Saturday morning, in January 2004, I preached on the relationship with God at a women’s conference. I spoke of God’s presence, but spent some five or six minutes during this long morning session, mentioning my own experiences with the absent God. Afterwards the women flocked around me, some with tears in their eyes, or with silent, solemn faces.

² Psalm 22:1-2 (NIV)

Most of them (around 40-50 women) said something like: «Thank you. This was good. Especially what you said about God's absence».

It surprised me. I did not have any idea that God was so silent in regular people's lives. I did not have the slightest idea I was touching speechless pain and hidden experiences with absent language. I did not expect to be met by a warm, responding wave of grateful recognition. There and then I started longing for an ability to understand more of God's hiddenness.

Almost ten years later, I got the opportunity to immerse myself in this theme that did hit such resonant string in several people's hearts. And the solemn responses continued, when people asked about my writings and I told them. I heard «I would really like to read your thesis, when it is finished» and «I have experienced what you write about» and «Thank you» and «I really look forward to read! Are you soon finished?» At a party, I found myself seated with six other people around a table. Three of them wanted me to listen to their narratives of absence.

What is it about God's absence? Where does it hit us? Why is it touching strings so deeply, that people speak with silenced voices, naked faces and – for some seconds – reveal their pain? Are there contexts and patterns? Is it possible to understand such incomprehensible experience as man's relation to some transcendent reality? Are there coinciding characteristics of different human being's experience connected to God as transcendent or immanent? Are there common features in life stories, in the absence-experiences itself and in the rise to it? Is there a mathematics of absence, with logical patterns and fathomable basic structure? Is there an «if a, then b» in Christian spirituality, theology or psychology of religion? In this thesis, *The Silence of the God who Speaks*³, these questions force the researcher to explore the interaction with man and its God. It is a study focusing God's presence and absence in the light of God transcendent and God immanent – and not the least in the light of the human self.

1.2 Divine absence – an experience through the millennia

God's absence has made philosophers and poets, theologians and authors, monks and nuns, men and women thousand years away and today cry with the king and musical artist David,

³ I borrowed the title from Nicholas Wolterstorff (in Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.215).

when he complains from his heart: «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (...)» Jesus himself let this deep lament become his own, on the cross, in the ultimate pain of divine abandonment. In the eleventh century, the archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Anselm, mourns God's hiddenness in *Proslogin*:

Why did he shut us away from the light, and cover us over with darkness?... From a native country into exile, from the vision of God into our present blindness, from the joy of immortality into the bitterness and horror of death. Miserable exchange of how great a good, for how great an evil! Heavy loss, heavy grief, heavy all our fate!
(Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.3).

Later “holy” persons, like John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, and mother Theresa of Calcutta expressed the pain and darkness of the felt divine hiddenness. Martin Luther was well known with “Deus absconditus”, it was a theme of major importance in his life and he addresses God's hiddenness in several aspects of his theology. Two centuries after Luther (in 1761) an anonymous woman with the initials A. R (A young lady in her retirement) writes her divine poems, meditations and contemplations on various subjects. The first volume is a *Complaint of Gods absence*. R.S Thomas, the poet of the hidden God, from the 20th century, reflected around God's hiddenness and its significance. Simone Weil was a remarkable, young woman, who recognized in her own life the experiences of John of the Cross. In *Waiting for God* some of her letters, with philosophical and theological reflections, are gathered. Writes Weil: «God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of our flesh. But he can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction» (Weil, 1951⁴, p.75).

These authors from decades ago mingle with Norwegian voices of today. In 2000 the Christian journalist Erling Rimehaug put divine absence on the agenda in Norway with his book *Når Gud blir borte*⁵ (2000), providing the readers with descriptions of an experience that until then was seldom discussed. Some years later the priest Odd Jarle Eidner (2006) shared his tremendous losses; two children and his God – the latter years later “returning”. In 2013, the former priest and author Eskil Skjeldal wrote a series of articles⁶ on God's absence and

⁴ Simone Weil lived 1909-1943, hence, this collection of essays was published after her death.

⁵ *When God disappears*.

⁶ Those articles were published in the Norwegian paper *Dag & Tid*.

the mystery of suffering, describing his own crisis of faith. He might serve as an example of a contemporary voice:

The latter two years an abyss is opened within me. My faith is threatened. I have lost my perspective on life. When darkness came upon me, the relation to God was tested – once again. This is not unexpected: If you believe in God’s existence and his love for us because he has created us, then you believe he might help you when you are hurting. (...) A depression is often followed by other crises. My loneliness has touched another loneliness – a doubt I have carried since I became a Christian: Does God really care for me? Why does he not help me when powerlessness overwhelms me? (...) [W]hat about the suffering? It seems stronger than God. Suffering visits all of us; God visits very few. Suffering might grab hold of you, maybe for years. Why does not God interfere? (Skjeldal, 2013a). Does my faith rest in a rich tradition without a holy ground? Was there perhaps no revelation, no God who spoke, no ear that heard? God is gone. And I do not know who of us made this distance (Skjeldal, 2013b).

1.3 The absence experience – a theme of broad scientific interest

My main theme, the absence of God, is overwhelmingly complex, and with a wide professional scope. Here are some main perspectives:

1) Philosophy: The issue of the hidden God represents an important ontological perspective: Is there a loving, relation-seeking God? If so, why is this God hiding? The hiding of God implies the non-existence of God and is a valuable atheistic argument (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.4). This first “argument for nonbelief” is related to the problem of theodicy: If God exists, God would not permit evil (ibid, p.5). It is as well related to the question of God’s hiding to grant human beings free will: «God hides and thus permits inculpable nonbelief (at least in principle) in order to enable people *freely* to love, trust, and obey Him; otherwise, we would be coerced in a manner incompatible with love» (ibid, p.11). We might also find the soul-making argument in this professional perspective: God is hiding to ensure human transformation towards “ultimate human fulfillment (Murray in Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.67-68). Here we see that philosophy engage in the question of divine hiddenness in various ways.

2) *Theologies*: We have several theological perspectives that touch the experience of God's absence; e.g. the Old Testament with its narratives of the present and absent God; the Psalms with its lamentations; and the book of Isaiah that is thematising divine elusiveness (Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.3). Both, the positive and negative theological perspectives contain an understanding of God as "immanent" and "transcendent" – although that might not imply divine absence⁷. Different Christian spiritualities, which focus on the personal, experienced spiritual life, will thematise the human experience of divine absence⁸.

3) *Psychologies*: Some psychodynamic perspectives are especially relevant when speaking of God's absence: Attachment theory explains different attachment styles and let us know some people are more vulnerable towards experienced rejection and felt distance than others. This probably affects our disposition in regards of experienced divine absence (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Object Relations theory explains the formation of the inner, experienced object understood as God – and is also a key to understanding absence. We will immerse ourselves in the latter.

4) *The social-sciences*: Social sciences might explain the human experience of divine absence and coinciding way of performing religious life in the individual's Christian sub-group or context.

An inter-academic discussion between neighboring disciplines, as the ones already mentioned, will contribute to a deeper understanding of God, the self, and God-and-self together (Henriksen, 2013, p.2). In this thesis, we will use psychological and theological perspectives.

⁷ This is a theme of investigation in Chapter 6.1.

⁸ We will use the thinking of St. Johns of the Cross (as introduced by Wilfrid Stinissen) and John Shea throughout this thesis.

2. TOWARDS A RESEARCH QUESTION

My motivation for this work probably became clear in Chapter 1.1: I search to *expand our language* for the human experience of divine absence – and I would like to contribute to our *understanding* of this particular kind of absence.

2.1 An empirical approach

As a journalist through 20 years, I have met and interviewed several people, thus the empirical approach was a natural choice for me. Later, through my theoretical research, I discovered the absence of empirical material around divine hiddenness. This strengthened my conviction to contribute with needed material.

The documentaries or poetic pieces written on divine absence, is mostly by saints and theologians. But what about regular people? Men and women with house, job or studies, single life or family – and, not the least; a relation with God. I wanted to find and talk to ordinary, but still reflecting, people who would share their experience. I wanted to come closer to an experience of divine absence, with a less finite language, and with a more intuitive approach to the themes. How would they describe the absence experience? How did they experience God's hiddenness? What language would they use to express that God was gone – or absent, disappearing, or maybe hiding? And why did they think this absence took place?

I started my research by preparing to collect the empirical data. My main specialization in theory took place after quite some time; when I had already initiated the empirical analysis. My work has an abductive approach, but with an inductive start, deeply rooted in the empirical material. The interview guide was basically made out of my curiosity and pre-understanding – and not out of a theoretical research. In the beginning, therefore, my work did have coinciding features with Grounded theory, but I did not have a hypothesis to investigate and my research question was rather vague in the beginning of the process. I just wanted to find out about God's absence, and I approached the interviews with a rather informal and undefined research question: What is God's absence really? And: How is God's absence experienced?

When I prepared the interview guide, it became clear that I wanted to have depth interviews, drawing a picture of the relation with God within the bigger life narrative. After conducting the interviews, and in the process of analysis, I found interesting material on the interviewees road to absence and how the absence experience changed to renewed presence. This made me change focus: I wanted to shed light on the catalysts towards absence, the absence experience itself and the catalysts for the changed sense of presence.

2.2 The hermeneutic process⁹ and disclosure of pre-understandings

While analyzing the empirical material, I read William Barry, Ana-Maria Rizzuto and John Shea, and they made me aware of some of my pre-understandings and gave language to some findings: I became increasingly aware of the longing/ desire, defence and ambivalence found in the empirical material. Shea gave me extended language for the change of God representation (the inner composite image of God), that was coinciding with my findings. The before and after divine absence, showed traits of transformation – and a wonder occurred; could we understand what divine absence is about without thematising transformation? Rizzuto and object relations theory gave rich language to the relation between a person's God, parental relations and self. This made me realize that I really wanted to come closer to my informal research question: What is God's absence really about?

The development of the research question is closely connected to the analysis; hence we here prejudice some aspects belonging to the expounding of my empirical analysis¹⁰. Through the abductive analytical process, my own assumptions became clearer – and were developing – as the findings supported or surprised, and the theory challenged me. Here are my main pre-understandings – as far as I see them – that shaped the process towards a research question:

1) *Divine absence is unwanted*: Before the research process started, I had the assumption that divine absence was emphatically unwanted. It did not occur to me that there could be other nuances to the experience, but the empirical material surprised me.

2) *Divine absence might have causes*: I was looking for catalysts towards absence. I did not know what I might find, but my idea was that we probably could find helpful information in

⁹ We will return to the theory around hermeneutics in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ Chapter 3.2

the life narrative that might explain why the absence took place. This pre-understanding made me use a life-graph in the interviews.

3) *Divine absence is divine*: Before I started my investigations, I expected both the empirical and theoretical material to disclose evidence of a hiding God, but this expectation was not confirmed.

4) *There might be catalysts out of absence*: I did have a vague sensation of probable patterns for the way out of experienced absence, and was curious to find them.

5) *The possibility of transformation*: I had the assumption that living through a process of divine absence might cause transformation. This pre-understanding affected my interview guide and made me emphasize the life narrative, in which divine absence was an element or event. This made me later read the absence experience as follows: a) the experience of God and self before divine absence, b) the absence experience itself, and c) the experience of God and self after the absence-experience. My pre-understanding was that I might find transformations by comparing the situation before and after the absence-experience. This was strengthened and confirmed when I conducted the interviews.

6) *The childhood and adolescence might affect the absence-experience*: This was an important pre-understanding that was strengthened when I studied psychology of religion. When I, one year after these studies, started the empirical work, I did not take sufficiently account on the importance of the parental relations for the experienced absence. But, this was discovered in the first interview, and thereafter I emphasized the significant others for the possible absence experience.

7) *The description of divine absence*: I probably expected a richer elaboration of the divine absence than my interviewees gave. They focused a lack of emotions, more than descriptive images of the experience. The absence-experience was filled with absence; hence the words were few.

8) *The understandings of absence*: I did not expect to find such rich material with regards to the understandings of absence. The interviewees' own explicit interpretation of the absence experience, and the implicit interpretations, gave me a varied material.

9) *The apophatic theology and absence*: With Vladimir Lossky I chose a particularly apophatic theological perspective, and expected to find theory on the absence of God's being. I was surprised by the penetrating divine presence in this theology.

10) *Object relations theory might explicit absence*: With Ana-Maria Rizzuto and object relations theory I expected to find some explicit insight connected to hidden or disappearing inner image of God. I mostly had to extract this knowledge from said theory myself.

The mentioned expectations influenced among other things my questions to the interviewees, and my choice of theoretical perspectives¹¹.

2.3 The research question

During the process it became clear that this study needed a wide (more linear) and deep approach. I wanted to focus the absence experience itself, but as well apply a developmental frame. I wanted to give *descriptive* language to the experience, but even more to our *understanding* of the experience and the possible *transformational effects*.

My main academic interest and professional goal has been to expand and elaborate our understanding of the human experience of divine absence. As described, I have approached the theme with the following curiosity: What is in the heart of the experienced absence of God? The data collection, empirical and theoretical analysis, and the discussion has led me to the tripartite research question:

“What are the characteristics, effects and understanding of the experience named “God’s absence”, as portrayed in the stories of persons with a personal relation to God?”

The research question will be answered through the following main questions:

- 1) How could we describe and understand the absence experiences and their effects, derived from empirical material?
- 2) How could theology and psychology understand the experienced absence of God?
- 3) How could the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and psychology enlighten the experienced absence?

¹¹ For a more thorough reflection, see Chapter 8.2.

3. METHODOLOGY

This thesis is conducted within the frame of qualitative research, that most often is used when phenomenological issues are discussed. *Descriptions* and *interpretations* are important in the tradition of hermeneutic epistemology that is concerned with «interpretation of meaning in human expressions» (Malterud, 2008, p.50). The empirical data is collected through semi-structured interviews, analyzed with STC (Systematic Text Condensation), and presented by means of *thick descriptions* to give space to the empirical material. I have used an abductive approach, and tried to shed light on the absence experience by reading my empirical material in a hermeneutic process with four theoretical perspectives.

3.1 The Empirical material

3.1.1 Selection of informants

The strength in qualitative research is the ability to open questioning without predefined response categories (Malterud, 2008, p.36). But the challenge might be to find a selection of informants that are not too homogenous. I wanted to explore the individual experience of divine absence in the narratives of people with a defined Christian faith. I needed people who were able to reflect around their experiences, a condition that obviously reduced my target group and the variation within the group.

In search of relevant informants, I considered inviting people through churches, and hence, receive informants from different Christian traditions, but preferred the screening I might get when going through counselling institutions. I also wanted to have more than one gender, and several ages, but considered the below mentioned criteria most important.

To obtain informants, I contacted (by letter¹²) the leaders of three counselling- and guidance institutions with a Christian profile, viz. Department of pastoral care at Modum Bad¹³, Fermate Counseling Center in Oslo, and St. Joseph Retreat center¹⁴ in Oslo. They all accomplish counseling or spiritual guidance, and not the least; the confidants themselves seek

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ Modum Bad is a psychiatric clinic with a separate department for pastoral care.

¹⁴ Since 1991 the St. Joseph sisters in Norway have been a center for Ignatian guidance in Norway.

these institutions, without referral from their doctor, which might imply emotional soundness and health. I asked the leader of each institution to bring up my cause in a team meeting where the counselors were present.

My criteria for the selection:

- 1) They have (or did have) a Christian faith.
- 2) They have a life- and faith-history that somehow thematise the experience of God's absence.
- 3) They might experience divine absence right now, or look back at phases with experienced absence of God. I delineated against psychiatric diagnosis – because this would have complicated the findings.

The process of approaching the informants was as follows: They were at first contacted by their counselor/ director with a written or oral invitation to a deep interview where their experiences of divine presence and absence would be emphasized. I explicitly asked the counselors not to disclose too much around the experience of absence, since their own language around the experiences was of such importance to me. If I was allowed to contact them, some personals – like name (hence, gender), age, and brief information on their Christian background – were released to me. Then I took over, and were free to contact the possible informants. Through this procedure, I received four informants from two institutions.

The third institution was reluctant in regards of the procedure, and I was invited to write a note, that they posted on their wall of information. The note included the following information: «One aim is to find language for and try to systematize the human experience of God's absence in relation to the descriptions of God as present and distant (immanent and transcendent) in Christian theology.» This did not result in any contacts.

The fifth informant had expressed his/ her story in media or social media in such way, that I – in agreement with my supervisor – contacted this person by letter and later by phone with an interview request that was accepted. Finally, the pilot interview was conducted with one acquaintance met through friends and family. The response when this person heard of my thesis was «I almost think you should have interviewed me. Perhaps. If I'd dare to.» A few months later I made a request for a pilot interview, with positive response. The relation was and is sufficiently distanced to conduct a professional interview.

When the selection was completed, I had the following composition of informants: Two men and four women age spread as follows: Two persons around 30 years old, one aged 40, one aged 55, one aged 65 and one informant around 80 years old¹⁵. A majority of my interviewees live in Oslo (Norway's capital city), while two informants live in other cities. They represent a larger geographical area, different church backgrounds and both village and city cultures. They are introduced in random order, and given fictive names – in the interest of anonymity.

3.1.2 The conduction of the interview

All the interviewees could choose the environment for the interview; either my home, their chosen place or some neutral ground. Three of them invited me to their homes and one to the working place (after regular work hour), one visited me at the hotel where I stayed and one preferred to come to my place.

When making the interview at the informant's place (home or office), the person does control the situation and is as well more responsible for privacy in the situation. When conducting the interview in my home, I let the interviewee know that my family was out and would not return until the interviewee had left the building. During the interview, I let the interviewee face a window with a view of a rural landscape. I made that choice to make the environment smaller and more intimate, thinking it would increase the ability for the personal storytelling. The greatest challenge was the interview at the hotel. I did not know whether the female interviewee had cases of (sexual) abuse in her story, that might make her feel uncomfortable or scared in a hotel room, hence, I let her choose between a meeting room or my (sufficiently large) hotel room with a sitting group. She chose my room, and I gave her the chair facing the door (turned away from the bed) to give her the feeling of a living room. All interviews were conducted with tape recorder, but I did take notes as well.

3.1.3 The issue of privacy

When conducting research that include sensitive information, Norwegian researchers are obliged to obtain permission from The Data Protection Official for Research at Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). I was given the required permission before I conducted any interviews¹⁶.

¹⁵ This is their approximate age.

¹⁶ See Appendix E.

Before we met for the interview, each informant received a letter containing the following: Nobody but my supervisor, professor Leif Gunnar Engedal, and myself will have access to the personally identifiable information. [This information] is subject to confidentiality and will be treated as such. Information of your name and other contact information will be kept separated from the transcribed interview. Other information, that might make you recognizable, will be anonymized. After finished work – May 15th, 2014 – audio recording and personal data will be deleted¹⁷.

This letter was signed when we met for the interview. The informants were, in the start of our interview oriented about their rights: They are allowed to withdraw from the research, at any time in the process.

3.1.4 Data collection

My primary source of data is the transcription of six semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 1.75 and 2.5 hours. The well-known methodologist, Alan Bryman, in his major work *Social research methods* (2012), applies semi-structured interviews as one of two major methods for data collection in qualitative research. The method offers both some *structure* – through the interview guide containing a list of questions or specific topics – and *flexibility* to join the interviewees in the direction their narratives take and use unplanned follow-up questions. The semi-structured, as well as the unstructured, interview is an in-depth interview (Bryman, 2012, p.470-476).

3.1.5. The structure of the interview

When focusing on a phenomenon from the human experience, it is important to give space to the interviewees' own experience. Kirsti Malterud, a Norwegian methodologist, emphasizes this: «Narratives that give us good material for qualitative analysis, is characterized by loyalty to the storytellers' own language (...)» (2008, p.140-141). To reduce the “danger” of my own language, I divided the interview into two different phases, and an “after-the-interview-phase¹⁸”, starting out very wide. I wanted the interviewees to get in contact with own experience, language and narrative before we introduced the theme of divine hiddenness.

¹⁷ My project lasted longer than assumed. Spring 2014 and December the same year, the interviewees were informed of the delay. I was given one year's reprieve, but in May 2015, I deleted the recorded material and went through the transcribed interviews, the coded material and any other document to additionally change information that could threaten the anonymity.

¹⁸ This phase became of such importance that I here name it the third phase.

1) The first phase gave the interviewees the opportunity to describe their relationship with God (or life with God¹⁹) in general. After the first interview, this was slightly adjusted and I began to start the following interviews by asking them to describe how their relation with God did occur and develop, before they described the relation more closely.

2) In the second phase, we immersed in the themes of divine presence and absence. Here I followed the interview guide more strictly, although the interviewees implicitly could have answered the questions when sharing their narratives. On several occasions, we obtained new information when the themes were introduced from another angle. We spent time immersing in their experience of God's presence and color the "something" that is lost in absence²⁰. It is part of my pre-understanding to assume that the experienced absence is the perseverance of a longed for or experienced presence or being. The six interviewees were asked to explain why they recognized the experienced presence as God's. Through the more open narrative and the presence-absence description, most interviewees created a comprehensive image of their God, the experienced God-self-relation, and the experienced presence. Against this background, the narratives of divine absence emerged.

3) In the third phase, when the main interview had come to an end²¹, the interviewees were introduced to a large drawing sheet, with only one horizontal line representing their life from birth to present time. This timeline is a neutral zero-point. Their task was to draw their "life-line" or life graph by marking turning points, explain what happened at the turning points, and draw the line between the peaks and valleys. Drawing over the line, meant that life is predominantly positive; beneath the line, meant life is mostly negative. A black line represented, in most cases²², their sense of life, and a red line their sense of divine presence and absence. With this technique, I hoped to find some language for the interviewees path into or out of the absence experience. The intention with the graph was to help the interviewees approaching their own history of life and faith more intuitively²³.

¹⁹ I gave them the opportunity to define which expression they liked the better, with the intention not to disturb them too much with my own language and expressions.

²⁰ In the interview guide we see that I approached the theme of divine absence very carefully, by questioning around possible changes of God's presence (question 8) before we explicitly spoke of divine absence.

²¹ The tape recorder was on through the work with the graph.

²² Two of the cases differed from this standard

²³ Various psychotherapeutic directions use music, motion, colors or drawing as instruments to get in contact with the subconscious layers in the human experience. But for me, who is not a psychologist, it would have been transboundary to use those methods in this situation. The graph "came along my path" as an intuitive impulse when I prepared the interview guide, and it actually improved the interviews.

Almost all the interviewees met the task of making a life graph with some sense of helplessness. Still, the drawing gave the interviewees a more intuitive access to their life, and increased the understanding of where and when they experienced God's absence. In the first interview, we tried to work linearly when drawing the life graph, but later I more clearly advised them to start with the most important turning points in life, which was helpful²⁴. This experimental graph was new to me, and I realize I should have tried it myself, before implementing it in real interviews. Still, the graphs provided all interviews with insight.

3.1.6 The quality of the interview

According to Kvale, the qualitative interview should be descriptively oriented in order to provide us with rich individual images (Malterud, 2008, p.130). The tripartite interview I accomplished seems to have opened up for the informants' lifeworld and almost all interviewees expressed that they had expelled greater openness than planned. Their answers show signs of confidence, among others by the way they dare to be exploratory in their narratives and life interpretation.

The quality of the interview to some extent depends on the interviewer. As a magazine journalist (with expertise in feature) I have conducted hundreds – probably close to a thousand – interviews with people who have a story, or opinion, to share. My “specialty” as journalist was to come close with open questions and catch the nerve in the narrative. I am trained at paying attention and might sit concentrated for a long time, listening, taking my notes, and later returning to elaborate on themes that catch my attention. I have most often experienced to succeed in creating an atmosphere of trust, honesty, and personal sharing. My experience gave me confidence to immerse in the interviewees' narratives by repeating questions and returning to significant subjects. This contributed to the result: empirical material of considerable size and depth.

3.1.7 The Pilot interview

When using a qualitative interview method, you are recommended to accomplish a pilot interview, to test the questioning guide, evaluate it, and possibly make some changes. For some reasons I had to accomplish my first main interview before conducting the pilot. I considered using the primer interview as the pilot, but did not, since the pilot (interview

²⁴ See Chapter 4.2 for all the graphs.

number two) was done with an acquaintance, who was contacted with the purpose of a pilot interview.

The situation was as follows: the pilot was conducted as pilot, but still functioned as a complete interview, while the first interview actually was the real pilot. I “solved” it as follows: I really conducted two pilot interviews, but – because of the sufficient quality and importance of obtained data – I have included both in the empirical material. The pilot interviewee was in advance told that I might want to use the pilot in my material, and we agreed upon including it as soon as the interview was accomplished.

After the first interview, I made some discoveries that I applied to the second interview: Significant information from the childhood was disclosed in the very end of the interview, when the informant drew her graph. This increased my consciousness on explicit questions around childhood, adolescence, and relation to significant others, and I therefore included this in my questioning guide thereafter. Before the second interview, I adjusted the order of my questions, initially focusing on the relation with God. In the first interview, I received unexpected information around the informant’s emotions connected to the experienced absence. In the next interview it was natural to explore if the informant had the same experience. This was confirmed, and made me test the possible connection between experienced divine absence and increased sense of self with the other informants. I did the same when other conspicuously correlations occurred. Beyond this, I did not conduct other significant changes in the interview guide.²⁵

3.2 The Empirical Analysis

3.2.1 Transcription of empirical material

When the six interviews were conducted, I had around 14 hours of material that I transcribed myself. The result was around 150 single-spaced pages. The transcription process was useful, and gave me a second meeting with the interview situation, and of course, I heard more this time than the first.

²⁵ See Appendix B.

According to Malterud, even the technically successful recording, just gives a representation of the real interview. And the written text, based on the sound recording is a representation of the representation. (Malterud, 2008, p.77). The material we analyze is a reduction of reality. This is a challenge for the researcher. To be as transparent as possible in the process of transcription, I sent the result to the informants for possible corrections and comments. My supervisor read the entire material, and has as such followed the process from the complete data material and through the analysis.

3.2.2 *The analytical process*

My analytical process goes along with Giorgi's phenomenological analysis with the STC (Systematic Text Condensation) method. This method has similarities with Grounded Theory²⁶, and with reference to Malterud (2008, p.99) it is suitable for descriptive transverse analysis of phenomena. Although this analysis works better for material with many informants, I have made it my primary model.

The analytical process was long-lasting and I have experienced what Malterud explains (2008, p. 118): When qualitative methods are used, we might create the methodological path as we journey. Here follows a brief description of my analytical approach, following and diverging from Malterud:

1) *Reading the empirical material*: I read through each interview, making notes in the margins. This was done to get the first overview. I noted down everything that struck me, but I did have some main categories in mind. Malterud emphasizes the importance of an open reading as the first analytical step, and a phenomenological perspective urges us to leave our pre-understanding and theoretical approach for a while. The point is to open up for the voices of our material (Malterud, 2008, p.100).

2) *Thematization, coding and condensation*: When transcribing, I found coinciding traits and descriptions in the interviews. This experience was strengthened as I read the transcribed texts, hence some preliminary possible codes (used to organize semantic units) and concepts could be derived. The work so far reinforced my understanding of the absence-experience as a

²⁶ *Grounded theory* is, according to Bryman, the most widely used framework for qualitative data analysis. Sometimes research is labelled with this term because the analysis is grounded in data. But grounded theory is more than an inductive methodology, a bit simplified: the methodology should lead to new theory (Bryman, 2012, p.568-570).

process. I made explicit the following main categories, that could disclose the absence-experience in a developmental frame: God's presence before absence; the relation with God before absence; the possible change in the experienced presence (from presence to absence); the very experience of divine absence; the possible change out of the absence experience; and the possibly following changed relationship with God, and sense of presence. I made a matrix²⁷ for each informant consisting of the main categories based on a linear reading of the life cycles; basically with a *before*, *during*, and *after* the experience of divine absence. Then, in concordance with Malterud and her second analytical step (2008, p.102), I withdrew large semantic units of meaning, encoded and systematized them within the thematic main categories.

The next step was to compare the interviews, look for similarities and variations. I went back and forth within each interview – and between the interviews – and changed and relocated codes/ subthemes and condensates as my understanding of the complete material was deepened. There is a danger connected to this process: To be overwhelmed by the correlations in the material, and overlook differences. I tried, as sincerely as possible, to be faithful to the individual stories and the interrelated differences while getting the bigger overview.

3) *Assembly of the coded material*: With reference to Malterud (ibid, p.105), I continued the deconstruction, but slightly out of procedure, by organizing the complete material into a comprehensive matrix. Here I placed the main categories in the left, vertical column and the different informants in the horizontal row. Then I thematised with a kind of coding, but partly with sentences, not only concepts. For a long time in the analytical process, I used whole sentences (and not solely strict codes) to describe semantic units. This was done in an attempt to keep seeing nuances by not pushing pieces of text into clear concepts too early. By molding the material slowly, I hoped to be able to respect each interviewee's own experience and interpretation – and I hoped to avoid making too quick interpretative inferences.

4) *Condensation – from code to meaning*: I had this large matrix of main categories, with associated subthemes and codes, which gave me a certain overview. With reference to Malterud's third step, we are supposed to abstract the knowledge that is included in the different code groups into *subgroups* (ibid, p.106), which are more interpretative and part of

²⁷ See Appendix C, Matrix 1

the possible derivation of new theory. I used the matrix, and worked to organize the many codes and subthemes under each main category into thematic units; new *subcategories*²⁸. I worked systematically through all the main categories and subcategories, and placed all codes and subthemes underneath one subcategory²⁹.

From now on the subcategory is the most important analytic unity, and Malterud suggests the creating of a densified artificial quotation affiliated each subgroup. The main issue is to retell the contents of the subgroup, preferably with the language of the informants (ibid, p.107).

What Malterud so far has described, is a process of decontextualisation. I have had the aforementioned main categories as a way of organizing the interviews, narratives, subthemes and codes, still I have committed a thorough decontextualisation. The main categories, developed at an early analytic stage, might have reduced the danger of placing quotations into subgroups where they do not belong (which could be the possible result of a textual deconstruction where you lose the context of the saying).

5) *Recontextualisation and new concepts*: After the decontextualisation, Malterud now suggests us to recontextualize. At this stage of the analytical process we concentrate on the contents within each subgroup (subcategory) (ibid, p.108-109). I did not create the mentioned artificial quotations, but started working on the analytical text. I basically worked within the subcategories, described common characteristic and differences across the individual narratives, and withdrew relevant quotations.

Here I went back and forth to the first individual matrixes³⁰, which included rich condensations. This became a cross-check on my recontextualisation, and helped me relate to each informant and her distinctiveness, not only to the entirety in the analytical process. In the analytic writing, I worked with main categories, subcategories and their underlying codes and subthemes in a slow progress, to carefully derive what my empirical material could possibly disclose. At the same time, I developed the large matrix, which now is separated into three

²⁸ Malterud (2008) calls them *subgroups* (p.107). Since I have some main categories as a basic organizer for my material, it is more convenient to use the term *subcategories*.

²⁹ Here is an example: An important question for us to answer is: What is God's absence? When I had worked through the empirical material several times (the transcripts twice or more, the rich individual condensates back and forth), some patterns emerged. I noticed that all the interviewees' own understanding – together with my emerging understanding – of the absence-experience could be organized within three subcategories: 1) Absence as result of outer incidents 2) Absence as an action of God and 3) Absence as an intra-psychic experience. Underneath those subcategories, I could place the codes and subthemes.

³⁰ See Appendix C.

complex matrixes³¹. These matrixes show my work and thinking, hence increase the transparency of my research. In Malterud's opinion matrixes could be an important research validation (ibid, p.105).

6) *Presentation of the analytical material*: The empirical material fills a specific function: «The results should be the data material's answer to the research questions, compiled by the researcher as a result of systematic review in the analytic phase. (...) The presentation is the place where the knowledge from the empirical material is conveyed» (ibid, p.115).

Malterud suggests this presentation of results to be summarized texts at general levels (ibid, p.117). I have nevertheless chosen to introduce my empirical material in a far more comprehensive manner: I use ample space to introduce my participants³², then present the result of my empirical findings³³ as an independent entity – before we immerse ourselves in theory. The empirical emphasizing is connected to the relevance of this thesis, which is one of very few researches on divine absence³⁴. It seemed necessary, almost compelling, to contribute with a rich empirical material. I have therefore used *thick descriptions*, that according to Lincoln and Guba is recommended in qualitative research. These «rich accounts of the details of a culture» might disclose the material in a more transferable way (Bryman, 2012, p.292). In concordance with Malterud (2008, p.79-80), I have used *slightly modified verbatim mode* when quoting the informants. Verbatim reproduction might disturb the reader and also blur the message. I have carefully modified the quotations to ensure that the meaning is properly conveyed.

3.3 The Theoretical material

3.3.1 The search for theory on divine absence

I searched for theory from the start of the project – before sampling my data. I searched within the Bibsys-, Atla- and Oria systems, and made use of the following key words: god *trans*, god *absen*, god *silen*, god *hid*, divine *abs* and “deus absconditus” besides of

³¹ Appendixes F-H, Matrix 2-4.

³² See Chapter 4.

³³ See Chapter 5.

³⁴ See Chapter 3.3.2 and 8.2.4.

course the corresponding Norwegian keywords³⁵. (In addition, I searched around the presence of God.) I found three Norwegian master theses on different aspects of God's absence – they were all theoretical³⁶.

People have written on divine absence, hiddenness, darkness and silence through the ages. We find the mystical writings of e.g. Master Eckhart; the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*³⁷; and Michael de Certeau's *The Mystic Fable*. We find discussions on divine silence or hiddenness within apophatic theological environments – and here I mention Paul Evdokimov; Denys Turner; and the primer Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. There are Old Testament derivations: discussions on the Book of Job; lamentations in the Psalms; and the Second Temple literature (Leo G. Perdue). We find books within spiritual edification and literature around understanding suffering, silence, and God's ministry (e.g. Ronald Dunn). There is an abundance of books on divine absence. Still I venture that the present work, *The Silence of The God Who Speaks*, is relevant.

3.3.2 Research relevance

During my investigations, I have come across only one – 1 – empirical piece of work on the theme of divine absence in the English-speaking world, and none in a Norwegian context: Piet Zuidgeist's (2001) *The absence of God: Exploring the Christian Tradition in a Situation of Mourning*³⁸. Zuidgeist investigated the significance of four themes from the Christian traditions to bereaved believers, amongst them the issue of God's absence (ibid, p.96-97). He found that the theme of divine absence was of increasingly significance during the weeks the participant groups were gathered (ibid, p.129), and concludes as such: «[P]astoral care should retrieve the religious experience of God's absence from its marginal position and restore it to the centre of Christian expressive behaviour» (ibid, p.133).

Zuidgeist had a quadruple focus, where absence was one of them. He investigated mourning people and used themes from Christian traditions. My empirical work is more directly concerned with divine absence, and the context is not limited to situations of bereavement. Our studies do not interfere with each other, but in different ways show the importance of thematising divine absence.

³⁵ I used: gudsfravær, guds fravær, gud *transcen*, gud *skjult*, gud *taus*, gud *fravær* and gud *still*.

³⁶ Two of them had a diaconal focus; Høiseth (2012) and Kristiseter (2011), and one discussed Psalm 88.

³⁷ The Norwegian version is *En sky av ikkeviten* (2013).

³⁸ This was a theological study that consisted of a pretest, practicum in groups, and a post-test conducted with 61 participants in 10 groups, and additional interviews with twelve participants (Zuidgeist, 2001, p.104,126).

In this thesis, I consider the experienced absence in light of both psychological and theological perspectives. I have only found one, rather limited, study (Underwood, 1986), comparing object relations theory with a theological perspective. The present thesis hence contributes with new research and an original combination of theoretical perspectives. For additional reference to research relevance, see Chapter 8.2.4.

3.3.3 *Theoretical perspectives*

«Theory exists to assist in the understanding of complex reality: it is not reality itself» (Rizzuto, 1979, p.11). Neither the empirical material nor the theoretical perspectives are the full reality, but together they might widen our understanding of our research task. The human experience of divine absence forces us to investigate at least three subjects of interest: The absent *God*, the experiencing *self* and the *experience* itself. As explained, thematization of the absent or hidden God, takes place within several academic arenas.

3.3.3.1 *Different academic traditions*

In this thesis I apply four theoretical perspectives; three theological and one psychological; one rather theocentric and three more or less anthropocentric. This is an attempt not to be reductionistic, as human life and human experience is composed – and, as professor Danbolt³⁹ puts it, «one perspective is not sufficient for a total understanding» (Danbolt, 2014, p.18).

With the emergence of psychology of religion as academic perspective, the dialogue between psychology and the experiential (Christian) spirituality is shaped. Religion of psychology applies various psychological methods to describe religious experience, behavior, and function – and it is concerned with human spirituality⁴⁰ (ibid, p.18).

“Christian spirituality” is in particular concerned with *the human relation to God* and the Christian spiritual life as *experience* (Downey, 1997, p.118-119). Both the experience and the theoretical study of this experience are emphasized. Michael Downey⁴¹ has an excellent clarification around this:

³⁹ Danbolt is professor at The Norwegian School of Theology.

⁴⁰ Spirituality is a comprehensive concept, and there is a discussion whether *spirituality* and *religiosity* is the same. I here just apply Pargament and Zinnbauer in their agreement: Spirituality is search for the sacred (Danbolt, 2014, p.22).

⁴¹ Downey has been Professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at Saint John’s Seminary in Camarillo, California. He was editor-in-chief of *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*.

Because it is spiritual, this study must attend to the human spirit and the Spirit of God, with equal attention given to both. Because it is concerned with life, it is not focused primarily upon rare or extraordinary phenomena, but upon the whole of life as existential project. And because it is concerned with *experience* as such, it must be attentive to the whole range of human experience, affective as well as cognitive, communal as well as individual. Precisely because the study of Christian spirituality is concerned with the experience of self-transcendence and personal integration in light of the ultimate value with which one is concerned, or the highest value which one perceives, all dimensions of human life are within its purview (Downey, 1997, p.118).

Here Downey opens the door to a more classical theocentric approach, by saying the study attend to *the spirit of God*. But he opens the door to philosophy and psychology as well, by including the whole range of human experience. The discipline of spirituality is to focus on both the relational, personal, social and political dimensions of an experienced relation with God (ibid, p.119). I dare say: Christian spirituality and psychology of religion have a shared intention: the search to understand the human experience of some extraordinary reality, i.e., what theology will name God, but psychology of religion will refer to as perceived, existential reality.

Perhaps a greater inter-academic challenge is the “conflict” between the more systematic theologies and the experience-focused and anthropocentric studies (Christian spirituality and psychology of religion). Downey speaks of challenges in the systematical theological- and spirituality-focused encounter (ibid, p.117), and pose the question of the role of theology vis-à-vis Christian spirituality. He emphasizes the academic interdependence and critical correlation between them: Systematic theology has crucial contributions to make, given its ability to reflect around, support, to some degree correct, challenge, and clarify the human experience. And the systematic theology is also shaped and changed by the spiritual experience⁴². «There is a dialectic between theology and spiritual experience. Theology can judge experience; experience can stretch theology (...)» (ibid, p.125).

⁴² Systematic theology has been considered a primarily dogmatic, and less experience-oriented, theology – and this is what professor Downey here comments on. Professor (in philosophy of religion) Jan-Olav Henriksen at The Norwegian School of Theology, has for years been concerned with theology as dialogue partner for psychology of religion. «Theology has changed character from being dominated by focusing text, sources, and interpretation towards being a science of experience that investigates and relates to what we name “lived religion”», writes Henriksen (2015, p.11). He is deeply concerned with the relation between God and the self (see Henriksen, 2013), and hence, highlights the experiential dimension. He considers Christian spirituality a meeting place between theology and psychology (Henriksen, 2015, p.16).

Downey has suggested four interrelated and complementary “methods⁴³” for the study of spirituality: 1) The theological, that views the Christian life in gradual transformation. 2) The historical, emphasizing the importance of spiritual experience from earlier times. 3) The anthropological, where being spiritual is to be human, hence we appreciate the complete human experience. 4) The appropriative method, that seeks to *describe, critically analyze* (preferably with insights from psychology) and *constructively interpret* the Christian spiritual life (ibid, p.124ff)

I have applied elements from all these approaches, but emphasized the latter by describing, analyzing, and interpreting the experience of divine absence, in the light of different theoretical perspectives. Let us have a brief initial look at my theoretical perspectives:

3.3.3.2 The theological approach

My primer theological approach is apophatic (or negative) theology, which is a strict systematic theological perspective, emphasizing the indescribability of God by use of negative terms. This theological “reluctance” to describe God, made me investigate whether there might be explanations relevant for our understanding of divine absence and distance.

The Eastern Church – or Orthodox churches – particularly and most deeply identify with apophatic theology, although most Christian churches seem to have an apophatic reflection in their dogmatism. For an immersed understanding of this theology, we will search in the writings of the Russian theologian, Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958). He is considered one of the greatest theologians of the Eastern Church and a bridge builder between the Eastern and Western churches (Kälvemark, 2010, p.7).

3.3.3.3 The psychodynamic approach

It was important to study the experienced absence in the light of psychology, as we could here touch the human experiences of rejection, abandonment, and distance. Different deep psychological perspectives give us tools and explanations regarding the inner structures of man and the human experience. «Dynamic psychology» denotes the variety of psychological traditions derived from Freud and classical psychoanalysis that is concerned with individual's

⁴³ I am critical to Downey's use of the concept *method*, as it does seem unclear, and does not coincide with more recent use of the concept. I merely understand this as theoretical approaches that arrange for academic width and explain the complexity of religious experience.

intrapsychic processes. The aim is to understand unconscious conflicts and how they influence the experienced world (Geels and Wikström, 2006, p. 127). On the psychological path since Freud, we find *object relations theory* – relying on and diverging from Freud. This psychodynamic theory emphasises essential psychological assumptions for the individual's belief and experienced relation with significant others, among them God. A key point of the theory is that we might not create inner representations outside our relational experiences (Stålsett 2014, p. 98-99, Rizzuto 1979). This seemed to be one (of more) relevant choice.

One of the most important theoretical and clinical contributors in recent decades is the award-winning⁴⁴, Argentinian psychoanalytic Ana-Maria Rizzuto (b.1932), who in 1979 published the landmark study *The birth of the living God*, based on a thorough study of twenty patients. I apply this work in the psychodynamic reading of the empirical material.

3.3.3.4 Bridging theoretical approaches

Our main task in this thesis is tripartite: we want to *describe* and *understand* divine absence and its *effects*. When I analyzed Lossky and Rizzuto, I discovered two things: 1) I had to derive out of their works an understanding of divine absence myself, since this was not explicit. 2) To enlighten the large empirical material theoretically, I needed supplementary theoretical approaches, preferably perspectives that could bridge theology and psychology.

Perspectives from Christian spirituality traditions could be this bridge. In some spirituality-traditions we find psychological insights, for instance in Augustin's *Confessions* or in *The Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola. A century ago, psychology was established as a separate academic discipline (Engedal⁴⁵, 2014, p.46, 53). But we did have psychological insight and views on reality before the emergence of psychology: through philosophy and not the least through this experience-oriented theology.

When we speak of Christian spirituality and divine absence, it is hard to avoid the Spanish mystic and Carmelite friar, John of the Cross (1542-91) and his work *Dark night of the soul* (2003), a Christian classic. The congregational brother of St. John, Wilfrid Stinissen (1927-

⁴⁴ In 1997, Rizzuto won *Oskar Pfister Award* – the highest award of the world's largest psychiatric organization, American Psychiatric Association (APA). This annual award is given to «an individual who has made outstanding contributions to the dialogue concerning religion, spirituality and psychiatry» (Oscar Pfister Award)

⁴⁵ Leif Gunnar Engedal is professor at MF Norwegian School of Theology (for years his professorship was within the discipline of psychology of religion).

2013), wrote *Natten är mitt ljus*⁴⁶ on the mystics of John of the Cross – especially on the experience of God’s hiddenness through a felt night. Stinissen contributes with my first supplementary theological perspective.

A psychodynamic oriented Jesuit friar and pastoral counselor, John Shea, is in his book *Finding God again* (2005) concerned with mature spirituality. He applies Rizzuto and extends her language, which deepens our understanding of the transforming God representation. Shea is my second supplementary perspective.

3.3.3.5 Appraisal

Several important theoretical perspectives would have immersed and widened our understanding of the empirical material. Attachment theory would increase our understanding of the absent God, with theory around God as attachment figure, the loss of God as significant attachment figure and the subsequent anxiety and desperation a hiding God might cause (Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Other (social-) psychological perspectives, enlightening the religious experience would have been of utmost interest. It is my conviction that different people deal in various ways with the absence experience as result of personality⁴⁷, attachment style, natural or learnt coping strategy, and not the least: what kind of social environment was the basement when the absence experience took place? It is impossible to choose such wide range of theoretical approaches. But I mention them to signalize that what I present in this thesis is just a part of reality, some perspectives out of a much larger entirety.

3.3.4 Conceptual clarifications

3.3.4.1 God or god

Who is God? Or what is god? In the Scandinavian environment of psychology of religion, it has been normalized to apply God (with capital G) within theology, and god (with minuscule

⁴⁶ I used the Norwegian translation, *Natten er mitt lys* (2001), which means *The night is my light*. This book is my main source for St John’s thinking.

⁴⁷ There are several theoretical perspectives on personalities. Here is two: 1) Meyers Briggs type indicator, based on C.G. Jung, is a standardized testing instrument showing different personality-styles (Wulff, 2005, p.55), and 2) The Enneagram, a complex system of nine main personality-styles, but with several variations underneath each style (Ebert, 2009).

g) within other disciplines. I have chosen not to walk along that path, and hence only use the concept God. The reason for this is twofold:

- 1) All my main theorists, including the psychoanalyst Rizzuto, uses God with capital G.
- 2) In the big Biblical narrative we seem to find an evolving image of God, hence, an unfolding God representation. This might mirror the maturing of humankind and its ability for increased and deepened understanding alongside a revelation development. Here it seems my theoretical extremes, Lossky and Rizzuto, touch each other's "theologies" in a coherence: a) They both have a transformational view on "revelation", b) both approve of the experience, and c) both perspectives read their God (representation) from limited perspectives.

Would we know exactly when to speak of God and when to speak of god? My point is that the transition would be vague. Therefore I apply God (with a capital G) throughout the thesis.

3.3.4.2 The Self

Two of my theorists, Rizzuto and Shea use the term "self" about man. They use it differently, and it is not always clear how it is used. Rizzuto found the concept too comprehensive for an explanation in her work⁴⁸, as do I. Shea uses the concept Self in terms of "person", inner being, and as a gender neutral personal pronoun. The Bible speaks of the soul of man. It is difficult to derive what the soul really is, but it is connected to the core of the individual. Let me reflect around the concept "self" as follows: When I speak of the "self", it is in this area: The self is the inner structure of a person, the subject of experience, perhaps we could say it is the self-representation (the complete inner image and experience a person has got of herself).

3.3.4.3 Presence and absence

As with "self", the concept of presence is difficult to define. I make it this simple: By someone's presence I mean the sensation, belief, understanding or experience of some(thing) other. By absence, this experience is changed. Of importance is the following: The experience of presence and absence is individual. We do not introduce or derive a standard definition, but allow the individual description and understanding of presence and absence to be applicable.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 6.3.3, footnote.

3.4 The theoretical analysis

A useful method for text analysis in qualitative research is philosophical hermeneutical method, developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer⁴⁹. This hermeneutic diverges from methodological or historical hermeneutics with its genuine philosophical concern on truth and validity (Wetlesen⁵⁰, 1983, p.219).

3.4.1 An hermeneutical approach

Gadamer's hermeneutical approach is an attempt to answer the question of how understanding is possible. This is not an empirical affair, but philosophical, phenomenological and existential, affected by the underlying assumptions and pre-understanding the questioner brings in to the text of investigation. "Hermeneutics" means *understanding* and *expounding*. To accomplish the process of understanding and expounding, we need to have a dialogue with the text – and this happens by reading the text as answer to specific and actual questions, and thereafter expound the text by answering the question (ibid, p.219-221).

What kind of texts should be subjected to a hermeneutical process? Gadamer invites the reader to immerse in classical or eminent texts, which primary criteria is that the text might increase our understanding. This means the text should provide us with «a deepened understanding of what it is like to be human, what is man's basic situation in the world, and especially the human relation to time» (ibid, p.222). The text should as well attract the reader, it should touch her being by conveying something new and unknown, it should stir and challenge the reader, it should conflict with the reader's original conviction. If the text gives the reader this resistance, she might have an "hermeneutical experience" with the text – being aware of own *assumptions* and *prejudices* that conflicts with the text. This "battle" is a prerequisite for the real or authentic conversation, the aim of which is to regain a mutual understanding (ibid, p.222-223).

How could we enter a hermeneutical process? The key to the process is the authentic conversation, which key is the real questions asked to the text. A genuine question, to Gadamer, is a question where the answer is open. This means the questioner enters the dialogue with the text, not knowing the answer. Another hallmark of genuine questions is that

⁴⁹ His famous work is *Wahrheit und Methode; Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*.

⁵⁰The Norwegian philosopher, Jon Wetlesen, explores Gadamer's hermeneutical method in the article *Samtaler med tekster i lys av Gadamer's hermeneutikk (Conversations with texts in light of Gadamer's hermeneutics)*.

they are posed within a question horizon where one of the possible answers is the prejudice of the questioner. If this conversation is succeeding as real and genuine, new mutual understanding will occur – and the participants of the dialogue will be transformed through the process and establish a new fellowship partaking in a common understanding of truth, a new understanding (ibid, 223-225).

The process with which Gadamer is really concerned is how this new understanding can take place, and he introduces the hermeneutical circle – an empirical description of how we might achieve understanding. He as well formulates a more normative recommendation: «Whoever wants to understand a text has to understand the parts from the entity, and the entity from the parts» (ibid, p.235). The hermeneutical process is a process where the researcher experiences contradictions in her encounter with the text, and her prejudices become visible. She keeps posing questions to the text, the text keeps stirring her – the arisen questions might be answered and hence the prejudices and understanding is transformed and the newfound knowledge included in the understanding horizon.

As the researcher and the one posing questions to the texts, I will describe my process as follows: I have initially, through an analytical process, worked with the empirical material, as text. Gadamer suggests that the researcher partakes in the dialogue with the text in three ways: 1) She poses questions, 2) she expounds or interprets the text, and 3) she uses the text. Those three dimensions are integrated. (ibid, p.230). I met the empirical material with my assumptions, went in a dialogue with the six portrait interviews, interpreted and expounded the material – with increased understanding and an expanded horizon of understanding.

Then, my next step was to use the text, by meeting the theoreticians with questions from the empirical material, questions formed through the understanding I got while working with the six portraits, hence; I went to the theory with my transformed understanding horizon, made explicit through many questions (see Appendix D). They were not answered systematically, but I read my two main theorists profoundly, looking for five superior themes. What could this theory say about: 1) Who and how is God, God's being, and actions?
2) Who is man? Are there prerequisites that might enlighten the absence experience?
3) What do we learn of the relation between God and man?
4) What do we possibly find with regards to human transformation?
5) What possible explanations or perspectives do we find on divine absence?

When reading my supplementary theorists, I looked for contributions that could add to my understanding.

3.4.2 *The abductive approach*

The analytical process of integrating theory and empirical material has either a main deductive (top-down, theory controlled) or inductive (bottom-up, empirically controlled) approach. With reference to Malterud, all research processes have both deductive and inductive elements, the question is where the research has its center of gravity. Qualitative research is often more inductively oriented than quantitative research, but in the process the researcher might adopt different perspectives, and switch between emphasizing the theoretical and the empirical (Malterud, 2008, p.172-173).

My approach in this study is abductive, with a strong emphasis on the empirical material in the start of the process, but with a stronger theoretical focus in the discussion and conclusion.

3.5 *Relevance, validity, reflexivity, and reliability*

Within most academic circles, there is an agreement upon the significance of systematic, critical reflection in an academic process. The researcher is expected to conduct an open-minded search for contradictive points of view, and findings and conclusions should be part of a larger context. Some conditions are established to affirm academic knowledge, and Malterud (2008) summarizes them as follows: Relevance, validity, and reflexivity (p.21-22).

Relevance concerns the consequences of the research; how could the results be used, and are they contributing to existing knowledge? If the research question is original, this could also contribute to increased knowledge and meet the requirement for relevance (ibid, p.22-23). The question of *validity* concerns transferability, truth, and relevance (ibid. p.24, 178, 185). «To validate is to question», says Kvale (ibid, p.178). We should ask questions to our research question – was this our real concern? We should ask questions to our selection of informants and theory – does this answer our questions? (ibid, p.179). Malterud speaks of two especially important validity considerations: Internal validity (about what is the research true?) and external validity (to what external contexts are our findings valid?) (ibid, p. 24-25). There are as well other ways to consider the validity of a research, and Malterud mentions the critique that the validity criteria receives within qualitative research (ibid, p.185).

Reflexivity is about the researcher's willingness to question own prejudices, processes, and findings (ibid, p.26-27). The transparency of the research process is of greatest significance. As well the researcher's own cultural, political and social context could be of importance.

For a comparison, Bryman (2012) applies *reliability* and *validity* as main research criteria, and asks how these mainly used quantitative research concepts could be adopted into a qualitative sphere (p.389). Lincoln and Guba found it necessary to find an alternative to reliability and validity and proposed two criteria for qualitative studies: *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*. Here trustworthiness contains four criteria: Credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (ibid, p.390). The authenticity-criteria has not been influential (ibid, p.393), and will not be emphasized in this study. When reading this study with criteria for good research (in Chapter 8.3), we will focus reflexivity, relevance, reliability, and external and internal validity.

3.6 The structure of this thesis

In Chapter 4 and 5, I introduce and analyze the empirical material. In Chapter 6, we deploy the theoretical perspectives, to shed light on the empirical material. In Chapter 7, we bring the empirical and theoretical material together, and discuss the three main themes in the research question: how we might *describe* and *understand* divine absence and its *effects*. In Chapter 8, we summarize the perspectives from discussion, evaluate the research process, and conclude the thesis.

*Impotent am I, God, to avow you.
Polar silence met my cries for you,
desperately waiting for the moment of truth.
You love me from behind a blank wall.
You let me hunger restlessly;
how I hate you, how I long for you.*
Ed Hoornik⁵¹

PART II: EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

In this part, I introduce and present my empirical material. In Chapter 4 narratives, relevant thematisation and the graphical lifeline⁵² richly introduce each portray. In Chapter 5, we are deepening our understanding, while analysing the different aspects of the God-self relationship and experienced presence and absence.

4. EMPIRICAL NARRATIVES

4.1 Introduction

How could we describe absence? Each approach of verbally grasping of reality is a reduction. Moving into the issue of absence – the inexplicable and the emptiness afterwards a something – is approaching the impossible. Recapitulating life experiences, and giving language to complicated psychological contexts, will necessarily imply beautifications and exacerbations, but also bring us closer to reality.

The narratives are my construction, based on the interviewees' life stories. We start by giving a brief background, taking into consideration individual episodes and information that seem

⁵¹ In Zuidgeist (2001, p.v)

⁵² The graph itself is (most often) drawn by the interviewee. I have removed all their own handwriting and replaced it with my own, I have adjusted and hid information to secure anonymity. The reader will not know which information is exact, and what is slightly “fictive”, still, the pictures that are shown will add to our understanding of the unfolding life narratives.

important to understand the experienced absence both from a theological and psychological perspective. The following narratives are part of the descriptive material used to answer our main question 1: *How could we describe and understand the absence experiences and their effects, derived from empirical material?*

4.2 Narrative presentations

Every human being has a unique story, unlike any other story in the world. Still there are similarities, common experiences, and one story could create a resonance in other persons' souls. The following narratives show unique and personal stories, revealing existential and common human experiences, which we later will analyse.

4.2.1 Anna: The returning absence

Brief background: Anna (80) was raised in a culturally strong home, with Christian, liberal parents. Her father was a priest, at times working abroad – and this made the family live in foreign countries. Anna herself was not a Christian until mid-life.

When Anna was four or five years old, she and her siblings – due to health issues caused by the climate in a big European city – were sent back home to stay with friends and relatives for four years, while their parents continued their ministry abroad. Anna did not, until recently, think this incidence had harmed her.

Anna married at 26, but shortly after felt marriage was extremely complicated. Her husband's position led them abroad and made her meet other men, who strongly affirmed her. She describes two or three intimate relationships during the last 30 years, where the latter still lasts. The review tone through the interview is that Anna needs intimacy, love, and skin-contact. She is very sentient, and as our conversation develops, she speaks more openly about her need for physical love.

In the middle of her 40-ies, Anna did have a concrete and sudden experience of faith, responding to God and her father in the very same moment. Since then Anna related to God, and her story of absence experiences started:

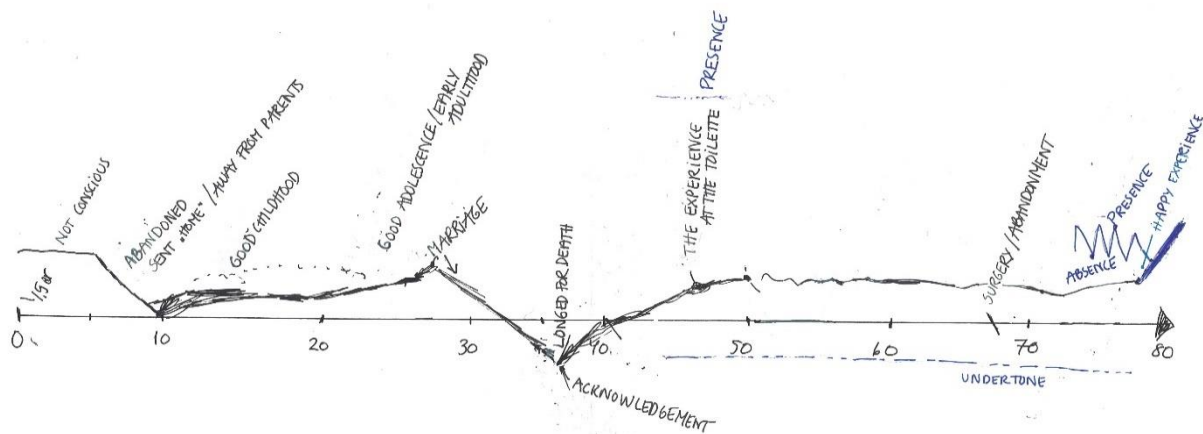
Then, seated on a toilet, in [City], it was pouring down, the whole bathroom tiled in black and white – and it was really just sad (*little laugh*). Father was dead at that time – I had just been home for funeral – and then my sister told me that my father said, “I believe [Anna] will come through.” While sitting on the toilet this sentence did come.

And suddenly I answer: “Yes, father!” (*Little laugh*) Who was that? Who did say yes? It was me. And from this moment there has been no doubt I do believe.

Some years ago, Anna was diagnosed with cancer. She discovered that her two significant others would be travelling at the time of surgery, which caused an emotional reaction: «And I suddenly felt completely abandoned. When they had left, I went and laid down in bed – in fetal position – and then let out the primal scream, as simple as that.» She was surprised. She did not think the childhood separation from her parents had affected her in such way.

Anna also mentions that she has had depressions throughout life, but she never focuses this depression and anxiety in the interview.

Anna’s lifeline:



Figur 1

Relationship with God before absence: When asking Anna what characterizes her relation with God, she is clear: «It’s precisely the absence. That [I] in these and those situations, that have been critical, have prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed – and no response as far as I have felt. So the absence has most of my Christian life been present.»

God’s presence is nevertheless an underlying tone in life. In phases of God’s presence, she experiences safety. Both art and Biblical texts touches her, and works as outer incidents for change in her life. God’s warmth and forgiveness appeal to her, as pictured by Rembrandt in the father’s warm embrace of the homecoming son⁵³.

⁵³ Rembrandt’s famous painting “The return of the prodigal son” is exhibited in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg

This Rembrandt painting of the prodigal son, who is returning home and the father's incredible love. (...) He returns as the beaten son and the father just runs towards him. And no "what have you done?!" but: "you have returned!" And I find it so beautiful?!

God's absence: Anna describes the phases of God's absence as many and lasting – primarily as God's silence when she is praying, but getting no response. Absence is connected to intellectual doubt, and emotionally to relief when she is liberated from bad conscience concerning her lifestyle.

Present relationship: This is similar with the relation before absence, since Anna seems to oscillate between absence and presence.

4.2.2 *Bea: The resistance of God and self*

Brief background: Bea (40) was raised in a safe home with busily working, friendly, and intelligent parents, who were often emotionally absent. In puberty, not daring to talk to her mother about the physical changes, she suddenly realised she was alone:

[T]en years old I had my first period and I realised I couldn't talk to my mum about it. So it is actually such an important point; me being alone.

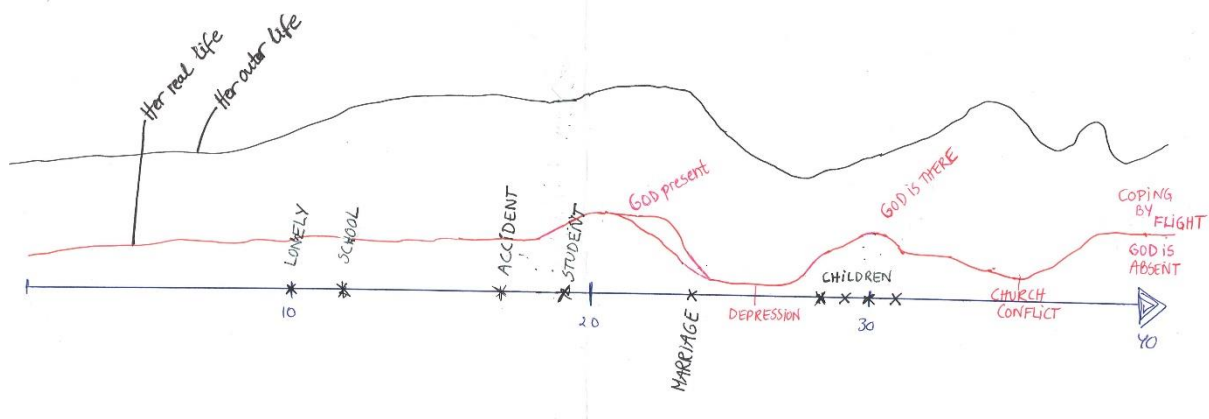
Bea was a sensitive child, raised to suppress her emotions: in experiencing hardships, like mocking, her parents told her to get up and fight back.

It was just "don't care about those emotions, just get up and don't let them step on you." To be vulnerable and sad and stuff wasn't very easy under such conditions. It is about showing them what you can... achievements and coping has been really important. Emotions are not important.

She was athletic and active. 17 years old, she had a crisis when breaking her back. Through a process, she became a Christian, but continued being a party-girl. During her youth, she experienced a trauma, which she does not want to talk to me about.

At around 20, she decided to become a devout Christian. She moved, met her husband to be, and married. Soon afterwards, she got deeply depressed. The couple moved to a smaller city, at the time of an emerging church-conflict. Her husband became a priest, and within a few years, they had children, born while she had a tough task at job. A new church-conflict, just a few years ago, brought her to this present state of experienced absence.

Bea's lifeline⁵⁴:



Figur 2

Bea finds it difficult to draw her life and explains why: «Because I've got an inner and an outer life. And the outer life has been great, almost all the time. Or very good. And then I do have an inner life which I do not like relating to, which hasn't been so great.»

Relationship with God before absence: It was characterized by a sense of security; small affirmations that God cares – which made her rest; an experience that God was in control; worship as “spiritual language”; and the experience that God was the only one who could really meet her emotionally in depth. God could give a sort of peace. She also had the feeling of being needed. Her identity was – and still is – strongly connected to *doing* (as opposed to *being*). God also gave comfort and his presence was related to emotions, all though Bea describes herself as extremely rational.

God's absence: Bea's absence experience seems connected to specific situations. It is also increasing in her life. In her twenties, she experienced tiredness, depression and a kind of burnout (after several years of high levels of activity and the first church conflict). Then God “disappeared”, and she spent years trying to re-establish the closeness. A few years ago, Bea felt betrayed by people in another church-conflict, and in her experience God betrayed her as well – by not protecting.

Present relationship: Bea is praying a lot, but with no striving, because she has no strength to pretend being better than she is. God seems asleep, and he is not strong enough for her life.

⁵⁴ Bea drew two lines marking her duality in life: The black line was the outer, visible life. The red line was her inner, invisible life. God's presence and absence is not clearly marked.

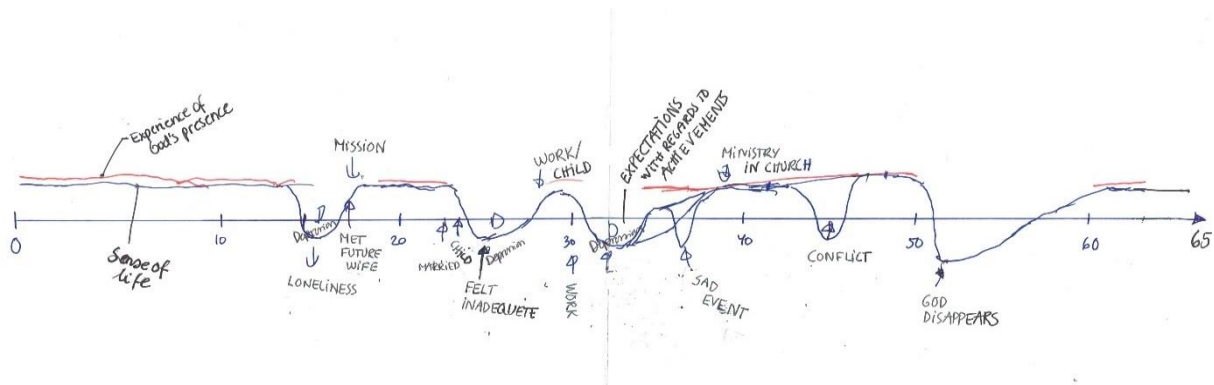
She is very tired - feeling God expects her to be a superhuman, without giving her the needed resources.

4.2.3 Carl: The new sense of being

Brief background: Carl (65) was raised in a Christian home and he considered his childhood safe and good. At the age of 15, he left his village for high school, and experienced loneliness and his first depression, before he made friends, had tasks, and met his future wife. At that time, he also made an independent decision to be a Christian. In his adolescence, he belonged to the Lutheran church, but after getting married and moving to a bigger city he – though sceptical – had close contact with charismatic Christian movements.

In his adult life, Carl had a high position at work, and later he became a leader in a charismatic church. In a powerful church-conflict, Carl lost his closest friend, felt betrayed and experienced that God suddenly was gone. After some years in darkness, depression and experienced divine absence, Carl slowly found a way towards a changed relation with God.

*Carl's lifeline*⁵⁵:



Figur 3

Relationship with God before absence: Security primarily characterized the relationship. Carl did define himself mostly rational with an intellectual faith, although intuitions played a part as well. He felt his Christian life was increasingly characterized by achievements, both related to Christian deeds and personal spiritual life.

⁵⁵ Carl drew the blue line, showing turning points in his life. The red line, which is weak but existing most times, except during depressions, shows God's presence.

God's absence: Carl describes the feeling of absence as grey emptiness. In his only experience with divine absence, he entered a deeper depression than he had experienced earlier, had a loss of emotions, and no longing for Bible & prayer. The main catalyst to absence was the sense of rejecting God when rejecting his best friend in the church conflict:

(...) then I felt utterly abandoned. And this doubt; is there something wrong with me, since nobody else see what I see? So it was someone having an important [Godlike] role who completely failed me. If I should explain why God disappeared, I think I mainly have to connect it to this [betrayal].

Present relationship: Carl's God is visually unclear. God is now more like light, air, or a good will. He can visualize Jesus, and considers him a close friend, but not so much a saviour and model anymore. The dimension of presence is changed. God is neither in emotions, achievements, nor in intellect, but surrounding him. «It really means a lot; having a relation to God, experiencing that God somehow is there, regardless of my achievements and emotions and intellect. It is in a way so good,» **says** Carl.

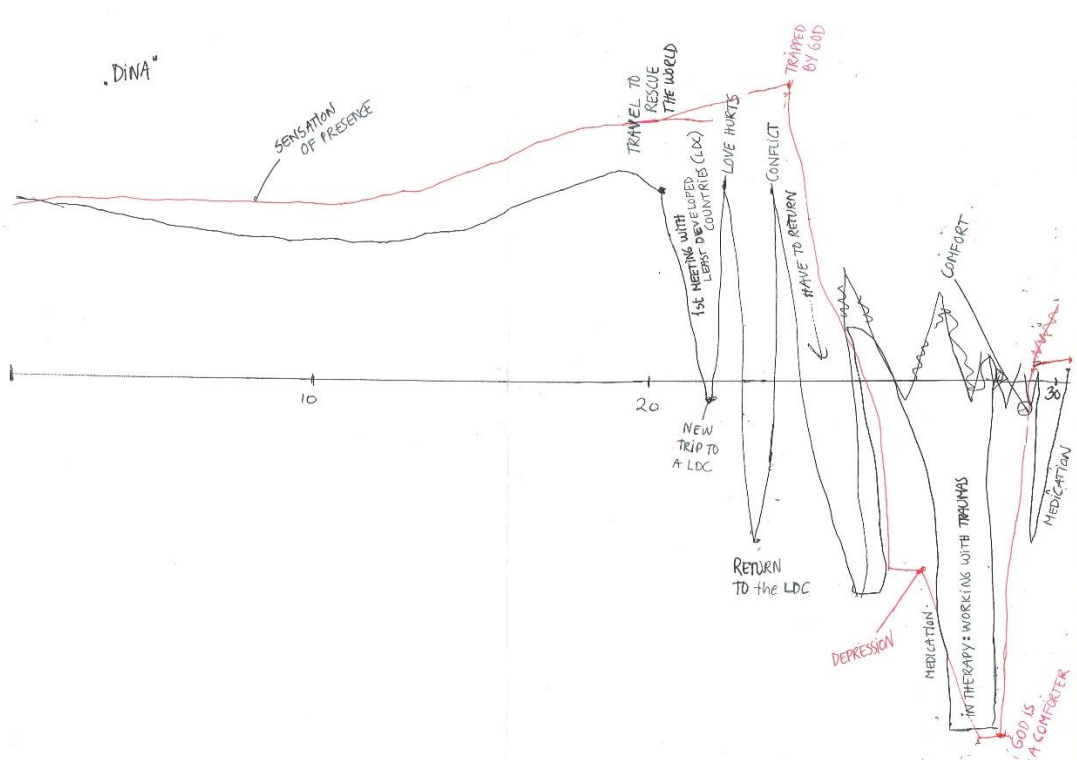
Carl has gained a new freedom: People's reviews hardly affect him anymore. And he speaks honestly with God, not pretending to be someone else. Knowing God is there, makes Carl secure, but the relationship is a bit distant. He is afraid of strong emotions, and his religious life is merely physical.

4.2.4 Dina: The transformed image of God

Brief background: Dina (30) was raised in a Christian home, with three siblings, and a grandma being Dina's dearest significant other. The parents gave Dina a safe home and a Christian faith through a conservative Lutheran house of worship, which strongly emphasised missions. Dina believed in a protecting Father-God. She wanted to rescue the world. She joined a Pentecostal church and later a charismatic evangelization-organisation, sensing a calling for missions.

After High-School she left for a Least Developed Country (LDC), to work with developmental aid. After a few years of studies in Norway she returned to this country with no supporting employer in Norway. She experienced conflicts, and went back home. This was the start of her crisis.

Dina's lifeline:



Figur 4

Relationship with God before absence: Lots of emotions and a strong dogmatic, apologetic, and evangelizing style characterized the relationship. She had a vocation awareness with a significant reciprocity-focused thinking: God was protective, in control, leading, and giving missions; she was obeying.

Dina's emotions and God's presence were closely connected. She had what she calls "supernatural experiences"; for instance people reminding her of things they didn't know anything about, or supernatural answers to prayer. She also had certain requirements to interpret phenomena – like bodily quaking, quivering, joy, and peace – as God's presence.

Dina now sees a clear correlation between God's presence and her own usefulness: «But I probably experienced, to some extent, this absence as a result of God being present when he could use me. Then he could not use me, and then he disappeared.» This also went the other way around: if God did not need Dina, then why would she need God?

God's absence: The time of absence was characterized by depression, and disappearance of emotions that she earlier interpreted as God's presence. Dina heard stories of God finding people, but that didn't happen to her. She was lacking comfort – from God and people, and

felt abandoned. Dina was angry with God for years. In different phases, she was in opposition, disappointed, ignorant, with an introvert focus, and indifference.

Present relationship: The image of God is more complex; she is reconciled with the difficult questions of reality; the relationship with God is meaningful in itself; and she is more like a child than a servant. When she describes the quality of the present relationship, *longing* is the first thought that comes to mind. Confidence, friendship and fewer emotions also characterize the relation. Dina now has an open mind towards God's chosen presence: She believes that God presence is constant; and the most important character of God's presence is now rest.

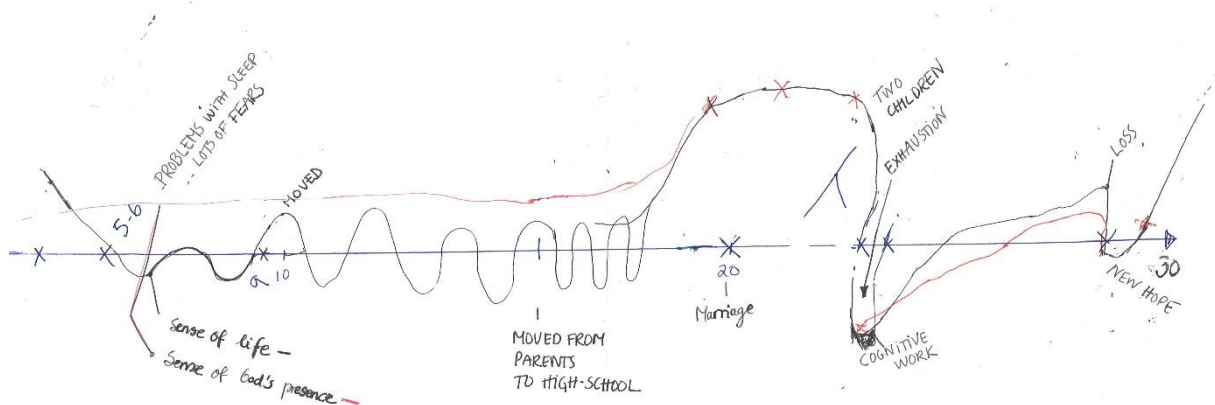
4.2.5 Eve: The God representation and the ambivalence

Brief background: Eve (30) was raised in a Christian home, in a small village far west. She was the second oldest, with a handful siblings whom she became a caretaker for. Her mother was tired, and struggled with depressions and anxiety. In her youth, her father had a burnout. Eve needed just to be a kid, but learnt to carry her life alone:

[E]ven though I might have been big and mature and responsible I wasn't adult... through adolescence so I also needed to talk about things, process things or being small or vulnerable. But it was in a way no suitable occasion for that. It was always somebody shouting louder or needing more than me, so I lined up back in the queue when it came to needs and... [was] very self-sacrificing in a very destructive way.

Through her childhood Eve was anxious and scared. She didn't dare sleep at night, had to deal with her fears alone, and developed what she as an adult recognized as anxiety. She didn't talk too much about her challenges and emotions. Eve realizes that her adolescence created deep, difficult, inner patterns that formed her image of God.

Eve's lifeline:



Figur 5

Relationship with God before absence: Eve's God was idealized; protective and good. At the same time, God was demanding and her identity was related to deeds.

Eve's Lutheran background emphasized Bible and theology; hence emotions and sense of presence were of less importance. In her mind, God's presence was connected to her intellectual understanding as well as to his rewards: When she obeyed, God was there. She was introduced to more charismatic thinking in her twenties, and reluctantly had to admit God could intervene unexpectedly.

God's absence: Twice Eve has experienced absence, and it was closely connected to outer incidents: 1) After giving birth, she lost her strength, and could do nothing but had to express her needs and receive help, which was terrible. This new role, not being useful, led to a period where God seemed absent and she was questioning her own faith. Through this, she gained a new freedom: in *being*, not just *doing*. This liberating experience helped her through the next absence experience that happened three years later 2) Intellectually she was introduced to some challenging themes. This triggered an enormous physical reaction of anxiety that made her lose her fetus in late stage of pregnancy. Says Eve: «[I]t was somehow so terrible, I had so much anxiety that I lost the baby.»

Experiencing this made her ambivalently questioning who God is. Eve is also giving explanations on the absence experience connected to her inner life: a "wall", built up between her and the world, to have control.

Present relationship: Right now Eve is working to clarify her relationship with God. She describes her present God as protecting (all though she tries to get rid of the image of a protecting God); without requests; unclear; accepting; and helping her making decisions. She has confidence in a future hope, and in allowing herself to take her time.

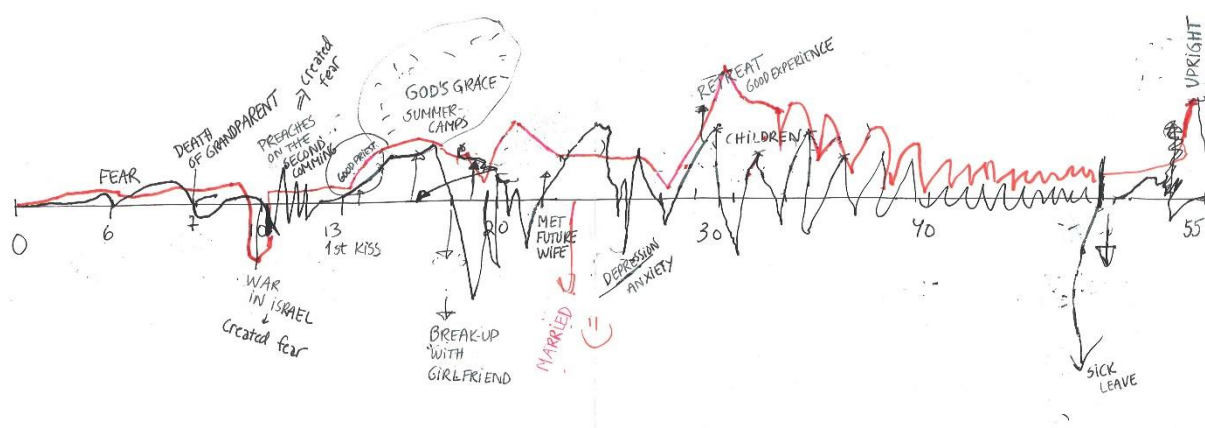
4.2.6 Frank: The coping with anxiety through religious practice

Brief background: Frank (55) lived with his two parents, but no siblings, in a small Norwegian town. He describes his parents as follows: «My dad was the mercy and my mom was the law, to speak theologically.»

Frank describes a childhood, which seems ambivalent: He was often scared, easily absorbing apocalyptic Bible stories and developing fearful thinking on the return of Jesus. When he was around 10-12 years old, his family started spending the summers at a family camp. A youth leader gave the young boys responsibilities and, primarily, spoke so warmly of mercy that Frank during three summers with him understood God had good intentions. The confirmation priest explained faith and trust in a touching way. Frank also, through youth work, used his creativity, and ability of preaching, and hence experienced the joy of coping.

His whole life he has struggled with depressions and anxiety. It overwhelmed him when he was 18-19 years old and left home for Bible school. When he was 35, a doctor recommended therapy.

Frank's lifeline:



Figur 6

Relationship with God before absence: Frank has not experienced sudden changes in his life; he mostly describes processes. The divine presence was in his childhood associated with fear,

but also with an experience of warmth, a place to stay forever. As youth he experienced joy in ministry, and as adult he has expanded the experience of presence and includes the meaning of communion, the sense of a “we” when performing liturgy. Through all his life Frank has experienced a basic knowing that God is with him.

God's absence: Frank's response when asked of God's absence is that he has never experienced it. In the many times of anxiety, God is more absent and the sense of warmth is gone – still questions of presence and absence are irrelevant. Later, as we are finishing the interview, Frank tells about his extremely strong loneliness – which is underlying when he complains together with the Psalmist. This loneliness is introvert, and God is outside, carrying him:

So, loneliness is well known to me. I've had enough of that, so to speak. This experience of loneliness or fright or being left or given up or stuff. This “My God my God now you have forsaken me” it is maybe a kind of loneliness. (...)

Present relationship: His relationship with God is personal; with sense of belonging; merciful; with consciousness of presence; ability to rest; exploration of freedom; and a slowly increasing sense of standing upright. Frank is also sensitive towards goodness, and he creates a dwelling space where he feels the goodness of life together with God. Primarily his relationship with God is characterized by confidence, and grounded in the security of grace that his youth leader passed on.

Commentary

We have given an introduction of each story to place the individual absence experiences into a developmental frame. We will now immerse ourselves more systematically in the different themes connected to divine absence, as experienced by my interviewees.

5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

There is a diversity of similarities and coinciding features when analysing the empirical material. In the following we will elaborate our understanding of the interviewees' experience of absence by comparing their experiences, emotions, reflections, and understandings – looking for similarities, diversities, and possible patterns. The interviewees have provided us with rich descriptions of their religious life, relation with God, and possible absence experiences – as they remember and understand it.

In the following, our aim is to answer the first research question: *How could we describe and understand the absence experiences and their effects, derived from the empirical material?*

We hence have three interconnected tasks:

- 1) *Describing absence.* How is God's absence experienced? This is our main question in Chapter 5.2.
- 2) *Understanding absence.* What is God's absence? (Chapter 5.3) Here we investigate the narratives of our interviewees. Contextualising helps us to understand what absence is about and perhaps why the experiences did take place.
- 3) *Understanding the effects of absence.* Has the experienced absence been playing a role in their lives? We look for an answer in Chapter 5.4.

Before we can immerse ourselves in the three main tasks, we will picture the absent or lost God, and in what way this God was considered present (Chapter 5.1).

5.1 Which God and what presence is absent?

How could we understand the absence, if we do not understand the presence? How could we get hold of the absent God if we see no glimpses of a person's present God?

5.1.1 Which God did "disappear"?

My interviewees were never asked to describe their image of God, rather their experienced relationship with God and perceived divine presence. Through their expounding we see the features of their hidden God; the one they partly subconsciously relate to. I would here like to

encroach a bit by introducing an appropriate expression: The *God representation*⁵⁶, which is a person's inner image of God, including parental images, the culture's understanding of God, and the person's own grandiose self. Popularly we could say the God representation is the inner, private, experienced God of a person.

In Appendix F, Matrix 2 we have arranged the relationship, probable God representation and experience of presence (before absence) to provide us with an overview and shed light on the God representation of our interviewees.

5.1.1.1 The protective and controlling God

Bea, Carl, Dina, and Eve describe a protective God, who brings security, is positively in control, gives them a mission, and is trustworthy. To Dina, one theme is highlighted in her former confident relation with God: «It was that he protected me. That he did have control. That he had a purpose connected to what happened, even though painful things happened.» Dina committed her life in God's hands, dared to bear struggles and pain, and trusted God as protector even during tough times.

Eve needed a protecting God, probably to survive all her fears. She fabricated a good and protecting God to gain control:

Yes, when I was a kid (...) I probably had an idealized childhood faith, where I related to an always caring God who always sent his angel beside me and protected me from all pain. Even though I perhaps experienced bad things I just ignored it in a way, living kind of in a bubble with God as a protector.

Bea needed the protective God, and this might be associated with the traumatic experience she had once during adolescence. Later we will see that one challenging aspects with regards to God's absence is the ruined image of protection. The protective God – sometimes as the protective father – is the dwelling place for confidence in the lives of Bea, Dina, and Eve. To Anna and Frank protection doesn't seem so crucial.

⁵⁶ This expression is used by Rizzuto (1979) and further explained in Chapter 6.

5.1.1.2 *The conditional and demanding God*

To Bea, Carl, Dina, and Eve achievements and deeds are significant for their Christian life. Bea had a high level of church-activities in her twenties that lead to exhaustion. Describing the sense of defeat, she also implies important patterns in her God-self relationship: «I measure everything, my whole life and identity in relation to what I manage (...).» She still feels the pressure of deeds: «[A]s a Christian I almost ought to be a kind of superhuman. And that is very tiresome, because I am not a superhuman, I am more of a subhuman... I can feel (...).» When asking Bea whether God's presence is connected to, or separated from her being something, she answers: «It's almost like pressing a button I actually think. So if God is present I have to do something, almost, yes. Then I have to change my life in a way, and I can't bear it.»

Carl describes a strong achievement focus in life, both when his faith was mostly intellectual and when he preferred strong emotions. He wanted to show God that he coped: «[B]ecause I defined my relation with God a lot according to what I should accomplish for God, this was underlying everything I did.»

Dina speaks of a kind of “contract”⁵⁷, where God's protection was coinciding with her deeds: «[I]t has also characterized my relation to God, that God is the strong one telling me where to go, then I go, and we are a team and I believe he protects me.» Eve describes an idealized God who is demanding her deeds, just like her parents did:

[...] perhaps in the same way I somehow experienced mum and dad expected me to do things – all the time doing, doing, doing – well I thought that God did expect this too, that I should do things for him and that he was almost depending on it.

Anna and Frank differ from the rest by experiencing joy when they use own talents in a Christian ministry. Frank is never describing a conditional or demanding God. Anna seems to feel ambivalence concerning God's presence – a presence mixed with joy, gratefulness and requirements towards lifestyle.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Chapter 4.2.4, The experienced presence before absence

⁵⁸ We will return to the issue of ambivalence.

5.1.1.3 *The parental God*

All our interviewees speak of a relationship between their parental (most often paternal) image and their experience of God. One of Anna's strongest experiences with God's presence was when she was seated on a toilet in [City], letting out her "Yes, father!" Later she refers to this episode, but with changed language towards "yes, God". She speaks warmly of her father and her God through the interview, but just twice of her mother; once when criticizing her for abandoning the children.

Bea lived with distant parents who did not affirm emotions. She discovered her deep loneliness at the age of ten⁵⁹. Bea's God, whom she consciously started relating to in the end of her teens, gave security, protection, care, comfort, and not the least; God was the only one who could reach and touch in depth⁶⁰. Her God seemed to possess the missing parental qualities, and hence was complementary in her life. Carl speaks explicitly of the relationship between the image of God and of parents. Security was the foremost quality in the parental relations, although the father might have been a bit distant. In the charismatic times the teaching of the "father-heart of God"⁶¹ touched Carl and probably strengthened the sense of a parental God.

One of Dina's most significant others was the grandmother. Her parents were also figures of protection in life, teaching her about God as a father.

I remember having (...) a [figure formed as a] hand with a child lying inside, and it was kind of describing my relation with God. I felt God looked after me and was a father. (...) I was taught this and have chosen to keep this during my youth.

Eve, like Bea, speaks of parents who left her emotionally desolate. They were too tired, depressed and almost burned-out to really see her. She seems to have been an unseen child⁶² that tried to protect herself, living without a strong connection to her parents. Frank is the one speaking most thoroughly of his parents; the father is mercy, the mother is law – and he connects his anxiety directly and strongly to her. When asking Frank what was holding him down in life, he speaks of his mother: «[...] Well... it is connected to this adolescence (...)

⁵⁹ See quotation, Chapter 4.2.2

⁶⁰ See quotation, Chapter 4.2.2

⁶¹ This theological focus is concerned with the loving, caring and compassionate aspects of God.

⁶² See quotation in Chapter 4.2.5

where I did have what I experienced as a strict mother, (...), and it wasn't much of a room for action, I felt. No. And this hasn't been easy to get rid of.»

Frank description of God's presence equals the childhood experience when he is getting into his father's car with this «ah, now it is good to exist.» Says he: «Well the first word hitting me is a kind of warmth, where anxiety loosens grip, and where I think “here, here I'll stay forever”...»

The interviewees' parental relations and how they connect with the God-self-relationship discloses considerable variation. Both Bea and Eve speak of distant parents. Carl had parents bringing security and conveying an intellectual, Lutheran faith. Dina's parents are in her life, mainly as protectors – and being protective was one of the most important qualities of her God. Anna and Frank speak of closer relationships with their parents; warmth in the paternal relation, but difficulties in the maternal.

5.1.1.4 The feel-good God

All the interviewees speak of affections, emotions and feelings⁶³. Anna, Bea, Dina and Frank always had an emotional dimension in their relation with God, while Carl and Eve had a rational adolescent-faith which later included emotions.

The third column in Matrix 2, give us a “My God is”-list, mainly describing the interviewees' “feel-good God” who is bringing e.g. a sense of forgiveness, love and acceptance, care, protection, comfort, control, and goodwill. They respond emotionally towards their God and God's presence, and experience gratitude, longing, trust, desire to worship and enjoyment. Carl, in particular, in addition experienced strong reactions of anger, condemnation and own sin.

*Commentary*⁶⁴

The God before the absence experience is basically a strong, protective, parental God who is giving and demanding – and hence seem omnipotent and in the lead. This God is connected to

⁶³ I follow The Merriam Webster dictionary: Affection is understood as feelings of loving, liking and caring; feeling as an awareness in the body – connected to mental reactions; emotion as a conscious, mental reaction of a wider range (e.g. hate and love, fear and joy). (Synonym Discussion of Emotion).

⁶⁴ Some of the quotations in Chapter 5.1.1 are really about God's presence, but are used here to enlighten the interviewee's perception of God before the absence-experience.

feel-good emotions which creates both affectionate and emotional responses in our interviewees. Nevertheless, the demanded achievements are strongly present as an undertone in the God-self relationships. We find a gap between the positive parental, protective, feel-good God and the conditional, demanding God. This ambivalence seems to be a struggle between the longing for God's warmth and protection, and the resistance towards conditionality.

5.1.2 How did they experience God's presence

God's presence is experienced in various ways according to our interviewees. Here we briefly add to the understanding we already got.

5.1.2.1 Presence – really emotions

To a large extent, God's presence seems to equal emotions. Carl is to the point when saying: «[...] God was there when emotions were there.» God's presence was increasingly connected with the emotional dimension in Bea, Carl, Dina, and Eve's lives. Dina and Eve did learn to emphasize emotions after adolescence, and Carl as an adult. Dina used to be «a strong believer (...) both dogmatically and emotionally.» As a passionate person, she searched for great emotions in life and in faith.

Anna all the way did have an emotional God-relation, since feelings, warmth and sensations strongly appealed to her. «[...] I'm filled up with a love that cannot just be my own,» says Anna. Bea reluctantly admits the importance of emotions, while Eve and Frank does not. Nevertheless, Frank has experienced a sense of warmth in connection with God's presence.

5.1.2.2 Presence – in body and creation

Anna connects divine presence to emotions, body, sensuality and the creation:

Well I am a really sensitive kind of person; both romantic, sensitive, everything concerning those moods, so if I really feel like a warmth in my whole being, I am being very happy, just using the word “thanks, thanks, thanks” – well at times I can't stop saying thanks.

Dina, Carl and Eve also describe bodily responses to supernatural impulses. To Dina divine presence has been fairly physical: «times of inexplicable and supernatural happenings, where

I experience an emotional reaction, bodily reaction; I start crying or the body is somehow quivering (...) Those experiences that I did have before which were really important [...].»

5.1.2.3 Presence – through outer incidents

Events and happenings served as markers of divine presence: Bible texts, songs, people speaking redemptive words; to Anna visual stimuli, like art, acts as small signs and signals of divine acceptance. When Eve experienced a more charismatic Christian environment, people approached her with words of significance to her. Frank also describes outer incidents, especially spoken or read words, as ways to experience God in life.

5.1.2.4 Presence - an underlying condition

Anna implies an underlying divine presence and to Bea presence was the normal condition, before the absence experiences. Frank conveys the existence of an existential presence when introducing the image of the Hardanger fiddle:⁶⁵

So such a Hardanger fiddle-thing, you know, where there are two sets of strings [and there is one set] which is placed underneath, which is like God in a way that has been there all the time. And then above; those strings of tone-variations. So it's like that. It has been such an interaction [...].

Anna, Bea and Frank describe an existential experience of presence. God's presence is there, independently of life's ups and downs. To Carl, Dina and Eve this seem slightly different, as they focus an intellectually based presence.

5.1.2.5 Presence - intellectually understood

Anna, Carl, Dina and Eve were raised in dogmatic, Lutheran churches. Carl and Eve basically experienced their faith as intellectual, hence God's perceived presence was not on the agenda until they entered more charismatic churches. Eve describes:

I might not have focused [the experienced divine presence] during my adolescence.

Yes, I grew up in a really Lutheran context, a kind of tradition where one really emphasizes the Bible, right, and not what one feels.

⁶⁵ A Hardanger fiddle (in Norwegian: hardingfele) is very similar to the violin, though with eight or nine strings. Four of the strings are strung and played like a violin, while the rest, aptly named understrings or sympathetic strings, resonate under the influence of the other four. For additional information, see for example (Hardanger fiddle, 2016).

Frank experiences security and rest based on theology and the descriptions of a merciful God. To Carl – especially – the rational and intellectual understanding of God and his presence weakens, as emotions grow important.

Commentary

God's presence seems to be existential; as an underlying dimension. It is as well experienced through thoughts, emotions, body, creation, and outer "events".

So far, we have now drawn a picture of the God-self relationship by looking closely at our interviewees' God representation and experience of divine presence. This, however, is just "half" the truth. Their reflections upon the hidden God, why and how God seems or seemed absent, also help clarify the God-self-relationship.

5.2 How is God's absence experienced?

«*How could we describe the absence experiences?*» is the primer part of our research question. Through the centuries saints and poets have written of absence, but in this thesis we investigate how regular Christians relate to absence experiences in their personal lives. As mentioned in Chapter 2, during some years I have met several people responding clearly to this (at that time) future research on experienced absence. What did the words "experienced absence of God" hit in their inner being? Which experience did they refer to when nodding and saying "you could have spoken to me"? The ones we have portrayed are providing us with descriptions of experiences sensed and interpreted as God's absence.

5.2.1 Absence – loss of emotions

As we saw, Anna, Bea, Carl, and Dina emphasized emotions in their God-self relationship before they experienced absence. They also clearly expressed *a loss of emotions* related to the loss of God's presence. Carl pinpoints this: «[M]y experience was as if God was completely disappearing as well, together with my emotions so to speak.» God was there when his emotions were there. When God disappeared, so did his emotions. Could it be the other way around as well: when emotions disappeared, so did God? Dina suggests such answer: «Perhaps his disappearance was me losing the good feelings I had.» Frank describes a lack of warmth in times of anxiety where God's presence is less significant.

Carl describes his loss of emotions: «(...) all colours disappeared from nature, so, yes, everything turned grey, colourless and empty.» Bea describes the absence experience as a time where presence, sense of security and protection are gone. Eve gives names to absence, such as; darkness, tunnel, a sense of powerlessness, silence, a kind of nothingness, disruptive, filled with anxiety, unpredictable and hopeless: « And you might not think, or you don't quite know how this will end, and will I ever leave the tunnel (...).»

The one word Anna uses to explain the mood of presence is “Yes!” This response comes from her whole body, after times of absence. God's presence or absence, as well as her bodily-emotional life, are interrelated: «This whole body, because it has been so – this is psychosomatic I think – *if your mind and heart is unhappy because of such a thing as absence, then the whole body partakes, at least with me.*»⁶⁶

A question arises: Did our interviewees experience a complete loss of emotions in times of absence? Carl denies this: «Oh well it isn't correct saying the emotions disappeared because I did have lots of negative emotions then...»

5.2.2 Absence – emerging “unwanted” emotions and moods

The lack of emotions is a significant characterization of the experienced absence. Still, almost all the interviewees include emotions when describing absence; they either define the emotions as God's absence or as result of absence, and it adjusts the picture of absence as non-emotional.

Bea is not emotionally met; she feels unprotected in absence times. «This is like a desert», says she, and adds: «Oh well I feel a bit afraid and empty, but also am in a kind of paranoid emergency, so I spend amounts of energy staying gathered.» Eve experiences fear in times of absence, combined with sorrow and insecurity.

Also Carl and Dina describe emotions in the emotionless absence: «It is not just this grey emptiness, it is despair as well. And anger. Because I think God acted badly,» says Carl. Dina experienced anger, the feeling of being alone, «and probably also of being left in the lurch.» She also experienced pain, partly connected to God's hiding when she looked for God. So did

⁶⁶ My italics

Eve: «But I think in a way [it was] very painful to experience whether it's me not being able to see God because I have my own hindrances, or it's me doing it myself, or if God actually hides.» This pain might be *a result* of the absence experience, and not the experience itself.

Frank emphasized, through the interview, that he did not experience absence. When we deepened the conversation, we found that the Psalmist's complaint, «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,» does hit a resonant string within him.

[W]hen I am [thinking] "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me"...(...). These are words that I kind of recognize, but it's more an expression of some helplessness. But not helplessness regarded to God being gone, no. It's somehow more like I haven't got hope anymore, that's what it does express, I think (...).

To Frank, the crying from Psalm 22 speaks more of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, and pain, than of the absence of God. Still the request to partake in the interviews made him respond; because he wanted to share the strong experiences of anxiety at silent retreats. In the end of our talk, when Frank is drawing his lifeline, he draws the presence of God (red line) even *lower* than his life (black line) at the deepest point. This could make us question whether he might have experienced a subconscious absence. When reflecting upon the probable underlying sense of absence in his life, we conclude together that he has experienced absence, especially in times of depression and anxiety. It is an emotional, but not existential, absence. He does not seem to be in contact with or bothered with this experience.

5.2.3. Absence – a condition of relief, liberty and strengthened self

Both Anna and Bea describe a sense of liberty and relief when God is absent. To Anna this relief comes after intense prayer and the subsequent resignation when she does not feel God answers. The relief is also connected to "the return of God".

Both [God's absence and presence] are a relief. (...) So then it is a relief to somehow be allowed to be naturally yourself again [in times of absence], with what you usually love doing. But then it is also a loss, [so when] you really did say yes to God, it also becomes a relief when you again feel that... now we are together...

Bea seems to live in a kind of ambivalence between a tiny longing for God and a sense of freedom to be herself when God is distant.

Yes, I would indeed [like to] have a close relation to God. I would indeed be safe. But I can't make it. It's both a feeling of sorrow and misery, I think, yes. And really some fear. And then it is delicious as well. I really think it is a little delicious to find it deadly funny going to a soccer game. And not only being "heav'nly"⁶⁷ spiritually focused all the time. Yes, to me this is delicious, and I kind of return to the one I am.

Bea is the one who most clearly recognizes a genuine and stronger experience of herself when God is distant. When Bea is asked whether living close to God means she cannot properly be who she is, she says: «No. No I can't, I feel I can't. Mm. Then I somehow have to act differently.» She continues:

So you are either somehow Christian and super spiritual and only concerned with what belongs to God in a way, or concerned with lots of stuff (*little laughter*). But I do understand it isn't this black and white – it's just a feeling. And a bit like the role of... wife. One has to feel a little stifled in a way, by this Christian approach to family life.

Anna and Bea are the ones who thematise benefits related to absence. Their longing for closeness *and distance*, warmth in presence, as well as liberty in absence, could give us information on the human self.

Commentary

The absence experience is composed: It could be a more subconscious experience, as we might see in the case of Frank. Most often it is experienced as darkened or greyed emotions, increasing difficult emotions or a more depressive condition. The absence experience is not solely negative. We have found a strong ambivalence in regard of experienced absence: Anna and Bea express sadness, uneasiness and anger in connection with God's absence, but also liberty to selfhood.

5.3 What is God's absence?

«*How could we understand the absence experiences?*» This is the second part of our research question. Helping us into the comprehensive theme of divine absence, we continue building the matrix,⁶⁸ started out in Chapter 5.2, to get an overview.

⁶⁷ In Norwegian: "himla"

⁶⁸ Now go to Appendix G, Matrix 3.

When immersing ourselves in our portrayed individual's explanations of the inexplicable absence, we seem to find a threefold answer: 1) The absences are the results of some outer incident or crisis, 2) it is a deliberate action by God, or 3) it might be connected to intrapsychic assumptions. We will investigate those three perspectives as explanations on absence.

5.3.1 Absence – a result of outer incidents

How and why did God's absence take place? These are almost foolhardy question, but the matters of how and why God might disappear are natural to people experiencing absence. Our portrayed informants reflect upon this, dwelling together with me around the following; what was this absence, what happened, why did it happen? When pondering upon this material, our interviewees started by telling the narrative of their absence experience.

5.3.1.1 Anna – prayer with no response

Anna describes God's absence as the clearest characterization of her God-self relation. It is connected to her prayer life: «Mm, it is just the absence. In these and those critical situations, [when I] have prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed – and no response as far as I could feel. Hence absence has been there a lot in my Christian life.» The struggle in this returning absence is probably a strong motivation for Anna's partaking in the research. «It is a grief, it is cruel because (...) I have called for God "where are you?" and I read ah devotions and I go listening to preaching and we have conversations, and I don't think God is there at all.»

In Anna's life the lack of expected response from God works as an outer incidence, causing an inner resignation – a situation that serves as catalyst towards sensed absence.

5.3.1.2 Bea – conflict and betrayal

Church conflicts (in charismatic movements) initiated the main absence experience of Bea:

[I]n the beginning of the church-conflict, I really was kind of strong in my faith and spiritually focused in a way. But then it was enough (...) it was absolutely horrible, and I felt God failed completely. (...) Yes, he could have protected us against this. (...) I need God to, well he could give me what I can handle but not more than I can handle, right. (...) I understand that God might not have failed, but that's what it feels like. It's something about the feeling of [not being] protected, because he knows how much...if we should talk about me... he knows how much I can withstand and not.

Bea's process started with a concrete crisis and ended up with her gathering up herself, probably pushing God away and gaining control. It seems the church conflict triggered a coping reaction that caused Bea to put up a defence. When being betrayed – and not protected in the situation – she stops trusting God. Bea describes both an outer crisis, strong inner preconceptions that empowers the crisis, and a non-protecting God.

5.3.1.3 Carl – conflict and rejection

In Carl's case as well, a tough church conflict worked as a significant outer incidence giving way to the one and only experience of divine absence in his life. Carl had to either support his friend or maintain his critique of the church practice. He was increasingly wondering whether he fought on God's or the evil side when questioning the pastor and church-leaders. When leaving church, Carl lost his friend, who had attained a God-like role in his life. Rejecting his friend, felt like rejecting God, and God was suddenly gone – so was his emotions. Carl expected intervention and support from other leaders whom he trusted. They did not react and Carl felt betrayed. The outer crisis of conflict, loss of friendship and betrayal goes along with the inner rejection of this friend. And then God was gone with Carl's emotions.⁶⁹

5.3.1.4 Dina – conflict, betrayal and loss

Dina knew God had sent her to the specific Least Developed Country. After the second trip, conflicts made her return to Norway, and she began questioning how an unsolved conflict could take place in a situation where God wanted her.

[U]p to that time I had experienced God as close. I experienced that he answered prayers, that I made him part of my life, my decisions, and I really trusted his guidance. And then suddenly I realised I was wrong; because I either interpreted wrongly or God had tricked me into a trap. (...) In the beginning I thought that I had failed God, because I didn't manage the mission.

At home, she had neither school nor work. She started losing both her trust in God and the confidence in his protection. «I lost the confidence in him guiding me, and finally I lost the confidence in his caring, because I didn't find him, and after a while I stopped praying, because I couldn't bear it anymore.» Several factors were part of Dina's honest and cognitive process towards experienced absence: She started questioning which God she believed in.

⁶⁹ See quotations Chapter 4.2.3

Then she had a sense of being left alone, and lost her confidence. She ceased to complain and pray. After a while a disappointment with her weak and betraying God emerged:

[...] I want God to be more than comfort. When he was reduced to this weak God, suffering with people and crying with the crying, it wasn't enough for me, and I wanted him to be the big strong one, who could "kick some ass"⁷⁰, and he didn't. (...) And when my life got better and I wasn't anymore in this desperate situation where I just focused getting help to get out of it, then I went into a phase of stronger indifference where I almost didn't need God.

The outer incidence of conflict and misery was the catalyst to an inner emotional and cognitive process where Dina ended up experiencing absence. We will later see that she also feels God played a role in this process.

5.3.1.5 Eve – illness and loss

Eve experienced two concrete phases of God's absence. The first seems to have hit her most deeply. Her inner response to a life crisis – when she was very ill, and unable to achieve – was to doubt her faith and God's ability of intervention.

[...] Well, I felt I was challenged on; "can I be a Christian when I'm ill and can't do anything?" Or don't want to do anything was also the case. (...) [C]an I really trust that God is the one who should somehow come and do anything for me and not me doing anything for him.

In this first experienced absence, Eve indirectly asked: Who am I? Can I be a Christian without my good deeds? In the second experience of absence, Eve is directing her questions towards God.

And then I was just thinking "What are you trying to tell me now, God? Who are you really and are you (...) causing us to suffer or what's the point with everything?" (...) I tried shouting to God; "who are you really?" but at the same time I felt a bit afraid of asking this question, because what would happen if I asked that question? Would God show himself for me, and... would I really want to see who he was?

⁷⁰ These are the exact English words that Dina uses.

Commentary

The interviewees have experienced different roads to divine hiddenness, but a crisis was among the outer catalysts, creating an inner response playing along with the deep personal dispositions in each one. This outer-inner dynamic probably initiated the absence experience.

Human betrayal, or the strong sense of God as betrayer, is central in the crises of Bea, Carl, and Dina. This perceived lack of God's protection, is a strong incitement of the lost God, who did not act as expected. Anna merely experienced divine silence, but encountered the same challenges as the others: The silent God did not respond, hence she lost the God she expected to meet. Eve experienced losses; at first the loss of own strength and ability to achieve challenged her image of herself; later, a crisis challenged her image of God. Both situations were perceived as God's absence. Frank is differing from the rest; he never describes any outer incident catalysing absence, but briefly mentions silence as catalyst for anxiety.

5.3.2 Absence – an action of God

The question “How did absence happen?” brought us to our interviewees' *understanding* of their absence experience: They do reflect around outer incidents, but primarily explain absence experiences as active actions by the God they thought they knew.

5.3.2.1 Absence – a lack of divine response

One possible explanation of divine absence is that God is deaf; a God who does not respond to prayers, requests and expectations⁷¹. «I do pray and pray and pray but... God kind of doesn't show up or... he doesn't give what I ask for or... (...) he doesn't change the situation at all», says Eve. Both Anna, Dina, and Eve keep turning to a God that does not answer in a recognizable way. They keep up their religious practice, but God is not “following the rules” which is to act “visibly”.

Bea does not speak of divine silence, but rather of a lack of divine intervention.

[J]ust in relation to God, I think I am emotionally met, and it is almost the only place where someone has come through – really. (...) But God now doesn't manage to come through anymore, or can't or won't or I will not or something. I realise I miss the sense of being safe. I miss feeling that God is with me where I am.

⁷¹ See Anna's story in Chapter 5.3.1.1.

Bea's God is either unable or unwilling to overcome the wall between them. She perceives absence as abandonment. God – the only one who usually can meet her – might be present, but silent.

5.3.2.2 Absence – a deliberately hiding God

Carl and Eve briefly refer to “the dark night of the soul”⁷² as possible explanation of their absence experience. Eve describes an intentionally hiding God and what this hiding could accomplish at best:

[...] And it is somehow also really painful...if I should think that God leads people into darkness, or... that he does this deliberately.. (...) it could be like this; God is hiding to teach people something about himself ... that he sees is good for people.

Eve wonders whether the absence experience is God hiding, or own inner dynamics: When is God really hiding? When do we experience an absent God which is actually present? Might God be hiding, to make sure false pictures of Him are dying?

«[...] I think [an] important point from God's perspective is that you've got lots of false images of God that you cannot carry. It isn't good for people to carry them around throughout life. (...) If I really thought that God had brought this upon me, (...) then I would have turned my back on him, because such a God I wouldn't believe in. (...) Then he had to, perhaps shake some of my foundation in life, (...) break something down, to be able to show another side or angel of [him-]self, so that I could sort of lay down a false image of God (...). »

None of the other interviewees speaks so clearly of God's positive interfering with transformational purposes. But both Carl and Dina explicitly state that they have experienced an improvement in their religious life.

5.3.2.3 Absence – a disappearing God

Bea, Carl, and Dina felt abandoned by God. Bea lived through two periods of absence, the primer was of «God disappearing». Dina went through a long period of time – losing the sense of confidence and protection, and finally she stopped praying: «And then I experienced

⁷² The dark night of the soul is, according to John of the cross, a condition of darkness and desert that God allows a person to go through – in order to “achieve” unification with God.

that *God left me*. And maybe it was the toughest, experiencing a long period of life – years...»⁷³

5.3.2.4 Absence – a part of God's being

God's absence is not connected to experienceable existence, but termination of God's willingness to relate, in Carl's life: «[S]o sometimes it was almost (...) as well a wish that I could have been atheist because it would have been much easier. He wasn't gone in the sense of not existing. But rather that he didn't want contact with me.»

The interviewees create a picture of a hiding and disappearing – maybe we could also add rejecting and erratic – God. Anna is the only one verbalizing absence as part of God's nature:

«[T]hen at first I think it's pretty natural that God isn't present all the time even though the Bible says he is. Then I think that others have experienced this before, there is quite a bit about doubt in the Bible, ah as we've seen, so I'd rather calm down, I'll just have to wait. I'll continue praying, (...)

In the difficult, lasting times of divine absence, Anna is comforted when thinking that Jesus himself experienced God's absence in Gethsemane, before he was captured, and on the cross when saying "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

Commentary

In Chapter 5.3.2 the interviewees have mainly spoken of absence in three ways:

- 1) The present God seems to be leaving the stage and disappearing.
- 2) The present God is continuing being present, but hiding himself deliberately – really the silence of the God who normally speaks. Hence, absence is seen as an action initiated by God. Most interviewees seem to expect God to be present, predictable and answering prayers. When God is not responding in correlation with their expectations, it leads to several emotional reactions as sadness and anger, and it could also lead to the conclusion that God is absent.
- 3) The present God is absent, and that is part of God's being and will. There is a search for meaning in the absence of God, hence the interviewees try to picture which good intentions God might have, when leaving them without the sensation of his presence.

⁷³ My italics

5.3.3 *Absence – an intra-psychic experience*⁷⁴

As we saw in Chapter 5.3.1 outer incidents seemed to play along with inner preconceptions in our interviewees. The inner dispositions that fully or partly are causing experienced absence could be almost infinite. Among other things, personality, history, attachment-style, preferred and learnt coping strategy, and social environment (for instance religious background as church affiliation and theology) will influence the individuals' ability to deal with and meet the absence experience. In a thesis at this level we will not be able to cover a wide range of inner preconceptions and intra-psychic dimensions, but we will elaborate some of the themes that could help us understand the complexity of divine absence.

5.3.3.1 *Absence and parental relations*

Developmentally focused psychology, as object relations theory, will emphasise the meaning of parents in individuals' identity-making. The interviewed persons show – with different clarity – the connection between the parental relationship and the experience of divine presence and absence.

Anna describes a strong connection with her father, through retelling small conversations between them. She never speaks of her mother, except once: when her parents sent their children away, and kept living abroad: «[T]his was really a very wrong thing to do that mother didn't... that we became parentless...» Later *Anna* discovered the strong sense of abandonment in her life. It seems her relation to her father was truly confident and loving, but underlying is this abandonment. Through life she has had a strong desire for proximity. We might see an underlying conflict: between abandonment and desire for intimacy? A conflict that is equivalent with her God-self-relation that is characterized by warmth, but also conditions.

Bea was suppressing her emotions and lacking emotional contact with her parents, hence absence is a basic experience. *Carl* describes good relations with his parents, but does not seem to have had close relations with them. *Dina* starts describing her parents in rather sober ways, but when speaking of the transformed relationship with God she expands the image of her mother:

⁷⁴ Some of our several themes in Chapter 5.3.3 are only mentioned by one or two of the portrayed. This does not give us a strong empirical platform. Still the theoretical material might give value to the descriptions given by the few.

[I]t has been lots of shame in my life, and the glance I got from my mother is another look than I get from God. God sees me with a merciful glance. And then I feel the comfort. And then I realize God may actually be like a mother, but a different mother than the one I had.

Eve was the care-giving, silent child, always putting own needs behind the railing, often carrying her parents by not letting them carry her. She learnt to be a giver and sunshine child – in relation with her parents, as well in her relation with God. Hence, being a Christian and performing good deeds were interrelated. When she could not serve God anymore, she probably lost her value, and started questioning whether she could have a relation to God.

Frank is the one speaking mostly of his parents, describing the strong conflict between the values they represent. Running to meet his father after school, getting into his car, gave Frank an instant feeling of goodness in life, unlike his emotional response towards his mother.

[H]e came and I could get into the car and we drove home, it was like “ah, now it is good to exist.” (...) And he joined me for soccer games you know, or it wasn’t too often, but I felt was teaming with what I experienced as good. But this didn’t happen with mum because when I went to soccer game – it was my favourite; visiting the [City] Stadium, and it somehow was this emotional expiration and [I] was completely committed – and then I came home and it went silent. The coffee table with blue tablecloth, on Sundays, because then I had done something terribly wrong and she looked down and out. That’s what I remember. It probably was differently lots of other times but this is what is remaining in my body.

He had a strong binding to his strict mother. She made him feel suppressed, and left him with little freedom. He connects his anxiety to his mother, and his sense of belonging to his father.

5.3.3.2 Absence - separation from significant others

Carl rejected his closest pastor-friend and broke with his church, to survive the church conflict. He admits: «[B]asically it was healthy to establish this dividing line but it was very dramatic to do it, because I sensed that I rejected God as well.» Carl also says that: «When I let go of everything it was as if God simply went along with everything else.» The rejection and betrayal Carl experienced might have activated inner patterns of separation and rejection, that created a feeling of abandonment and absence.

5.3.3.3 Absence – defence and flight from God and self

Bea speaks of an event that made her realise she was not protected. Both her background and the specific event could have forced her need to keep a strong separation between her inner and outer life⁷⁵. Bea does not want to focus the inner life, she does not want or dare or can allow God or silence to reach her inner being, but she keeps up the distance. In her second experience of absence – a major church conflict – Bea describes her reaction towards God:

[T]hen I was thinking “ok, you’re not strong enough. I’ll have to handle things myself.” But, it is really pretty concrete, that I [decided] “ok, you don’t protect me, then I have to protect my own heart... myself.” This is kind of part of my coping strategy since I was a child, being hard, in a way; ”stay away”, and I can be pretty hard.

Bea escapes because God’s presence forces her to be present in her own life. When she expands her descriptions of absence, we find a clear correlation between God’s absence and her distance to self: «[I]f God is going to be close I have to keep sensing all those shitty things that I don’t want to relate to. And it is a much bigger story than I’m telling now, that I do not want to relate to. And I feel I have to relate to it if God is close – and I will not.»

Bea is not the only one building an inner defence. When Eve was a child, she built an inner “wall” around herself: «Ah, well, I’ve kind of just built up a wall around myself... to keep control, where I’ve somehow kept God and people out because... then I’m at least alone and can control who’s coming close to me.» She discovered her wall while working therapeutically with her anxiety, and carefully started tearing the bricks down.

5.3.3.4 Absence - anxiety and depression

All the interviewees know well of anxiety and depression, and this complicates our understanding of the experienced absence. Could the hiding God really be a strengthened depression? Or could the absence experience be reinforced because of depression? These questions are important, and our interviewees have reflected upon them.

Dina verbalises a potential coherence between depression and absence, suggesting depression both as cause and consequence of divine absence, not exactly knowing what is true.

⁷⁵ See Chapter 4.2.2.

[...] then there were many years where I was terribly angry with God and I felt very little, and it should be said I was depressed in parts of this period, and I have wondered a little about how much of my divine absence that was caused by depression. At the same time I would say there is a difference. It's not like God returned immediately when I recovered, so I think it has been reinforced; that I also experienced depression because God disappeared (...) so it goes both ways.»

Carl admits a tendency towards depression, nevertheless he emphasizes the differences between a regular depression and the darkness of experienced absence. One significant difference is that he could not find comfort in reading the Bible and praying in the absence period, on the contrary; both Bible and prayer became a strain. This reinforced his understanding of absence as more than depression. Both Carl and Dina have had several experiences with depression; hence, they might be able to distinguish between former depressions and the experienced absence.

5.3.3.5 Absence - a conscious, cognitive process

Dina describes God's absence as an action by God, but also as caused by her own cognitive work. God is hiding *and she is ruining her own representation of God*; allowing her God to be lost in a cognitive process: «[...] So I do believe that God leaving me was, yes both him leaving me but also me allowing myself to tear apart the image of God that I had. I did let this happen, and then... then he disappeared.» Her statement “allowing myself to tear apart” implies an action by will. Dina's God seems gone – emotionally and cognitively. She also realises that her image of God – which is not her possible real God – could and should be replaced. Eve touched the same theme, explaining the necessity of divine absence by a changed God representation.

Commentary

In Chapter 5.3.3 we see a multitude of somehow differing dimensions:

1) Absence and relation to significant others: Divine absence is understood in relation to significant others that might have played the role of a substitute God, which now is rejected. The absence of the person could be perceived as the absence of God. The most important significant others in childhood are often the parents. We find patterns in the parental relations that might explain important inner preconceptions, which are relevant for the experienced absence.

2) *Absence and relation to self*: We find in Bea a strong resistance towards divine presence – interrelated to an equally strong resistance towards self. Bea wants to relate closely to God – and this is part of her desire – but she also enjoys being herself (even though this means not being close to herself). Those two conditions seem irreconcilable. Could absence really be a person’s distance to his or her own inner being? Or the other way around; could absence be the experience of a protective isolation, a defence, ensuring no interfering from others?

3) *Absence, anxiety and depression*: The experience of divine absence, as portrayed by our interviewees, has many commonalities with conditions of depression, and is sometimes related to conditions of anxiety.

4) *Absence and cognition*: Finally, our interviewees speak of absence in terms of a conscious act of will; cognitively ruining the image of God. Interestingly this implies a certain understanding; the God that has become absent is just an image. There could be a more real or better God to be found.

In the introduction to Chapter 5.3.1 we asked *how and why absence happened*. Throughout Chapter 5.3 we have developed an understanding of this, allowing the empirical material to explain divine absence. We have shown three main catalysts towards divine absence, that also suggests what this absence experience is about:

1) *Absence – a result of outer incidents*: Concrete outer incidences initiating a process of questions, struggles, complaints and – to some extent – relief and freedom, are understood as phases of God’s absence. This outer incident is often not wanted, and it seems to lead to or create a continuation of some process.

2) *Absence – an action of God*: Divine absence, as initiated by God, is connected to who God is and what God is deliberately doing.

3) *Absence – an intra-psychic experience*: The inner individual preconceptions – with important keywords as; parental relationships, resistance, ambivalence, defence and cognition – created conditions allowing absence to be experienced when an incident occurred.

5.4 What are the possible effects of absence?

How do we understand the effect of absence? In the introduction to Chapter 5 we asked if the experienced absence might have been playing a role in the interviewees’ lives.

The experience of divine hiddenness touches the human search for significance: Why did our interviewees experience absence? Or, at a more philosophical level: Why does divine absence exist? By asking these questions, we touch profound issues: Is absence – as a way of suffering – indispensable for human transformation? Brought to a head: Is it possible to become a true self not experiencing suffering? And hence; could divine absence be part of the human suffering that leads to transformation and maturing? These questions will be developed in our discussion. Now we will investigate whether something good – a transformation – came out of the experienced absence, and hence brought significance to the experience. Looking at possible transformations might be one of the keys to understanding absence. In Appendix H, Matrix 4 we focus the probable changes that will be developed in the following subsections.

In Chapter 5.1.1 we met the protective, controlling, conditional and demanding parental God who among other things left our interviewees with feel-good-emotions. In Chapter 5.1.2 they pictured their experience of divine presence. When investigating their God after (or in) the absence experience, we are closer to their current situation, and they show a clearer picture of themselves and the quality of the God-self-relation. Bea and Eve clearly express there is a relation between meeting God and meeting own self; experiencing divine presence and being present in own lives. To Bea this connection is crystal clear: «So when I can't be present in my own life, I can't stay close to God either.»

In Chapter 5.4. we immerse ourselves in the interviewees' present sense of being in the world, the possible transformations of their God representations and experience of God's presence⁷⁶, and as well their present God-self-relation.

⁷⁶ It would have been of utmost interest to introduce the reader to the catalysts for change from sensation of absence towards transformed experience of presence. The space does not allow this kind of elaboration. But let me briefly mention: When the interviewees pondered into their own narratives, they were able to derive some catalysts for transformation of the absence condition. We have found that our interviewees mainly speak of own actions in keeping or changing their religious practise, of desire or of outer incidents as other people, nature, words and art. They do not speak of a sudden return of God. They slightly noticed small changes, and when investigating their life in retrospect they manage to discover important episodes serving as turning points. The catalysts towards renewed divine presence are almost the same as the catalysts towards absence: 1) outer incidences (often playing along with inner dispositions), 2) inner assumptions, and 3) initiated by God. All though none of our interviewees speak explicitly of an act of God, the quotations might be read as implications that God took action. Or perhaps their understanding of who God is, and how God is at work, has changed.

5.4.1 God and man – the increased significance of being, not doing

There is a remarkable transformation related to the importance of deeds in several of the interviewees' narratives.

5.4.1.1 The God that does not fix

Almost all our interviewees somehow did expect God to intervene and hinder difficult events to happen – like betrayal (Bea and Carl), conflict and a loss of mission (Dina), as well as illness and personal loss (Anna and Eve). They emphasized divine deeds. Frank is the only one not expressing those kinds of expectations.

Carl and Dina think differently now. When Carl was asked what is important in his present relationship with God, he answered: «(...) Well it's knowing that He is there. And I hardly have any expectation that he should help out with a lot.» Carl does not claim God for help anymore. It seems Carl's God has transformed similarly; and is now neither claiming achievements in deeds nor emotions from Carl: «(...) So I don't have to do anything for divine presence. It's just there,» says Carl.

Dina now mostly speaks with God as a friend rather than one who should fix her life.

[T]his expectation I've got that he should be a big and strong God isn't necessarily better for me either. I'm not sure it's such a God I need, who is supposed to fix everything, that I need a painless life. So it has kind of made me reconciling with this; that he does not intervene like I wanted him to do before.

5.4.1.2 The self - from "doing" to "being"

Bea, Carl, Dina, and Eve expressed a clear connection between God's presence and own deeds/ ministry before the experienced absence. It was of great importance to serve God. Now Carl and Dina in particular, but Eve as well, have a relaxed and much less vocation- and mission-focused life. Their centre of gravity has changed from doing towards being.

Carl experienced a situation of claimless, divine presence through other people, while visiting a chapel. This gave him a new taste of how God's presence could be: «(...) It was a way of being close to God that didn't request anything at all.» Dina describes the importance of the God-self-relationship in itself, regardless of what God can do and what she can produce.

[T]o be broken completely down, to see that it is enough just coming to God, if only to be... together, and find rest – this is a sufficient faith. (...) [E]arlier I was more busy doing, than being. Doing things for God. But now I'm more concerned with being with God.

Dina is in a condition of rest. Even though she wants to accomplish something of significance and use her strengths, this is not a requirement for a relationship with God. The first word that comes to her mind when hearing the concept "God's presence" is: «(...) Rest. Perhaps because it's when I sit down and let go of everything that I experience that we are online, that I open up to feel his presence.» Her basic sensation of life is changed.

Eve seems to be in a process of ongoing change, practising a less deed-focused life. It was hard to believe in her own value when she stopped serving God. Slowly realising that God wanted to do something *for her*, was like a change of paradigm.

[T]hen I thought that God expected it too; that I should do something for him and that he perhaps almost depended on that. But I had not tried so much just to be. [I] altered between the feeling of being and doing, and I did see clearly after a while that I had been judging myself when I couldn't do anything. It was not God. (...) But I received an incredible sense of freedom when I could see that I could actually just be before God without him requesting anything from me and without having to do something.

Bea does not have the strength to depend on her deeds anymore, but she still does not rest in the situation. To Anna and Frank, deeds have been connected to positive self-realisation. Anna has all the way felt God's conditionality towards lifestyle, but not towards doing deeds. Frank has found life itself hard, but these hardships are related to his self-esteem and anxiety, not to deeds and activity.

Commentary

God is now "sufficient" without performing good deeds. God's presence is unconditional; to a lesser degree a reward for deeds. It seems the road towards changed sense of selves has to go through a process from doing towards being. And their God representation goes through a similar process.

5.4.2 God and man – less protection, increasing confidence

Closely connected to the fixer-God is the God of conditional protection⁷⁷ – who has established a contract that can be paraphrased as “Man performs, God protects”. The aspect of protection was of importance in almost all cases. After the experienced absence, this relational quality transformed in Dina’s life.

I’m not protected. I know that. And I think I have to a greater extent – and through therapy, I think – been challenged to receive (...) comfort. And to a greater extent I’m now capable – I had to learn this as an adult – to be comforted and allowing comfort. And it has probably offset my need of protection, to realise that not either parents could protect from every danger.

Carl has always emphasized safety, which is the most significant quality in his relation with God: «[...] I experience this safety also in times of anxiety. It is regardless of my emotions. (...) Nay this security is somehow objective; the anxiety is subjective, yes. I also know the anxiety with time will lose its grip». This basic tune of safety in life seems to have undergone a change: now it does take place independently of circumstances and it helps Carl being honest in his prayers. In a concrete, difficult situation in his life he did not bother praying to God, because he found it impossible to relate to God. Carl told his God how he felt, ending with a «so you better; good bye so long». Then Carl says: «(...) but this nevertheless didn’t change my experience of safety, it was still there. It was kind of “he can handle it”.»

Both Bea and Eve live in a phase of losing or having lost the experience of protection. To Bea, experiencing loss of protection in the church-conflict, made her realise she is alone.

To Eve the protective-God-image is under construction, and she is wondering whether she could have confidence in God. Is he going to protect her? Anna and Frank did not thematise the issue of protection.

Commentary

What I read out of the linear narratives is a coinciding movement from the individual’s need of protection towards increased confidence, and from the significance of a protective God towards a relation in confidence. Protection is now subordinate. It seems the journey follow

⁷⁷ Se Chapters 5.1.1.1 through 5.1.1.3 (the protective, conditional and parental God).

this route: Protection of importance – loss of protection – changed relation and existential feeling where confidence is of deepened significance.

5.4.3 The omnipresent God and sense of unification

We find an understanding of God as omnipresent experienced in an underlying presence, which is coinciding with a sensation of strengthened unification.

5.4.3.1 The omnipresent God and the underlying presence

Both Carl and Dina speak of God's omnipotence and unchangeable presence. And their God will never leave them. «I've got a basic conviction that God is there and with good intentions. (...) And it is profound in a different way because I can easily be in great intellectual doubt and emotionally low, but it sort of doesn't afflict it (...)», says Carl. When asking him where this sensation of presence is found in his existence, he answers:

Well, it's just exactly this; it is not found in the emotional life, and insofar not in the intellect either. It's just a part... yes it's almost like the air, right, it's just surrounding me, it's just there. (...) So God is close, it's just up to me to what degree I'll connect.

Carl, Dina and Eve now describe an underlying presence that they cannot escape. This presence Anna often experience and Frank describes it as his life keel, but the three primers have gained this new aspect in their relationship with God. Says Dina:

[N]ow it's more like I can't... imagine that he will disappear like he did, because my assumption to perceive him is expanded. I haven't got this many criteria to feel his presence, because... well I think he is present, so it means I can't run away from him.

The omnipresent aspect of God's being is connected to Dina's expanded perception of God. Neither Carl nor Dina strive to achieve in order to gain God's presence anymore. The omnipresent God is unconditional – which is a major transformation.

5.4.3.2 A strengthened sense of a God-self-unification

Coinciding with the transformed sensation of divine presence, is the experience of the God-and-self relation. When reading the interviews, my impression is that we sometimes touch a deeper sense of existence; a chanced sensation of unity.

Dina has a strengthened experience of divine presence in unification with own presence which seems to deepen her sense of self.

This presence I felt before [Country] wasn't a presence connected to my presence in own life. Because then I was a lot less in contact with myself, and just wanted God to guide me. When the crisis hit, I experienced that I got more in touch with my own life. But God was nevertheless absent. Now I feel they are united, those two, thus the experience of God being present and me being present in my own life. And I think this is slightly connected to me experiencing him as a place where I can rest. A place where I'm in contact with myself. Can feel and think, in peace and quiet.

Frank describes a slow process in his spiritual life; an increasingly deepened relationship with God that has components of unification:

It was a kind of closer relation. (...) [T]he grace got a face, (...) and with the Jesus meditation and such things... God is more personal – at least for me. (...) [S]o the relationship with God was kind of more of a I-you you-I, then before.

Recently Frank has been feeling upright, and quotes from a prayer; “the source of life is with you”. He also describes a new kind of confidence in sharing, when being with God. Frank does not speak of unification, but of belonging, mercy, the ability to share the good times with God – thus describing an intimate relationship.

5.4.4 The more composed God and strengthened selfhood

As a result, (so far) of the transformational process some of our interviewees have got a changed God representation, an extended understanding of presence and a strengthened sensation of self.

5.4.4.1 The more composed God

Bea's God was protective, in control, reaching her in depth, caring and comforting. This God is almost lost. Her present God – who is mostly absent – is as we have seen through Chapter 4 and 5 not protecting, not strong enough, not seeing what she can handle, he is remote, not trustworthy, and impossible to find.

Eve's God was to some extent a fabricated illusionary image, but when experiencing hardships this image was disturbed. Now Eve speaks of her relationship with God as unclear,

and God seems somehow unpredictable. Bea's and Eve's loss of the well-known, controllable God could be seen as the first step towards a more composed God. The God-in-their-pockets has left the pockets. This is uncomfortable, perhaps even slightly frightening.

The more composed God could to some degree equal the unpredictable God, but there is a difference: Focusing God as composed – and not unpredictable – implies a confidence; *it is not dangerous not to grasp God.*

Dina's image of God is more nuanced after the absence experience: «I see God from a different angle, or God has become someone else. A much, you could say, more composed [image of God] (...).» Both Eve and Carl speak of a changed image of God, but Carl mostly of a renewed divine presence and sense of being. Also Frank has, through his lifelong struggle with anxiety, an expanded God-image which is visible when we look carefully into his changed self and sense of divine presence.

In the following, we look into two aspects of the expanded God representation:

1) God is father **and** mother: Most of my interviewees have spoken of God and their father, and Carl also positively of his mother⁷⁸. Dina speaks now of God as mother/ motherly, which seems to imply an extended God representation. «God may actually be a mother, and a mother may actually give comfort – and a good glance, an affirmative glance. Not necessarily being a protective father, but he could also be a comforting mother. »

2) God is bigger **and** weaker: Dina's God is less omnipotent: «(...) So he has in a manner become less almighty, (...) more weak than strong, (...).» God is as well mightier:

I still work to find him, find out “well, who is he now”, because now I [realize] that I have to put the different pieces of him together to a kind of mosaic. And I want to hold his hand I want to know who he is, then I see that... that he is too big to be drawn. And, well I have got him, so in Jesus I can see him, (...), as person that I can relate to, but he is for example both strong and weak, both present and distant...

⁷⁸ See Chapter 5.1.1.3.

5.4.4.2 *The strengthened sense of self*

Some of the interviewees speak differently of their *sensation of being* in the world: they feel more real and speak of strengthened selves in or after the absence experience. Carl was asked whether he felt liberated to “be himself”⁷⁹ after experiencing absence. He is not familiar with the expression, but reflects around it: «[N]ow I do express myself the way I want to, independently of what people will think. And I wouldn’t have dared this before, [since] then I would have known what I was supposed to say.»

Dina describes what we might understand as a self-transformation; she experiences a strengthened unification between God and self⁸⁰ and a changed centre of gravity; from being an object in life towards being a subject. Frank has lately experienced a strengthened sense of being upright. When visiting a retreat centre he read the Biblical story of the blind Bartimeus who met Jesus and was asked “what do you want me to do for you?” Frank realised he had never expressed his needs for healing, so he started to pray; «I want to be healed.» He has discovered that something is changing:

[T]here is a kind of redress, I experience that God is doing something, yes almost as if I physically can notice that I kind of feel I can be more upright and look up and...
Yes, I’ve read many Biblical texts on freedom that concerns being raised, and I think this is part of what is happening.

Earlier we touched the special liberation towards selfhood that Anna and Bea felt in times of divine absence. To Bea this relief and strengthened sense of own self could be a positive consequence both of opposition towards a possibly suppressing system and a rebellion towards her own God representation.

5.4.4.3 *The extended understanding of presence*

We found⁸¹ a correlation between our interviewees’ experience of presence and their feel-good-emotions. But, remarkably enough: *after experiencing divine absence, the importance of emotions is weakened*. «[W]e say “God was clearly present” because we had lots of emotions, right. So in a way I might have lost God with emotions and then found him without emotions, or something,» says Carl.

⁷⁹ “Being oneself” is an expression. Norwegian: “å være seg selv”.

⁸⁰ See 5.3.1.2.B.

⁸¹ See Chapter 5.1.1.1.

Dina now has fewer criteria to define experiences as divine presence. She makes explicit what also some of the other interviewees seem to have seen; God's presence is expanded, and her "vocabulary of presence" is changed:

[The experienced presence] has changed suddenly and brutally by going from high degree of perceived presence through emotional experiences, physical experiences, supernatural answers to prayer towards experiencing none of those, towards to change mind set and deliberately choose searching for God in different places from what I have previously done.

The extended divine presence is physical; connected to nature, body and sacraments – together with arts, words and silence.

A) God's "physical" presence

Carl and Dina emphasise the strengthened meaning of *body* and *nature* when speaking of God's presence after the experienced absence. Dina made a decision looking for God other places than before, and to believe in a present God independent of own emotions. «[God's presence] I'll describe as... what I see of his greatness and beauty in the creation, (...) which brings me joy, as a declaration of love to us and to me.» To Dina this physical dimension is more than nature and visible creation. Her *breath* and God's spirit is linked; when she is breathing, God is present.

To Anna the ability of sensuousness is of major importance. The unceasing significance of *sacraments* has been there through the lives of Anna and Frank, while Carl gives sacraments strengthened significance after the absence experience:

[...] I fancy the physical, the sign of the cross and stuff... using the body, makes things so concretely. (...) And I really seldom get something out of the preaching, so then it is... yes, music can often be good (...). Then it is the Bible texts and the blessing and the communion – that is nice, all these are valuable things.

Physical elements as nature, own body, sacraments, *music* and *symbols* are of increasing significance, especially to Carl and Dina, and is part of their transformed relation with God.

B) God's presence through people

Most of those portrayed – in one way or another – speak of other people's significance in their own experience of God. This is described as "God with skin"⁸², God in others and fellowship. Anna has experienced human warmth as God's presence.

"How and when did God return?" An acquaintance once asked Carl this question, but Carl could not explain what made his conditions change. In the interview situation, as we speak, his understanding is increasing: The first glimpse of God came during the first year after the crisis. Carl was at a retreat-house, doing physical work, almost reluctantly following the retreat-leader for the midday prayer. There he for the first time experienced the prayer of others and acknowledged God's presence in other people as a request-free presence.

[A]nd I was sitting there in the chapel (...) and the others were praying and I didn't pray but I was there and then I suddenly realised it was good enough prayer that the others are praying... So this might have been the first experience of God's presence completely independent of me, you could say. It was the presence of God in the others.

Eve experiences strangers' comfort when they seem to convey messages from God. Frank experiences divine presence when being part of the fellowship; in his Bible group when people care and when he participates as liturgist in church, experiencing the "we".

C) God's presence through words, songs and silence

Words, songs and Biblical texts are in one way or the other mentioned by most of our interviewees. Earlier Anna mentioned the significance of Biblical texts, and Frank has experienced being read by the Bible. To Carl working with texts was of importance and Eve is comforted when Biblical texts and songs touches her in times of absence.

Silence is a sign of presence or helper into a condition where Dina and Frank experience presence. Dina mentions a silence where she can receive thoughts or reminders that she finds divine. Frank refers to a Bible text, 1 Kings 19, about the, at that time, rather depressive Prophet Elijah: «[A]nd then this sound of the silent wind right, "the fragile silence" it says now⁸³, and this is the kind of fragile silence that is "here is God" to me.»

⁸² It is referred to *Skammens spor* (Tracks of shame), by Marie Farstad.

⁸³ The Norwegian 2011-translation of the Bible.

Commentary

In Chapter 5.4, we have disclosed different findings regarding the absence experience. Since our material is limited, we could only suggest possible understandings of what we have read in this subsection:

- 1) We see a threefold expansion of experience: both the understanding of who God is, how God is present and the sensation of selfhood is strengthened throughout or after the absence experience.
- 2) It seems to be a coinciding development of the God-self-relation and the strengthened self. Some of our interviewees have experienced a movement from God as “producer” of (feel-good-emotions) and protector, towards a God who’s being is more significant than God’s deeds. Especially Carl and Dina (but Frank as well) experience a strengthened confidence, and have moved from a conditioned presence towards a stronger sense of unification with their God.
- 3) The transformation of selves seems connected to the sense of being in the world, unification with something other, and a reduced focus on achievements.
- 4) We seem to find a movement in their relational condition: from a certain limited relation with a God of clear characteristics, towards a more open relation, with less descriptions, less control, and less *need to* control their God.
- 5) We see a transformed God representation in most our cases. The process seems to go as follows: Having a God representation – losing the God representation when God is absent – finding a new and more holistic image of God with less paternal, demanding and achievement-focused features.

5.5 A bridge towards theory

Sharing the interviewee’s stories and analysing the findings shows a comprehensive and complex reality – insofar we dare calling it reality – knowing all analyses involve interpreting. Let us go back to our first main question: *How could we describe and understand the absence experiences and its effects, based on the empirical material?*

5.5.1 Findings

Here we have derived some main findings in our analysis so far, and I have arranged them in accordance with our main question.

Characteristics of God's absence

- 1) Divine absence is primarily characterized by absence of feel-good emotions, increased “negative” or “difficult” emotions, and increased depression. Absence is described as a phase of darkness, emptiness, or as a condition of desert being in a tunnel.
- 2) Divine absence is as well characterized by a felt easiness and increased opportunity to being oneself.
- 3) Divine absence is primarily an unwanted experience, but some interviewees feel liberated by God's absence. Hence, there is ambivalence connected to the experienced divine absence.

The understandings of God's absence

- 4) Divine absence is experienced – and described – as an action at first glance initiated by God. When God is understood as actively absent, this is either by *hiding his presence* or by *leaving the person* experiencing absence.
- 5) Divine absence could also be understood as result of God's unreachable being.
- 6) Outer, difficult incidences occasioned five of six of the interviewees' experience of absence. An outer crisis, together with inner dispositions, seems to be central in the absence experience.
- 7) Upon closer reflection, the absence experience is connected to events on the intra-psychic stage, such as relational and emotional experiences, as well as inner dispositions. The following intra-psychic dimensions might contribute to our understanding of experienced absence:
 - a) A correlation between the need to flee from God and from self
 - b) The need to build up an inner defence and thus keep a distance to God and own inner being.
 - c) Inner ambivalence; a desire for closeness and distance to God.
 - d) A correlation between parental relations and experienced absence of God: Four of the interviewees seem to experience reduced emotional attachment to their parents. As adults they emphasize the emotional aspect of divine presence – and hence, experienced absence when emotions were gone.
 - e) A correlation between human betrayal and rejection and the experience of betrayal and rejection in the God-self-relation.
 - f) Use of cognitive work to change own images of God.
- 8) Inner dispositions work together with concrete, unexpected, outer incidents as catalysts towards a new kind of presence.

The effects of God's absence:

9) After the absence experience, the interviewees seem to experience transformations in their God-self-relation, their God representation and experience of own self:

10) The God representation has undergone clear changes in four of the six interviewees. The transformational process, where the experienced divine absence might have had influence, looks like this: a) a loss of the well-known God, b) interphase, potentially towards a changed representation, and c) a transformed God representation.

11) More of the interviewees experience loss of God as loss of a protector, a fixer, a predictable and demanding God. Those characteristics seems after the experienced absence virtually unimportant.

12) The God relation after experienced absence is characterized by: a) a stronger emphasis on being than on mission, action, and deeds, and b) a basic sensation of security and confidence is more important than the need of protection.

13) The understanding of God's presence seems expanded after the experienced absence; physical dimensions like nature, body, sacraments, and other people, as well as art and songs are more significant.

14) The significance of emotions is changed, and presence is now more existential than emotional.

5.5.2 Towards theory

In this study we attempt to gain a better understanding of divine absence by working along several lines:

1) We have investigated *the disappearing God*: Speaking of absence does not make sense without the word "divine". Our thesis is about *divine* absence; *God's* hiddenness. This immediately brings up two major questions: Who is God (in theology and psychology)? Which God did disappear? Some of our theorists will add to our understanding here.

2) We have investigated *the experiencing man*: Absence is a personal and existential experience. We have tried to figure out whether the empirical material shows us individual and general human assumptions and dispositions that might affect the experienced absence. Our theory will further develop our understanding of man.

3) We have investigated *the developmental or transformational perspective*: To immerse ourselves in divine absence – and to figure out whether the absence experience might have any transformational effects – I have chosen a developmental approach. Hence, we have studied the interviewees' relation with God and experience of presence before and after the

absence experience(s). This has given us insight of any transformed God representation, sense of divine presence and sense of self. The transformational perspective is important in our theoretical study.

4) We have investigated *the presence-absence dichotomy*: Absence is less meaningful without the experience and description of presence. The presence-absence dichotomy has been important in the empirical material specifically, to disclose the God-self-relation, the God representation and the quality of the experienced absence. The dimension of presence is mostly an important background picture and we will not delve deeply into the sensation of presence in our theoretical approach.

5) We have investigated *the catalysts towards absence*: This has been important to contribute with a deeper understanding of the divine absence, and it has helped us to see absence in a context of development. Those catalysts are slightly touched, but never developed as separate themes in our theory or discussion.

*The journey into self
is the journey into God,
and the journey into God
is the journey into self.*

*John Shea*⁸⁴

PART III: THEORY

6. THEOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY - ENLIGHTENING THE ABSENCE EXPERIENCE

In our empirical material, we have seen the experience of God's absence as complex and composed. Now we will continue to answer our research question by the second main question: *How could theology and psychology understand the experienced absence of God, and its effects?*

For absence to be of significance, presence must be of importance. For absence to be registered, presence somehow has to be noticeable. For absence to create emotional response, the relation has to be clearly wanted or unwanted. Absence is a discovered lack of perceived relational presence, and understanding absence hence implies understanding the "surroundings" of that experience, e.g., the absent God, the person experiencing absence, the felt presence, and sensed relation.

We bring the mentioned surroundings to the floor when approaching our two main theorists, Vladimir Lossky and Ana-Maria Rizzuto, and their theoretical platform that we will investigate through the following three perspectives:

- 1) Theological/ psychological perspective; understanding of God.
- 2) Anthropological perspective; understanding of man. What kind of inner dispositions or precautions would increase the chance to experience divine absence?

⁸⁴ Shea (2005, p.163)

3) Relational perspective; understanding of presence and absence.

The two supportive perspectives from Wilfrid Stinissen and John Shea are rooted in traditions of Christian spirituality. These authors have a catholic theological foundation, combined with an academic psychodynamic or philosophical background. They are not used as systematically as the former two, nevertheless they enlighten important aspects of the divine absence and/ or its effects and surroundings. To give the reader a thematic flow, I start with Lossky and continue with Stinissen who complements and challenges Lossky, using a similar language. When we come to Rizzuto, the theoretical language and style will be completely changed. Shea is partly based on Rizzuto in his inter-academic bridging, and he develops some useful aspects of her thinking.

6.1 Vladimir Lossky: The absent God – a God Beyond

All theology search to answer the question of who God is – and, by extension, also who man is, and how God and man may relate. Apophatic theology is answering the question of God in negative terms, but still reflecting deeply on the apparently impossible relation between Godhead and humankind.

6.1.1 An introduction to apophatic theology

The apophatic – negative – theology has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy with Philo of Alexandria (around 20BC-50AD). Two apophatic lines emanate from Philo: one connected to Origen, the other among others to Clemens of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, and John Damascene (Ekenberg, 2003, p.20). We will follow the latter line, by reading Vladimir Lossky's main and classical work from 1944; *Essai sur la theologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient*⁸⁵, which is the central book in my theoretical preparation.

The apophatic theology is *experience-oriented and ontological*, avoiding an abstract or purely intellectual approach – not to replace spiritual reality with cognition and concepts. It

⁸⁵ The English translation, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, was published in 1957. I have thoroughly studied the Swedish translation of this book, *Östkyrkans mystiska teologi*, and the few quotations from it (Lossky, 2011) are my translations from Swedish to English. Most often, however, quotations will be from the English version (Lossky, 1957).

emphasizes the mystery in order to separate the real God from images of God (Lossky, 2011, p.33, 36).

The apophatic theology – by most church fathers perceived as *a religious attitude* towards the incomprehensible God (ibid, p.29) – is *a theology of mystery*. This implies a strong connection between mysticism and theology, as well as between individual experience and dogmas of the church (ibid, p.8). Remarks Lossky: «There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism» (Lossky, 1957, p.9). The core of the mystery is the unification with God.

According to Dionysius the Aeropagite, *the road to this mystical unification* is the apophatic theology (Lossky 2011, p.25). This brings us to a description of apophatic theology as a method or way that has the opposite direction of cataphatic theology. The positive theology is a descending road that describes God's names and gives a certain knowledge of God. The apophatic theology is our road upwards to unification and complete ignorance. This is one road, but in two directions (ibid, p.22, 33-34). Even though this theology describes a road where the words are of decreasing importance and the silent unification is the goal, we will expand our understanding through certain central concepts.

6.1.2 Apophatic theological perspective; the ineffable and accessible God

In our attempt to understand absence we deepen our understanding of the God that is found to be absent, the experienced divine hiddenness, as well as central dimensions of the God-self relation and the self that might enlighten this absence experience. Here I will make heard the most important apophatic dimensions which might help us “understand” the incomprehensible God.

6.1.2.1 God – one and three; *ousía* and *hypóstasis*

All mainstream Christian theology speak of a triune God⁸⁶, and Orthodox theology emphasize and understand the Trinity as the primordial mystery of revelation. The triune God just is, with no becoming, no beginning and no end, three and one – inseparable and with no inner

⁸⁶ In the 11th century, the Church discussed the intra-Trinitarian origin relationships. The (Catholic) Church determined The Holy Spirit to proceed from both the Father *and the Son (filioque)*, but some (eastern) churches considered God the Father the only source of divinity (Lossky, 2011, p.12, 52, 55). The filioque-debate that affects one of the most significant theological dimensions in the apophatic theology; namely, how to understand the coinciding monadic and triadic God – led to the so-called *great schism* between west and east (ibid, p.210)

process or dialectic between the persons, since the oneness is absolute. Gregory of Nazianzus (the Theologian) describes this one-three-ness when expounding baptism:

No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three, I think of Him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light (Lossky, 1957, p.46).

To express the Trinitarian mystery, the Church fathers used the terms *ousía* (nature, being, essence) and *hypóstasis* (the specific persons) (Lossky, 2011, p.46). Nevertheless, the Triune God who is an infinite goal is «not a nature or an essence, nor is it a person; it is something which transcends all notion both of nature and of person» (Lossky, 1957, p.44). Says John The Damascene: «The persons are made one not so as to commingle, but so as to cleave to each other and have their being in each other (...)» (ibid, p.53-54).

Gregory Nazianzen uses *one* *ousía* in respect of the Godhead, but *three* properties, hypostases or persons. The only characterization of the hypostatic difference is the origin relation: The father is unborn, source of the trinity and the principle of unity⁸⁷. The son is born, and the Holy Spirit is emanated (Lossky, 2011, p.47, 52, 55). John the Damascene describes this:

For in their hypostatic or personal properties alone (...) – the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession – do the three divine hypostases differ from each other, being *indivisibly divided*⁸⁸, not by essence but by the distinguishing mark of their proper and peculiar hypostasis (Lossky, 1957, p.54).

The mystery of the triune God is known only in an ignorance above all philosophy. Still the triune God has revealed himself in the Son (Lossky, 2011, p.44, 127). In the following, we will look at some of the great paradoxes connected to a Godhead that is inexpressible but still

⁸⁷ The orthodox apophatism has been criticised for a hierarchic structure and the father's monarchy. Gregory of Nazianzus answers by describing the mysterious equivalence: «Godhead... neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite connaturality of Three Infinite Ones (...)» (Lossky, 1957, p.63).

⁸⁸ My italics.

experienceable, accessible and inaccessible, transcendent and immanent, found in darkness and in light.

6.1.2.2 *God – incomprehensible and experienceable*

In his work, Lossky emphasizes some coherent fundamental properties regarding the nature of the Godhead. The most significant is; God is incomprehensible (ibid, p.27). The 14th century theologian, John the Damascene, verbalised this as follows:

God, then, is infinite and incomprehensible, and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. All that we can say cataphatically concerning God does not show forth His nature but the things that relate to His nature (...)
(Lossky, 1957, p. 36).

In addition, God's being is absolutely inaccessible, with unfathomable depths out of our cognitive reach (Lossky, 2011, p.27-28, 61). St. Basil states that when we observe any object, there will always be some "irrational residue" escaping our analysis – and this is «the unknowable depth of things, that which constitutes their true, indefinable essence». Gregory of Nyssa seems to take this further, claiming that every concept describing the Godhead is an idol. (Lossky, 1957, p.33). Nevertheless – and this is part of the mystery – God is coincidentally experienceable, communicable and accessible; available for our experience and in search of a real unification with man (Lossky, 2011, p.27, 61).

6.1.2.3 *God – transcendent and immanent*

Entering the theme of transcendence and immanence, we will start by a contradiction: «the accessibility of the inaccessible nature» (ibid, p.61). During the 14th century, this gave way to lively discussions about how man could experience and truly be unified with an inaccessible Godhead⁸⁹. The Thessalonian Archbishop, Gregory Palamas⁹⁰, adduced a comparison with the Godhead being the antinomy of one and three:

⁸⁹ Lossky's famous work, *The vision of God* (1963), elaborates on this theme. His question is here whether we are able to see God, since the face-to-face vision seems central for a real unification with God in his essence. «If the essence of God is unknowable by definition, how will we be able to know God as he is (...)?» (Lossky, 1963, p.12) Here Lossky refers to St John (1. John 3:2) who says we shall see God as he is. Simultaneously Lossky refer to another verse from the Scripture: «no one has ever seen God» (John 4:12) (Ibid, p.11). In the fourteenth century this was debated in both the Eastern and Western Churches, in several doctrinal contexts. In Byzantium, whose theology Lossky is a bearer of, the disputes referred to the real distinction between divine essence and energies, and the question is whether we might know God in his essence (ibid, p.12-13). Could the created see the uncreated? The theologians diverged. One of the aspects of this discussion is whether the *enérgeia* – which is not the essence – really belongs to the divine being, hence, is God (ibid, p.158). To Lossky and the Byzantium

[T]he divine nature must be said to be at the same time both exclusive of, and, in some sense, open to participation. We attain to participation in the divine nature, and yet at the same time it remains totally inaccessible (Lossky, 1957, p.69).

Lossky asks, rhetorically, whether we are united with the Trinity through unification with one of the three persons, but then notes this kind of oneness is for the Son alone. With Palamas' words he then concludes «(...) to say that the divine *nature* is communicable not in itself but through its *energy*, is to remain within the bounds of right devotion⁹¹» (ibid, p.70).

With the concept couple *ousía* and *enérgeia* (God's actions, communications), we add another dimension to the Trinity. The energies are the Godhead itself – God's experienceable works and powers that are inseparable from his being. God's different names – «Wisdom, life Power, Justice, Love, Being, God» (Lossky, 2011, p.70) – express these energies, because the essence is unfathomable and unavailable. Through his energies, God reveals, communicates and sheds himself; not his essence, but what surrounds the divine being (ibid, p.63-65). The energies «are outpourings of the divine nature which cannot set bounds to itself, for God is more than the essence. The energies might be described as that mode of existence of the Trinity which is outside of its inaccessible being» (Lossky, 1957, p.73).

What makes the energies so important? God is present in his energies. God is absolutely immanent in «every beam of his Godhead», because the energies emerge from the divine being, and are not some effects or consequences of a triune cause (Lossky, 2011, p.65). The reality of every mystical experience is dogmatically based on the doctrine of energies distinct from the essence. They are the external mode of divine existence. Here Lossky implicitly explains God's absolute transcendence and immanence:

This doctrine [of energies] makes it possible to understand how the Trinity can remain incommunicable in essence and at the same time dwell within us. (...) The presence is not a causal one, such as divine omnipresence in creation; no more is it a presence according to the very essence – which is by definition incommunicable; it is a mode according to which the Trinity dwells in us by means of that in itself which is

orthodoxy the answer to this question is that the divine *enérgeia* is inseparable from God's being. We can see God in his energies, especially in the image of the transfigured Christ who has manifested God to us, but not in his unknowable essence (ibid, p.168-169).

⁹⁰ Palamas is by Lossky considered a significant voice within the entire Orthodox tradition (Lossky, 2010, p 270).

⁹¹ My italics.

communicable – that is to say, by the energies which are common to the three hypostases, or, in other words, by grace – for it is by this name that we know the deifying energies which the Holy Spirit communicates to us (Lossky, 1957, p.86).

The triune God is one essence in three hypostases manifested in an exceeding being through divine energies (Lossky, 2011, p.212). The triune God is as such transcendent in nature and immanent in energies. The immanence seems to have other dimensions as well: The Holy Spirit is the one who becomes present and causes unification, dwelling in man (ibid, p.148-150). The church – as image of the Trinity – is the arena for unification. Also through the sacraments, our nature is unified with the divine nature as found in the Son – the head of the church (ibid, p.155, 158-159).

6.1.2.4 God – darkness and light

The strongest cataphatic expression Lossky uses of God is that God is light. Lossky suggests this light is in God's energies but not in essence. However, he also shows how Georgy Palamas understood the light at mount Tabor (Christ's transfiguration); viz. as part of divine nature (ibid, p.194, 196). God is the light, the light is God's dwelling place and experiencing light is central for a mystical experience (ibid, p.150, 192ff).

How is darkness and light connected? Beyond the ignorance, Dionysius describes a condition where mysteries are revealed in «a darkness of the silence that is brighter than the light» (ibid, p.23). The heights of holiness, hence, are beyond divine lights, in this shining darkness where the Triune God is (ibid, p.24, 30). The unification process is a process from darkness towards God's light, and in the inner depth of divine light, there is a bright darkness.

God is described in paradoxes: incomprehensible and revealed, secret mystery and incarnated person, transcendent and immanent, inaccessible and accessible, light and darkness.

Nevertheless, all possible attributes are subordinated the divine, ontological nature of a God that *is*. A being beyond everything we might fathom.

6.1.3. Apophatic anthropological perspective; the desiring man

Christianity is really about man's relation with the living God (ibid, p.36). Hence, apophatic theology that in its depth is a theology of unification is concerned with God, man, and our

relation with God. In the following, we investigate dimensions of human dispositions that might enlighten the findings and the experienced absence of God.

6.1.3.1 Man – created to relation and unification

The profound base for understanding humanity is that we are created in the image and likeness of God, in «a primordial togetherness between the being of man and being of God», which includes the human nature in ultimate goodness. Lossky clarifies that *humanity as a whole* contains the nature that is created in this divine image and likeness (ibid, p.100, 104-105).

According to Gregory of Nazianzus man is made by soil and divine breath, which connects us to earthly life but with a desire for something greater. It is a presence of divinity - «a portion of the deity» - breathed into man, in such way that the human spirit is participating in divine energy and intimately connected with grace (ibid, p.102-103). The Damascene applies man was created for “deification” – to become the perfect image of God. This does not mean man is born united with God, but this unity is the ultimate goal (ibid, p.105, 110).

This unity is at the core of the theology. Says Lossky: «[T]here is no theology apart from experience; it is necessary to change, to become a new man. To know God one must draw near to Him. No one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian» (Lossky, 1957, p.39). This unification is the goal of existence, the vocation of the human nature (Lossky, 2011, p.9-10), and the essence of theology. Man is created with a deep inner desire for unification and likeness with the Creator. Nevertheless, other inner desires complicate this image:

6.1.3.2 Man – person and individual, will and desire

According to Maximus, all created beings are limited and aim for goals outside themselves. God is the only being in absolute rest, and he «awakens in us the love that reaches for him (...) and draws us towards himself» (ibid, p.86). Nevertheless, both Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa speak of a double tendency: a natural propensity towards God, but also to sin – here understood as “the world” (ibid, p.114).

‘Primitive righteousness’ rested on the fact that since man was created in the image of God, he could not be other than a good nature, ordered towards goodness, towards communion with God, and the acquisition of uncreated grace. If this good nature has

come into disharmony with its Creator, that can only be by reason of its power of determination from within, its [*autexousía*]. It is this which confers on man the possibility of acting and willing not only in conformity with his natural disposition, but also in opposition to his nature which he can pervert, and render ‘against nature’. The decadence of human nature is the direct consequence of the free decision of man (Lossky, 1957, p.131-132).

Maximus emphasizes a double disposition: *conformity* and *opposition* with our natural disposition. To understand this contradiction, we will immerse our understanding of man: Lossky introduces two well-known concepts – “person” and “individual” – but he is using them in a particular and unusual way. He makes a distinction between them, clarifying that they do not mean the same, but rather the opposite of each other. We do not know what the human hypostasis (person) really is, but to some extent, it is the opposite of the “individual”, which is the properties and traits of humankind (Lossky, 2011, p.105-107). Lossky describes man after the fall as follows:

Man now has a double character: as an individual nature, he is part of a whole, one of the elements which make up the universe; but as a person, he is in no sense a part: he contains all in himself. The nature is the content of the person, the person the existence of the nature (Lossky, 1957, p.123).

When we try to define each other, we often describe one another by applying characterizations really belonging to the nature of humanity. While here, the personal that is differentiating us from each other – this special “something” that makes the other him- or herself – is the indefinable person. Acting in accordance with human nature really is being *less personal* (Lossky, 2011, p.105-107). This probably means that acting in conflict with human nature, and in concordance with our personality, really is being *less human*. Here we touch upon an issue of significance; namely, the free will that is giving man the ability to choose the less good (being personal and individualistic) and close the heart to God.

To refrain own will is in the essence of the three divine hypostases, as Christ renounced his will to accomplish his Father’s, yes, the Triune, will. The perfection of a person is about self-abandonment (ibid, p.126). This means that surrendering is at the core of being unified. Maximus describes two kinds of wills: 1) The natural will: our desire for goodness – in accordance with our nature. 2) The choosing will: our accepting or rejecting of the natural

will and desires. This free will implies the loss of our likeness with God, and is a sign of the imperfection of a fallen humanity (ibid, p.109).

Sin and conflicting desires are defacing man. «Sin is a disease of the will which is deceived, and takes a mere shadow of the good for the good itself», says Gregory of Nyssa (Lossky, 1957, p.128). The free will contradicts the deep desire for union with God, and here we find an ambivalence at the core of man. This ambivalence is probably the most important inner disposition that might enlighten experienced absence.

It is otherwise a lot to say about man: The condition of humanity does as well include salvation; an overcoming of the threefold hindering – of death, sin, and nature – for unity with God. Nicholas Cabasilas maintains that Christ set aside the barriers: through the incarnation, the two natures; through his death, sin; through the resurrection, death. (Lossky, 2011, p.120). We do not elaborate these themes in this Thesis, but suffice it to say that reconciliation made a road to unification, and also enables relation and experience of presence.

6.1.3.3 Man – journeying towards transformation and unification

As has been emphasised several times, the relation and unification between man and God, humankind and Godhead, is at the very core of Christianity. The Christian life is to journey towards the goal. «There is no theology outside experience; it is necessary to change and become a new man», says Lossky (ibid, p.33). Transformation is the road of experience, through grace, to unification.

To attain to union with God, in the measure in which it is realizable here on earth, requires continual effort, or, more precisely, an unceasing vigil that the integrity of the inward man, the ‘union of heart and spirit’ (to use an expression of Orthodox asceticism), withstand all the assaults of the enemy: every irrational movement of our fallen nature (Lossky, 1957, p.18).

In his work, Lossky emphasizes that this unification is a synergy; a cooperation between God and man. The Christian life is the human side of this synergy. God, on his side, has given us the Holy Spirit (embodying the grace of God within us) and the church that is the environment for unification (Lossky, 2011, p.151, 157, 173). Some keys describe the human responsibility in this common task to unify man with God:

- 1) Prayer (and contemplation - that is a silent wordless prayer) really is the core of the relation with God (ibid, p.181).
- 2) Asceticism; really to refrain own will to find true liberty, being the real image of God (ibid, p.107).
- 3) The sacramental life, especially the Eucharist where «the “divine fire” reach the inner nature of our being» (ibid, p.159).

Lossky also describes a two-pronged road; contemplation and practice – where the activity is a conscious cleansing of heart, which really is a fulfilment of contemplation. The three-pronged “road of remorse” to unification consists, according to Isaac the Syrian, of penance, cleansing, and repentance of the will (ibid, p.178-179). In addition, Lossky briefly mentions suffering and renunciations as possible roads to unification – if they are embraced (ibid, p.191). The road towards unification is as well the road to human transformation; that is to loose one’s personal self in order to partake in the nature of humankind, the nature of the church.

6.1.4 What is God’s absence?

Apophatism is concerned with the ultimate goal of existence; human deification and union with the Triune God in ignorance. This does not imply absence or emptiness, rather the contrary; the absolute fullness (ibid, p.36-37). Then, what is absence to a theology that is emphasizing divine fullness, immanence in transcendence, and a God who is inaccessible but still absolutely revealed?

Let us now see how apophatic theology, through Lossky’s work, understands divine absence. At first glance, apophatism – with its understanding of an unreachable and indescribable God – should imply divine hiddenness. However, this image is more nuanced and absence is not this easily understood.

6.1.4.1 Absence – a real condition

The absence experience is not prominent for apophatism. Still Lossky acknowledges the existence of human experiences of absence, giving the floor to Symeon the New Theologian and his blooming description of the hidden God:

I often saw the Light (...) sometimes it appeared to me within me, when my soul possessed peace and silence; sometimes it only appeared afar off, and even hid itself

altogether. Then I suffered an immense sorrow, thinking that I should never see it again. But when I began to weep, and witnessed to my complete detachment from everything, and to an absolute humility and obedience, the Light reappeared like the sun which chases away the thick clouds, and which gradually discloses itself, and brings joyfulness. Thus didst Thou, O Thou, Ineffable, Invisible, Intangible Mover of all things, present in all things, at all times, filling all things, showing Thyself and hiding Thyself at every hour, thus didst Thou appear to me, and disappear, by night and day. Slowly didst Thou disperse the mists around me, and dispatch the clouds which covered me. Thou didst open my spiritual ear, and didst purify the sight of my soul. At last, having done as Thou didst will, Thou didst reveal Thyself to my cleansed soul, coming to me, but still invisible. And suddenly Thou didst appear as another Sun, O ineffable and divine condescension! (Lossky, 1957, p.226).

What Lossky extracts from this paragraph is that this condition of aridity and hiddenness is temporary, and no constant attitude. Out of the passage, we might also read it is normal for light to reappear and dispatch the clouds; it is normal for the soul to sense divine presence after absence; and man might actively do something – being humble and obedient – to change the condition of absence.

6.1.4.2 Absence – an unwanted condition

In apophatic theology, a condition of desert, drought, and “the mystical night” is not – as in the Western Church – a necessary and inevitable part of the journey towards unification and holiness. While the Western Church search to live with Christ through the loneliness and abandonment of Gethsemane, the Eastern merely search unification with God through transfiguration (Lossky, 2011, p.198-199).

6.1.4.3 Absence – an unhealthy condition of darkness

The experience of dryness is considered unhealthy, it is always dangerous, and might cause spiritual death. It is often connected to the bored and downcast heart that has become cold and callous. Living in relation with God means living in the light – and darkness is either *caused by sin* or *caused by God who is testing man*⁹². No matter what caused the condition, the

⁹² The latter is hardly further developed by Lossky (2011).

human task is to overcome the absence – through humility and obedience – and then it seems God with necessity will manifest himself (ibid, p.198).

Commentary

This review of apophatic theology gives us a perspective on God, man, and their relation. As suggested, I did expect to find profound theory around divine absence, when delving into a theology of divine transcendence and relational ignorance. I expected a theology of absence, but found a theology of accessible inaccessibility. I expected an emphasized transcendence, but found an equally profound immanence. I expected the ineffable, but also found the comprehensibility of apophatism. In my perception and understanding, we see an explanation of absence that is primarily connected to the complex human being and our deficient ability to perceive God in his immanence and revelation. But there is also an underlying aspect of absence in the different natures of Godhead and mankind. This will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

SUPPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVE #1 FROM CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY:

6.2 Wilfrid Stinissen: The absent God – a God of the night

There are a great variety of Christian spiritualities, and our first perspective is from the catholic Carmelite tradition, by Wilfrid Stinissen. He was a priest and doctor of Philosophy who has contributed with more than 30 books, including the investigation and reflections around John of the Cross and the dark-night-thinking that will now be applied to our general topic⁹³.

What is *the night*, in John of the Cross' theological universe? We will elaborate on this, but in summary: The night is a personal, dark, night-like experience on man's inner journey towards unification with God (Stinissen, 2001, p.35)⁹⁴.

⁹³ For the record: We do not describe Carmelite theology in general in this chapter, but just immerse ourselves in the dark-night-thinking.

⁹⁴ In Chapter 6.2 I primarily employ Stinissen (2001), and hence just refer with page-numbers until other sources occur.

6.2.1 *The indispensability of the night*

Stinissen postulates that the night is «a mandatory stage on the road to God» (p.7). Why is the night indispensable? What human dispositions might explain the importance of such a process? According to St. John it is absolutely necessary to purify the individual's selfishness (p.27) and draw us from our egocentric periphery, that really is our unreal selves, towards the centre of the soul, where we are God's image and likeness (p.45). In our periphery, we desire "wrong things" to fill up our emptiness (p.136-137). In the centre of the soul, the Triune God dwells (p.12-13). Here the mystical unification might take place (p.36) and here the human infinity is recovered to accommodate the infinite God (p.21).

Stinissen differentiates between illusion and reality. The illusion is that we are small and limited creatures who have to struggle for life, but the reality is different: «The truth, the reality, is the pure contradiction. You are not the one you think you are. You are created in the image of God, particularly in the image of the Son. You are from God and to God, not just *like* him, but *in* him» (p.44-45). The most real inner desire of man, is the longing for God, our real nature (p.45). The night is, hence, a necessary journey from the outer, egoistic, inhumanly limited (as result of sin) and illusory spheres of the being, towards the real self, towards God and unification.

6.2.2 *The three coherent nights*

The night is, according to St. John, caused by God who *is* the centre of the soul, incessantly enticing the exiled soul to unification in this centre (35). The night is *one* journey, but with *three* sections of the road (p.161), each connected to dimensions of the inner structure of man:

6.2.2.1 *The night of the senses*

This night is connected to the disruption from the "outside" of the soul, "el sentido", meaning the mind or senses. El sentido is consisting of our bodies, emotions, passions and lesser desires (p.11). At this level of the soul, we are characterized by a self-centred relationship with God; we approach him to have our needs fulfilled or our sweet emotions arisen (p.13).

To help us breaking up from the peripheries, God is darkening the outside of the soul. This might force us towards deeper layers within, towards a different joy in the spirit. How do we notice this occurring dark night of the senses? Stinissen speaks of three signs:

- 1) A general resistance. Elements of life – like books, cinema and travelling – that earlier pleased us, is replaced by emptiness and boredom.
- 2) A worry that we are losing God, since the relation no longer fulfils us.
- 3) A general drought and lack of interest connected to our earlier prayer, meditation and way of reading the Bible (p.14-15, 35).

The night of the senses is a purification and redirection of our desire. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to direct all desires towards God to complete the journey. No, the soul has to cease hunting what it desires, and start waiting with empty hands stretched out to receive – to let happen (p.132-133). The night of the senses is, hence, not the end of nights, but the beginning. When the soul has found its “spirit”, it just wants to dwell there, relieved to escape the surface of the senses and having reached another depth. But then the second night occurs (p.16-17).

6.2.2.2 *The night of the spirit*

Through the night of the senses, the soul has been drawn from its outside to its inside, “*el spiritu*”, where our will, ability of love, our reason and deeper “emotions”⁹⁵ are found. But this is not the deepest depth of the soul. There is a third level: the centre of the soul, which is our holy and inner nature. This place is calling; hence, the soul experiences its second night, which is the journey to its centre (p.12). In this night – that is a far deeper and darker night than the foregoing – the individual loses both God and himself. God appears unknown, and the former immanent God, is now transcendent and inaccessible (p.17, 26). The night is pure agony to the soul, and is experienced as thoroughgoing, subtle, and with incorporated egocentricity. The consciousness of own sin is devastating, and the darkness is complete (p.17-19, 24).

What really happens in this night of death is a tremendous transformation: the man, who through the night of the senses was deepened, is now actually losing himself to gain God’s life. The way of loving is transformed: «Here there is no question about loving God with an even deeper love, but loving him with his own love» (p.17). God is now the inner drive, working through us, instead of being a tool for our projects (p.22). Thérèse of Lisieux, living

⁹⁵ Stinissen suggests we have no notion to describe the *deeper “emotions”* (security, meaning, fellowship and peace), but psychodynamic thinking uses the notion “fundamental existential moods”, which seems to be what Stinissen calls for.

some 300 years after St John, speaks of a shifting of center of gravity – from man to God; from «I want to be sanctified» towards «how good *you* are, my God» (p.39-40). The limited human soul, is as well widened back to its natural dimensions, being enabled to accommodate the infinite and unlimited God (p.21-22). Through this night of growth crisis – that is a metamorphosis of the soul's desire – the light of faith displaces the reason. In Stinissen's words: «God is too great. The reason is forced to abstain from its demand to fathom him. Those images of God, constructed by the reason, does not correspond to the real God» (p.25).

«God is now allowed to become whom he really is, instead of being the one fulfilling your needs», says Stinissen (p.27-28). As time in this desert land passes, the soul starts finding the bleakness attractive, and an increasing sensation of freedom and peace will slowly occur (p.32-33). The night of the spirit, is a long-lasting darkness. In order for it to be considered serious enough, it should last for years, says St John (p.32). In the end of the night of the spirit «the door is opened to the mystical unification» (p.36). This unification is always a result of a double interaction; between divine and human free will (p.91), and it leads to a holistic, non-individualistic and universal state of being (p106). Since the transforming union is the real goal, we might assume the night is surpassed. Still, there might be a night to come.

6.2.2.3 The redemptive night

This night comes after the cleansing and preparation for unification, yes, after the unification itself (p.97) and immensely few people experience this third stage. This night is like the twilight, followed by the sunrise. The soul is now silent and resting. The journey is ended and still never-ending. Stinissen describes this inexplicable mystery beautifully:

You have now reached your centre. All though, since the human centre is God, this paradox takes place: when you reach your centre, you leave yourself and move into God. (...) We should see our centre as an open door. As soon as we reach this door, we enter the infinite. To reach the deepest self, is to go beyond yourself. No one can reach his centre, and still remain in himself» (p.163).

Why might a night occur in this condition of deepest unification, when the soul is purified and united with God in its deepest depth? The third night is actually not about our own soul, but about vicarious suffering. We partake in Christ's sufferings; carry his cross in a night of solidarity (p.95-97). The third night is about being a universal person, which individuality

solely is a vocation to carry and partake in the holistic universality, living beyond egocentric limitations (p.105).

6.2.3 *The night, pathology, and psychology*

The story of the dark night is complex since each individual has his specific combination of personality, pathological tendencies, and wounds. In the expounding of St. John's thinking, Stinissen does not devalue psychological challenges or vulnerabilities, rather the contrary: «psychological distress may be included in the night» (p.74).

If we look at the example of Thérèse of Lisieux, we see that a turbulent background – including among others her separation from the family when she was an infant and early death of her mother – made her sensitive. Stinissen applies that her road and her spirituality was deeply influenced by her basic vulnerability. Hence, this fragility became a means of purification and of night. Psychic suffering might be at the service of God; an invitation to enter the night (p.72-74).

The individual background and inner dispositions might cause pathology and instability. Nevertheless, it could as well be the other way around; the night itself might cause anxiety. When God is coming closer to the soul – illuminating it through and through so the distorted egocentrism and inner blocks are revealed – the desperation increases. God's presence is death to our ego, and it might cause a strong sensation of anxiety, emptiness and restlessness (p. 81ff). We see a double movement: Pathology might cause the night, and the night might apparently lead to pathology.

Stinissen clarifies that disharmony and crises are unavoidable for the developing self and *could be used* in the service of transformation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to bring own emotions to God, accept the mental distress, and indulge in the process to live the night (p.85ff), and partake in the interaction with God: God works, while we accept God's intervention in a humble and passive receiving (p.91, 112-113). Moreover, “in the end of the night” God is freed from our expectations. When we refrain from «God for me» we might experience «God himself»⁹⁶ (p.141) in unification.

⁹⁶ This is Eckhart's perspective, analogously with Kant's diversion between the experienced and real reality: «Das ding für mich» and «Das ding in sich».

Commentary

Stinissen does not emphasize the absent God, but the omnipresent God, searching for opportunities to invite human beings to liberation from own self, to transformation, and to a unification process. The transformational journey goes through three coinciding and separate nights – and in those nights the individual might experience a clear and painful divine absence. This absence has a specific aim: to create transformation; and could have a specific effect: transformation and unification.

6.3 Ana-Maria Rizzuto: The absent God – a transformed or regressed representation

We will now investigate divine absence from a completely different perspective and in another language. I briefly introduce object relations theory and then move on to expounding perspectives on God, man, and the God-and-self relation, as found in Ana-Maria Rizzuto's masterpiece, *The birth of the living God* (1979)⁹⁷.

6.3.1 An introduction to object relations theory

The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), made the first and powerful contribution to a theory of object imagos when investigating the psychology of human religiosity. He considered religion a mystery, a collective neurosis functioning as «an illusory protection against human fragility» (Rizzuto, 2005, p. 409). Through life, Freud tried to figure out how God psychologically could come into existence, and he found that God was really an exalted father figure, playing the role of a protective godhead, originated in the child's need of a substitute father. (Rizzuto, 1979, p.4-6, Rizzuto, 2005, p.409, Stålsett, 2014, p.98).

Freud has been studied, followed, criticised and rejected, but he contributed with an important perspective to the theory of object relations: When the God imago is originated in a person, it cannot disappear. In the unconscious many representations «dwell, awaiting in their multiple richness, to be awakened by a person's emotional needs», to be rejected or accepted consciously (p.35-36), and probably to be experienced as present and absent.

Since Freud, object relations and object representations have been a theme of interest, investigation, and transformation by a numbers of clinicians and theoreticians. Rizzuto herself

⁹⁷ When using Rizzuto (1979), I just refer to page number until other sources occur.

is a Freudian, but she clarifies her disagreement with Freud on, among other things, this specific and central point: the significance of religious experience. Pinpointed: where Freud finds religion illusory, Rizzuto finds it necessary (Stålsett, 2014, p.97, Rizzuto, 1979, p.47).

6.3.1.1 What is an object representation?

The object representation is the key to understanding the object relations theory. Throughout the last century, several theoreticians discussed this complex phenomenon and contributed to our understanding. Partly based on Schafer as well as Sandler & Rosenblatt⁹⁸, Rizzuto gives this description:

An object representation is a very complex psychological process, which encompasses a wide variety of psychic functions from perception of psychological changes related to memories to compounded mental, visual, and other representations (Rizzuto, 1979, p.27). (...) Those processes are representing, remembering, fantasizing, interpreting and integrating experiences with others through defensive and adaptive maneuvers (p.75).

These encompassing and indispensable processes form the human psychic structure. They are a *combination of reality and fantasy*, originated in «multiple sources of experience» (p.53, 182). The representations are crucial for the person's process of being an individual (p.75), since all aspects of the human selves are somehow object-related; «we cannot wish, feel, fantasize, or even live without memories of our objects». Life might never be experienced outside a context of objects, and through life, we organize our indestructible memories as representations (p.77, 79).

The representations are nevertheless more than conceptual memories; they include a register of physical and psychic, perceptual and iconic experiences – coded and processed into a representation. Rizzuto explains this as follows:

The memory is not of an isolated event; it is the result of the synthetic function of the ego organizing a multitude of memorial experiences. The final synthetic result of that most active process is a highly significant representation for the needs of a particular moment (p.56).

⁹⁸ They are the sources for the first part (p.27) of this composed quotation.

To summarize we might say that the object representations are organizing principles⁹⁹ and a framework for mentation, indispensable for a balanced psychic life and the ability of relations.

6.3.1.2 *Where and how are representations originated?*

This question will be answered more consistently in Chapter 6.2.2.1. Here we just briefly mention two important theorists. D. W. Winnicott contributed to object relations theory by solving the problem of external and internal reality, and explaining how the child might internalize external objects into a representational, inner world: He introduced the transitional phenomena; a *transitional space* populated with *transitional objects* (p. 38, 73).

Erikson is significant for the developing object relations theory with his epigenetic stages of development. A recurring theme throughout Rizzuto's book, as in the theory, is the relation between self and objects. In her conclusions, Rizzuto shows the undividable connection between God, self, and parents. She applies Erikson's developmental stages and introduces different kinds of God representations that might develop, depending on the child's parental and self-imagos (p.205-207).

Commentary

In Chapter 6.2.1, we have briefly introduced the object relations theory, up to Rizzuto. Her clinical study is a major contribution (to the already existing theory) that mainly investigates the origins and further elaborations of a person's private *God representation*, and «the relation existing in the secret chambers of the human heart between that God and the person that believes in him during the vicissitudes of the life cycle» (p.3). In the next subsections, we will investigate Rizzuto's contribution more closely and in our discussion we withdraw relevant information for our understanding of absence. Before pondering into the God representation and God-self relation, we apply Guntrip's description of the religious experience and its object related nature:

Since religion is pre-eminently an experience of personal relationship, which extends the "personal" interpretation of experience to the Nth degree, to embrace both man and his universe in one meaningful whole, the integrating nature of fully developed personal relationship experience, is our most solid clue to the nature of religious experience (p.38).

⁹⁹ According to Rizzuto most psychoanalytic thinkers, except to some extent Winnicott and Schafer, consider the representations structural entities (p.74)

6.3.2 Object relational “theological” perspective; the inner God

When elaborating an understanding of the *experienced* absence, we relate to *perceived* reality and relations. Since human beings are relational in the deepest depth, since the originating of significant representations is a relational process and since absence is all about relations, we might find keys to absence in the formation of the God representation. In addition, different aspects of the relation between God and self, its possible development and transformation, might enlighten our main task.

What could we say about God? Object relations theory does not discuss whether or not there is an existing universal God, but how a God representation originates and functions in the individual human experience and self in monotheistic cultures. It is not concerned with the concept or images of God, mostly fabricated cognitively, but with the experienceable dimension.

6.3.2.1 The God representation

According to object relations theory, all object representations are complex psychological processes. Among those, the God representation is extraordinary. It is a private, individual God - an inner reality, not a dogmatic, theological external figure. Rizzuto points out that the God representation is a special and amazing object; the only relevant object not available for reality testing, a living and real being to the believer (p.47-49). The God representation is made of representational material and primary objects, and originated from multiple sources: the real parents, the aggrandized wished-for or feared parents, own grandiosity, the need for love and fear of separation, sexual urges and fantasies, and the religiosity of family and culture (p.27, 44-45). Rizzuto has shown that this representation is new and original, and not just an exalted father figure. It has got abilities to «soothe and comfort, provide inspiration and courage – or terror and dread – far beyond that inspired by the actual parents» (p.46).

6.3.2.2 When and where is God originated in a person?

The complex God representation is originated in the child’s developing self, through all the first stages of life, oral through oedipal (p.44). Freud “scheduled” the formation of God to the oedipal climax. Rizzuto shows, in her clinical research, that you might find traces of a God representation in the first phase, before the age of one. In the following, we apply Rizzuto’s chronological description of a formed God representation (p.182 pp).

0) *The preset stage*¹⁰⁰. Already before the child is thought of, the child is really thought of or wished for in the parents' childish dreams of their own future children. The parents also had a God representation in time of their oedipal solution, which will influence how they receive their children: as gifts or blessings, accidents or punishments, or maybe as a test of their faith. The parents will, consciously or unconsciously, bring these inner perceptions to the child, and hence start creating «a “mythology” of the child's origin» into which the child is born (p.183).

1) *The mirroring stage*. These first months (the oral phase according to Freud) are crucial for the child that is developing significant representations of itself and the mother. The key to this phase is the child at the mother's breast. Here the child is mirrored and sees itself as wonderful and powerful (if the process is sufficient), by the shining and affirming glance of the mother. This symbiotic relation, with the mirroring experience, is at the core of the child becoming a human – the first experience in the child's life that is «used directly in the first representation of God¹⁰¹» (p. 185-187). During the mirroring experience, the foundation is laid for the development of a transitional space. According to Spitz, the child is sensing with its mouth and seeing the mother's face when it lays at the mother's breast. This oral sensing, inside the child, while having eye-to-eye contact with the mother, is central. It helps bridging between «external perception» and «internal reception», and is the start of all perception (p.184). Eye-to-eye an intermediate space between mother and child is established. A space that will become the child's own transitional space.

In the mysterious and indescribable experience of eye contact, two human beings respond to each other beyond the boundaries of need satisfaction. Through each other's eyes they enter the area of playing (Winnicott 1971) and transitional space (p.184).

In this immensely important phase, we find traces of the elaborating God representation and the foundation of the child's God. If the mirroring is functioning sufficiently, the child will elaborate trust; if not, the child merely develop mistrust (p.184, 188). Rizzuto, following Spitz, says that maternal inability of mirroring might cause great and irreparable damage. She also proposes that «the damage affects the symbolic function essential to becoming human – the child's ability to represent himself and others, to discover a transitional space, and to create a transitional object» (p.185). It hence seems impossible, or extremely difficult, for the

¹⁰⁰ My concept.

¹⁰¹ This is a lot earlier than Freud suggested.

child to create inner representations – including the God representation – and experience real relations if the mirroring phase completely fails.

If the mirroring is inadequate, the child might partly be fixated in a narcissistic need of mirroring, an aggrandized self-representation or even an identification with God¹⁰². If the child is not seen, he will through life strive to be seen. Rizzuto refers to Winnicott who concluded that the essential significance of mirroring is making the individual feel real, being able to exist as himself, and find a self in which to rest (p.122, 186-188).

2) *The stage of separation and individuation* (Freud; the anal phase). In the end of the mirroring, oral phase, the child needs to «go through the mirror», to the next stage. This means to start encountering the mother as individual, though idealized, separated from the child (p.184). In Margaret Mahler's words: «“Growing up” entails a gradual growing away from the normal state of human symbiosis, of “one-ness” with the mother. This growing away process is (...) a life-long mourning process» (p.49). When the child through separation-individuation starts seeing the mother as a separate being, the child also experiences its own smallness and need for affirmations from a “big person” – the mother or God. If the child is accepted, it can relax, if not it will experience a «conflict of being», sensing that he or she *is* wrong. The way the child experience itself in this more mature mirroring, is of great importance for the developing God representation (p.188).

3) *The transitional phenomena*. The transitional area is the locus for the originating God. This intermediate area of experience is the space for human illusion, playfulness, creativity, religiosity, arts and imagination. Freud located the originating God in a part of the individual's inner structure; the super-ego. Winnicott placed religiosity¹⁰³ – and hence implicitly the formation of God – in an area at the same time «outside, inside, and at the border», between the inner and outer world (p.177-178).

However, how do transitional objects originate? When object constancy (the ability to have a permanent, inner memory of an existing object) occurs, the child starts populating the transitional area with imaginary figures (p.190). According to Nagara, those figures play

¹⁰² This happens if the child is greatly exalted by the mother, who then reflect her projected narcissistic dreams upon the child, and do not mirror the real child.

¹⁰³ Winnicott found the roots of human religious development related to these phenomena, but was not concerned with the God representation.

different roles; among other things they help the child solving conflicts, developing his ego (accepting his badness and representing his grandiosity), and seem to have a compensating role. Here, in this imaginary world located in the child's transitional space, God comes into existence, as a living reality in the child's mind (p.191, 193).

The God representation has parental and imaginary figure qualities, but is soon experienced as omnipotent, omnipresent and mightier than anybody else. Significant others or the subculture's references and submission to this extraordinary figure, confirm the grandiosity of this inner God (p.50, 193-195). This developing understanding of God takes place in the phallic phase (Freud), when the child is approximately two-and-a-half, until the oedipal climax.

4) The developing God and self. When the child is around five years old, it lives through the peak of the oedipal conflict. If the oedipal conflict is solved, the child gets a less sexualized and more nuanced relation to the parents. Both the representations of parents, God and self – all transformed in a dialectic process – are then normalized and less grandiose. The child might now relate to God in its everyday-context. This slightly changes during the following year. According to Gesell, the child at the age of six is able to include and grasp God as creator, to participate in rituals and develop «a feeling relationship with God» (p.196-197). If the oedipal conflict is unsolved, the child might be stuck with his pre-oedipal God, whom he probably later will neglect (p.201). As Rizzuto has shown in one of her cases, the unsolved conflict might leave the individual with a childish, superficial relation to an uncomplicated, immature God without the quality of real intimacy (p.106).

Brief summary: The (healthy) child has so far gone through a developmental process in relation not only to parents, but also to self and God; starting out in a symbiosis, experiencing his own smallness and afterwards grandiosity, while both parents and God seemed omnipotent. God is initially aggrandized, and then the representations of God, parents, and self are normalized and the child can start relating to God in a different way, e.g. by finding meaning in prayers.

5) The mediator God. Then the child moves to the next stage, latency, where he experiences disillusionment with family and parents, and at the same time starts dreaming of an ideal counterpart (a twin, a pet animal, a wonderful family) who is an equal that possesses desired

qualities – and even more important; one whom the child will not be separated from. Into this dream, organized religion might function as one ideal group, to which the child might belong. Rizzuto proposes that the God representation as well is «a mediator for this feeling of loneliness and separation», a powerful ally for the child (p. 198-199). At this developmental stage, the child has a basic personality woven together with the parental representations and the God representation with its basic personality. This is the “core reservoir” of experiences and memories for life. Now the child might have a useful and available God representation, or perhaps a frightening or pain filled representation that it is difficult to deal with (p.199-200).

6) *A God beyond representation.* The child keeps developing and maturing. Rizzuto emphasizes two important developmental crises after the oedipal conflict, both belonging to the epigenetic stage where identity conquers identity diffusion: *Puberty* and *late adolescence*. In puberty, the ability of logical mathematical conceptualization occurs, and the young person is empowered to conceptualize God philosophically «beyond the limits of his God representation». In late adolescence, a more integrated, unified self-representation is needed in order to enable choice making and help the growing person to a more individualized identity. In this phase, the young person will encounter God representations from past and present times (p.200-201, 207). It is a great test of the representation when the young adult experience bodily changes, enlarged intellectual capacity, and a need for intimacy (p.202).

7) *The adult life.* Throughout life, the adult person is repeatedly invited to critical changes of the self-representation, when dealing with the challenges of life. The God representation may or may not take part in this transformation. Since the empirical material in this thesis, only focus adult God-self relations, this (possible lack of) dialectic transformation of God and self, is of immensely importance, and will be of further investigation.

Some summaries and additions:

1) The God representation comes to existence through multiple object sources, created by the child during the first two to three years of life. It is located in the transitional area for playfulness, arts and imagination, and develops until the end of the oedipal stage. We find (traces of) a God representation at each developmental stage.

2) The God representation is utterly private and, like all representations, indestructible and immortal (p.5). In Mahler’s words: «We remain enmeshed with them ‘unto the grave’» (p.53).

- 3) The God representation is latent in every person, always available for further acceptance and rejection, and it might be used, transformed, repressed, or regressed (p.90, 179).
- 4) If the God representation seems inconvenient, troublesome, painful, or suddenly unusable, it might be repressed. To accomplish belief, the representation has to undergo transformations.
- 5) If the God representation ceases its development before the oedipal solution, we might recognize the stage where it stopped by investigating the adult's God representation. It is possible to re-elaborate the God representation, by ego functions such as defences, adaption, and synthesis (p.179).

6.3.3 Object relational anthropological perspective; the relational self¹⁰⁴

What we have seen so far is the immense importance of relations for the creation of the human identity and inner structures. The intertwined development of representations – of self, God and parents – implies everybody (in the western world) has a God representation (p.47, 50-51) and we cannot have an object relations theoretical understanding of man outside relations. Relation is a prerequisite for experienced divine absence. In the following, we will focus relational aspects of the individual, emphasizing the self and its God representation. I will partly extract from theory so far, and as well add some important perspectives to our empirical findings.

6.3.3.1 Self – relational with dialectic nature

As we have shown through Chapter 6.2.2, there is a significant dialectic nature in the God-, self-, and object representations. The strong correlative nature of these representations are for example shown in the relation between God and parents and how it might influence the ability of adult belief: a) a life-long process of pending separation-individuation and new relation with parents and God, might cause the individual's strong identification with parents and belief in God, or b) the individual might instead repress both parents and the God

¹⁰⁴ Use of the concept «self»: Rizzuto refers to Jacobsen and her differentiation of «ego» from both «self» and «self-representation». It is slightly difficult to understand how Rizzuto uses these concepts, but she seems to follow Sandler and Rosenblatt who applies that the child's ego «constructs or creates the self-representation» (p.68). I perceive Rizzuto's use of these concepts as follows: *Ego* is, psychodynamically understood, the (more) conscious part of a person's inner structure (where super-ego is the inner judge, parent or conscience, and id is the instincts). Ego is the mediator between super-ego, id and reality (Id, ego and super-ego, 2016). The *self-representation* is constructed by ego. As for the concept of *self*, it seems Rizzuto finds this far too complex to be discussed within the frame of this book; hence, she does not go with the understanding of self as a «subject of all experiences» or «the total person» (Rizzuto, 1979, p.79). The way she seems to use the concept «self», still might include both ego, super-ego, id and self-representation, and hence to some extent be overarched and unifying.

representation in such a way that non-belief is most natural. This repression might take place when the self representation and God representation evolves differently (p.50-51).

6.3.3.2 Self – ambivalence, conflict, and longing

There seems to be a profound experience of ambivalence in the relational individual: We want closeness and distance. We desire love, approval, and guidance – but this is frequently replaced by rejection, doubt, and a need for independence. The God representation is exposed to both aggressive and libidinal wishes. We commute between a pure pride of being God’s servant and a painful state of feeling unworthy. We also have ego-syntonic experiences of relational character that strengthens a sense of well-being. When dealing with ambivalence we unconsciously search for balance – and here one important tool is defences (p.88). In the heart of an ambivalent maturation, are the unavoidable conflicts connected to displacements between maturity levels.

6.3.3.3 Self – and necessary defences

Ego contains a variety of defences, such as projection, splitting, repression, regression, idealization, and identification with aggressor. These unconscious or preconscious activities are used in the service of psychic equilibrium and reshaping of self- and object representations (p.66, 69, 80, 89). The defensive system is important in the child’s relation to its parents or other significant objects. Through defensive manoeuvres, the child’s God is positioned as either a prolonged parent, a direct opposition to parents or a combination where some aspects of God are similar and others oppose the parents (p.89).

In her four cases, Rizzuto shows how her adult interviewees use their defensive system in different ways:

- 1) A repression of sexual and aggressive wishes to maintain an ego-syntonic belief in a simple father-God who satisfactory protects and provides (p. 94-95).
- 2) A combination of repression and violent reaction against the needs for God and the mother – to keep them away – together with an aggrandized, seemingly self-sufficient self-image. This causes a situation where the individual knows that God exists, but he cannot “reach” this God (p.111, 121).
- 3) A use of affect-isolation, intellectualization, and withdrawal as defences, to avoid meeting an inadequate self and a critical Father-God that is completely ignored (p.132-134).

4) A clear ambivalence, where the individual needs the Mother-God, but does not feel sufficient and good enough to receive it, causes several defences: projection, displacement, to some extent idealization, partial use of one component of the representation, and self-devaluation (p.150-162).

The way Rizzuto introduces defensive systems – as one important way to understand the studied patients' belief system and parental relations – shows the importance, power, subtlety and I dare say health and psychic survival mechanism in defences.

Rizzuto returns to some of the major defences through her book, considering *repression* most prevalent. Repression is primarily a natural process, starting after the oedipal solution (p.44). But repression might as well be pathology (according to Freud, p.63), and when massive repression of objects and self-representations occurs, both loneliness, emptiness, sense of abandonment and a fear of losing oneself could be experienced (p.44, 80-81).

A psychic function that sometimes is defensive is splitting – understood by Rizzuto as a «separation of certain components of the representation» (p.80). Lichtenberg and Slap postulates that splitting originates in conflicting feelings and drives, as defence against anxiety (p.69-70). Rizzuto seems to follow up on the anxiety-dimension; postulating that splitting and repression might be used for instance if anxiety is evoked when individuals consciously remembers an unsplit experience¹⁰⁵ (p.80-81). Winnicott has contributed by speaking of the true and split (or false) self. The true self means a sense of being real, and is maintained through a connection with both ourselves, others, the universe and our God (p.204).

Another important psychodynamic defence is regression. Freud postulated religion originates in regression to an earlier object (the primeval father) and the compelling feelings he evokes (p.25). We might regress to earlier representations – of God and other objects – if that is useful for our psychic stability (p.89). The final defensive manoeuvre we slightly mention is idealization, which among others might be useful if the image of God or a parent is too

¹⁰⁵ Rizzuto does not exemplify, but I assume these defences might be activated e.g. in situations of sudden violence, and accidents etc.

difficult to handle, and the individual needs to protect, maintain or create an illusory image (p.133, 171).

Throughout life, we use different defences in a variety of ways; but the main goal is to maintain equilibrium between past and present representations.

Defences may distort representations when they become distressing. The image may be reshaped by idealizations, repression, regression to an earlier representation, distortion of a previously well-established trait, or simply by reworking and sifting it through past and recent experiences to attain a new, more harmonious image (p.89).

6.3.3.4 *Self – a transformational nature*

Object relations theory speaks of human creation as a process and not an event, hence we have an inherent ability to develop and transform. Yes, the nature of representations is that they might and should transform, and walk the line from symbiosis to maturity, all though fully developed object relations seem rare.

Rizzuto applies Erikson's postulation of human life as «a gradually unfolding of the personality through phase-specific psychosocial crises» (p.205). Each of the crises are conflicts of immense importance. Primarily because each phase concludes with a more or less lasting solution – the first with either *trust* or *mistrust* – that strongly affects relational life. However, each phase also has consequences for the God representation: «The central thesis is that God as a transitional representation *needs to* be recreated in each developmental crisis if it is to be found relevant for lasting belief» (p.205-208).¹⁰⁶ Implicitly: it does not *have to* be recreated or transformed.

Crises of rejection and acceptance in relations (with real and transitional objects) are inevitable in a human life cycle and seems as well inevitable for transformation (p.180). Piaget postulates non-balance as a drive towards development of thought. Rizzuto seems to imply that non-balance, or felt disharmony related to the self ideal, might serve as catalyst towards psychic transformation (p.55, 223): At each epigenetic stage, crisis might function as invitations towards development. For a developmental success, significant object representations have to develop along with our self to become appropriate for the next level.

¹⁰⁶ My italics

If the God representation is not synchronized with the developing self, it might be found irrelevant, ridiculous, or perhaps threatening. (p.77, 200, 203). Rizzuto postulates: «Those who are capable of mature religious belief renew their God representation to make it compatible with their emotional, conscious and unconscious situation, as well as with their cognitive and object-related development» (p.46). The recreation of the God representation is, hence, crucial for a relevant and maturing belief.

The developmental process of the God representation never ceases. No, «The God representation changes along with us and our primary objects in the lifelong metamorphosis of becoming ourselves in a context of other relevant beings» (p.52). Our creation is life-long and slow. Each developmental stage serves as a crisis with a possibly re-elaborated, transformed, rejected – and perhaps suddenly absent – God, all in the service of psychic equilibrium.

6.3.3.5 Self – with ability of maturity

To overcome crises and transform is as well a growth in maturity. Rizzuto speaks briefly of the possible maturity in a relation with the God representation. The mature relation is characterized by a certain “silent communication” that strengthens the sense of being real and maintains the true self. This communication takes place between 1) our sense of self, 2) some outer reality, and 3) components of our God representation:

A convincing sense of being alive, connected, in communion with ourselves, others, the universe, and God himself may occur when, in the profoundest privacy of self, “an identity of experience” takes place between vital components of our God representation, our sense of self, and some reality in the world. It may be provoked by a landscape, a newly found person (...), the birth of a child, a passage in a book, a poem, a tune, or myriad other experiences (p.204).

Commentary

We have now immersed ourselves in the object relational understanding of the God representation and its connection to the developing self, which is important for the understanding of divine absence.

Rizzuto does not speak directly of an absent God. She explicates the presence-absence dichotomy in the God-self relation only once, related to the love of God. Here she postulates

that God, as expected «loved and loving object», is psychologically present but sentient absent (p.88).

However, implicitly the theory might contribute to our understanding. I suppose absence could be seen as a psychic, often unconscious, process taking place in an intrapsychic debate of how to survive, how to feel good about life, how to maintain balance, and how to deal with life sufficiently. Sometimes God is useful as maintainer of well-being and hence is accepted through the crises of life. Other God representations are rather the contrary; hence, consciously or unconsciously they are rejected as life emerges. In the discussion, I apply my own carefully derived *suggestions* and hints, to a possible object relations theoretical explanation of divine absence. Suggestions that I hope might be followed by further studies.

SUPPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVE #2 FROM CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY:

6.4 John Shea: The absent God – a necessary loss of the Superego God

Let us move to the pastoral counsellor and teacher John Shea (1940)¹⁰⁷. In *Finding God again* (2005)¹⁰⁸ he is dealing with the complex «inter-relationship between images of God's relationship to us and human maturity¹⁰⁹» (Shea, 2005). He creates a bridge between psychodynamic thinking and Christian spirituality with his immersing in adolescent faith and the transformation necessity towards the Living God and a mutual relationship.

In the introduction to *Finding God again*, Shea raises three important questions: 1) «How adequate is our imaging of God for the reality of who God is?» 2) «How adequate is our imaging of God for the reality of who we are?» 3) «Is our imaging of God meant to undergo transformation as we grow and develop?» If so, how can this transformation happen? (p.xi). In his answer Shea shows the connection between the immature *adolescing self* and its limited image of a Superego God, as well as the relationship between the *adult self* and the Living God. Here he also explains why people might need to reject their adolescent God, to free their lives.

¹⁰⁷ Shea has been an associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, Boston College.

¹⁰⁸ This work is the main source in Chapter 6.4. I only refer with page-number, until other sources occur.

¹⁰⁹ The award-winning professor, Philip Sheldrake, uses these words in a blurb for Shea's book.

Shea speaks of the adolescent and adult self¹¹⁰ as two rather different states in the human development. The adolescent self, that is in the process of growing into adulthood, is “a becoming self”, with Carl Rogers words. It is still-forming and still-dependent. It is on its way to become a mature being – a full self (p. xi, 3-5). This implies a movement from incongruence to congruence, to continue in Roger’s landscape. The incongruent self is depended on other people’s love, acceptance, meanings, and values – on behalf of own inner “knowing”. To be approved and accepted, the adolescent (and incongruent) self is willing to deny own experience or felt reality. The congruent self is not depended on love and acceptance from significant others, but is relying on own meaning and value (p.4).

6.4.1 The adolescent self and the Superego-God

Based on this introduction to Shea’s inter-academic universe, we will now have a closer look at the adolescent self with its Superego God.

6.4.1.1 Adolescent self with fettered imaging

A central characterization of human beings and our ability to develop and relate, is our imaging. «Imaging is a continuous, developing, bodily process, an ongoing organizing and reorganizing of perceiving and knowing», says Shea (p.9). Imaging is part of our integrity project, and it connects us to reality – including religious reality. This gives us information about the relation with God: «The central meeting place of “the self and God together¹¹¹” is our developing process of imaging» (p.10). The quality of the relationship with God, according to Shea, is depending on our imaging.

From the perspective of adulthood, we might say that the adolescent way of imaging is fettered. Three major dimensions characterize fettered imaging:

- 1) A fantasy at the service of protecting the developing self that could be self-preoccupied, illusionary and a compensating projection – but still necessary for the maturing self¹¹².
- 2) A way of relating that does not really accept the other being as its own subject, but rather see the other as object for own needs (p.10ff). Shea calls this “relating in transference” and rephrases Mario Jacobi’s description¹¹³:

¹¹⁰ Shea is not explicitly defining «self».

¹¹¹ Sharon Parks’ expression.

¹¹² Shea builds on Ronald Grimes, Pruyser, and Vivienne Joyce to construct his argument.

¹¹³ Shea has here substituted «God» for the «other person».

«It is a fact that in a relationship which we term transference, the Thou as another whole subject hardly does exist as such. God is an object for my own needs, desires, fantasies and fears. God does not have reality as a whole subject but is somehow the carrier of the projection of my own psychic reality. God is experienced as a part of myself and is not a Thou in God's own right» (p.14).

3) The third central component in the fettered imaging is the logic of objective knowing, which simplified is an understanding of reality as empirical, observable, and objective – independent of the perceiving observer (p.16).

6.4.1.2 *The parental, demanding and fixing Superego God*

Since the adolecing self is still growing, with a fettered and still growing ability to perceive and image reality, it relates by necessity to a “still growing” God – the “Superego God” in Shea's terminology (p.xi). This is an incomplete, individual image of God, that coincidentally has some overarching characteristics. Those characteristics are not negative but developmental – and just dysfunctional if they prevent a natural, adult religious development (p.23-24).

1) «*The Superego God is a Supreme Being*»¹¹⁴, a being within the “subject-object-dichotomy” – experienced as a powerful object in life, but still not an object; a powerful person, but still not a real person in a mutual relation. The Superego God is in the beginning an exalted being with strong human and parental features. Later this Supreme Being might appear inconsistent, at times «loving, or uncaring, or quite interested in conformity, control and punishment» (p.25). There is an implicit contract in the relation: Superego God promises security if we respect its authority. As time passes, the adolecing self might experience growing ambivalence towards this being.

2) «*The Superego God is a God of Law*», an absolute authority and commander, whom we relate to by obedience. This God often evokes guilt and fear as punisher of disobedience. Also, this Superego God-feature is contradicting: God is kind *and* judging, loving *and* forcing. The God of Law has a Janus-face of good and evil, relating to us with conditional acceptance. As the adolecing self grows, it might feel strengthened ambivalence about this God of Perfection (p.25ff).

¹¹⁴ Shea's capitalization is used when introducing and using the characterizations of the Superego God and the Living God.

3) «*The Superego God is a God of Belief*» in a combination of religious facts and loyalty towards the conveying authorities. This God is a God of doctrines – parental in the beginning, but afterwards more abstract and logical. It is claiming proper belief, and in return it offers protection from abandonment, among other things (p.27ff).

4) «*The Superego God is a God of Dependency and Control*» – a really contradictive God. The God of Dependency provides the adolecing self with what it needs for development and growth, but the God of Control leaves the individual with little room for own autonomy. «On the one hand, this God appears to be calling us to more and more freedom and responsibility; on the other hand, this God seems to be demanding that we remain in a position of absolute dependence», says Shea (p.29). The adolecing self will experience increasing ambivalence towards this God of Domination, still knowing the tempting force from this God's promise to protect from pain, inner struggle and from the responsibility of making own choices (p.29).

5) «*The Superego God is a God of the Group*». The group is here a gathering of adolecing selves lead by some individuals with certain God-given authority. The God in the middle of the group is conventional and conforming, with all the above mentioned contradicting features. In the beginning, this God seems parenting and nurturing – welcoming people into fellowship, inclusion, and belonging. Later the fixed moral laws, doctrines, and lack of freedom might evoke ambivalence and conflict in the maturing self (p.30).

Shea's Superego God emerges as a powerful, selfish, self-centred, and unstable being. This God fits the developmental process of the adolecing self. The relation between the adolecing self and the Superego God is an «early form of “the self and God together”», Shea postulates. He paints a picture of a possible, but – to formal religion – rare option of deepened religion and real relation (p.36), and argues for the necessary journey from a self-centred existence towards an increasing ability of empathy in an augmented image of reality.

6.4.2 *The adult self and the Living God*

The young person growing into adulthood cannot relate to any other God than the Superego God. Nevertheless, he might as time passes develop ambivalence towards this contrastingly compound God that produces both conflict and confusion in the adolecing self. «In dealing with this God, the adolecing self may adopt a modus vivendi that goes back and forth on a continuum of trust, anxiety, fear, lack of engagement, and complete rejection» (p.25), says Shea. This increasing inner conflict might be a road to maturity and adulthood.

6.4.2.1 *The adult self with unfettered imaging*

The adult self is a free being in the world, with an increased capacity for intimacy, commitment, and a «productive acceptance of personal extinction», according to Stewart and Healy Jr. (p.67). Shea defines an adult self as «an integral self-in-mutuality» described as «an undivided integral whole» with a clear centre and clear boundaries (p.57). It is important to notice the duality in the expression self-in-mutuality. Being a self and relating to others is inter-related. Shea beautifully describes this context: «Without real dialogue and without mutual relationships of solicitude, love, respect and understanding, the adult self simply cannot continue to be itself» (p.58).

The adult self is enabled to have unfettered imaging; a limitless, whole and complete imaging of reality. The imaging is no longer self-protective, holding the other person in a fixed pre-understanding or stuck in an objective worldview. Adult imaging includes feeling, depth, and, not least, the body. The adult self with its unfettered imaging *relates in mutuality* to reality (p.75-77). Shea gives us six characteristics of the adult self and its unfettered imaging:

- 1) «The adult self is *a body self*», it is anchored and at home in its own body and enabled to have mature and affective relationships (p.60ff). The unfettered imaging of this adult self is holistic and integral, including a full appropriation of the body (p.77).
- 2) «The adult self is *founded in feeling*», and this is crucial for the sensation of own identity. Rogers describes the adult self as a cognitive, affective, and bodily process of felt interaction (p.61-62). This founding in feeling is a deep bodily experience, where thought and emotion is one in an unfettered imaging (p.77) – connected to an inner “knowing” and sense of meaning.
- 3) «The adult self *has a sense of depth*», which means a permeating, deep sense of self. This depth could be described as our “soul”, our “heart” or the essence of the human – «both revealed and concealed». Here we are profoundly alone, still equally connected in relatedness. Here is the root of our autonomy, self-esteem, desires, and mysteries (p.62).
- 4) «The adult self *has clear boundaries*», ensuring delineation and wholeness of the self. The adult self knows «who it is and who it is not», where it begins and where it ends, and it acknowledges own limitations (p.63). The unfettered imaging within those clear boundaries is therefore a «coherent and unified experience of reality» (p.78).
- 5) «The adult self *exists in intimacy*», which means living with penetrable boundaries through availability, understanding, love, openness, self-forgetfulness and genuine empathy. «In an adult self as an integral self-in-mutuality, empathy, love, sexuality and intimacy go together,

making real community possible», Shea concludes (p.64). He also postulates that the fullness of unfettered imaging seems to depend on this context of love, empathy, and intimacy within clear boundaries (p.78).

6) «The adult self *is its own responsible process*», meaning it is responding towards what is other, out of a deep sense of self, knowing who it is, and who it is not. Richard Niebuhr clarifies it: «To be responsible, is to be a self in the presence of other selves, to whom one is bound and to whom one is able to answer freely» (p.64). The unfettered imaging is as such «the adult self relating to reality [...]» (p.79)

The unfettered imaging is a free, intuitive, deep, and bodily perception of reality in an adult self who is experiencing intimate relationships, but with clear boundaries –delineated from the other. Important keywords are: “integral self-in-mutuality” That is «the process of imaging of the formed, interdependent self as it grasps, understands and relates in mutuality to other persons and to other meaningful wholes to be found in reality» (p.76).

6.4.2.2 *The Living God*

The adult self is developmentally differing from the adolecing self, and this results in inevitable consequences for the relation with and experience of the Living God. Even though the Living God is experienced individually, Shea offers five important, common characteristics of the Living God:

1) «*The Living God is a God as Thou*» – a transformation of the Supreme Being into a personal, unique and encompassing being. The adult self might encounter this “Thou” in freedom, intimacy, integrity, and experience a real relational betweenness¹¹⁵. In the emerging relationship a paradox is arising: At the same time, the Living God is «other-than-the-self and not-other-than-the-self» in a deep inexplicable dwelling of transcendence and immanence – of distinct separation and inseparable togetherness (p.88-89).

2) «*The Living God is a God of Love*» – a transformation of the God of Law. The God of Love finds its resonance in the depth of the adult self. As the relationship unfolds, this God exceeds our conceptual boundaries; and is beyond descriptions as good or evil, right or wrong – yes, these understandings fades in the reality of God of Love (p.90).

¹¹⁵ A Carl Jung-expression.

3) «*The Living God is a God of Mystery*» – a transformation of the God of Belief. God of Mystery awakes awe and wonder in the adult self, who is experiencing a deep unconditional acceptance in God's presence. As the relation unfolds, the dimension of mystery grows stronger than the dimension of knowledge, right beliefs and objective knowing (p.91).

4) «*The Living God is a God of Freedom*» – a transformation of the God of Dependency and Control. The adult self experiences an increasing inner desire to surrender itself with openness to this God. As the relation emerges, a paradox of surrendering into freedom takes place, and the adult self ceases to control and to be controlled (p.92).

5) «*The Living God is a God of Community*» – a transformation of the God of the Group. The adult self is not living in a pressure of homogenizing and a dichotomized reality, but may accept the invitation to unity with the Living God and other adults. The relationships unfold in increased compassion, and in increased mutuality of love, respect and concern (p.93-94).

This mature relation between the adult self and the Living God is no finalized relation, but evolving and unfolding towards mutual indwelling. «In this mutual indwelling, there is a kind of *synergy*, or shared interactive energy,» says Shea, «an empowerment in God that makes the adult self more its own integral process even as it moves the self deeper into the reality of the Living God». It is a «living relationship of mutuality» (p.88).

6.4.3 *The religious experience and transformation*

Describing the dichotomy of the adolcescing and the adult self, as well as the Superego God and the Living God, Shea invites us towards adulthood and a mutual, deep, transforming relation with God. The inevitability of transformation is, as we have seen, the quivering under string in his work. But we are invited to an arduous journey considering the tremendous lack of adulthood and living relation in a youth-oriented, substitute-loving, achievement-stressing Western society, where adulthood is dull. Says Shea:

[T]he superego imaging of God comes to us so early in life, is so pervasive in the culture, and often is so strongly supported by organized religion that we may be completely unaware that there is anything more than a Superego God. (...) I believe the hegemony the Superego God has over us to be a religious tragedy – the developmental equivalent of the worst idolatries and heresies in the history of Western religion (p.xiii).

Hence, transforming the fettered imaging and relation with the Superego God towards unfettered imaging and the “integral self-in-mutuality” with the Living God, is really non-intuitive. Why is transformation so crucial? Shea is clear: «Our imaging of God *is meant to be transformed* as we grow and develop. An adollescening self *is meant to be transformed* into an adult self¹¹⁶» (p.182). In other words, we cannot become our true selves without paradigmatic transformation.

What hinders the transformational process? Probably the tremendous work – and often equivalent presence of pain – inextricably linked to the transformation of our image of God, our self and our God-self-relation. «Allowing our relationship with the Superego God to become transformed can be a terribly, confusing, wrenching, and disillusioning experience, one that evokes feelings of fear, anxiety, guilt, loss, vulnerability, ingratitude, betrayal, and abandonment», says Shea (p.138).

Commentary

Shea does not emphasize the absence experience in his important work. His theme is the inevitable transformation towards true humanization and ability to live in mutual, intimate relations – with the great Thou (the Living God) and with significant “yous”. The transformational journey is on a road of losing and let go of Superego God and of the adollescening self. This will be further investigated in the next chapter.

Through our four theorists, we have richly colored our empirical painting and increased our understanding of the prerequisites for the absence experience, the explanation of this perceived event, and the possible effects of divine absence. In the following discussion, other thinkers will add to our understanding.

¹¹⁶ My italics.

*[T]he self discovers
its sociality
in its isolation*

Ralph L. Underwood¹¹⁷

PART IV: DISCUSSION, SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

The overall question of this research is: “*What are the characteristics, effects, and understanding of the experience named “God’s absence”, as portrayed in the stories of persons with a personal relation to God?*” This question will be reflected upon throughout our discussion – and summarized in the conclusion.

7. THE EXPERIENCED ABSENCE OF GOD – AND ITS EFFECTS

In this chapter we will bring together our five main pieces: the empirical material¹¹⁸, our two main theorists, Lossky and Rizzuto, together with our two supplementary theorists, Stinissen and Shea, by answering our third main question: *How could an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and psychology enlighten the experienced absence?*

We have three foci with regards to divine hiddenness: 1) describing absence, 2) understanding absence, and 3) reflecting around the effects of absence. I use this division as well through Chapter 7, where we just briefly comment on the first focus, but immerse ourselves in the two latter.

7.1 Characteristics of the experienced absence

What are the characteristics of the experience named “God’s absence”? Our findings from Chapter 5.5.1 summarizes the empirical characteristics of absence as follows:

¹¹⁷ Underwood (1986)

¹¹⁸ Chapter 4 and 5.

- 1) Divine absence is a phase of lost feel-good-emotions, emptiness, journeying in the desert or in a tunnel, with “difficult” emotions and increased depression.
- 2) Divine absence is additionally characterized by a felt easiness and increased opportunity to being oneself.
- 3) Divine absence is an ambivalent experience; primarily unwanted but deliberating as well.

7.1.1 The darkness of divine absence

People have through the ages described the pain connected to divine hiddenness, God’s silence or absence. Even though most of the theorists of my Thesis do not dwell in flourishing paintings of this experience, there is a “cloud of witnesses” through history who has suffered through the confusing sense of divine abandonment¹¹⁹.

The interviewees in this Thesis described depression-like conditions¹²⁰; they spoke of muted colors in nature, loss of good feelings and warmth. Some of them lost the sensation of protection or the deep experience of bodily joy¹²¹. John of the Cross gave words to two of the interviewees’ understanding of their situation with his description of the dark night. In the following, St John describes the first sign of the night of the senses¹²² and gives language that might be recognizable in present-days peoples’ times of absence:

[W]hen the soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, it also fails to find it in any thing created; for, as God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever (John of the Cross, 2003, p.21-22).

The loss of emotions is a significant characterisation of St. John’s night of the senses, which fits well with my empirical material. However, my interviewees speak of increasingly difficult emotions and moods as well; despair, anger, anxiety, fear, loneliness and pain.

In 2007 the sensational disclosure of Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s correspondence with her spiritual directors was published, showing her deep experience of darkness, abandonment, and

¹¹⁹ See the Introduction, Chapter 1.

¹²⁰ The issue of depression and anxiety will be developed in Chapter 7.2.7.

¹²¹ See Chapter 5.2.1 and 5.2.2.

¹²² St John clearly differentiates between aridity caused by sin, imperfections, weakness, lukewarmness, bad humour, or bodily indispositions on the one hand, and aridity caused by the night on the other. Nevertheless, independent of cause, the absence experiences could have the same “symptoms” or expressions (St. John of the Cross, 2003, p.20-21).

divine absence through decades. We cannot exclude the possibility that her life is a remarkable example of St John's third night, the very last purification – an experience only for the few. When I borrow an excerpt of her letters, it is to show the emotional dimension and the pain that could be part of the emptiness in divine absence.

«If I ever become a Saint – I will surely be one of “darkness”. I will continually be absent from Heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth», she wrote to Father Neuner SJ in March 1962 (Mother Theresa, 2007, p.1). One year earlier (probably) she wrote:

Now father – since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. – Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. – The place of God in my soul is blank. – There is no God in me. – When the pain of longing is so great – I just long & long for God – and then it is that I feel – He does not want me – He is not there. – ... God does not want me. – Sometimes – I just hear my own heart cry out – “My God” and nothing else comes. – The torture and pain I can't explain (ibid, p.1-2).

Mother Theresa's absence experience is extraordinary and long-lasting. Nevertheless, the human pain, confusion, and sense of being abandoned is thoroughgoing in narratives from past and present times. The six interviewees do, as expected, join the long list of people telling stories of the darkness of absence.

7.1.2 The relief and ambivalence in divine absence

The second finding describing the experienced absence was as surprising as the former was expected: Divine absence is characterized by – or followed by – a felt liberation, easiness, and increased opportunity to being oneself. The relief connected to God's disappearing, does alternate (in Anna and Bea's stories) with a slowly emerging or partly existent sadness related to divine hiddenness – disclosing the ambivalence in the absence. We will develop the thematically coherence of desire, resistance and ambivalence in the God-self-relation in Chapter 7.2.3. Now we focus the felt *easiness and relief* connected to the absence experience.

Very few of the theorists I have read have spoken explicitly of relief in regard of God's hiddenness. In Lossky's theological universe, divine absence is mainly considered an unwanted experience, caused by people's sin or God testing us. The natural and healthy

condition for man is a desire for unification all though the complexity of human will might disturb this wanting¹²³.

Rizzuto goes further and gives us helpful contributions to understand the sense of liberation and relief when God is absent, although she does not speak explicitly of this relief. If the God representation at a certain phase of the individual's life is useless as comforter or too immature for the mature life, a sense of liberation or relief might easily follow the rejection of this God. To reject the teddy bear God, mother God, father God or some other provoking, frightening, hurting, or childish God – in the service of the self – could cause relief.

John Shea is in *Finding God again* (2005) concerned with mature spirituality. Here he is emphasizing real dialogue and mutual relationships as prerequisites for the mature adult and its ability of being a self. As soon as the God representation of an individual is not enabling maturity and real relationship, it is possible to understand the felt easiness when God is absent; this might free the individual to personal growth. Both Rizzuto and Shea implicitly express liberation connected to divine absence.

What is the case with our interviewees? Bea feels a slightly fearful joy being freed from a stifling Christian life as a pastor's wife. Her parental God, who has failed her, could have intervened and helped her, but does not. Bea seems to keep God distant with a sense of deep relief. But there are other components in our understanding of Bea; she is so terrified by her inner condition that she rejects her deeper self to a successful outer life. Her relief might partly be connected to liberation from her failing, non-protective and unpredictable God, partly a liberation from an adolescent faith hindering a true maturing process, and partly being her way of controlling her dangerous inside.

Anna emphasizes absence as the most prominent feature of her God, and this hurts her. Still, her first reaction when God does not answer her prayers, and she is freed from her demanding and loving God, is an ability to be herself. Anna most often wants to be in a relation with her God, and the relief in times of absence is always quickly superseded by a desire for God.

¹²³ See Chapter 6.1.3.2

Commentary

Here we have described the absence experience, its darkness, and its freedom. The descriptive aspect of darkness will not be further elaborated. When we move towards summary and conclusions we mostly focus the understandings of the experienced absence and its effects.

7.2 Understandings of the experienced absence

How could we understand the experience named “God’s absence”? Both our empirical material and our theory have expounded our understanding of this complex experience. The findings from Chapter 5.5.1 show us three main perspectives:

- 1) Divine absence is experienced as an action at first glance initiated by God. It is caused by God’s disappearing, hiding or by dimensions of God’s being¹²⁴.
- 2) When immersing in the individual’s stories, we find that outer, difficult incidences occasioned five of six of the interviewees’ experience of absence¹²⁵.
- 3) An outer crisis, together with earlier relational experiences, inner dispositions, and assumptions¹²⁶, seems to be central in the absence experience.

7.2.1 Absence – a result of God’s actions

Our interviewees’ initially understand the experienced absence as an action by God. God is deliberately hiding, God is not responding, God is not relating. God is acting by not acting. The God who speaks is silent. We will see how this explanation correlates with theory.

7.2.1.1 Hiding to cause otherness

Psychology in general, and Rizzuto’s point of view is here, naturally, not to discuss whether an external God has intervened, but how *the individual* interprets incidents as divine actions, in concordance with their God representation. Says she: «Other so-called actions of God in the realities of our lives (his responses to our prayers, his punishments, his indications of what we should do) rest upon our interpretation of events and realities (...)» (Rizzuto, 1979, p.87).

I have found but one study reflecting around object relations theory and divine absence. In *The presence and Absence of God in Object Relational and Theological Perspectives*, Ralph

¹²⁴ This is discussed in Chapter 7.2.1 and 7.2.2.

¹²⁵ This is discussed in Chapter 7.2.3.

¹²⁶ This is discussed in Chapter 7.2.4 through 7.2.7.

L. Underwood (1986), touches the aspect of God's hiding. He compares the protestant theologian Samuel Terrien's perspectives on divine elusiveness with object relations theory (Rizzuto). I would like to extract one of Underwood's points, in regard of the ceasing mirroring phase in the infant's life that is of importance for our case: when the mother allows the child to experience her absence, the child is enabled to advance its understanding of reality to include parental absence, and hence, experience otherness. This is transferable to God: an experience of the absence of God «is essential to an authentic sense of the reality of God» and helps us distinguishing God from imaginations and dreams. Thus, God's elusiveness is essential to our confidence in divine reality (Underwood, 1986, p.302).

7.2.1.2 Absence – a night caused by God

How does our interviewees' explanation correspond with theology? Could God, as Eve has suggested¹²⁷, actively hide for some reason? Lossky briefly mentions the possibility of divine hiding to test man – in the intention of unification. Still, a hiding divinity is not Lossky's theological agenda. Lossky explicitly disassociates with John of the Cross and his spiritual nights as catalysts for human transformation towards its true self.

Conditions of drought, “the mystical night”, does not contain the same in the Eastern Church as in the west. A person that increasingly is unified with God cannot stay outside the light. Should she find herself in darkness, it is because her nature is darkened by sin or because God is testing her to increase her eagerness. This is a condition that has to be overcome by obedience and humility, which God responds to by again making himself known to the soul and conveying his light to the one who some time has been abandoned. The drought is a morbid condition that is not lasting, and the mystical ascetics of the Eastern tradition have never considered it a necessary and normal lap on the journey towards unification. Although you often, on this road, is affected by drought, but this is always something dangerous. It is too closely related to *akedia* – depression or boredom because the heart has become cold and thus insensitive (Lossky, 2011, p.198).

¹²⁷ See Chapter 5.3.2.2

In Lossky's opinion, the main reason for experienced absence is the human will, sin, choices, and lack of obedience and humility. God is not actively hiding in the cause of transformation¹²⁸.

We might name St. John "the brother of the night". Still, to him, the dark night is not about divine absence, rather the contrary: The night is *experienced* as darkness and absence, but is really a sign of intrusive, divine presence and God's impact on the soul; God's speaking is so loud that it is almost deafening, God's light is so bright that it is blinding. God's presence is so overwhelming that God *seems* absent, but is not (Stinissen, 2001, p.19-20, 30). This absence sensation is rather a sign: that God has started drawing the soul towards its centre. As we saw in Chapter 7.1.1; «God sets the soul in this dark night» to purge the sensual desires (ibid, p.21-22). The night – experienced as darkness and lack of divine presence – could be a result of the sufferings in life, according to Stinissen. But, when a person is invited to his night, it is as well a tremendous sign of God at work, even though it is often sensed as God at sleep.

The first night¹²⁹ is a disruption from the outside of the soul where we approach God to have our needs fulfilled or our sweet emotions arisen. This self-centered living corresponds with Shea's description¹³⁰ of the adolcescing self in relation with the Superego God, where God is an object for man's needs and desires. It describes large portions of Christianity, as well. In his book, Shea (2005) criticizes Western Christianity for its immature and adolcescing-focused characteristics that retain people in an immature spirituality. Both Stinissen, Lossky, and Shea paint an image of another reality; a mature, Other-centered relation with a Living God, with whom man could be unified, living beyond own egocentrism. Such an attainable, adult, spirituality, that focuses on unification rather than own self, might explain why a loving God could hide to force the transformational process and a breakup from the soul's periphery.

¹²⁸ In this context, I would like to make reference to the Swedish Pentecostal pastor and author, Peter Halldorf, who through decades has immersed himself in Orthodox spirituality and the writings of the Church fathers. Unlike Lossky, who is one of his significant sources of inspiration, he joins St John and the understanding of the night as a necessary crisis of growth. Halldorf even applies the night as a possible invitation for everybody: «The crisis of growth that John of the Cross describes as a "night", and which Gregory of Nyssa calls "mist", is not relevant just for certain people, those who spend lots of time in prayer. It is a part of our road, of our development. For each individual it will be the case that one cannot receive the new without losing the old» (Halldorf, 2016, p.33).

¹²⁹ See Chapter 6.2.2.1

¹³⁰ See Chapter 6.4.1.1

7.2.1.3 *The six portrayed and their absence experiences as caused by God*

None of our theorists speak of a hiding God, but Stinissen conveys a God that interferes with intrusive presence. His explanations of absence caused by God, is solely connected to God's actions, not God's being. The night is caused by God who *is* the centre of the soul, incessantly enticing the exiled soul to unification in this centre (Stinissen, 2001, p.35). Then an important question will be: could our interviewees have experienced parts of the dark night – and, hence, have experienced absence as divine hiding? If we look at the night of the senses (the first night), we might find correlations with some of our interviewees' experience of night, and we might find transformations – that *could be* a sign of the night:

Most our interviewees speak of darkened emotions, and emerging depressive conditions¹³¹. This could look like the night of the senses, as described by St. John¹³². In Stinissen's theological approach we see that every crisis, darkness and depression *could be used* in the service of transformation, and might as such be an invitation. The way I read the narratives of our interviewees, I postulate we cannot exclude the possibility that some of them have experienced "the night of the senses". Hence, we cannot exclude their understanding of absence as a deliberate action of God, in Stinissen's vocabulary, or as a result of God's elusiveness, to use Underwood's terminology. However, we might see conquering understandings when immersing in the inner dispositions and the individual's relation to their God representation.

7.2.2 *Absence – a result of God's being*

Who or what is God? We keep returning to the question of who this absent being is.

7.2.2.1 *Could God's being cause absence?*

Is God's being of such an inaccessible and ineffable nature that we might say the experienced absence is inevitable? To Lossky God is incessantly present in the energies which at full is God. God is equally incessantly drawing man towards *the essence* of the Godhead – which is inaccessible. If we follow Lossky in his conclusions concerning the vision of God¹³³, humanity cannot completely partake in, know, or have a vision of the divine essence. The different natures of the Godhead and man cause man to experience a bright darkness in the

¹³¹ See Chapter 5.2

¹³² See Chapter 6.2.2.1

¹³³ See Chapter 6.1.2.3

middle of the divine dazzling light¹³⁴. Even if fully unified with the Godhead, man could not experience the light at full in this life.

None of the other theologians I read have got such a theocentric perspective as does Lossky. Nevertheless, John Shea touches the theme of divine absence in the very being of the Living God, who is both a God of Presence and a God of Absence. We have seen that the Living God is «other-than-the-self and not-other-than-the-self», transcendent and immanent, of distinct separation and inseparable togetherness (Shea, 2005, p.88-89). This seems to be a description of relational unity, which – unlike symbiosis – requires distance to achieve the dimension of twoness, togetherness, and mutuality in a unity where the individuals in relation do not annihilate themselves. Shea seems to place the absence both within man and within God.

This leads to reflections around the differentiation between unification and annihilation. The way I read Stinissen, he suggests a unification where the human self is completely absorbed by and integrated with God – a loss of self where God is all. As we saw in Chapter 6.2.2.3, he says that: «when you reach your centre, you leave yourself and move into God», and «[t]o reach the deepest self, is to go beyond yourself. No one can reach his centre, and still remain in himself» (Stinissen, 2001, p.163). This coincides with Lossky, who emphasises the importance of being *more individual* (being in concordance with humanity) and *less personal*¹³⁵. The realization of the individual is really a complete entrusting by denying oneself. Nevertheless, this complete unification does not take place in this living, but in the age to come (Lossky, 2011, p.160).

It seems Lossky/ Stinissen and Shea have different nuances in their understanding of unification: Shea emphasises the relation and inseparable togetherness, while the former describe a “beyondness” of self that is closer to annihilation. If the ultimate relational goal is Shea’s inseparable twoness, which includes the element of a certain distance caused by the togetherness of two, there could be an element of absence in the being of God. If the ultimate relational goal is a unification, where the human self goes beyond itself, we do not seem to find an element of absence in God. This apparent contradiction could be a construction: the difference might be found in the focus of concern. Shea seems to deepen in the maturing God-self-relation in earthly life, while Lossky (and to some extent Stinissen) speak of the complete

¹³⁴ See Chapter 6.1.2.4

¹³⁵ See Chapter 6.1.3.2

unification as phenomena mainly occurring in life after death. Since in this thesis we speak of the developing God-and-self-relation on its *journey towards* unification in earthly life, we speak of a condition where perfected unification cannot yet take place, and where man cannot access the inaccessible divine essence, if we follow Lossky. To both Lossky, Stinissen, and Shea God is Mystery. This implies that God to some extent is unreachable, indescribable and inexplicable *to man* – like the centre of the sun that we cannot see, but that nevertheless exists. If the inner being of the Trinity is inaccessible to the human nature and man has a limited ability of in-depth perception and relation, then distance between the differentiated beings seems inevitable – even though the Godhead itself should be accessible in its transcendence.

Commentary

Could God's being cause absence, in the light of theology? Perhaps we could reflect around this as such: There might not be absence in the living God, when we experience this God in the perfected unification *in the infinite*. Nevertheless, the different natures (God and man) will by necessity cause an *experience of absence in God*, until the perfect unification is possible. This means: even if we now were in the midst of the most absolute presence of God, there would be unreachable dimensions in the Godhead. Man will with necessity experience absence *in the human encounter* with the inaccessibility of the Godhead.

7.2.2.2 Could the God representation itself be the reason for absence?

We ask psychology: are there aspects of the God representation that might cause the experienced absence? Psychology has a solely anthropocentric view on reality. Could object relations theory still contribute to our understanding of divine absence and God's being? We will return to some perspectives from Chapter 6.3.2.2, where we immersed ourselves in the developmental phases and the originating God representation.

A) Absence – caused by the post-Oedipal God representation

Rizzuto maintains that each phase in the identity cycle comes with a *religious crisis* – and hence with a specific God representation that needs to be recreated for lasting belief (Rizzuto, 1979, p.52, 208). Then she adds:

If this reasoning is correct, we can no longer talk about God in general when dealing with the concept in psychoanalytic terms. We must specify whose God we are talking

about, at what particular moment in that person's life, in what constellation of objects, and in what experience of self as context (ibid, p.52).

Each epigenetic stage means a religious crisis with the possibilities of different outcome for the developing self and its relation to the God representation. Which God representation does the child end up with after the Oedipus conflict? The child might have a God that is a substitute for parents, a direct opposition to parents or a combination, where some qualities equals the parents and others do not (ibid, p.89). The individual God could be an aggrandized and abandoning mother, a betraying father, or an insufficient significant other – the not mirroring parent leaving the individual with a deep existential loneliness. A person's God could as such have features of withdrawal and be experienced absent. The child might have an idealized or terrifying image of God – a God to lean on and use, or a God to build strong defences against, to maintain life. This God from childhood could be bearable – and not, hence worth of acceptance or rejection.

B) Absence – caused by an asynchronous or useless representation

Rizzuto implicitly postulates that we create a God to master the oedipal crisis, and whenever we experience existential situations like birth, death, marriage, or divorce, our oedipal God enters the stage¹³⁶ (ibid, p.7). The God representation is indestructible and might always be – either dormant or active – a lifelong helper in psychic integrational processes, useful for psychic equilibrium and sense of meaning. Rizzuto highly estimates its potential:

«Throughout life God remains a transitional object at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others, and with life itself» (ibid, p.178-180).

However, Rizzuto also speak of non-conflicted non-believers who might repress a God representation that is not evolved in line with their self-representation – without any sense of loss (ibid, p.51). When through a crisis belief is not compatible with development, this belief might cease, be revised or remain anachronistic (ibid, p.203). If the less mature God seems inappropriate and unusable for the more mature and evolving self, an ego-syntonic rejection might take place. A repressed representation is deactivated as a conscious representation, and, hence, I assume it could be found absent.

¹³⁶ This representation might belong to an earlier phase, since the individual might not yet have mastered the oedipal conflict (p.77).

To other individuals a less mature God could be useful in crises; like the teddy bear brought back from the cubbyhole for instant comfort, then again hid and forlorn. Here the God representation is not transformed or synchronized with the maturing self, but the individual regress to the phase where God was left, for a childhood-like comfort, then return to normal mature life without a present God, and with no expectations of presence. In times of crises the God representation we relate to, is at test: useful or not, acceptable or merely rejected? If the representation is useless, it might – consciously or unconsciously – be rejected and seem absent. And if an individual is repressing his God – could this probably leave a hidden, unconscious trait of an absent God within him.

Neither Anna, Bea, Carl, Dina, nor Eve found their God representation useful in their crisis. To all of them the following happened: God did not respond as expected. Then God disappeared. Bea experienced that God did not protect her as she needed, and she seems to have refrained this God, to take control in life. Eve had an idealized faith in an idealized God – but with a certain conditionality; her own deeds. When she could not perform anymore, God could not be present either.

The goal of psychic life – and of ego’s adaptive and defensive work – is psychic equilibrium and meaning. The God representation is useful when contributing to this achievement (ibid, p.55, 70, 87, 89). If it is not contributing, it might be abandoned, and seem absent.

C) Absence – as a lost Superego God

In Chapter 6.4.1-6.4.2, John Shea showed the connection between the immature *adolescing self* and its limited image of Superego God, as well as the relationship between the *adult self* and the Living God. Superego God, or the God of our oedipal solution, is a necessary part of the child and the *adolescing self*’s slow cognitive, emotional and spiritual “conquest” or integration of a personal God-self-relation. Nevertheless, the maturing individual might as time passes develop ambivalence towards this God that produces both *conflict and confusion in the adolescing self*. The contrasting features of the *adolescing God* might explain the human need of losing this God.

7.2.2.3 The six portrays and their absent God

In Chapter 5.1.1 (commentary) we found the following characterizations of the absent God as; «a strong protective, parental God who is giving and demanding – and hence seems

omnipotent and the one who is in lead». We find implicit contracts in the relation to some of our interviewees: the Superego God promises security if they respect its authority.

Our interviewees paint an image of their absent God that has many Superego God features: all of them described their absent God as paternal and parental. Eve described a fear connected to her own lacking ability of servanthood, when she was ill. She described demanding parents, an equally demanding God, and a dogmatic faith. The importance of dogmas seems to have characterized both Carl's, Dina's, and Frank's faith as well. God was a powerful protector of Dina, someone who gave her life mission and direction. Servanthood in the God-self-relation was significant to Bea, Carl, and Eve. We might see traces of an unpredictable God in the absence-relief that Anna and Bea express. A claim of dependency is found in Carl's dependent relation with his best friend, who almost played the role of God in his life. To reject this friend – and hereby God – is to break the dependency, an action that led Carl into deep darkness. Both, Bea, Carl and Dina experienced situations with conflict – in a church or in missions. The conflicts were the most important outer incitements for their sensation of deep ambivalence and betrayal, leading to the experience of a lost and absent God. This could be read as a settlement with the group and with the God of the group. Our six portrayed people have a God representation with features that could cause such strong inner, subconscious ambivalence that a loss of God might be necessary.

Shea emphasizes the need for an adult and mature relation with the Living God.¹³⁷ We will later elaborate on the transformational journey, but for now underline what both Rizzuto and Shea emphasize: the importance of losing and let go of Superego God (and other useless representations) and of the adolescent self. A process of losing such fundamental dimensions as own shape of identity and own imaging of God, might very well imply a lost experience of divine presence. The Superego God is initially a warm, welcoming, protecting, loving figure, but, as time passes, other features occur. «In dealing with this God, the adolescent self may adopt a modus vivendi that goes back and forth on a continuum of trust, anxiety, fear, lack of engagement, and complete rejection», says Shea (2005, p.25).

¹³⁷ We will return to the features of the Living God.

Rizzuto, who acknowledges the significance of human interactions with God, shows the ambivalence that Shea here refers to, when describing the relational exchange between man and its God:

The love of God is of paramount importance in Christian belief, but the loved and loving object, God, remains distinctly absent to the senses, though powerfully present psychologically. Shame, dejection, guilt, the wish to hide, or their counterparts, feelings of pride, well-being, goodness, and the joy of being in God's presence, are typical religious feelings directly connected to the ongoing exchange between a person and his God. (...) Speaking structurally, one could say that the God representation oscillates between serving as target for libidinal and aggressive wishes (id) to offering superego regulatory control. Midway there are ego-syntonic experiences of object love and sustenance, which contribute to feelings of being faithful and good believer, or a forgiven sinner, which, in turn, enhance feelings of well-being (Rizzuto, 1979, p.88).

Superego God is causing feelings of shame and well-being, a wish to hide, and a joyous presence. When the self matures, the confusion, ambivalence, and anxiety increases – so the adult self might have to leave its God in the service of maturation.

Commentary

From a theocentric perspective, it seems we cannot explain divine absence by God's being. This correlates with our empirical material in the following way: the absent God rather seems to be a complex, instable, God representation with Superego God features, and not with the features of the divine Godhead as conveyed by Lossky. The empirical material hence correlates with an anthropocentric understanding of divine absence as the individual's changed perception of and loss of its God representation.

7.2.3 Absence – a result of outer incidents

When we immersed ourselves in the narratives of our six portrayed informants, we found some outer crisis catalysing the experienced absence,¹³⁸ most often playing along with deep inner dispositions.¹³⁹ The understanding of crises, great changes and surprising events as incitements both of depression, anxiety, and transformation, correlates with both psychology and theology.

¹³⁸ See Chapter 5.3.1

¹³⁹ See Chapter 5.3.3 and our next Chapter; 7.2.4.

Stinissen postulates that outer incidents most often are the catalysts towards the night, since God uses all kinds of tribulations to cleanse us and make us whole. Stinissen maintains that there might be a key to understanding suffering when it leads us to the night: «We get to know that what is threatening our downfall, might be our rescue. That no abyss is so deep, no cliff so high, that it might not be a *road*» (Stinissen, 2001, p.8). Stinissen uses St. John's own life as an example: when he was imprisoned in the monastery, alone, taunted by his former brothers, he lived his night. Francis of Assisi experienced that *his friends* abandoned the ideal of poverty, but he felt abandoned and left *by God* (ibid, p.55-56).

All tribulations might serve our “wholeness”. It might be questions of failure, of being humiliated, a divorce, the grief connected to the decease of a beloved, aging, physical or psychic illness. Yes, as well psychic disease might be a dark night cleansing and transforming the man (ibid, p.55).

He concludes as such: «If God disappears in a person's life, it is often because painful outer incidents are obscuring his presence» (ibid, p.55). It is most often a “demonstrable connection” between life situations and dark nights¹⁴⁰ (ibid, p.63).

In Chapter 6.3.3.4, we introduced Rizzuto's understanding of self as transformational in its nature. She emphasizes the meaning of outer incidents as catalysts for transformation: crises or landmarks in life – such as «illness, death, promotions, falling in love, birth of children, catastrophes, wars, and so on» – might trigger the necessary development (Rizzuto, 1979, p.200).

In this section, I would like to add an interesting conclusion from an American Think-tank established in 2002¹⁴¹, consisting of (mainly) evangelical (hence protestant) theologians, spiritual-formation- practitioners and cultural thinkers¹⁴². Their concern was the spiritual conditions of the church, American culture and spiritual formation. They wanted to determine «the crucial elements – the key concepts – that have to be present in our personal lives, our

¹⁴⁰ The absence *could be*, if we follow this argument, *a way of experiencing a night* as result of outer incidents. But we have to underline “could be”. Stinissen underlines that most people should not speak of their sufferings and hardships as the night of the soul, and definitely not as the night of the spirit. But if we welcome the sufferings as divine purification it might be a first step on the journey of the night – and looking at life in retrospect the migration might be read as a night (Stinissen, 2001, p.60-61).

¹⁴¹ Their name is TACT, Theological and Cultural Thinkers.

¹⁴² Among them we find Alan Andrews (former U.S. Director of The Navigators), Bruce Demarest (professor of Christian theology and spiritual formation), Bill Hull (pastor in the Evangelical Free Church and author), Dallas Willard (professor of Philosophy and ordained Baptist minister), to mention a few.

communities, and our God-given mission if real transformation is going to take place» (Andrews & Morton in Andrews, 2010, p.9). They found ten keys; one of them was the importance and possible meaning of suffering, that might shape the spiritual formation (ibid, p.21). In the chapter discussing suffering, writes Peggy Reynoso:

God calls us to participate with Him in the process of our spiritual formation, but we do not initiate some of the most life-changing experiences in our journey. They are unexpectedly thrust upon us in the form of failure, loss, injury, illness, pain, exploitation and unfulfilled desires. These painful experiences can shake our foundations and expose our deepest longings and weaknesses. Because suffering affects us deeply, it can also be profoundly transformative (...) (Reynoso in Andrews, 2010, p.166).

Commentary

Both our theoretical and empirical material emphasize outer incitements and its suffering as important catalysts towards transformation¹⁴³. Stinissen is the one who clearly speaks of the connection between life catastrophes and crises *and* nights of darkness and divine absence. Rizzuto emphasize the natural crises in a life cycle as incitements towards transformations, included the transforming God representation that implies the loss of a God representation (for a possible matured experience of God). It is reasonable to assume that outer events could work as catalysts to sufferings in general, as well this of experienced absence.

We will now move on to the probably most important perspectives in regards of *how to understand the experience named “God’s absence”*. Our interviewees did understand divine absence primarily as an action by God. Nevertheless, they shared narratives showing outer incitements catalysing the experience. What we found in Chapter 5.5.1 is that the experienced absence as well could be connected to events on the intra-psychic stage, such as relational experiences, and inner dispositions. The inner assumptions for the absence experiences are strong and significant, connected to humankind as such and to the individual. Let us have a throwback to our findings in regards of how to understand absence from an intra-psychic perspective¹⁴⁴:

¹⁴³ One of our theorists seems to speak differently of outer incidents. As I read Lossky, we might say unification is hindered by *lack of* “outer incidents”. Then he speaks of concrete events as religious practice, spiritual exercises, partaking in sacraments and fellowship – that are important disciplines for the unification process.

¹⁴⁴ Here those findings are reorganized.

- 1) There is an inner ambivalence in man: a desire for closeness, but also a conscious or subconscious resistance. This theme is of major interest, and will be investigated thoroughly.
- 2) Divine absence seems to be strongly correlating with a distance to or flight from own self. Or the other way around; it might be a protective isolation, a defence, ensuring no interference from others.
- 3) Divine absence might be the result of significant others and their rejection of or distance to the abandoned person.
- 4) Absence has many commonalities with conditions of depression, and is sometimes related to conditions of anxiety.

7.2.4. Absence – ambivalent desires and resistance

Throughout the empirical material, we found the desire-resistance ambivalence that seems to find its resonance as well in theory. Both Lossky and Rizzuto express an anthropology of the divided heart, and they are followed by several thinkers.

7.2.4.1 A theological approach: the ambivalent desire for God

In Chapter 7.1.2, we looked at the relief and sensation of emergent selfhood in times of divine absence. In the following, we will discuss the ambivalence in differentiated kinds of desires.

A) The deep desire and clouding passions

Lossky emphasizes as basic for humankind that we are created to «a primordial togetherness between the being of man and being of God»¹⁴⁵. The deepest inner drive of man is a desire for God, for likeness, for relation. The natural will and disposition of man is to want for God. Still, there is opposition in man, conflicting desires, a free will that tends to choose itself, not God and unification¹⁴⁶.

The divine light, that is the core of divine grace, might be obscured by our passions that are hindering a surrendering of will and prevents us from becoming individuals that receive grace (Lossky, 2011, p. 193,160). Sin and passions cloud the natural condition – the awareness of God’s presence – and implicitly is at the core of absence. «Every sin, as well the least – and the inner conditions of the heart, as well as an external action – might obscure our nature, so the grace cannot break through» (p.158). The grace is unconditional and its objective

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 6.1.3.1.

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter 6.1.3.2.

assumptions are constant. Still, our sin might disturb the reception of grace, which then is inactive in our lives.

B) Self-centred and real desire

Stinissen emphasizes the same double tendency in the human desire: we have got the self-centered desires (apetitos) and lust (concupiscencias), or the most real desire of man that is the longing for God – our real nature (Stinissen, 2001, p.45,132). To St. John the desires are in the heart of humanity, and all evil is a result of us desiring «wrong things in wrong ways». In our periphery we desire these “wrong things” to fill up our emptiness (ibid, p.136-137). In our periphery we long for God, but for the God who might fulfil our needs (ibid, p.27). Our desires are like conquering arrows, that hunt down what we are eager to have. One main reason for the dark night is to purify the individual’s selfishness and transform the way we desire (ibid, p.27 and 132-133). We need to be drawn from our egocentric periphery, towards the centre of the soul, where we are God’s image and likeness (ibid, p.45). In the centre of the soul the mystical unification might take place (ibid, p.36), here the human infinity is recovered to accommodate the infinite God (ibid, p.21), and not the least; here our desires are transformed from hunting arrows to open, empty, outstretched hands (ibid, p.133).

C) The double desire

In a significant article, *The absence of God in the presence of desire*, the Norwegian theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen (2003) thematise the double nature of desire. He emphasizes the human desire that connects us with the world and directs us towards God. At the same time, the author warns us against our desire: if God is determined by our desires, or is a fulfilment of our desire, this might be a reduction of God, who is far beyond everything we might fathom. If God is used as an instrument to gratification of our desires, our desires might imply reduction; a «restriction to transcendence and otherness». In Richard Kearney’s words this is called an onto-theological desire; a desire concentrated on lacks and searching the fullness of life. Henriksen explains why this desire tends to be so reducing:

[P]opular religion plays on a simple relation between God and desire by claiming that God is the answer to your desire, the fulfilment of all your needs. This is the very oversimplification that does not make God god. This is a lesser god, a god created for and determined by my desire. Such a god is no god – it is only a subtle version of

myself, my needs, my reality, my urge for harmony and demand for closure¹⁴⁷
(Henriksen, 2003, p.86).

The human desire for God might hence lead us astray, unless the desire has another quality than the aforementioned: Kearney introduces «the eschatological desire» – a desire transcending lack or no lack, a desire for the infinite, the impossible, the unseen, the unknown God. A desire freed from our expectations and imagination, that might free us «into a world constituted by the Other» (ibid, p.88).

How is this double desire – the onto-theological desire and the eschatological desire – connected to divine absence? The famous atheist, Schellenberg, who criticizes the paradox of a loving divinity that coincidentally is hiding¹⁴⁸ (Schellenberg in Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p. 46), has brought to the table two arguments: the Stimulus Argument, applying that God hides to stimulate a more diligent and urgent search for him; and the Presumption Argument, applying that God hides to prevent us from entering the wrong kind of relationship with him (Garcia in Howard-Snyder & Moser, 2002, p.92). Garcia suggests those two arguments would coincide in St. John's thinking.

D) The inherent ambivalence

Then what about the resistance? Here we apply the Jesuit father, spiritual advisor, and priest, William Barry,¹⁴⁹ who has contributed with several books on Ignatian spirituality. In one of his books, *A friendship like no other* (2008), he pictures several facets of the human resistance towards a relation we really desire:

1) *Resistance in fear*: The basic and consistent thinking of Barry is that the omnipresent God wants intimate relationship with man, and thus invites to friendship. A normal human response to this is fear. Hence, some of the first exercises towards friendship is to overcome the resistance in own fear (ibid, p.8, 181).

2) *Resistance through sense of shortcoming*: If we overcome our fear, we might enter a honeymoon period, but this will often be followed by distance: We withdraw when we see how «shamefully short we have fallen of God's hopes for us» (ibid, p.8). This inner resistance

¹⁴⁷ This description of this lesser God correlates with John Shea's description of the Superego God.

¹⁴⁸ We do not enter this classical discussion, but here use the mentioned two arguments of Scellenberg.

¹⁴⁹ Barry has studied philosophy and conducted a Ph.D in clinical psychology. He is considered one of the most influential Ignatian commentators at work today (Loyola Press).

is thus connected to our discovery of the enormous difference between God and ourselves and we hide in shame awaiting punishment (ibid, p. 40).

3) *Resistance through rivalry*: Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Still there is a deep imagination in the human heart that we might gain a control and power, which God refuses us to have, by our own actions. Out of this inner disposition, man enters into rivalry with God (ibid, page 16-17).

4) *Resistance in ambivalence*: Barry refers to Ignatius and mentions the diverging emotions man might have in relation with God: a possible pendulum between sense of unworthiness and friendship (ibid, p.48). As the relationship emerges in intimacy we might notice both attraction and resistance towards Christ as man (ibid, p.54).

5) *Resistance towards commitment*: with reference to Jesus' parable of the rich, young man who was challenged to sell his possessions, Barry describes a resistance connected to surrendering and sacrificing something we cannot bear to live without (ibid, p.64).

6) *Resistance in misconceptions*: There is a resistance that is basically connected to the perception of who God is and who we are. «The biggest obstacle to a true relationship with God is our belief that the relationship depends, ultimately, on us» (ibid, p.93). In addition, we are sinful, hence unworthy of relation. «Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin», the English poet George Herbert wrote in the seventeenth century (ibid, p.145). He expresses the expectations we have, being inadequate beings entering the divine presence and imagining we will be rebuffed.

7) *Resistance to union*: In a series of articles,¹⁵⁰ Barry thematises the resistance to deeper intimacy with God; to love without expecting love in return; to forgive like Jesus forgave; and resistance to surrender to the future – yes, to life itself. Barry speaks of a double tendency: The first is that we do not want change, even though the presence is painful. «[A]ny counsellor or spiritual director can testify that there is in us some power that is inherently conservative, that wants the *status quo* to be preserved no matter how painful that *status quo* is», says he (Barry, 1987, p.50). The second is that there is a resistance towards good experiences, resistance to unification. We so deeply fear what we most deeply want; unification with God (ibid, p.595). This makes Barry conclude as follows:

[A] heartfelt desire for closeness to God can coexist with a strong fear of such closeness and, therefore, with a resistance to it. Ambivalence is, it seems, the characteristic state of the human heart» (Barry, 1986, p.911).

¹⁵⁰ Barry (1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1987) in Review for Religious.

We might summarize as follows: Man hides because she is man and God is God. Hence, ambivalence is at the core.

7.2.4.2 A psychological approach: the conflicting desires

How deep is the possible ambivalent desire of man? To object relations theory, the answer is connected to the earliest origination of identity.

A) Desire for unification

Lossky and Stinissen describe the deep unification with God as goal of existence. Object relations theory emphasizes the deep inner human instinct of togetherness and search for symbiosis, originating in the first phase of the infant, where mirroring takes place. Here human religiosity is made possible in the holy, symbiotic exchange of glances between mother (parent) and child. When Rudolf Otto speaks of the numinous experience of God (Rizzuto, 1979, p.106), it probably is the adult relational and mystic experience rooted in the mirroring stage we are longing back to. The little infant has a basic need of mirroring in its originating identity. We find traces of *desire* for the numinous, for someone bigger (the mother or God) created in a sufficient mirroring phase. Without sufficient mirroring, the individual might lack a sense of underlying existential presence, find it hard to experience a harmonic being in the world, and I wonder if the inner longing for unification and relation could be disturbed and reduced as well. Then the basic condition in existence is not a symbiosis that might grow to a sense of unification, but a sense of abandonment and existential sensation of absence.

B) Desire for selfhood and the significant other

Rizzuto emphasizes each developmental phase and its inherent conflicts. The first conflict in the life of the child is the immensely important separation-individuation situation, when the child desires symbiosis with the mother, and equally desires liberation and selfhood.¹⁵¹ This conflict is basic. Mahler speaks of separation-individuation as a lifelong mourning process. We might ask; why is this mourning so penetrating? She (partly referring Erikson) verbalizes the intensity of the mother-child relation:

¹⁵¹ See Chapter 6.2.3.1.B

As is the case with any intrapsychic process, this one reverberates throughout the life cycle. It is never finished; it can always become reactivated; new phases of the life cycle witness new derivatives of the earliest process still at work (ibid, p.49).

The separation-individuation is inevitable and crucial to become a human being, and probably as reverberating as the relation. When separation occurs, the symbiotic relation ceases and the child experiences a most real abandonment when she understands that the mother has left the room. Separation-individuation is the first experience of abandonment and absence. It is a thorough experience strongly characterizing the experience world of the child with a sense of being lost, not reaching either God, the significant parent or own self¹⁵².

In his work, *En illusion och dess utveckling* (2004)¹⁵³, the Swedish priest and psychotherapist, Göran Bergstrand, among others thematise separation-individuation and Erik H. Erikson's approximation to this. He describes a context of despair, conflict, separation, anxiety and connects it to divine absence (Bergstrand, 2004, p.60).

Erikson as well shows us that *there is a drama and deep anxiety in the separation-experience of the child*. At the time of separation, the child knows of its complete dependence of its mother, for survival. Nevertheless, it has started applying its aggression to pull up a border against the mother. The anxiety in the separation experience has its center in the amazement of the child; will the mother revenge on the child for its boundaries or is she going to accept it? The life of the child depends on the mother's response to the separation. The child is powerless. The mother is omnipotent, as the child sees it. The fright for the mother's revenge is actualized every time the mother is disappearing. *The absence could mean that the mother has abandoned the child forever*.

The mother represents the god. The fear that the god will abandon is hence built into the earliest and most difficult experience of the relationship with god. Freud did consider guilt the basic difficulty for religion to resolve. Erikson considers *God's abandonment*¹⁵⁴ *one of the two basic questions that religion is digesting in adulthood*.

The other basic question is the right to identity (ibid, p.60-61).

¹⁵² This happened to Douglas O'Duffy (Rizzuto, 1979, p.109ff).

¹⁵³ The title in English: *An illusion and its development*

¹⁵⁴ The Swedish word used is "gudsövergivenhet".

What we see in the gigantic first ambivalence of separation-individuation is the child's desire for its self and for the other, coincidentally a reluctance towards symbiosis and selfhood. Before the human being again might experience a more mutual and non-symbiotic unification and relation, it has to gain selfhood¹⁵⁵. To become a self, and gain identity, distance is needed to break the symbiosis. An inevitable consequence is an experience of absence and abandonment in the deepest identity of man.

Ambivalent feelings mix with longings; wishes to avoid God intermingle with wishes for closeness. The search for love, approval and guidance alternates with noisy and rebellious rejection, doubt, and displays of independence. The pride of faithful service to God contrasts with painful doubts about being unworthy (Rizzuto, 1979, p.88).

Ambivalence is at the core of human life. In Chapter 6.3.3.4, we looked at a couple of premises for maturity; and here we will add one more: A combination of *integration* and *emotional distance* between the objects contributing to our inner psychic structure and the present, seems to be a premise for maturity. This balance Loewald calls "the maturity of memory", and it implies a freedom to call our objects to our service, and in our fantasy «love or hate our objects, play or fight with them, laugh or cry with them (...)» (ibid, p.81-82). This ego-syntonic ability to inner intimacy and distance is both a playful and mature way of relating to the representations. The natural distance corresponds with Shea's description of a mutual relation with God as Thou, where the Otherness implies some separateness.

7.2.4.3 *Psychology and theology together*

Before we read these theoretical derivations in light of our empirical material, we see how the theories go together in the following matrix (see next page).

As the matrix shows, the theorists do seem to have coinciding perceptions on the essential characterizations of the desire-resistance-ambivalence. Simplified we might say the main ambivalence is between a mature and congruent self in mutual relation with an Other/ others *and* self-centredness.

¹⁵⁵ Parenthetically, Shea emphasizes the adolescent phase where the maturing young person needs to relate to Superego God as part of its journey. I do not consider this a contradiction to Stinissen and Lossky and their description of a journey from an egocentric life towards a theocentric God-self-relation, where the self is surrendering to someone greater, so to speak. In my opinion, Shea builds a bridge between psychology (and its esteem of the self) and mystical theology (that focuses the losing of the superficial self to the deeper self in unification with God), when he describes the adolescent and mature spirituality.

Theorist ↙ Topic	Lossky	Stinissen	Kearney (Henriksen)	Barry	Rizzuto	Shea
Desire	Unification with God (natural will)	God and our real nature	God for Godself (Eschatological desire)	Friendship and intimacy with God	The numinous/ Someone other/ Self	Living God/ Adulthood
Resistance/ Contradicting desire	Sin, clouding passions (free will)	God to fulfil my needs	God as need-satisfier (Onto-theological desire)	Fear/ shortcoming and shame/ rivalry/ restraint to surrendering and union/ wrong image of God	Individuation and unification (might not be a real resistance)	Status quo/ Incongruence
Ambivalence	Self ↕ God/ unification	Egocentric periphery ↕ Center of the soul (where God lives)	God for me ↕ God as God	Shortcoming/ Fear/ Shame etc ↕ Deep friendship with God	Status quo ↕ Development/ Maturing/ Unification and sense of wholeness	Need fulfilling relation ↕ Mutual relation (adult self and Living God)

7.2.4.4 An empirical response: the double desire

A conflicting desire constitutes the deep human ambivalence, as shown above. This same desire is found in our empirical material:

A) The self-centered or onto-theological desires

In our empirical material we do find a desire for God, but perhaps also a desire for harmony, security, peace and warmth? Of prominent importance for all our interviewees' relation with

their God (before the absence experience) was the good feelings it produced. God was not only important and desired as God, but as conveyer of meaning, mission, good emotions, protection, and parental qualities¹⁵⁶. The loss of God was, hence, connected to the loss of those benefits that their religious lives produced, and the desire for this God seems – with reference to Kearney – to be an onto-theological desire.

This desire, that is searching God for what God might give and produce, is, though, a strong drive to relation. There is namely one aspect of desire, that was not presented in Chapter 5; desire is the most significant inner dispositions – working as catalyst towards transformed God-self-relations. After having experienced emergent liberty in times of absence, Anna slowly started longing. She seemed to be longing for the sense of presence, proximity, and warmth. Bea recognised her longing – as a work of The Holy Spirit – in small signs of a present God in the ongoing absence she experiences in her rather outer life. They both seem to desire the relation *as it has been*, their desire is turned to the God they know or have known, who has the strong features of a Superego God. Even though this desire is not the purified (Lossky), or adult, relational desire (Shea), human desire starts with the adolcescing desires that search the other for the good effects of the relationship. The problem, according to all our main theorists, occur when the desire does not transform.

B) The Other-centred, eschatological desire

Dina and Eve want to change their image of God. This is a cognitive decision, but could it also be connected to a kind of longing? Dina's desire for God was clearly aroused when she heard the Easter texts and singing in Taizé¹⁵⁷ – an outer incident touched her desire: «Ah, and then I experienced that I got back the desire to be in relation with God, and that desire for... yes, simply the desire for him.»

Dina might here have experienced some glimpses of «the eschatological desire». She now expresses a desire for God, just for God's being. Her desire could be analogous with Kearney's description of a desire more freed from our expectations and imagination. Carl might be on a journey towards this desire, but he seems reluctant and keeps a certain distance

¹⁵⁶ See Chapter 5.1.1.

¹⁵⁷ In the small, French village, Taizé, thousands of (young) people gather every week, for silence, prayer and singing together with the small ecumenical community of brothers and some sisters.

to God (and/ or to his own emotions). He is able to join in or back out of the relaxed relation with his God. Frank might as well, as we will see later, have traits of this kind of desire.

C) The ambivalent desires

Our empirical material has additionally shown the ambivalence: Anna and Bea express a reluctant desire, and Eve shows her ambivalence in her pending between trusting in the God – whom she does not yet know – and keeping the control by herself. They do not explain the contents of this reluctance, but maybe Barry gave us some helpers when postulating that the characteristic state of the human heart might be ambivalence. In Chapter 7.2.4.1 he listed emotions and conditions that could feed the human ambivalence: fear, sense of shortcoming, lack of control, shame, unworthiness, sin, and resistance to surrender and sacrifice.

Eve touches those dimensions in her first absence experience, where she expresses unworthiness (can I be a Christian if I cannot serve God?), shame (I do not really know who God is), and fear of losing control (who are you really, God?). Bea has a clear awareness of own resistance to union and to allow God to enter her life.

Here I will briefly mention the remarkable fact that some of the things Barry mentions are of less importance in our interviewees' understanding of their absence. They primarily speak of absence as God hiding, disappearing, and withdrawing. There are few reflections on the human withdrawal as possible catalyst to absence. And none(!) of my interviewees ever spoke of *sin* – an aspect that is of utmost importance to Lossky. Nevertheless, Anna might have implied the issue of sin, since her absence experience deliberates her to live life *the way she wants* – but she does not seem sure of this is a life her God might affirm.

Commentary

The empirical material has, together with theory, shown a threefold desire:

- 1) The self-centered (onto-theological) desire for Superego God.
- 2) The freed (eschatological) desire for the indescribable God, for the numinous and for unification.
- 3) The reluctant or ambivalent, fleeing desire.¹⁵⁸

This has become clearer through the dialogue with theory, and seems to correlate with theory:

¹⁵⁸ This might be a version of the onto-theological desire.

The individuation-separation-experience – in particular – explains psychologically the ambivalence and reluctance in human desire. So does also the perspective of an unfolding spirituality, drawn by Shea who emphasizes the significant movement from adolescence towards adult spirituality. He implicitly thematises a kind of desire from a relation with the Superego God towards a mutual relationship with God as Thou.

Lossky speak of a deep conflict between the natural and free will: we search unification with a God beyond, but we also search ourselves by desiring God for what he might accomplish in our lives. John of the Cross describes an uncleaned desire that is in deep need of purification, and Shea would categorize this as an adolescent and immature relationship. All our theologians speak in various ways of the ambivalent inner man, and the conflicting or compound desire. So does Rizzuto: as we saw in Chapter 6.3.3.2, in the heart of an ambivalent maturation, are the unavoidable conflicts connected to displacements between maturity levels.

The present thesis is concerned with divine absence, and the human desire seems to be of utmost importance to the absence experience. It is my belief, after having studied the experienced divine absence, that we are here approaching one of the core explanations in regards of absence.

7.2.5 Absence – flight, defence, or wall

In our empirical material we have found tendencies to flight and withdrawal, we have found an inner wall – and these mechanisms could be defensive. Rizzuto emphasizes the importance of human defences and, as we saw in Chapter 6.3.3.3, she has shown how all her cases use defensive systems. Our theologians do not explicitly thematise defences; nevertheless, Barry's description of the human resistance has got similarities with psychological defences. In the six portraits of this thesis, we might find defensive systems at work within most our cases, but we have a closer look at a few. The following are my *tentative reflections and suggestions*, definitely not to be thought of as an expert conclusion:

7.2.5.1 Bea's repressive defence and flight

In the story of Bea, we find a coinciding defensive system, a flight from God and also a flight from self. She seems to build a tremendous defence to hold herself together and keeping everything away and *out*. However, she also keeps distance to her *inner* being, and likewise to

the God who might reach her innermost. She cannot be vulnerable and she flees silence, not wanting to feel how life really is.

I am really very busy and fleeing a whole lot and I know I do, so... Escaping silence big time. I can't stand silence. I can't take it, all this too much conflict in a way. (...)
Ah, but I know that God's absence also means I'm really on the run, from myself.

Bea felt betrayed in the church conflict. Could this betrayal have made her regress to the situation where she was not protected, where she was alone and had to be the one and only carrying her life? When discussing the case of Bea with Ana-Maria Rizzuto and professor McDargh, we reflected around the strong defensive system, separating her inner self and outer life. There are few situations where such complete separation between inner and outer life is necessary. We at least speak of a remarkably strong defence, maybe an inner splitting.

God's absence is needed in Bea's life, and she seems left with a choice that is verbalised during our conversation. When I ask her whether she has to choose either God's absence and hence the absence of relating to difficult issues *or* God's presence and relating to those issues, she answers: «Yes, it is almost a bit like that. It sounds rather black and white, but in reality, this is what it is like for me – sort of, and I do not trust God enough to endure relating to what is difficult. I do not.»

Bea does not dare to meet God because it would cause a meeting with her inner being. Since she does not want to meet herself, she is building this defence, flying into a busy outer life, while signaling loneliness. She seems ambivalent and she is terrified when thinking of being alone.

Anxiety to me is to be by myself in this room having to think and feel. So I avoid it.
So I am rather flat but it's very... I am almost like a volcano I can feel. There are incredibly many conflicts and unsolved things inside me that I just cannot relate to.
And I am very tired.

Bea seems to protect her outer "happiness" against the inner volcano, or she defends her inner vulnerability against anything – including God – who might interfere, if ever so carefully, and disturb the balance she has achieved. Her defensive system might be a tremendous *repressing of the self-representation and the God-representation*, as an act of surviving with the inner terror that is suppressed. This defensive manoeuvre might have been realized or intensified in

the church-conflict, when she suddenly felt deeply unprotected, and needed to protect herself. If her defensive response is a repressing of the God- and self-representation, it might explain why her God disappeared.

7.2.5.2 Dina's defensive regression and rejection

Dina might have had a strong encounter with her childhood God representation when she entered a new situation of mourning and was forced to some reconciliation in life after the conflict in the country she visited. She lost her usefulness, the sensation of being protected, and she let her image of the unusable God be destroyed.

There are details in her story that might make us think of the defensive regression: In the times of divine absence she experienced two things, that might be considered important:

- 1) She started enjoying the nature. This could be a regressive manoeuvre, since her childhood at a farm probably included playing in the nature.
- 2) More importantly, she was comforted by her counsellor. Dina discovered a (long lost) experience of friendly comforting, which could remind her of a former significant other: her grandmother – and her mild glance and caring. The incidents might have caused a process of regression in the service of the I.

Dina also speaks clearly about her cognitive choice of ruining her image of God. In general, a difficult situation could very well activate the individual defensive systems – in the service of the I – to maintain psychic equilibrium. This could be at the core of Dina's absence experience. Her God was proven useless for her emerging life; which included experiences such as pain, depression, conflict, confusion, as well as lack of meaning and direction. She might have experienced an ego-syntonic rejection of a useless God representation that she deliberately ruined (through counselling).

7.2.5.3 Eve and the idealization of God and self

When Eve was a little child, she built an inner wall, which she discovered through therapy many years later. Everyone, including God, was outside her wall of protection. Eve lived with needy and demanding parents, and the same demanding is connected to her God. Her defences are probably deeply needed, to help her sustain a life with anxiety and fears, and create some safety in her aloneness.

Eve speaks of an idealized¹⁵⁹ God representation: Her God, before he became absent, was good and protective – but, she had to be this nice, Christian “sunshine child”. This idealized image of God as both coinciding with and differing from her parents, might have approved some part of herself, and given her value in an idealized image of her self. Eve’s deep crisis in life was when she could not perform achievements anymore. Who was she then? And who was her God? This experience might initially have meant a loss of her self-representation; as a pleasant, serving, performing girl. But her God and self is closely connected and she admits this connection as such: «[I]t’s crucial that you have met yourself before you somehow can meet God.» Then what if you lose your self? My assumption is that Eve lost her self, and shortly thereafter lost her God. The losing of self, might have been so dangerous that she withdrew from both her God representation and her self into a state of anxiety, and the feeling of being in a tunnel.

Commentary

In the closing commentary in Chapter 5.3.3, we asked whether absence could be a person’s distance to his or her own inner being, or the experience of a protective isolation, a defence, ensuring no interfering from others? I think my above suggestions to some extent show the possibility of such context.¹⁶⁰ We see traits of the close connection between the God- and self-representations, and between the defending systems and the absence experience.

7.2.6 Absence and significant others

Our empirical material, to some extent, gives us hints on the relationship between self, God and parents. The empirical result of such connection is varying; partly because I did not emphasize the parental relations sufficiently when conducting the interviews, and partly because I do not have a sufficiently solid psychodynamic background to understand the complexity of parental relations and their effects, as trained persons might have been able to find in the material.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ This is Eve’s own expression.

¹⁶⁰ Suggestions that I hope to be able to discuss and investigate more thoroughly with professionals in the years to come.

¹⁶¹ Let me her mention that Ana-Maria Rizzuto, had a rich, complex material of information from the patients of the research, their relatives, as well as other documents. This enabled her to write a biography of each patient (Rizzuto, 1979, p.x). She, hence, had a solid foundation for her interpretation of their interconnected representations of God, self and significant others

We return to Chapter 5.1.1.1 and the summed features of the God representation before the absence experience: The interviewees God was strong, protective, parental, giving (but demanding) achievements, seemingly omnipotent, producer of feel-good-emotions, and the one in lead.

Rizzuto has shown us how the God representation is interrelated with the self- and parental representations. Shea has expounded the description of the God representation, and, throughout Chapter 7.2.2.2.C and 7.2.2.3, we saw how the interviewees' God corresponds with their Superego God. Shea (2005) additionally underlines three things conspiring to make the early imaging of God both significant and difficult to transform (p.136):

- 1) The image of God occurs in a period of life where fears and fantasy is vivid and unbridled.
- 2) Our early experiences of God are closely tied with our parental experiences. Our ambivalent responding to the parental values and beliefs, could become one with our responding to God.
- 3) The tiny self and the almighty God define each other.

Here I want us to notice how Shea emphasize the bounds between our significant others and the features of a Superego God. Our theologians have with varying weight made the connection between a person's inner image of God and their relation with their parents. To Lossky (2011) the thematisation of human inter-relations is rather absent. Stinissen is concerned with man as psychological individual: He for instance mentions the background of Therese of Lisieux and the psychological importance of her separation from her family to live with a wet nurse, her mother's early death and her big sister's entry in the Carmelite monastery. These events could easily be explanations on her fragility and experience of the dark night (Stinissen, 2001, p.72).

I do not dare to draw conclusions in regards of the individual interviewee, her God representation and its relation to her parents. Nevertheless, I have tried to show that we find traits of such a context. I hope psychodynamic capable researchers would accomplish future studies of attachment to parents and the experienced divine presence and absence¹⁶².

¹⁶² Here we touch themes of relevance for attachment theory which contributes to our understanding of man by explaining a «biosocial behavioural system in the infant» that maintains proximity between the infant and its most significant caregiver (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p.4). The theory describes four attachment-styles: 1) The secure attachment relation, where the mother functions as a secure base (for the child's exploration of the world) and haven of safety (to whom the child easily "runs" for comfort and proximity in experiences of threat). 2) The

7.2.7 Absence – anxiety and depression

The darkness of absence touches another dimension of the human psyche; namely depression and anxiety. All my interviewees know well of depression and/ or anxiety, and both Carl, Dina, Eve, and Frank reflect around the possible interrelated condition of experienced divine absence and depression. What comes first? The hen or the egg; the absence or the depression? Dina states that the depression might have caused absence – but the absence might as well have caused depression.

Is the experience the interviewees had, with Stinissen's words, a «mental disorder or [a] dark night»? (Stinissen, 2001, p.85) Before psychology as science really arose (in the 19th century), theology and philosophy were the most important interpreters of the human self. St John must have had an extraordinary insight, seemingly describing a regular depression – but with theological terms – when painting the picture of the night of the senses with its lost emotions and lack of joy in life¹⁶³. When Stinissen discusses the dark night – and whether it is a depression – he gives some perspectives to our understanding:

1) When physical or psychological illness occur we might not ask ourselves where this comes from or why this does happen, but «to what»¹⁶⁴. Stinissen asks «[w]hich intention does God have with this?» He answers: «There is a secretive unity between nature and grace, making them often flow into each other. All natural can be transformed into grace, as well the “natural” mental disorder» (ibid, p.85). He pictures the journey of the soul as a possible deliverer from “melancholy¹⁶⁵” (ibid, p.89). There is a road *from* the psychic illness and suffering *to* the night, if the individual accepts the suffering and opposes the tug to flight (ibid, p.86-87).

avoidant attachment-relation, where the mother does not seem to function as neither secure base nor haven of safety. 3) The anxious-ambivalent attachment style, where the child swings between clinging proximity searching on the one hand and episodically reacts with anger and resistance on the other hand. These three patterns show the kind of relational experiences that adult persons might have in close relationships (ibid, p.4-5). The attachment style of the infant is basic for the adult way of attaching. Kirkpatrick shows how (several researchers) suggest God could function as a primary attachment figure in the adult life, to whom man relates in its original attachment style (ibid, p.8). The loss of an attachment figure is of great significance, and, most likely, this will activate the individual's attachment behaviour. When an attachment figure is lost, or when other events that might activate the attachment system occurs, God might serve as a (substitute) attachment figure that provides with comfort and security. Here Kirkpatrick conveys an interesting observation: «[I]n most theistic religions, separation from God is the most horrific threat imaginable» (ibid, p.9).

¹⁶³ See Chapter 6.2.2.1.

¹⁶⁴ Stinissen here refers to Elisabeth Ott, who wrote the article *Die dunkle Nacht der Seele, Depression?* (Stinissen, 2001, p.85, 200).

¹⁶⁵ «Melancholy» here includes all kinds of psychological distress (ibid, p.89).

2) Is all psychological pathology hence the night? No, Stinissen says, and provides us with two terms for a darkness to be named dark night: a) the sufferer has to consciously journey towards God, and b) the sufferer has to be able to see her suffering into a larger context – and choose to see this as a deeper incidence than the psychic illness. Because the night is interaction, between the human's free willingness to partake and God as the transforming subject (ibid, p.89-91).

3) The third perspective is rather sensational: Anxiety and God is strongly connected. «If God comes too close, anxiety arises. If he is too far away, anxiety arises as well» (ibid, p.82). Why will anxiety arise in God's absence? Where there is no God, there is no love, hence anxiety arises. But why will anxiety arise in God's presence? Our Ego is frightened of God – who is such different being. When God reveals and ruins the extreme egocentricity that is hiding our true selves, this causes anxiety. «God's arrival is the downfall of ego», and it terrorises us and liberates us (ibid, p.82-83).

When you are affected by suffering – it can be illness, sorrow, mental distress, loneliness, desperation, a feeling of being abandoned by God – then you chose by yourself what impact this will have in your life. A depression might be a regular depression, and remain so. It might as well be a part of your dark night. It might make you mature, psychologically and spiritually, and make you grow in love. It might give you a chance to save others, be involved in Jesus' salvation, “suffer what is still lacking, for the Church.” Nothing is decided in advance. You decide (ibid, p.110).

Our question is the following: is divine absence really an experience of depression or anxiety? One answer will be: yes, the dark night could be anxiety. The felt absence of God and Gods love, might arise anxiety in us – so the dark night and the anxiety is two sides of the coin. Another answer will be: no, the depression is not the night. It has to be a wanted relationship with God, and a certain willingness to entrust oneself to the process, to claim for the night. Hence, a depression might very well be just a depression. Yet, there is a third answer, according to Stinissen: it does not matter if divine absence really is the result of a regular depression – the issue of importance is what possible transformation the depression might lead to.

The explicit psychological reflections upon divine absence are lacking in Rizzuto's theory, and, hence, there is no clear connection between God's absence and depression either.

Nevertheless, Bergstrand brings together God's absence and an existential anxiety in the separation-individuation experience¹⁶⁶. Depression is as well a regular response to hopelessness, losses, crisis and other unwanted conditions in life. So finding a correlation between crisis, felt divine absence and depression does not seem to be peculiar psychology.

7.3 Effects of the experienced absence

What are the effects of the experience named "God's absence"? For the record; there might be diverging effects of the absence experience. Rizzuto has e.g. shown us how a useless God representation might be rejected or suppressed – and left unimportant and ineffective in an individual's life. This probably happen in many people's life, but is not considered loss, rather a maturing away from religiosity. In this thesis we investigate the possible effects in our interviewees' life, as it was when I met them, and none of them did reject their God consciously, hence we do not follow up on absence as merely accepted or wanted loss of the God representation.

One of my pre-understandings was that an absence experience might cause transformation, and Chapter 5.4 shows affirming traits.

- 1) We seem to find transformations in the interviewees' God representation, God-self-relation, and experience of own self.
- 2) The possible transformational process in regards of the God representation looks like this:
 - a) loss of the well-known God, b) interphase where God seems disappearing, and c) transformed God representation.
- 3) The God relation – and hence the experience of self – after the experienced absence is (to more of the interviewees) characterized by: being and confidence
- 4) The understanding of God's presence and being seems expanded and expounded after the experienced absence.

In the following we will explore these possible transformational effects.

7.3.1 The significant transformation

Before we immerse in our findings, we will see that our main theorists underline the significance of transformation: Lossky states that God is present through his energies, the

¹⁶⁶ See Chapter 7.2.4.2.B.

energies are the Godhead and God is as such omnipresent. Even though this is the natural condition, it somehow has to be an *increasing condition*, as we journey *towards* unification. Incarnation was God's step towards humanity, as unification is the human journey towards God. A transformational process is needed to experience unification, since unity is not basically possible. Lossky describes the *natural condition* on our road towards unification, as *an awareness of God that is inevitable* if our nature is spiritually healthy (p.197-198, 201). However, even though this awareness is most natural, the contrary occurs, mainly because of the clouding desires, and thus this inherent need to live in transformation.

What needs transformation? When we deployed in the desire-resistance-ambivalence¹⁶⁷ we found ourselves in the middle of the mystery of the self. Stinissen speaks of the dark nights where we need to be transformed from our egocentric periphery, towards unification with God (Stinissen, 2001, p.45). Rizzuto speaks of man's transformational nature¹⁶⁸ through the development phases and later through crisis. She emphasizes the coinciding and completely interlinked transformation of the God- and self-representations towards maturity (Rizzuto, 1979, p.88), and how the once-formed God representation cannot disappear, but has to either be used, repressed, or transformed (ibid, p.90).

Shea describes a maturing journey of the self; from the adolescent self in relation with Superego God towards adult selfhood in relation with the Living God as the Other.¹⁶⁹ This individual journey is an important existential theme: Winnicott is speaking of the false and true self (Rizzuto, 1979, p.204-205), as does the Trappist monk Thomas Merton who emphasizes the process from the false, shadow self towards the true or deep self (Scazzero,

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 7.2.4.1.B.

¹⁶⁸ See Chapter 6.3.3.4

¹⁶⁹ Our theorists are four of many theorists speaking in different ways of the indispensability of human, inner transformation: Freud emphasizes the transformational process from immature illusion towards mature rationality; C.G. Jung is concerned with the archetypal individuation process, from being a person (an outer image or mask) towards realization and real self (Geels & Wikström, 2006, p.180); Erikson developed the understanding of the epigenetic stages, where the individual's goal is integration; James Fowler (2005) spoke of stages of faith, from primal faith to the universalizing faith; the catholic priest, Henri Nouwen (2006), wrote on the prodigal son and his homebound brother – and their need to mature into likeness with their father; the Ignatian spirituality uses “four weeks” as markers of four progressive stages into deeper intimacy with God, where man eventually is being «lost and found in the Divine» (Coutinho, 2011, p.xxiv). Richard Rohr describes in Villmannen (“*The Savage*”; 1989) the two necessary male journeys towards integration, wholeness and Christlikeness; Rohr (2016a) has in his Daily Meditations additionally spoken of the maturing process from order (conservatism) through disorder (liberalism) towards reorder where we find true wisdom and mystery. With reference to Merton www.PTypes compares his self-dichotomies with those of the psychoanalyst Karen Horney, who describes the idealized and real self, where the latter is a developmental aim (Idealized self, 2010).

2006, p.84,134, Rohr, 2016b). Rohr defines Merton's false self as «the mental self-images of who [we] think [we] are, instead of living in the primal "I" that is already good in God's eyes» (Rohr, 2016b). To find the true self we have to journey through “nothingness”, or “poverty” (as the Franciscan would say), or the Buddhist's "emptiness”, or the biblical “desert”. We journey towards the True Self (ibid). What characterizes the True self? Rohr calls this “the God Self” or “the Christ Self”, a self of deep inner security. It is not depending on other people's opinions or own performance, but relating in dependence to God (ibid).

In his work *Relating God and the self: Dynamic Interplay*, Henriksen (2013) is concerned with the self and its relation to God and otherness. With reference to Kierkegaard he describes the self as “a becoming self”, hence, a developing self (p.32-33). What might characterize the development of self? Henriksen emphasizes the self's awareness of self and, hence, an awareness and experience of what is other (p.36). The emerging self is depending on the experience of something other. As I understand Henriksen, the ability of *experiencing* is at the core of the self (p.38): «[The self] presents itself from a phenomenological angle as that which is not the other: to experience being a self is to experiencing oneself » (p.36).¹⁷⁰

The child, mirrored by the mother, experiences itself as a self, when the mother's otherness emerges¹⁷¹. The core of identity – experiencing of self – evolves in the encounter with the other. Then we might ask what is the developmental goal? What is it like to become a true self?¹⁷² Henriksen, Shea, Stinissen, and Rizzuto all agree (though with different language) on the transformed or mature self as a relating, congruent, Other-centred (or other-centred) self, that searches the other for itself, and not for its own need for satisfaction. Rizzuto refers to Winnicott's true self as a “sense of being real” that she describes in an existential relation to the world:

A convincing sense of being alive, connected, in communion with ourselves, others, the universe, and God himself may occur when, in the profoundest privacy of the self, “an identity of experience” takes place between the vital components of our God representation, our sense of self, and some reality in the world (Rizzuto, 1979, p.202).

¹⁷⁰ Henriksen rejects the thought of self as an unchanging essence (2013, p.38), but still acknowledges a certain sense of self «prior to language and cognitive consciousness» (ibid, p.8).

¹⁷¹ See the perspective from Underwood in Chapter 7.2.1.1.

¹⁷² Is it an annihilation of the self or a unification between inseparable entities; God and man? See the discussion in Chapter 7.2.2.1. This is, as aforementioned, too complex to be discussed within the frames of this thesis.

There is a compound theoretical platform to assume an essential feature of the transformed, true, real, deep self is the experience of mutuality (unlike egocentrism) in relation with some other.

7.3.2 Transformations of God representation and self

When reading the transformed God representation together with the interviewees' experience of own life (underlying: their experience of self), we see the following.¹⁷³

- 1) There is an ontological shift, from achievement-focus to strengthened sense of being. To some extent all the interviewees, except Frank, expected the fixer-God and focused themselves as individuals of achievements.¹⁷⁴ Dina and Carl has a significant shift of focus from doing to being. Eve is progressing to such rest, still practising to let go.
- 2) There is an experienceable shift: in Chapter 5.4.2, we find significant changes with regards to protection, which was the most important and prominent feature with the God of Anna, Bea, Carl (merely security), Dina, and Eve. There has been a movement from the individual's need of protection towards confidence and from the protective God representation towards a relation where confidence is of deepened significance.
- 3) There has been an existential shift: The sensation of own being and experience of God's presence is transformed: God is now unconditionally omnipresent, and especially Dina and Carl experience an increased sensation of their own being in the world.¹⁷⁵
- 4) In connection with the increased sensation of unification, Frank describes an emergent You-and-I-relation with God, while Dina has a place to rest.¹⁷⁶
- 5) An interesting finding is the combination of a more composed God representation, strengthened selfhood, and expounded perception of presence.¹⁷⁷ It seems a more composed God could appear as they lost or surrendered their control. As well a more relaxed relation to own self has occurred.
- 6) The expounded divine presence is a movement from the significance of emotions to physical dimensions like nature, body, sacraments and other people.

¹⁷³ This is summarized differently in Chapter 5.5.1.

¹⁷⁴ See Chapter 5.4.1.

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter 5.4.3.

¹⁷⁶ See Chapter 5.4.3.

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 5.4.4.

7.3.2.1 Transformations of self

How do these findings correlate with theory? In Chapter 6.1.3.3 we found that the road towards unification as well is the road towards human transformation which Lossky applies, is to lose one's personal self in order to partake in the nature of humankind, the nature of the church, and become more individual. Here I apply Shea, who systematically has shown the transformations of the images of the adolcescing self (and the Superego God). The adolcescing self was characterized by fettered imaging, self-centred relations – where the other is an object for my desires, needs, and fears – and a subject-object understanding of reality¹⁷⁸.

The adult self is different¹⁷⁹: Shea speaks of *a body self*. Both Carl and Dina have a stronger experience of nature, bodily rituals, resting, and other people (comfort and presence) after the absence experience. Nature and other people was Carl's first steps out of absence. Both, Carl and Dina emphasized the body before the absence experience, but this bodily spirituality was connected to achievements, hence, with reduced rest. Now they both rest deeply. Anna is a strong body self; nature, the sensuousness and her bodily emotions are of spiritual importance. Eve works with her breath as instrument for prayer, but find it hard to relax in her body self.

The adult self is *founded in feeling* which means thought and emotion are more integrated – connected to an inner “knowing” and sense of meaning. This is closely related to the adult self with a *deep sense of self* in the profoundest solitude and in relatedness. Here is the root of our autonomy, self-esteem, desires and mysteries. This might correspond with the sensation of confidence that superseded the need of protection in many of the interviewees' narratives. Dina speaks of her newfound experience of just being with God, and now rest is a significant quality of her God-and-self-relation. This has similarities with the adult self, in a body-and-emotion-integration. Both Carl, Dina and Frank describe a condition that I interpret as a deeper sensation of being alive, a strengthened holistic approach with more clear unification with the world. Anna and Frank have all the way been living with a deep foundation in their selves, and their experience of divine presence is underlying, which might imply qualities of a self founded in feeling.

The adult self *has got clear boundaries* that makes it know who it is and who it is not. This feature probably strengthens the autonomy and reduces the performance pressure. That seems

¹⁷⁸ See Chapter 6.4.1.1

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter 6.4.2.1

to be an important transformational step. The self with clear boundaries might as well know who the other is, and is not. I wonder if this could partly explain the experience of a more composed God representation and weakened need of control.

The adult self is able to *exist in intimacy*, relate in mutuality and respond towards what is *other* out of a deep sense of self. This seems to correspond with Stinissen's simple description of the transformational process: a loss of egocentrism towards a relating to God as God (or as Thou), and not as object for my needs and as catalyst to good emotions. This experience is described by Frank who increasingly experience God as Thou and Dina who is concerned with God's being,

7.3.2.2 Transformations of the God representation

Our theorists draw, as already mentioned, different images of God. The most prominent difference is that of clear theocentric perspectives (Lossky) and the imaging of God as an infinite, external, living being who exists independently of any relation with man; and merely anthropocentric perspectives, focusing the individual's experienced God. Our use of the concept "God representation" does not mean there are no external Other outside man, but we cannot experience or relate outside ourselves. Relating to an other is an essential part of being a self, and to follow Rizzuto and Winnicott, the experience of our relations take place in our being, in the transitional area, where we mediate the outer and inner reality.

Again, we will apply Shea's description of the Living God¹⁸⁰ – as representation relating to the adult self – when we study the possible transformation of God representations. In Chapter 6.4.1.2 the Superego God is characterized as follows: a parental and Supreme Being, a conditional God of law, a God of Dependency and Control, a God of orthodoxy, and an authoritarian God of the Group.

The Living God is different: Shea speaks of the Living God as *a personal, encompassing Thou*. This correlates with Frank and Dina's emerging experience.

¹⁸⁰ See Chapter 6.4.2.2.

The Living God is a *God of Love*, who finds its resonance in the depth of the adult self. This is something other than the feel-good-producing God of protection. Our interviewees' emerging confidence in relation might be an experience of God of love.

The Living God is a *God of Freedom* and of *Mystery*, and the dimension of orthodoxy is weakened. Both Carl, Dina, and Eve described an intellectually focused faith, that is replaced. To Carl and Dina, it is of less importance to grasp God, which now is more composed. Their (good and right) deeds are of decreasing importance, the aspect of being is increased. The God of mystery cannot be controlled, and both, Anna, Carl, Dina and Frank seem to acknowledge this. It is difficult to lose this control, and Eve shows us the ambivalence in the process of losing her image of God¹⁸¹.

The Living God is as well a *God of Community*, inviting people to unity with Godself and other people. To Anna, Carl, and Frank the fellowship is significant. Carl could rest in other people's prayers when God was completely absent. Frank partakes in the greater We when officiating communion, Eve had to accept the service of others when she was ill – and it was a way towards changed God-self-relation and towards a loss of her demanding, parental God.

In the following figure, we have a closer look at the possible transformations of the God representation:

¹⁸¹ See Chapter 5.4.2

	Anna (80)	Bea (40)	Carl (65)	Dina (30)	Eve (30)	Frank (55)
<p>God before absence</p> <p>“My God was”:</p>	FATHER FORGIVING TRUSTWORTHY LOVING AND ACCEPTING PRESENT GRATITUDE-worthy CONDITIONAL ABSENT	CARING IN CONTROL CALLING PROTECTING COMFORTING REACHING in depth REQUESTING	PROTECTOR FATHER (AND MOTHER) TRUSTWORTHY LOVING REQUESTING	PROTECTOR IN CONTROL LEADING/ SENDING CARING FATHER FRIEND “BODY”	IDEALIZED IMAGE: - GOOD - PROTECTIVE DEMANDING CONDITIONAL LATER ALSO: HUMOROUS DEPENDED ON HER	FATHER/ MERCY MOTHER/ LAW GOOD- WILLED
<p>God after absence</p> <p>“My God is”:</p>	FATHER (AND MOTHER) FORGIVING TRUSTWORTHY LOVING and accepting PRESENT GRATITUDE-worthy CONDITIONAL ABSENT	REQUESTING NOT PROTECTING NOT STRONG NOT SEEING what she can handle REMOTE ABSENT (but slightly present) NOT TRUST- WORTHY	IMPERSONAL (the air and the will) MOTHER AND FATHER PRESENT and SURROUNDING	MORE COMPOSED: STRONG and WEAK BIGGER FATHER & MOTHER COMFORTER (not protecting) CREATOR FRIEND LESS OMNIPOTENT	IMAGE IN PROCESS (leaving God the protector) NOT CLAIMING INCONTROLABLE PARTAKING/ NIGH UNCONDITIONAL UNPREDICTABLE	PERSONAL PARTAKING in joy LISTENING RAISING UP CARRYING MERCY – like the father

We will return to the variations in regards of transforming representations; from Anna’s almost unchanged image to Dina’s significant transformation.

Commentary

In Chapter 7.3.2.1 and 7.3.2.2 we have seen that Shea’s descriptions of the developing God and self is in concordance with the traits of transformation found in our empirical material: a movement from an adolecing faith in a Superego God, through a loss of this God, towards an emerging mutual and mature relation between more adult selves and a more composed God.

7.3.2.3 The individual transformations

Here we will add some comments on the individual’s process and present viewpoint.

Anna is all the way through phases of absence living with confidence in her relationship with a God who seems to hold several positive attributes. Still her God is conditional, requires a certain lifestyle, and causes her ambivalence, hence has got some Superego God features. *Anna* lives cyclically in a process of prayer, experience of God’s silence, relief in absence, and increased sensation of self, some outer incitement leading to “God’s return”, relief in presence, and renewed prayer. It is not clear whether there are elements of true transformation

in the relation with God or her experienced God representation. She conveys qualities in the God-self-relation coinciding with features of the adult self in relation with a Living God.

Bea's God has been increasingly untrustworthy, and seems to be like the Superego God; evermore unpredictable. *Bea's* God was intolerable, nevertheless she has ambivalent feelings concerning the loss of this God; she is liberated to live outside limiting Christian expectations, and still she would have wanted God to intervene in her life. *Bea* is possibly in a position of having lost her God but not yet found a more convenient and mature image of God. The condition of absence might be strong defensive systems causing a loss of an asynchronous God representation. *Bea* might experience a transformed relation and God representation if she overcomes the dichotomy of inner and outer life, and reach an integral life.

Carl seems to be resting after transition. His God is now less than before; present, impersonal, and still connected to a kind of parental security. *Carl* is free to join God or not. In the absence experience *Carl* might have defended himself by rejecting the God representation (that reminded him of his friend). He lost his illusionary image of God, and probably the idealized image of himself. Through some years he might have lived waiting in a transformational process. The time of absence seems to have served or partaken as a catalyst towards change. Both the God representation and self-representation is now more compound and *Carl* does not seem to control neither himself nor his God.

Dina describes a severe transformation of her God- and self-representations through a defensive manoeuvre of regression and rejection. Her former Superego God was “in her pockets”, and she was in God's pockets as well. Now there is a freedom in the relationship, and her God is greater and less omnipotent, more composed, and, not least, a secure place with stronger Living-God-features. Both *Carl* and *Dina* seem to have found a larger existential platform.

Eve's God is partaking and unconditional, but also unpredictable and uncontrollable. She has through the first absence experience lost her achievements focused self-representation, and also her strongly idealized God representation. *Eve* is probably in a liminal stage, between representations, but seeing new representations of God and self under construction.

Frank describes a profound and slow transformation, not easily connected to a “before and after” experienced absence. Frank’s fight seems rooted in the duality of the lawful mother and the merciful father. Through life, this is his ambivalence, in depth a fight of life and death, where powers of life seem increasing – and we see a slowly forming transformation. Both Frank and Dina might be developing a real and mutual relationship, and experience some kind of congruence in relation.

7.3.3 *Absence as catalyst towards transformation*

In our introduction to Chapter 5.4, we asked: why does divine absence exist? Is absence – as a way of suffering – indispensable for human transformation? Brought to a head: Is it possible to become a true self without having experienced suffering? And hence; could divine absence be part of the human suffering that leads to transformation and maturing?

Could we conclude around absence as catalyst towards transformation? It is reasonable to suggest that transformation is connected to suffering as such; hence, it could be caused by the surrounding events causing great pain in our interviewees’ life. We do not know if the absence experiences itself caused transformation, but we cannot exclude such understanding. We just do not know. However, which complicated processes that make our interviewees feel God is absent, is not crystal clear.

Still, there is a perspective of interest with regards to absence as suffering: The absence experience allows the person to experience what both psychodynamic and theological thinkers would agree upon: the necessity of losing an inner image of God, to a more adequate God representation that is aligned with an increasingly congruent self-representation. This goes along with the equal necessity of losing a self-representation – a shadow self – to the emergence of a true self – and this might happen through crises.

Here we probably find the key to understand divine absence as catalyst towards transformation: *The absence experience is a situation of a lost God representation – which probably is a prerequisite for a transformed image of God.*

8. SUMMARIES, REFLECTIONS & PERSPECTIVES

Our research question is: *What are the characteristics, effects, and understanding of the experience named “God’s absence”, as portrayed in the stories of persons with a personal relation to God?*

In this thesis, we have met God as psychological reality, which might be a challenging read raising questions like: is there a real God, or is a person’s God just a grandiose parent or a psychological construction? Is there a God outside ourselves? Philosophy will doubt and discuss this. Psychology does not really care about a probable God outside our inner structures. Theology would not be theology if it excluded God as an external being, separated from man – and relating to us.

This thesis is based on a theological platform. However, this does not exclude the importance of psychological contributions, understandings and perspectives. Rather the contrary, theology and psychology together widen our understanding of the human self, and perhaps also of God: How might individuals be able to experience and relate to an existence who is by nature so different, if this overarching being somehow would not appear perceptible and experienceable in our inner structure? A central doctrine in the Christian theologies is the mystery of incarnation. God as inner representation might also be understood in an incarnational way; a “reduced” Godhead for the case of availability, a God who enters the psychological world to be experienced. Coincidentally – following the Christian theologies of this thesis: God is beyond, inevitably transcendent, and inevitably immanent, inviting us to a maturing, transforming, and mutual relation.

8.1 Summaries: How do we describe and understand the absence experience and its effects?

In this chapter, I present my summaries. Here we concentrate on the aspect of *understanding absence and its effects*.

8.1.1 Descriptions of absence

Our empirical material has disclosed divine absence as experienced through:

- 1) A loss of feel-good emotions.
- 2) Increasingly difficult emotions and conditions of depression.
- 3) A sensation of deliberation and relief, and hence an experience of ambivalence.

The theoretical material mainly confirms the first two findings with regards to *the description* of absence. When analysing the theoretical contributions concerning inner human dispositions, we find a clear ambivalence in the resistance-desire dichotomy, that seems to follow and affirm the descriptions of deliberation and increased selfhood in times of divine absence.

8.1.2 Understandings of absence and its effects

Our empirical material has disclosed a quadruple, interrelated understanding of divine absence:

- 1) Absence as result of God's being or deliberately hiding.
- 2) Absence as a condition caused by outer incitements.
- 3) Absence as intra-psycho experiences and responses. This is coherent with the individual assumptions, dispositions, and inner representations that were activated when some outer incident occurred.
- 4) Absence as a possible contributing factor to maturing and transformation.

These perspectives have been thoroughly discussed in Chapter 7. I would like to derive and pinpoint the aspects that in my opinion are of significance with regard to understanding divine absence:

Absence as result of God's being or deliberately hiding:

- 1) *We cannot dismiss divine interventions as catalysts towards a transformation that realizes a self into maturity and true selfhood.* A hiding God could prevent a God-self relation characterized by the onto-theological, self-centred desire of good emotions, protection or other "divine products".
- 2) *Given the Godhead's and humankind's different natures, there is an inaccessibility in God to human experience, which could be perceived as divine absence.* There exists a divine transcendence that human beings cannot penetrate. Although God theologically spoken should be completely accessible, I believe the differentiated nature hinders the human ability for real unification. Seen from a theocentric perspective, we probably

cannot find divine absence. Seen from an anthropocentric theological perspective, we might say God's absence is inevitable, because of God's beyondness.

- 3) God is *experienced* as an individual, inner representation. The God representation could have such characteristics, that the maturing self, in its attempt to achieve psychic equilibrium has to reject this being. Then absence could be explained as a (often subconscious) response towards the individual's God representation. *I tend to believe this is the most significant reason for the absence experience, when explaining absence with God's being.*

Absence as condition caused by outer incitements:

- 4) The experience of divine absence could be initiated or caused by developmentally crises, life crises, other events in life – in combination with individual responses caused by a complex of individual inner dispositions and assumptions.

Absence as intra-psychic experiences and responses:

- 5) The absent God is a lost or hidden God representation.
- 6) To become a mature self in congruence, *the individual (most often) has to lose its God* of adolescence that often has strong parental features (the feared parent, wished-for parent, or the real parents). This losing could happen gradually or instantly, and probably has to mean some kind of absence experience.
- 7) The absence experience is *always* an intra-psychic experience, often in the service of psychic equilibrium and maturation, all though not always solely an intra-psychic experience.¹⁸²
- 8) The absence experience is closely connected to ambivalence at the core of humanity. This ambivalence consists of resistance caused by notions of self and God, and the dichotomy of self-centred and Other-centred desires. The experienced absence is, hence, feared and hurting, but also wanted.
- 9) The absence experience will often include some ego-syntonic defensive manoeuvre; a subconscious rejection, suppression, or repression of the God representation.
- 10) The absence experience could be caused by, or cause, depression. The experience could still be transformative.

¹⁸² There are probably lots of other themes, related to the intra-psychic dispositions that might cause or strengthen an absence experience. Other theories will emphasize other characterizations than did I.

Absence and transformation:

- 11) Along with many theorists, I will conclude: every crisis – including the absence experience – can be a transforming night, transferring man towards maturity and real relations.
- 12) An absence experience is central, perhaps inevitable, in a transformational process towards a mature and mutual relation with the Living God.
- 13) An absence experience should (in pastoral care) be considered an invitation towards transformation, and, hence, be treated with sincerity, acceptance, and respect.
- 14) An absence experience seems to have the following possible order:
 - 1) Losing (most often a Superego-) God,
 - 2) live in an interphase of confusion, anger, relief, resignation, and/ or indifference,
 - and 3) experience of some transformed God representation¹⁸³.

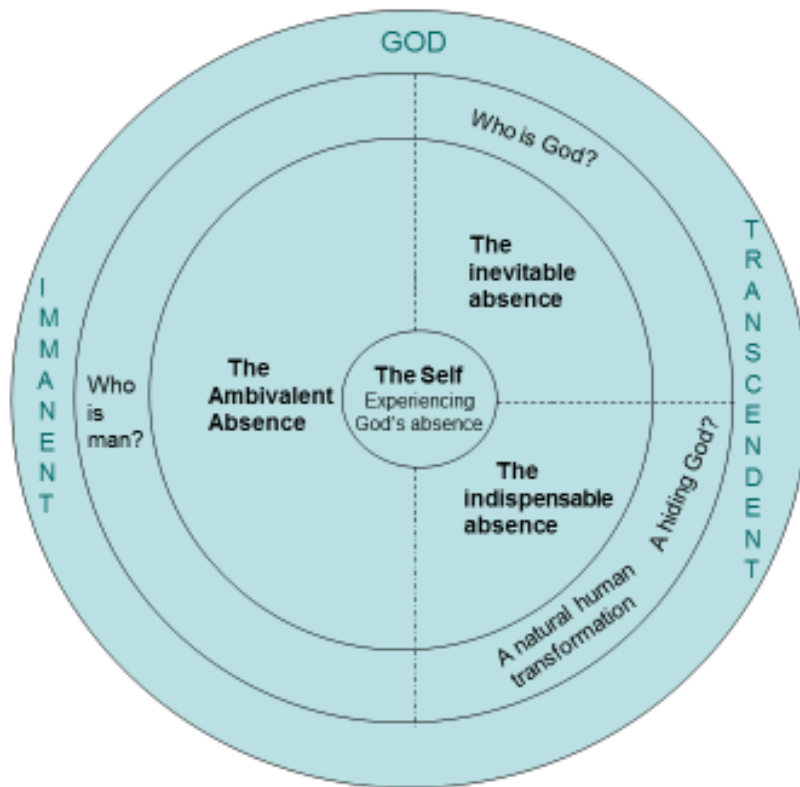
8.1.3 A useful model for the pastoral care

Out of the summaries in Chapter 8.1, we might derive a threefold *anthropocentric*¹⁸⁴ theological understanding of absence:

- 1) *The ambivalent absence:* The absence experience is feared and desired, as God is wanted and resisted. In this ambivalence a long row of human prerequisites and circumstances are influencing, i.e.: personality, attachment style, coping ability, socio-cultural background, quality of God representation, the desire-resistance ambivalence, and defensive needs.
- 2) *The Indispensable absence:* An experience of divine absence (as loss of God representation) might be indispensable – at least of significance – for real transformation of both God and the self.
- 3) *The Inevitable absence:* Some experience of divine absence seems inevitable, connected to God's beyondness, and the differentiated natures of God and man.

¹⁸³ If the God representation is not transformed, it might be rejected and silenced, while the individual continue life without a conscious relation to its God.

¹⁸⁴ Here I focus the human experience and perceived absence, not the theological emphasis on omnipresence.



The model is a tremendous simplification, but might be useful in pastoral care. I would like to emphasize the ambivalent absence as the strongest explanation to human absence experiences. This dimension is, still, inseparable from the inevitability and indispensability of absence. In pastoral care, I suggest we focus on the human *experience* of divine absence, and thus, on the multitude of outer events, inner dispositions and assumptions – together with the God representation – when we try to understand the absent God of an individual.

8.2 Reflections on the research process

Here we will explore the, reflexivity, reliability, validity, and relevance of this research.

8.2.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research, is the will and ability to question own process and conclusions (Malterud, 2008, p.26). Here I want to point at my own research process, as it has emerged through the dissertation:

Phase 1 - the expectations: in Chapter 2.2 I disclosed my expectations and assumptions – as far as I am aware of them – in the beginning of the empirical process.

Phase 2 – the empirical findings: the findings in Chapter 5.5.1 show my emerging notion on the complexity of divine absence, after thorough analysing of the empirical material. The *descriptions* of the absence experience were more composed than I expected; less emotional, more depressive, and with a surprising ambivalence connected to a sensation of relief and increased selfhood (expectation 1¹⁸⁵). The *understandings* of divine absence, by far exceeded my imagination: the absence experienced could be understood as related to God, connected to some outer incidence, and mainly be caused by intra-psychic dispositions. The absence experience seemed less related to God alone, than I would have thought (expectation 3), and the intra-psychic processes were more intrusive. Listening to the absence experience within the framework the life narratives, gave me a more complex image of the absence experience than I did expect. The *effects* of divine absence – in shape of transformation – correlated with my expectations.

Phase 3 – abductive work: while analysing the transcribed interviews, I read¹⁸⁶ Barry, Rizzuto and Shea (for the first time). This especially made me aware of the resistance-desire dichotomy that might have gotten my attention on behalf of other themes. Once I discovered the complex of desire, longing, resistance, conflict, ambivalence, and defences, these features “stepped forward” in my empirical material, and might have shadowed other findings dwelling in my blind zone. This might be a weak point in my thesis, and I hope other researcher’s will continue the empirical research with regards to divine absence, and see dimensions that I have missed.

Phase 4 – the beginning of the hermeneutic process: with an expanding horizon of understanding, I went to my main theorists with a complex of questions¹⁸⁷ for thorough studies. These questions show that I had not given up on my pre-understandings, I still hold on to them – and mixed my prejudices with my emerging understanding. I expected to receive more theoretical perspectives on absence than I did (see expectation 9 and 10): a thorough reading of Lossky nevertheless surprised me. He does not speak of absence, rather the contrary; there is no absence in God’s being, absence is less important. A thorough reading of Rizzuto surprised me as well; she describes mechanisms that seems to correlate strongly with

¹⁸⁵ See Chapter 2.2.1

¹⁸⁶ I was in this process as well able to meet and speak with Ana-Maria Rizzuto, professor John McDargh, William Barry, John Shea, and Laura Garcia. This was part of my hermeneutical process.

¹⁸⁷ See Appendix D.

my interviewees' narratives and inner complexity; i.e. defensive systems and rejection of useless representations.

The hermeneutical process went on. I realized I needed more help from theory for a better understanding of the compound absence. Stinissen could help me with an emerging understanding of the absence experience, and I thought he would speak of divine hiding as an action by God; but he rather conveyed the contrary. Shea's descriptions of the adolcescing and adult spirituality was a theoretical perspective giving language to my empirical findings, hence he was included.

Phase 5 – the continued hermeneutic process through discussion: throughout the discussion I have tried to reflect around the three implicit themes in my research question: the *description*, *understanding*, and *effects* of God's absence. I have discussed them systematically, and used our main thinkers and other thinkers that might contribute. Even though I have discussed this with utmost sincerity, I am aware of theoretical perspectives that could have contributed to, and perhaps changed, the results or the emphases conducted. I have already mentioned attachment theory, and would also highlight the social sciences and the interesting comparison of absence experiences, preached images of God and Christian socio-cultures – that would increase our understanding of the theme of investigation in this thesis.

There is a danger in all research that we tend to look for similarities and correlations, and hence subconsciously avoid theory that contradicts with empirical findings. I cannot exclude the possibility that I made this mistake. However, the hermeneutic discussion, changed my understanding of divine absence, which might imply I have experienced some hermeneutic transformation.

Phase 6 – conclusions and transformed view upon findings: if we compare my prejudices in Chapter 2.2 and the empirical findings of Chapter 5.5.1 with my summaries in Chapter 8.1.2, we see my emerging understanding:

- I thought divine absence could partly be explained by God's deliberate actions or being. This understanding is changed.
- The most prominent reason for the experienced absence is probably the quality of the individual's God representation that could be tolerable or unbearable. I did not expect this to dominate my understanding.

- The strong experience of ambivalence connected to divine absence was surprising to me when conducting the interviews, but strongly confirmed through theories.
- The transformational aspect of divine absence is supported by the empirical material and by the theories, and hence strengthened as component in my understanding of divine absence.

Some findings affirm my prejudices, others do not. Gadamer speaks of hallmarks of genuine questions, which are crucial for the hermeneutical process; both, that the question should be open (which implies that the questioner does not know the answer), and the question should be posed within a question horizon where the prejudice of the researcher is one possible answer¹⁸⁸. I have met the interview situation with a combination of openness and prejudices; I have been surprised and affirmed.

With these considerations about the research process, I have wanted to be transparent. Bryman's criterion of confirmability is difficult in qualitative research. I have here (and also by means of several matrixes in the Appendixes) opened my research process to disclose my reflections and changed prejudices, hopefully showing that I have acted in good faith, and treated my material with careful respect.

8.2.2 Reliability

Here I will apply Tale Steen-Johnsen's (2014)¹⁸⁹ interpretation of Bryman's term "reliability": «Translated into qualitative terms it refers to how I documented the empirical collected for this dissertation» (p.306). I have in details explained how I collected and treated the empirical material, and the matrixes has also shown how I used the material to extract information.

8.2.3 Validity

The validity of the research is connected to the transference of findings to an extended context. Both Malterud (2008, p.24-25) and Bryman (2012, p.390) speak of internal and external validity.

With regards to the *internal validity* we evaluate the choice of method: have we used the right method, and have we used it in a proper way? (Malterud, 2008, p.24-25). The choice of semi-

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter 3.4.1

¹⁸⁹ Her doctoral dissertation is: *Oil on troubled waters – religious peacebuilding in Ethiopia*.

structured, depth interviews gave us a rich material – and gave me the possibility of an extended understanding of the absence experience, as seen in a life cycle. The use of the life-graph gave additionally expounded information. The abductive analytic style was important for the hermeneutical process that enabled me to transform my understanding of divine absence.

Could something have disturbed the process of collecting and using information? I should mention that in a rather narrow Norwegian, Christian environment, some of the interviewees recognized me as the author of a book on a Norwegian retreat centre¹⁹⁰. At least two of my informants were well aware of my authorship, and the other three might possibly have known it as well. This could have been part of their motivations to meet with me, and might have disturbed the interview process, and made them appear differently than if I was completely unknown. On the other hand, this could have increased their confidence in me, and made them trust me with information of personal significance. What we discovered in the interview, was that all the interviewees exposed more than they had planned, or discovered new aspects of their own narrative. Hopefully, this means that knowing who I am did not interfere negatively.

This situation goes the other way around: I know of three of my interviewees, and have a professional relationship with an acquaintance of the fourth. I have kept this in mind when analysing my findings. And I have been very conscious not to let this beautify my findings.

The *external validity* is concerned with possible transference to other contexts (ibid, p. 25). The environment of my research was mainly persons who had sought counselling or spiritual directional institutions for dialogue. The introduction¹⁹¹ shows the regularity of the divine absence experience. I assume this research would be of interest both inside and outside the counselling room and pastoral care. The external validity is closely connected to the next subsection; on relevance.

¹⁹⁰ The retreat center is fairly well-known among Christians in Scandinavia.

¹⁹¹ Chapter 1.1

8.2.4 Relevance

Here we ask whether this research contributes to existing knowledge, and if we might withdraw new information from the study (ibid, p.22-23). I would like to draw attention towards three perspectives:

1) *Empirical contribution*: as we have seen, when presenting the research relevance¹⁹², I have only found one empirical study on divine absence, and this study did have a specific context; Zuidgeest's (2001) concern was the meaning of the Christian tradition for mourning believers, and the divine absence was one (increasingly significant) of four themes of investigation (p.7,84). My study is specifically concerned with divine absence. My research group is small, but the topics covered have involved situations beyond only mourning. I have not found any other empirical studies specifically concerned with the experienced divine absence.¹⁹³

2) *Perspectives from theology and psychology*: As mentioned, I have found only one study of absence in light of object relation theory and theology together, Underwood (1986).

3) *Perspectives from differing theologies*: I do not know whether there are studies discussing the divine absence within a frame of different theological perspectives. It would surprise me if such research does not exist, although I have not found them. In my study, I have applied both a systematic theological perspective and perspectives from Christian spirituality traditions.

The relevance of this study, *The silence of the God who speaks*, is based on its contributions within the mentioned area: it might be the only empirical study (in the English speaking and Scandinavian environments) with the absence experience as main focus; it might be the only existing study bridging empirical material with perspectives from both psychology and systematic theology, not to mention Christian spirituality traditions. Hence, both the empirical findings – and the way they are read hermeneutically – could be considered contributions.

¹⁹² See Chapter 3.5

¹⁹³ This does not exclude the possible existence of such studies. If any reader of this thesis is aware of empirical studies of divine absence, please let me know.

8.3 Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have wanted to understand more of the complex experience of divine absence; popularly formulated: what is at the heart of the experienced absence of God? As shown in the above chapter, my horizon of understanding has changed.

I thought I would find evidence that there were strong aspects of hiding within the Godhead, but reading Lossky, Stinissen, and Barry surprised me: they all emphasize the unceasing divine presence. Stinissen even postulates that the dark nights are not signs of absence, but of intrusive presence. We cannot dismiss the possibility that the differentiated beings, God and man, might cause an experience of absence, but we do not seem to find the key to understanding divine absence here.

I thought I would find evidence of the deliberately hiding God for transformational reasons, but neither the empirical material, Lossky, Stinissen, nor Shea affirm such prejudices. The Godhead is ineffable, and we live in ignorance, not completely seeing who God is, hence, we cannot exclude the deliberately hiding God (as mother Theresa and St. John might have experienced this). Nevertheless, the intrusions of God as reason for the absence experience, is bleached in my understanding of absence, and my conviction is the following: God is not a hiding God. God is present.

Then what is the experienced absence? In ordinary people's life, I believe the absent God primarily is the lost, hidden, rejected, or suppressed God representation. We probably have to lose our God representations and our self-representations (as long as we live) in the service of the maturing self; in the service of the I; and in the service of the transformation man has to experience towards maturity and mutual relations. In ordinary people's life, I believe the absence experience is complex, but mainly consisting of an outer event coinciding with both individual and general human dispositions, among them; the deep ambivalence in our conflicting desires, and our defensive systems activated to maintain equilibrium.

The theoretical material – both the different theological perspectives, and object relations theory – seem to confirm such findings.

8.4 Perspectives

«God is dead – to me!» «God is absent!» The reverberating experience of divine hiddenness that penetrates the Psalms and penetrates so many lives is of utmost importance to any Christian church, any priest, pastor, and counsellor that want to speak truthfully of life. There is a temptation to focus only on divine presence. Nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically, giving space and language to divine absence becomes an implicit invitation for people to cease devaluing their own faith..

There is, though, a painful attachment to this willingness to speak: to allow for our own darkness, doubt, and suffering. To embrace the possible absence experience in our own lives. How can we dare to meet others in their pain, if we dare not face our own? How can we open the religious life for real maturation and transformation if we do not dare to face the dying of something; some of our selves, some of our God representations?

There is a silence of the God who speaks. This silence is complex. This silence should not be silenced.

Prepare yourself for the message.

You are prepared?

Silence.

Silence is the message.

The message is... Wait.

Are you sure? An echo?

An echo of an echo?

Sound.

Was it always there

with us failing

to hear it?

What was the shell doing

On the shore? An ear endlessly

drinking?

What? Sound? Silence?

Which came first?

Listen.

I'll tell you a story

as it was told me by the teller

of stories.

Where did he hear it?

By listening? To silence? To sound?

To an echo? To an echo

of an echo?

Wait.

R.S.Thomas¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Thomas in Philips, 1986, p.170-171.

PART V: APPENDIXES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX A: LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANTS

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ABOUT GOD'S ABSENCE

Interview request in connection with a Master Thesis

As part of my work with a Master Thesis at the Norwegian School of Theology, I will during the fall of 2013 conduct five to eight in-depth interviews about the experienced absence of God. The aim of the project is to find a language for the experienced absence of God, and then try to systematize this human experience in relation to the Christian theology's description of God being close as well as distant (immanent and transcendent).

Participation in the project means that I will have an in-depth interview with you, during which we will look at your faith history – i.e., your life history where the relationship with God is the main topic. The interview is likely to last one to two hours, and we will agree on a suitable place and time. Our conversation will be recorded, and I will be taking notes as we speak. Sometime after the interview our conversation will be transcribed (i.e., written down verbatim), and you will be given the opportunity to read through it all.

No one except my supervisor, professor Leif Gunnar Engedal, and myself will have access to any information that can be traced back to you as an individual. It will all be subject to non-disclosure rules and treated as confidential. Your name and other contact information will be stored separate from the transcribed interview. Any information that would make it possible for readers to identify you will be anonymised. Upon completion of this work – 15 May 2014 – recordings and all personal information will be erased.

Participation in this project is voluntary, and you may at any time withdraw and demand that the information you have given not be used the project. In the case of such withdrawal, all collected data about you will be erased.

The results of the study will be published in the form of a written thesis. The study is registered by the Data Protection Official of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Your written consent may simply be handed to me when we meet for the interview. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me before or after our conversation.

Best regards

[NN (signature)]

Master student

Norwegian School of Theology

[Contact information to supervisor]

An empirical study about God's absence

Statement of consent:

I have received the pertinent written information, and am willing to participate in the study.

Signature Phone number

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction:

- Walk-through of letter
- That I will make notes to remember, and for going back (if warranted) to in-depth considerations
- The conversation is divided into two parts:
 - 1) Open the telling of the story. Pose open questions – give room for the long story.
 - 2) Questions that are more direct.

During the conversation we will focus on various phases of life – life as it is now, as well as childhood and adolescence.

You are free to choose what to answer and what not. It is perfectly ok to set limits for the conversation, and to let me know if there are topics you are not comfortable talking about.

Main questions:

- 1) How has your relationship to God or your life with God emerged and developed throughout your life?
Here I seek to understand the person's "faith history" – i.e., the life history with faith as the narrative starting point.
- 2) Can you tell me about or describe your relationship to/ life with God?
- 3) Can you give me some information about your childhood and adolescence? Important events? Important relations? How were your parents?
- 4) What about your relationship to/ life with God is important to you?
- 5) Why are these things important?

In-depth questions:

- 6) How would you describe that which you experience as God's closeness or presence in your life? What makes you know/believe that this is God?
- 7) In what way is this experience of closeness or presence important to you? What kind of emotions are related to the experience of presence? What do you associate with this presence? Can you elaborate on what your life has been like during times when you experience God's presence?
- 8) That which you experience as God's presence – has it's character changed during the course of your life? (Have you had *different* experiences of God's presence?) If so, in what way? And, if so, compared to what has it changed its character? How would you describe and explain this change?
- 9) How would you describe that which you experience as God's absence in your life?
- 10) What has this experience meant to you? What consequences, if any, has the experience had? (How has the experience affected you?) What emotions are associated with the experience of absence? What causes you to identify this experience as an absence of God?
- 11) That which you experience as God's absence – has it's character changed during the course of your life? How would you describe and explain this change?
- 12) Would it – if relevant – be possible for you to describe the shifts between presence and absence?
- 13) What does God's presence/absence currently mean in your life? To what degree is this an important topic? Or, alternatively, why is it not important?

- 14) Do you find the phrase “presence in your own life” meaningful? Have you any experience with a possible connection between your own presence and that of God, or your own absence (i.e., lack of presence in your own life) and that of God?
- 15) You may not perceive this as meaningful, but might it be the case that your ability to be yourself is experienced more or less strongly depending on God’s presence or absence? If so, why?

AFTER the conversation: Could we try to capture that which you have shared with me using a graph? This is your time line. Where in your history were the turning points related to God’s presence or absence? Did other things happen in your life at those times?

Concluding question: Are there any additions or qualifications you would like to make?

Next steps: I will e-mail or send you the transcribed interview so that you can read and possibly comment on it.

**APPENDIX C: MATRIX 1, EXAMPEL¹⁹⁵
– INDIVIDUAL CODING AND CONDENSATION**

INFORMANT CARL MAIN THEME¹⁹⁶ (codes and subthemes)	Condensed material (quotations)
I. BACKGROUND I.1 Relation to significant others I.2 Existential feeling (childhood/ adolescence) I.3 Christian background/ transference to a conscious faith I.4 Church experiences I.5 Social position I.6 Other background/ Life situations	
II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELATION WITH GOD (before experienced absence) II.1 Confidence II.2 Safety II.3 Intellect II.4 Achievements II.5 Emotions II.6 Comfort II.7 Image of God – father and mother	
III. QUALITIES OF EXPERIENCED PRESENCE (How is God’s presence experienced) III.1 Intellectually III.2 Achievement-oriented III.3 Emotionally III.4 With intuitions	

¹⁹⁵ Here I just show the kind of matrix I used for all informants. They were filled with rich condensates in the right column.

¹⁹⁶ The main themes are used for all the informants. The subthemes and codes are individual.

<p>IV. QUALITIES OF EXPERIENCED ABSENCE (How is God’s absence experienced?)</p> <p>IV.1 Catalysts for absence Church-conflict/ betrayal/ outcast/ standing alone</p> <p>IV.2 The characteristics of absence Loss of emotions/ Deeper depression/ No comfort</p> <p>IV. 3 Emotions in connection with experienced absence Emptiness/ despair/ anger</p>	
<p>V. CHANGE (of condition: from absence to presence) (What made the conditions change?)</p> <p>V.1 Indescribable road V.2 God in others V.3 Claimless presence V.4 Nature V.5 Poetic texts</p>	
<p>VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELATION WITH GOD (after absence)</p> <p>VI.1 Changed presence (of God) VI.2 Sense of being VI.3 Physical VI.4 Distant VI.5 Freedom VI.6 Identity – increased selfness VI.7 Changed image of God VI.8 Safety</p>	

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONS FOR THE DIALOGUE WITH THEORY

1. Who is the absent God?

- A. Which characteristics of God could shed light on divine absence?
- B. Are there keys in the (theoretical) understanding of *God's being* that might *explain* divine hiddenness?
 - What does apophatic theology say of God?
 - Which understanding of God does Christian spirituality provide us with?
 - Which understanding of a hiding/ absent God does psychodynamic oriented spirituality provide us with?
 - Which understanding of a hiding/ absent God might psychology provide us with?
- C. Are there keys in the (theoretical) understanding of *God's deeds* that might *explain* divine absence?
 - What does apophatic theology say of a possible deliberately hiding God?
 - Which understanding of God's possible active absence does Christian spirituality provide us with?
 - Which understanding of a hiding/ absent god might psychodynamic oriented spirituality and/or psychology provide us with?

2. What is God's absence?

- A. How do our theories *describe* an experience of God's or a significant other's hiding?
- B. How does apophatic theology/ Christian spirituality/ a psychodynamic oriented spirituality/ psychology *explain* God's absence?
- C. What might *cause the experience of absence*, according to our theories?

3. Who is the person experiencing absence?

- A. What kind of inner dispositions or precautions would – according to our theories – increase the chance to experience divine absence?
- B. Which role could outer incidents play related to divine absence?

4. What effects could an experience of suffering/ divine absence have?

- A. In what way might absence be intentional or necessary for a purpose?
- B. What do our theories convey around the relation between suffering and transformation? With other words: Could real transformation happen without suffering?
- C. Is an experience of *divine absence* necessary for a transformed God representation/ self (in a God-self relation) and sense of divine presence?

APPENDIX E: AFFIRMATION FROM NSD

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Vår dato: 07.06.2013

Vår ref:34554 / 3 / HIT

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

TILBAKEMELDING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 15.05.2013. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

34554	<i>En empirisk studie om gudsfravær</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	<i>Det teologiske menighetsfakultet, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
Daglig ansvarlig	<i>Leif Gunnar Engedal</i>
Student	<i>Anne Margrethe Mandt-Anfinsen</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/meldeplikt/skjema.html>. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://pvo.nsd.no/prosjekt>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 15.05.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen


Vigdis Namtvedt Kvalheim


Hildur Thorarensen

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APPENDIX F: MATRIX 2 – BEFORE ABSENCE

In this matrix¹⁹⁷ we have arranged the relationship, probable God representation and experience of presence before absence in a matrix.

Main-category Case	BEFORE ABSENCE			
	1. Psychological keys (background) ¹⁹⁸	2. God & Self Relationship is Characterized by:	3. God representation “My God is”:	4. God’s Presence
Anna (80)	<p>-FATHER -ABANDONMENT -PROXIMITY- LONGING</p>	<p>God “gives” and is: -UNDERLYING PRESENCE -ABSENCE -LOVE and ACCEPT</p> <p>Self experiences: -AMBIVALENCE: FAITH and DOUBT; LOVE and BAD CONSCIENCE; RELIEF IN ABSENCE and LONGING FOR PRESENCE -TRUST</p>	<p>-PRESENT -FATHER -ABSENT -AMBIVALENT (presence/ absence) -LOVING, ACCEPTING -CONDITIONAL -FORGIVING -WORTH OF GRATITUDE -TRUSTWORTHY</p>	<p>-UNDERLYING -CONDITIONAL</p> <p>Through: -SENSES (Warmth Bodily) -BIBLE TEXTS -GRATITUDE Creation Warmth -SECURITY -RELIEF after absence</p>
Bea (40)	<p>-PARENTS (EMOTIONALLY ABSENT) -SUPPRESSED EMOTIONS -LONELINESS -MASTERY -TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE</p>	<p>God “gives” and is: -SECURITY/ PROTECTION -TOUCH IN DEPTH -CARE AND AFFIRMATION -COMFORT</p> <p>Self experiences: -REST -WORSHIPORIENTED -DOING, NOT BEING -CONFIDENCE in achievement -CONTACT WITH SELF</p>	<p>-PROTECTIVE -IN CONTROL -REACHING IN DEPTH -CARING -COMFORTING -CALLING -Increasingly REQUESTING</p>	<p>NORMAL CONDITION</p> <p>Through: -REST -AFFIRMATIONS -CARE -CLARITY -EMPATHY -gods GOODNESS -LONGING -CONTACT WITH SELF</p>


¹⁹⁷ The words in the matrix have different colours related to themes. Blue is connected to the protective God, orange to emotions in the God-self relation, red to the aspect of conditions and demanding, and green relates to father (and sometimes mother) issues. The words that could give us some hints towards the interviewee’s existential feeling of life according to presence and absence are marked with burgundy, while issues of doing-or-being are marked pink. We also seem to see ambivalence and conflict as a theme connected to the relationship, to God or to self. This is marked violet.

¹⁹⁸ The main psychological keys are found in Chapter 4.

Main- category Case	BEFORE ABSENCE			
	1. Psychol. keys/ background ¹⁹⁹	2. God & Self Relationship is Characterized by:	3. God representation “My God is”:	4. God’s Presence
Dina (30)	-The GRAND-MOTHER -PROTECTIVE FATHER-GOD -VOCATION-FOCUS -TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE	God “gives” and is: -PROTECTION -IN CONTROL -LEADING/ SENDING -BEST FRIEND - FATHER -CONDITIONAL Self experiences: -RECIPROCITY-FOCUS -STRONG EMOTIONS -DOGmatic -CONFIDENCE -PROJECTORIENTED -VOCATION-FOCUSED	-PROTECTIVE -IN CONTROL -LEADING/ SENDING -FATHER and FRIEND -“BODY” -CARING -DEPENDED ON HER	DOGmatically understood EMOTION-FILLED CONDITIONAL Through: -BODY -EMOTIONS -SUPER-NATURAL experiences
Eve (30)	-ALONE -UNSEEN -ANXIOUS -AN INNER WALL of CONTROL	God “gives” and is: -GOOD -PROTECTIVE -DEMANDING Self experiences: -DOING and SERVING IDENTITY -AMBIVALENCE	-IDEALIZED IMAGE: God is: GOOD/ PROTECTIVE -DEMANDING -CONDITIONAL Later also: -HUMOROUS -DEPENDED ON HER	-NOT IMPORTANT -INTELLECTUALLY and DOGmatically Through: -REWARD (for obedience) -GOD’s SPEAKING -EMOTIONAL
Frank (55)	-CHILDHOOD with fears -STRONG bindings to MOTHER -FATHER is MERCY - ENJOYMENT of TASKS -LONELY -HELPLESS	God “gives” and is: -MERCY -WARMTH Self experiences: -PROCESS-oriented -ENJOYING TASKS -ANXIETY -CONFIDENCE	-FATHER/ MERCY -MOTHER/ LAW -GOODWILLED	UNDERLYING Experienced through: -WARMTH -INSECURITY and AMBIVALENCE - PRAYER/ WORDS -BEING READ - FRAGILE SILENCE -COMMUNION -THE “WE”

¹⁹⁹ The main psychological keys are found in chapter 4.

APPENDIX G: MATRIX 3 – EXPERIENCES OF DIVINE ABSENCE

Main-category 	EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE ABSENCE			
Case	5. Absence-catalysts	6. Absence experience What is absence like?	Reflections Absence is/ could be”:	7. Out of absence (Catalyst to probable presence) ²⁰⁰
Anna (80)	Outer incidents: -CRISES/ ILLNESS Inner incidents: -RESIGNATION in prayer -INTELLECTUAL DOUBT God: SILENT	God is SILENT -SORROW -LONGING -RELIEF (LIBERTY) -AMBIVALENCE	-NATURAL: absence is part of life	Outer incidents: -ART -TEXTS Inner: -LONGING -KEEPING RELIGIOUS PRACTICE
Bea (40)	Outer incidents: 1) HIGH ACTIVITY LEVEL 2) CRISES; CONFLICT and BETRAYAL Inner incidents: 1) TIREDNESS 2) FLIGHT FROM SELF God: -NOT PROTECTIVE	God is GONE - LOST SECURITY -NO PROTECTION -Sense of DESERT/ FEAR/ EMPTINESS/ SORROW/ DEFEAT -Slightly LONGING - DELICIOUS and a RELIEF -AMBIVALENCE	SELFCAUSED: Correlation between God’s absence and her distance to Self	Outer incidents: -God CARES -God AFFIRMS Inner: -LONGING
Carl (65)	Outer incidence: - CRISIS and CHURCH-CONFLICT -BETRAYAL Inner incident: -REJECTION (of friend, hence of God)	God DISAPPEARED -NO POSITIVE EMOTIONS: But emptiness/ anger/ despair -NO COMFORT -NO LONGING -STRONGER DEPRESSION	GOD and EMOTIONS disappeared simultaneously DEPRESSION	Outer incidents: -RETREAT -GOD IN OTHERS -CLAIMLESS PRESENCE -GOD IN NATURE Inner: -TEXTS

²⁰⁰ The theme of this column is not investigated further, but is kept here to give expounded information.

Main- category Case	EXPERIENCE OF DIVINE ABSENCE			
	5. Absence-catalysts	6. Absence experience What is absence like?	Reflections Absence is/ could be”:	7. Out of absence (Catalyst to probable presence)
Dina (30)	<p>Outer incidence: -CONFLICT</p> <p>Inner incidents: - LOSS OF CONFIDENCE - LOSS OF FAITH - NO PRAYER - COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL RUINING OF GOD IMAGE.</p> <p>God: AN IMAGE – able to ruin</p>	<p>God DISAPPEARED/LEFT cognitively and emotionally</p> <p>-QUESTIONS -DEPRESSION -PRESENCE IS GONE -LOSS OF DIRECTION -Sense of being ALONE ABANDONED/ DIS- APPOINTED/ IGNORANT/ ANGRY/ not COMFORTED -INTERNAL FOCUS</p>	<p>PASSIVE/ ACTIVE DISAPPEARANCE</p> <p>Passively: God disappeared</p> <p>Actively: She ruined the God image</p> <p>REFLECTION ON DEPRESSION</p>	<p>Outer incidents: -RELIGIOUS PRACTICE -SHE IS COMFORTED</p> <p>Inner: -COGNITIVE WORK -ACKNOWLEDGING NEW WAYS of PRESENCE -MEDITATIVE work RECREATE LONGING</p>
Eve (30)	<p>Outer incidents: -CRISES 1) ILLNESS 2) ANXIETY and loss</p> <p>Inner incidents: 1) WHO AM I (without deeds)? 2) WHO IS GOD? -AMBIVALENCE -INNER WALL -DEPRESSION</p> <p>God: INTENTIONALLY HIDING</p>	<p>God is HIDING, GIVING NO RESPONSE</p> <p>- TUNNEL/ DARKNESS - POWERLESSNESS - SILENCE - IN A NOTHINGNESS - DISRUPTIVE PHASE - ANXIETY - Other emotions: SORROW/ SHAME/ FEAR/ PAIN/ INSECURITY</p>	<p>REFLECTIONS: Is the absence she or God?</p>	<p>Outer incidents: - MERCY and HELP - GOD IN OTHERS - SPOKEN WORDS</p> <p>Inner: - SENSE OF VOCATION TO WHOLENESS -COGNITIVE WORK -FROM VICTIMISED to RESPONSIBLE - LIBERATING COUNSELLING -CONTEMPLATION</p>
Frank (55)	<p>Inner incidents: ANXIETY</p>	<p>-NO SENSE of GOD -ANXIETY/ depression -EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS -Lost WARMTH -DESPAIR -Psalmist word touches: HELPLESSNESS and LIFE PAIN</p>	<p>ABSENCE SUBORDINATED - Absence does not exist OR Absence is connected to anxiety</p>	<p>Outer incidents: -SPOKEN WORDS -BIBLE VERSES</p> <p>Inner: -RELIGIOUS PRACTICE -RETREATS -THERAPY/ COGNITIVE WORK</p>

APPENDIX H: MATRIX 4 – POSSIBLE TRANSFORMATIONS AFTER ABSENCE

Main- category Case	POSSIBLE TRANSFORMATIONS/ CHANGE Situation after absence			
	God & Self	God representation “My God is”:	God’s Presence	Self
Anna (80)	Anna is not telling a before-and-after story, hence we mostly find the same qualities before and after absence, though a probable immersed God-self-relationship.			
Bea (40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -REQUEST filled -AMBIVALENT -PRESENCE EQUALS DEEDS -CONDITIONAL -WITHOUT CONFIDENCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -REQUESTING -NOT PROTECTING -NOT STRONG ENOUGH -NOT SEEING what she can handle -REMOTE -ABSENT (normal condition) -NOT TRUST-WORTHY 	Through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -GOD CARING FOR PEOPLE -THE HOLY SPIRIT -LONGING -EMPATHY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -NO RESOURCE -HARDENING HEART -SELF CONTROL -SELF PROTECTION -NO CONTACT WITH EMOTIONS -FEEL LIBERATED -SEPARATION OUTER/ INNER LIFE -UNDERHUMAN (NOT SUPER-HUMAN) -NOT PRETENDING, BUT HONEST
Carl (65)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -NO EMOTIONS -NO ACHIEVEMENTS -DISTANCE -HONESTY -CONFIDENCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PRESENT and SURROUNDING -CLAIMLESS -NO FIXER GOD -IMPERSONAL -MOTHER & FATHER 	Through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -NATURE -BODY -COMMUNION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -LIBERATED -CONDITION OF BEING -SELFNESS

Main- category ↙ Case	POSSIBLE TRANSFORMATIONS/ CHANGE Situation after absence			
	God & Self	God representation “My God is”:	God’s Presence	Self
Dina (30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -UNIFICATION -RELATIONSHIP itself IMPORTANT -LONGING -BEING not doing -COGNITIVE focus -CONFIDENCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PRESENT -MORE COMPOSED -COMFORTER -FATHER & MOTHER -CREATOR -FRIEND -LESS OMNIPOTENT 	<p>Through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -REST - COGNITION -GOD DOES NOT LEAVE -NATURE -GOD IN OTHERS -TEXTS -SILENCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -RECONCILED (intellectually) -COGNITIVE UNDERSTANDING -RESTING -BEING -FEWER EMOTIONS -CHILD (not servant) -SUBJECT in own life -CHANGED expectations: GOD’s BEING important
Eve (30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -RELATION IS UNRESOLVED -MEETING GOD = MEETING SELF -CONFIDENCE -HOPE -Work related to CONTROL and COMMITMENT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -IN PROCESS -PRESENT/ PARTAKING -NOT CLAIMING -INCONTROLABLE -PARTAKING/ NIGH -INCONDITIONAL -INPREDICTABLE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -UNDERLYING presence <p>Through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -GOD CONVEYS -COMFORT (TEXTS and SONGS) -AFFIRMATIONS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -BEING, NOT DOING -CHANGED VIEW ON REALITY -AMBIVALENT
Frank (55)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PERSONAL (You and I) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -PERSONAL -PARTAKING IN JOY -LISTENING -RAISING UP -CARRYING -MERCY 	<p>Through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -JESUS PRESENCE -WARMTH -FRAGILE SILENCE -A PLACE TO STAY FOREVER -A SENSE OF RESONANCE/ “BEING READ” BY THE BIBLE -COMMUNION - FELLOWSHIP - JOY IN CREATIVITY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -SENSE OF BELONGING -TASTE OF REST -SHARE NEEDS -INCREASING SENSE OF STANDING UPRIGHT -CONFIDENCE -SHARES JOY AND GOOD-NESS WITH GOD - EXPERIENCE OF LOVE -SENSE OF BEING CARRIED

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