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I am not so sure whether God is present and is able to do stuff.

An empirical study of clergy with non-theistic inclinations.

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Abstract

This is an empirical qualitative study of six pastors of the Church of Norway, who to differing degrees hold a non-theistic view of God. That is to say that they to different degrees suspect or believe that it is meaningless to talk of God´s existence, that we are unable to say anything meaningful of the essence of God, and that God does not intervene in our physical world. The question is how these pastors interpret and communicate their image of God. Can they speak openly of their image of God? Are there parts of their work that conflicts with their image of God? Have they developed linguistical strategies or liturgical tricks to correct or nuance how the ideas of the divine is communicated?

I have conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews of six self-selected pastors of Church of Norway, and I have used grounded theory to inductively develop theory from the interviews. In addition, I have considered the theories of theopoetics, Caputo´s idea regarding the weakness of God, D. Z. Phillips´ ideas regarding religion as practices, and the theories developed by Dennett and LaScola in response to their studies of clergy who has lost belief.

A couple of the many conclusions that I have made is that they tend to speak very careful of how God might not be said to exist, how objective knowledge about God is inaccessible, and about how we are unable to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. They are however very clear in their dismissals of every sign of a judgmental God. Many also seem to find a peace in religious practices, even though they either find them unintelligible or that they lack a mental state of assent to them.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The general idea.

One of the main tasks of the Christian clergy is to communicate and teach the doctrines, ethics, and philosophies of the denominations that they serve. But what happens when a clerical member has personal doubts about some of the theological teachings? What if they doubt that God intervenes in our world, or doubt that we humans are capable of saying anything meaningful of the essence of God? Or what if the clerical member even doubts the existence of God, but still have faith in the church? Is there leeway for those clerical members to speak of the transcendent in alternative ways? Do these clerical members feel like they can speak openly about their doubt or lack of assent to some theological teachings. If they are unable to speak openly, are they bound to silence, or can they doubt or object to those theological teachings in more discrete or subtle ways?

Another main task of the Christian clergy is to officiate the services and liturgies of their church in accordance with that church's regulations, culture, and traditions. But what happens when a clerical member experiences that parts of those services or liturgies portrays an image of God that conflicts with the image of God of that clerical member? Have they found ways to adapt the services or liturgies to prevent these potential conflictions.

This thesis tries to map and analyze the beliefs, doubts, and practices of some clergy who in some degree questions, doubts, or sometimes outright rejects parts of an image of God that is otherwise prevalent in their community. It will explore the image of God, the experiences, and the use of language and liturgy of pastors within the Church of Norway (CoN), who cannot fully commit to a traditional notion of theism. Through this thesis I will often refer to this inability to fully commit to traditional notions of theism as "non-theistic inclinations", and this term will be expanded upon at several later stages.

I have been interested in this topic for a long time, and my interest was further piqued when I read Dennet´s and LaScola´s (2010, 2015) studies about clergy who have lost their faith, but for various reasons remain as clergy. Their studies were based on American respondents, and I want to compliment with a European Scandinavian, and more specifically, Norwegian Lutheran view. While Dennett´s and LaScola´s work have been a valuable insight

into an understudied field of dissenting believes amongst clergy, it has also been critiqued for labeling some forms of dissent of traditional Theism as unbelief (Dennet & LaScola, 2015, p. 126). The spectrum between belief and unbelief is complicated and has multiple facets, and I therefore want to compliment and broaden Dennett´s and LaScola´s work by delving deeper into the theology, and especially image of God, of clergy who have some non-theistic inclinations.

While I find it interesting on its own to map and analyze the images of God of pastors of CoN with non-theistic inclinations, I have also been very interested in seeing how their image of God has affected their relations to colleagues, and how it affects their communication of God both in the church service and in conversations with parishioners. Do they feel like they must hide their belief or lack thereof, and if so, what do they think the consequences would be if their belief were revealed? Do they feel like they can be open about some of it, and if so, under what circumstances, and towards whom? Are there traditional Christian words regarding the divine that they either prefer or avoid while trying to communicate their image of God?

1.2 The research question.

The general idea described above can be condensed to one short research question:

How does pastors with non-theistic inclinations interpret and communicate their image of God?

There are two words in this question that needs some further explanation. The first word is “interpret”. This thesis will mainly work with two definitions of what that means. The first is the participants attempts to describe their image of God. The second is the participants attempts to differentiate and compare their image of God with the image of God of other believers, especially those within CoN. The second word is “communicate”. The first question regarding the communication of the participants´ image of God is whether they feel like they can communicate freely or if they somehow restrict their communication. In the cases where the communication is restricted I will both focus on what that restriction looks like, and in what settings the restriction occurs. I will focus on the participants professional setting, both

congregational and collegial. In the congregational setting I will consider both public acts, such as a sermons and liturgies, and private communications, such as spiritual care. In the collegial setting I will look both at the closer setting of immediate colleagues, a hierarchical setting in relation to deans and bishops, and an institutional setting as in expectations and demands from CoN.

1.3 An introduction to method and theory.

This is a qualitative study of in-depth semi-structured interviews of 6 self-selected pastors of CoN. They do, to varying degrees, doubt the personal traits of the divine, doubt that the divine concretely interacts in our physical world (through miracles or answers to prayer), doubt that we as humans can say anything meaningful about the nature, or existence, of the divine. They all, at least most of the time, have some sort of belief in God.

I have used grounded theory to inductively develop theory from the interviews. That is to say that I have applied inductive reasoning through the collection and analyzation of the data with the aim of constructing hypothesis and theories. I will also make use of other theoretical frameworks to analyze my material. I will analyze my material in light of the theoretical framework constructed by Dennett and LaScola (2010, 2015) in response to their informants. Many of the informants also make use of poetry in their work. I analyze these instances considering the theory of theopoetics, both from a view of Amos Niven Wilder´s (Hunter, 1978) groundbreaking work, and from a view of more contemporary thinkers, such as John Caputo (2013). In extension, I will try to show that the beliefs of many of the informants, knowingly or not, are linked to Caputo´s (2006) idea of "the weakness of God". I will further try to show that many of the informants both favors and try to foster the ritualistic sides of belief, or the "practice of belief", above an intellectual assent to belief. I will analyze this focus on the "practice of belief" through D. Z. Phillips idea of religions as practices (Eikrem, 2013; Kim, 2022). Based on this I will question whether Dennet´s (2006) idea of "belief in belief" in this instance might better be modified and understood as "belief in the practice of belief", that is to say that the practice of belief is seen as something that "one should aspire to, work strenuously to remain, and foster in others – and feel guilty or dismayed if one fails to achieve it." (Dennett & LaScola, 2010, p. 125).

1.4 Introductory definition of terms.

The term "non-theism" will be further explored in this thesis. It is sometimes used as a synonym for atheism, i.e., "a psychological […] state of not believing in the existence of God (or gods)." (Draper, 2017). But the definition of the term "non-theism" that I will explore is both broader, and more precise. It is broader in the way that it questions the unambiguousness of what it means to have psychological state of belief, what it means to exist, and what is meant by God. It is more precise in the way that it clarifies that the non-theist lacks a (psychological state of) belief in theism specifically, i.e., "the view that all limited or finite things are dependent in some way on one supreme or ultimate reality of which one may also speak in personal terms." (Lewis, 2019).

The term "inclinations" indicates that I have not demanded a clear non-theistic theological adherence from the participants. I was sampling for participants with a varying degree of urge, liking, or preference towards non-theistic ideas, however how ambiguous that inclination might be.

2 What does CoN want or demand its pastors to believe?

CoN is often described as a folk-church (folkekirke). That is to say that it aims to be a confessing, missionary, serving, and open folk-church. There is an interesting tension in that statement, since "confessing and serving" puts emphasis on the importance of confessing and promoting a belief in the triune God, while "serving and open" puts emphasis on the importance of openness, a low threshold for participation, and a larger acceptance for the subjective beliefs of the members (Hegstad, 1999, p. 22-25, 68-69). This tension between an expectation for orthodoxy (confessing and missionary), and a longing to voice a theology that is present in parts of the congregation (serving and open) is, as we shall see later, felt by the participants in this study.

We will now look at the pastoral vows to get a better understanding of CoN´s expectations and demands on the belief and actions of its pastors. The pastoral vows, or vows of ordination, are given when someone begins as a pastor in CoN. There are four vows. The first one is a promise to "preach the word of God clear and pure, as it is given us in the holy Scripture, and as our church bear witness to it in our confession, and to administer the holy sacraments according to Christ´s institution and the order of our church," (Den Norske Kirke, 1992, p. 169, my translation). The rest of the vows commits the pastor to guide others to God, to seek God for themselves, and to try to live according to the word of God. (See attachment 10.4 for the complete vows.) "Our confession" is mentioned in the vows, and in the case of CoN that refers to these five confessions: the Apostles´ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the unamended Augsburg Confession from 1530 (hereafter referred to as Confessio Augustana), and Luther's Small Catechism (Den Norske Kirke, 2020a). These are seen as the basis for the doctrines of CoN. The question of the participants´ obligations to the pastoral vows will be a theme in the analysis.

The leeway for clergy to hold or express non-theistic inclinations is in many ways determined by the doctrinal rigidity of the denomination that they serve. By doctrinal rigidity I am both referring to the extent and the amount of doctrine, and how strictly the institutions expect the clergy to adhere to it.

The main work that details the obligations to doctrinal rigidity for the pastors of CoN translates to "duty of office and loyalty" (Asheim, 1980). It states that the pastor is obligated

to serve with the Scripture as a source and norm, understanding that the Scripture is interpreted by the creed (p. 91). It further says that not all statements in the creed are equally important, but that "The center in the creed is the message of salvation, expressed in the creed´s teaching of justification by grace through belief in Jesus Christ." (p. 92. My translation). CoN also states that the normative status of the confessions is subordinate to the Scripture (Den norske kirkes lærenemnd, 2006, section 3.3; Church of Norway, 2020b). So, in principle there is leeway for interpretations of the doctrinal confessions, but only in light of, and through CoN´s principles for interpretations of Scripture (Den norske kirkes lærenemnd, 2006, section 3.4, 3.6).

Asheim (1980) states that the church should not enforce a form of loyalty that hinders voicings of critique (p. 23). The question then becomes what the church can demand from a pastor that voices critical views. Asheim claims that the critical pastor must "show a willingness to have his views discussed within the frame of the church community […] and an ability to work towards unity." (p. 25-26, my translation). Asheim goes as far as to say that the will for unity is the core of the demanded loyalty. On the other hand, Asheim makes clear that there are subjects that the creed says nothing about. No one can in those cases demand that the pastor should be beholden to a view that has an unclear basis in Scripture (p. 32-33). Asheim stresses that the subjective sincerity of the critical pastor must be respected (p. 66), and the main goal must be to correct the heresy, not to punish the heretic (p. 80).

There might arise instances where the distance between the personal belief of the pastor and the belief and creed of the church grows too big.

> He will then experience a conflict between the loyalty to his own conviction and the loyalty to the teaching of the church. In such a situation it would be a breach of his duty of office to adapt the message to suit his own conviction and belief. (Asheim, 1980, p. 95, my translation).

If this is the case, the pastor is advised to discuss that matter with their bishop. It then continues:

> If this reveals a fundamental deviation from the teaching of the church, that said individual finds necessary to maintain publicly, then the church must protect its belief. (Asheim, 1980, p. 95, my translation).

This work (Asheim, 1980) gives no indication of what it means for the church to "protect its belief". Nor does it give guidelines on whether or how the church should defrock a pastor that publicly maintain a fundamental deviation from the teaching of the church.

The governing body of these matters has since been restructured for unrelated reasons (NOU 1985:21; Den Norske Kirke, 2016). The current regulations states that the bishop meeting is the institution that reviews cases and issue statements regarding accusations of teachings or actions in confliction with the creed. They intend to only review cases that regard central teachings with far-reaching character. A pastor can be indicted by their bishop. The bishop and pastor shall have thorough discussions to try to reach consensus. The case is brought to the bishop meeting if a consensus is not reached. The case is dismissed if the pastor changes their mind, or if they resign. It is within the right of the bishop meeting to conclude that there can be basis for a "reaction of service" (tjenstlig reaksjon) (Den Norske Kirke, 2021).

There has to my knowledge been no cases regarding a teaching under the current regulations, so it seems unclear what "reaction of service" means, but I think it is reasonable to assume that both termination of employment and being defrocked are possible consequences.

All this is to say that the participants in this study face the possibility of being indicted to a case regarding their teaching, with the possible outcome of losing their job if they are found to contradict central teachings with far-reaching character.

So far, we have looked at the more formal sides of doctrinal rigidity. But when it comes to the risk of a pastor losing their job, we must consider that it says that the church will

protect itself from fundamental deviations. I claim that there is some sort of informal agreement of what counts as acceptable deviations. This “informal doctrinal rigidity” is not fixed. It is affected by societal change and evolves over time. Some anecdotal examples of acceptable deviations are that pastors do not seem to have to believe in eternal torment (Leer-Salvesen, 2005, p. 114). or virgin birth (Rognsvåg & Bregård, 2014).

3 Literature review

This literature review will be divided into two sections. The first section is a presentation of what I deem to be the most relevant qualitative studies of images of God among clergy, which includes non-theistic themes. The second section deals with the similarly relevant quantitative studies.

3.1 Qualitative studies including non-theistic images of God amongst clergy.

3.1.1 Dennett´s and LaScola´s qualitative studies.

There seem to have been conducted only a small number of empirical studies of the images of God amongst clergy which includes elements of non-theistic elements. Out of those few, it is especially Daniel Dennett´s and Linda LaScola´s article "Preachers Who Are Not Believers" (2010), and their book "Caught in the pulpit" (2015) that stirred my interest in this topic, and those publications have greatly inspired my desire to broaden the research in this field. Their combined publications present studies of thirty-five American informants (twenty of those are active clergy, seven former clergy, five students, and three seminary professors. Thirty-one of the informants are of Christian backgrounds of different denominations, two are of Mormon background, and two are of Jewish background) who all, in some way, have lost a form of faith in God.

These publications are generically self-described as restricted to "non-believing" clergy, but Dennett and LaScola acknowledges and explores the difficulties of drawing a clear line between belief and non-belief (2010, p. 124). Two of the five participants in the article seem to be comfortable in self-describing as non-believers. The remaining three is presented as claiming that "they may not believe in a supernatural god, but they believe in something. [… Still] they don´t believe what many of their parishioners believe and think they ought to believe." (Dennett & LaScola, 2010, p. 124-125). Dennett´s and LaScola´s focus on "non-belief" has resulted in stricter parameters for participation in their studies, but I would argue that some of Dennett´s and LaScola´s informants could be better described as non-theists rather than non-believers. There is hence some overlap in theological thought in the phenomenon that both Dennett and LaScola and I wish to explore. This is to a large degree

explained by the fact that I follow Dennett and LaScola when they claim that there is such a great pluralism of images of God that the question "do you believe in God?" for some is deemed unanswerable, since they do not even know what they are being asked (2010, p. 124).

Dennett and LaScola describes how their article (2010) received critique from liberal clergy for "missing the nuances of the liberals´ sophisticated, evolved faith, which thrives on myth and mystery, tradition and reason." (2015, p. 126) As a response to the critique they included two participants in their book (2015) which they described as liberal "believing" Episcopal priests (their use of quotation marks). Dennett and LaScola draws some interesting conclusions from these two informants. Firstly, that the beliefs, or lack of beliefs, of these two "believers" were not unlike the other clergy informants who characterized themselves as agnostic or atheists. Secondly, they found them inexplicit about their beliefs. Thirdly, they seem to imply that those who end up as atheists lead with their heads, and those liberal clergy who remains "believers" lead with their heart. The "head" might view Christianity and see a lack of logically coherent substance, or even lies. The "heart" might view Christianity and see a mysterious spiritual dimension in the poetry and myth. This hypothesis is connected to the fourth observation that the "believer" distinguishes between the words "factual" and "true". It might, for example, be irrelevant for the "believer" whether details in a biblical story actually happened or not. The story is still capable of delivering importance and truthfulness (Dennett & LaScola, 2015, p. 126, 128, 134). These observations might be exemplified in a hypothetical "believer", who might say: I carry both belief and un-belief, but I choose to be a believer because my heart tells me that there is mysterious truthfulness embedded in the Christian tradition.

I will consider these observations of Dennett and LaScola in the analysis of my data, but I will also challenge their sense of the inexplicitness of the beliefs of the "believer". My data is, of course, different from theirs, but I do believe that it is possible, through a greater theological understanding to create typologies of non-theistic beliefs, and perhaps even suggest why these “liberal believers” (in the eyes of Dennett and LaScola) wish to remain believers.

Many of the informants in Dennett´s and LaScola´s works expresses a feeling of being trapped in clergy. They want to leave, but they fear the social and practical consequences. What will their family and friends think? Will they be able to find another job?

3.1.2 The clergy project.

One institution who deals extensively with clergy that feel trapped in their jobs is the organization The Clergy Project (The Clergy Project, 2019). They are an anonymous and closed support group for clergy who have lost their faith, but dare not, or cannot step out of clergy. The organizations webpage is an excellent source for testimonies of these clergy-members. But I have chosen to not focus too much on their work. The main reason is that none of my informants felt trapped, or expressed a clear desire to leave clergy, although some of the informants have considered leaving in the past.

3.2 Quantitative studies

There is in my estimation three relevant quantitative studies that includes somewhat non-theistic elements amongst clergy (the third includes some qualitative data).

3.2.1 Woodhead.

The first study worth looking into is a survey designed by Professor Linda Woodhead. It was conducted in 2014 by YouGov and included 1509 (about 2/3 male, 1/3 female) randomly selected Anglican clergy in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland (YouGov, 2014). The survey deals with a lot of different topics, but I will only focus on one part that inquiries about their image of God.

83% of the respondents, with a choice of six options, said that they believe in a personal God. 9% said that no-one can know what God is like. 3% believe in some sort of spirit or lifeforce. 2% is not sure that "God" is more than a human construct. 2% did not like any of the options above, and 1% preferred not to answer. There is no significant difference

between the male and female respondents. An interesting detail, if one studies the statistics more thoroughly, is that there is a tendency that older clergy are more likely to choose the option that no-one can know what God is, and younger clergy is more likely to believe in a personal God. The differences of responses by the different age-groups can be seen as an indication that the Anglican priests develops a less dogmatic view of the image of God as they grow older. But it is not necessarily so. In lack of previous research, we cannot rule out the possibility that these older respondents held the same views when they were younger, or that there has been a shift in the desires for theological and social views in the people that the Anglican church desires to recruit. I speculate that both reasons are at play, but once again, the research seems to be lacking.

3.2.2 Willander & Blåder.

The second study worth looking into is by by Willander & Blåder (2016), and translates to the Swedish church and the belief of its pastors. It explores how 1348 pastors interpret and relate to the faith, confession, and teaching of the Swedish church. The study is not dealing directly with non-theistic images of God, but it focuses on different claims of supernatural occurrences, such as the resurrection, eternal life, atonement, and miracles. Based on their answers, the respondents were divided into three categories. A free, functional, and formal orientation of interpretation.

There are two findings in Willander´s and Blåder´s research that are of special interest for my thesis. Firstly, the respondents were asked to evaluate their personal belief in relation to the faith, confession, and teaching of the Swedish church. They could choose on a scale from one to ten, where one represented "no difference", and ten represented "big difference". 12,9% marked one, and a combined total of 74,6% marked either one, two, or three. 0,6% marked ten, and a combined total of 5,6% marked either eight, nine, or ten. Willander and Blåder also states that there is a statistically proven correlation between a free orientation of interpretation, and a distance to the doctrines of the Swedish church.

The second relevant finding in the work of Willander and Blåder, is that there is a clear tendency that those who were ordained further in the past tends to gravitate towards a formal orientation of interpretation. Those who are ordained closer to our current day tends to,

comparatively to the former ordained, gravitate towards a free orientation of interpretation. In other words: The younger pastors are in general more liberal than the older. This seems to be in opposition to the findings of the Anglicans. It is difficult to know for sure why this is.

3.2.3 Niemelä.

The third, and final, study worth looking into is Doctrinal Views and Conflicts among Clergy and other Church Employees, by Kati Niemelä (2005). It is based on a questionnaire sent out in 2002 that was answered by 792 employees of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The sampled employees were either vicars, other parish ministers, lectors, church musicians, diaconal workers, youth workers, children´s workers, or mission workers. The questionnaire was sent to every sixth parish and had a response rate of 72%. In addition, Niemelä interviewed 21 ministers, diaconal workers, and youth workers.

There are two findings that are of interest to me. The first is that the survey includes some questions about whether they believe some basic traditional confessional Christian doctrinal statements. None of those questions are directly connected to non-theistic beliefs. Based on the answers, Niemelä groups the respondents into four groups, namely traditional believers, non-traditional believers, doubters, and non-believers. The doubters are described as having a "tenuous commitment to official Christian faith." (p. 58). They often find a positive form of an afterlife plausible, a judgement unlikely, and are uncertain about miracles. The non-believers are described as being "not committed to the Christian faith at all." (p. 58). They either strongly doubt or do not believe in either "crucial" nor other doctrines. The description of the last two groups has, as we shall later see, many similarities to how the participants in my study describe their faith. Among all the respondents 9 % were categorized as doubters, and 1 % as non-believers. Divided into the different professions, among the vicars 2 % are doubters and 2 % are non-believers (N=65). Among the other ministers 6 % are doubters and 1 % are non-believers (N=153). The questions and the methodology in Niemelä´s study differ significantly from both Woodhead´s and Willander & Blåder´s studies previously mentioned. It nevertheless gives a valuable view of beliefs of clergy in another Scandinavian evangelical Lutheran Church.

The second finding that I find interesting is concerning sources of conflict, and how those conflicts are coped with. Out of all the respondents, 8 % felt like there often was a conflict between their own ideas and the teachings of the Church. 2 % felt like the conflict was constant. Perhaps even more interesting is Niemelä´s findings through the interviews on how these conflicts are coped with. It is probably not surprising that the most common coping strategy is to try to keep silent. Many respondents try to de-emphasize the contradictions, make them almost invisible, and to shift focus onto other aspects of their daily jobs. The respondents were more likely to speak openly of their conflictual issues when they are deemed as rather irrelevant (the virgin birth is used as an example), but they seem to not want to speak of the conflictual issues when they are deemed as major elements of the church´s doctrine. Niemelä states that when the subject cannot be avoided, it is often easier for the interviewed participants to go against their personal beliefs by talking against their own ideas in favor for the church's ideas. These interviewees explain that behavior by referring to their commitment to the church, and the following duty to act and teach in accordance with the church´s doctrine. They are commitment to the church, and they view the "dogma as a whole" of that institution to be worthy of commitment. Some contradictory issues can therefore be ignored, silenced, or even spoken about against the speaker's conviction. One final coping strategy worth mentioning is that some ministers would try to avoid occasions where a conflict is likely to arise. One example mentioned is that a minister who does not believe in hell might actively try to avoid preaching on Judgement Day, or try to avoid the subject with parish members, and perhaps especially with confirmands, who might be extraordinary direct in their questions.

3.3 Other often referred works.

When studying the subject of the belief of evangelical Lutheran clergy in the Scandinavian countries, and especially Norway, I found that there were a couple of works that were frequently referred to. The most prevalent seems to be Eriksson (2012), Bäckström (1992), Leer-Salvesen (2005), and Repstad and Henrikssen (2005). These are interesting works on the subject matter. I nevertheless decided to not analyze them here in the literature review. The reason is either that they serve as confirmation of the findings presented in the

other analyzed works, or that they lack a clear connection to non-theistic questions and thoughts.

4 Method

The process of this work has been to recruit a quantity of participants suitable and manageable for a qualitative study. The participants chose to apply to this study due to their self-reported alignment to the type of image of God outlined in the information letter. Most of the applicants were interviewed, and these interviews were analysed with the intent to map their image of God and their experiences as pastors. This mapping was used as a comparison to previous studies and theories, and to try to develop theories further. There have been several methodological choices in all these steps that will be dealt with in this chapter.

4.1 Sampling, criteria for participation, and the information letter.

The participants were purposively sampled, and the sample was self-selected. My sampling goals was to sample for homogeneity (Pastors of CoN with non-theistic inclinations), and to sample for mapping (the belief and experiences of said pastors) and theory development (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p. 92, 97).

Due to the lack of previous research on clergy with non-theistic inclinations it was hard to estimate the prevalence of said inclinations amongst pastors of CoN. There have been a few public examples in the past, such as P. H. Andersen´s (1977) book that deals with the death of God, and the public story of how the image of God of pastor I. B. Larssen led to him being advised to find another line of work by his bishop (Bjørke, 2016; Lindvåg, 2016). I will explore those two cases later in this thesis, but the fact that they both experienced severe consequences for being open about their non-theistic image of God led me to assume that some pastors of CoN with non-theistic inclinations might, fully or partly, conceal their image of God in fear of repercussions. On the other hand, there are a couple of examples of pastors of CoN who speak openly about an image of God which leave an openness to non-theistic interpretations. The perhaps clearest example is Knut Rygh, who has translated the book "Speaking Christian" by Marcus J. Borg (2011) to Norwegian (2017) and has used the ideas from that book in his sermons. Rygh claims that the Norwegian translation has inspired other pastors of CoN to consider and, to some extent, preach some of the ideas presented by Borg (Rem, 2019). In lack of concrete data, I was assuming that there might be some pastors within CoN who speak openly about an image of God which might be interpreted into a non-theistic

framework, and that they furthermore might regard that which they communicate about God to be orthodox, non-controversial, and in line with the beliefs of a large part of the members of CoN.

The intent of the information letter was to validate those different assumed experiences of the pastors who might consider participation in my study. I had to both acknowledge the fear of the pastor who feel anxious to be outed as a non-theist and acknowledge the sense of orthodoxy of pastors who feel that their views about non-theism is within the boundaries of the doctrines of CoN. In both cases I indirectly wanted to communicate that I, as a researcher was not seeing non-theistic inclinations as a "bad thing".

I was also presuming that it is rather uncommon for pastors within CoN to have non-theistic inclinations, and I feared that it would be hard to recruit the desired number of participants. In the following section I will deal with how the wording of the criteria for participation was intended to lower the bar for participation. The information letter stated that:

> The purpose is to analyse experiences and use of language of pastors who are considering, or subscribes to a non-theistic inclination, or who considers themselves to have a liberal image of God, an image of God that is represented among many of the members of the church, but nevertheless is considered controversial among the “inner circle” of the members of the Church of Norway (CoN). (See attachment 10.1 for the complete information letter).

Several measures have been taken here to lower the bar for participation. I would argue that a non-theistic view of God could be classified as a form of liberal view of God. It is my presumption that the term non-theism has the potential to trigger more negative connotations than the term "liberal view of God". Indirectly suggesting that non-theism is a form of a liberal view of God can lead the reader to have less fear about their participation, as well as it might signal the researchers "friendliness" towards the topic of non-theism. The downside is that the introduction of the term "liberal view of God" might give the reader associations toward "liberal Christianity" and "liberal ethics", and there is an abundance of

subjective definitions of those two terms. The introduction of the term "liberal view of God" might have obscured my desire to focus on non-theism, but I was willing to take that risk since I feared that it might be hard to recruit the desired number of participants. The term "liberal view of God" also provides some explanatory direction for the readers who are unfamiliar with the concept of non-theism.

The second part of the citation above was intended to signal "friendliness" and to affirm the fearful non-theistic pastor that their belief is commonly held by many members of the church, and to only point toward a smaller "inner circle" as a source for potential conflict. At the same it was worded as a possible affirmation towards the pastors who are more open about their non-theistic inclinations.

The term "non-theistic inclinations" was in the information letter described in the following way:

> The term “non-theistic inclination” can be interpreted in many ways, but I use the term describing people who identifies as Christians, but who are uncertain to whether God is a personal God who concretely interacts in the reality of humans. Some view God as an impersonal force. Some are uncertain as to whether we as humans can say anything meaningful of the essence or existence of God (e.g., Tillich´s “God beyond God” or “God as ground of being”). Some are uncertain as to whether they really believe in God, but nevertheless has a “belief in belief”, and a belief in the church as a positive force. Some might also experience that the biblical and traditional church-language of God communicates problematic connotations. (10.1).

Finally, the bar for participation was further lowered by explicitly stating that I did not demand that the participants hold a clear theological conviction about any of the opinions previously described, but that it is sufficient that the participant privately have considered a non-theistic or liberal view of God.

4.2 Anonymity, privacy, rights, and security.

The information letter (se 10.1) encouraged the reader to contact me through a throw away email-account if they desired to stay anonymous in our initial interaction. I further stated that I am aware of the sensitivity of the subject, and that anonymity is of highest priority. The information letter explained that I will be the only one who knew the identity of the participants, and the only one who had access to the recordings and the transcriptions in both the literal and anonymized versions.

I was also explicit about the role of my advisor, Harald Hegstad. The Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) requires that the information letter names the advisor. Hegstad was the deputy (nestleder) of the church council (kirkerådet) from 2016-2020 and was still active in this role by the time that the information letter was distributed. My advisor´s said connection to CoN could potentially frighten some pastors who filled the criteria for participation. Therefore, I was explicit that my advisor would not know the identity of the participants, nor have access to any data, and that Hegstad and I would only discuss my analysis of the interviews, including some carefully anonymized quotes from the interviews.

The information letter made clear that the research project had been approved by NSD. It also stated that participation is voluntary, and that the participant can retract consent at any time for any reason. In such case, all personal data, recordings, and transcripts would be deleted immediately.

The information letter further stated that the list of names and contact info would be stored on a file separated from all other data, and that the contact information, sound recordings, and transcriptions from the interviews would be stored on a password protected USB-stick that would be stored in a locked safe. It also informed that the only file that would be stored on my password protected computer is the anonymized transcriptions stored as a password protected file.

The information letter further stated that the participants will not be recognizable in the publication. It also informed the participants that if they desired, they would be given the opportunity to read a late draft before the thesis is delivered. None of the participants made

use of this opportunity. It went on to say that the participants have the right to have insight, correct, or delete any registered personal data, and that they could send a complaint to NSD regarding the treatment of their personal data.

Finally, the information letter stated that personal data, recordings and transcriptions will be deleted when the project is completed.

4.3 Recruitment.

I used several strategies for recruitment.

The information letter was published as a linkable web page under the web domain of the Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society (mf.no), both as full text and as a downloadable PDF file. This link was referenced in all strategies of recruitment.

My advisor has access to the private Facebook-group "Pastors in CoN" (Prester i Den norske kirke). The group consists of about 1,5K members. My advisor made a post wherein he briefly described my research project and linked to the information letter. He further lowered the bar for participation by also encouraging participation by those who have sympathy for a non-theistic or liberal understanding of God, and those who felt close to the target group.

I sent a direct mail with information about the project to about ten pastors or former pastors, all of which has talked or written publicly of either non-theistic inclinations, or a periodical or permanent loss of faith. The thought was that not fully open non-theistic pastors might have confided in the ones who have spoken publicly. The pastors who received this mail were asked to not give me names, but to forward the information to pastors who they thought might be interested in the project. I sent a similar mail to a handful of scholars whose field of expertise might have gained them knowledge of possible participants. They were, in the same way, asked to forward the information, and not give me names.

I decided to not make use of the snowball-method through the respondents who considered participation. Often, I had no way of knowing how comfortable they were to speak

openly of their non-theistic inclinations, and to ask them to spread the information might cause them to indirectly hint at their inclinations by just forwarding the information.

I have no way of knowing how well the information was spread to the intended targets, but the combination of these methods of recruitment makes me presume that the information reached a majority of those who fills the criteria for participation.

4.4 Responses and selection.

I was contacted by eleven people. None of them opted to use a throw-away mail-account. Two out of the eleven did not fit the criteria. One was not yet ordained, and the other was no longer ordained. Out of the remaining nine, two were interested, but were unsure if their image of God filled the criteria. I separately spoke with both over video-call, and we briefly discussed their image of God. Both were willing to participate but let me decide whether their image of God was close enough for my criteria. I told them that our conversation was covered by my duty of confidentiality, and that I would not consider that which was said as data for my research. I decided that one of those two people filled the criteria, and that the other did not.

After I had interviewed all eight participants, transcribed the interviews, anonymized the transcripts, and begun to analyze the transcripts, I decided to exclude two participants from the study. I deemed that their image of God was not non-theistic enough. The first of the two excluded participants argued that believers hold several images of God simultaneously, and that the different images of God serve different functions in different situations in life. Even though this participant had interesting ideas and observations regarding the function of a non-theistic image of God, especially in periods of hardship and grief, it nevertheless became clear that the images of God that were in function for most of the time for this participant were rather orthodox images of God. The second excluded participant had interesting experiences as an ethically liberal pastor amongst conservative colleagues. “They” have met resistance, especially regarding “their” willingness to officiate weddings for homosexuals. But this participant´s image of God was otherwise rather orthodox and traditional. I have used no material or quotes from these two participants for the analysis.

Out of the final six selected for analysis, four were either working as pastors, or had fairly recently been retired under normal circumstances. The final two had previously worked as pastors but are currently having other paid positions within CoN.

4.5 Organizing the interviews.

I would have preferred to do all the interviews face-to-face (hereby F2F). Research has shown that the results from video-interviews are of comparable quality as F2F interviews (Archibald, et. al., 2019; Nehls, et.al., 2015, p. 146), but I feel more comfortable with F2F interviews, and it also feels most respectful to the sensitivity of the subject.

There were, however, a couple of circumstances that prevented making all interviews F2F. Firstly, due to the Covid-19 situation, it felt irresponsible to fly to the participants located far away. I decided to mention my preference for F2F interviews to the four participants that I deemed to be within driving-distance, but I gave them the opportunity to opt for video-interviews if that felt more comfortable for them. Three out of those four opted for F2F interviews, and one opted for a video-interview. The remaining four that were outside of driving distance were comfortable with being interviewed over video. In my communications with the participants, I stressed that we should work together to find a place and time for the interview that felt secure for the participant.

I chose Zoom as the program for video-interviews, since it uses real-time encryption, and enables secure recording and storing without the need for third-party programs (Archibald, et. Al., 2019). It further does not require the participant to install additional software.

4.6 Structure of the interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured. After making sure that they had read and understood the information letter and gave consent to be interviewed and recorded, I

explained that the interview had three main parts. The first part dealt with their image of God, the second part dealt with words used to describe God, and the third part dealt with their experiences as pastors. I encouraged them to feel free to digress and said that it was totally fine to jump between the three parts, but that I had some questions for each part that I would ask if they didn´t naturally come up during the interview. I had the interview guide accessible during the interview to check off topics that were dealt with, and to bring up topics that were not spontaneously brought up by the participants.

The first part that dealt with their image of God included questions such as: what is your image of God, does God exist, does God answer prayers, does God intervene, and can we say anything meaningful about God. I unfortunately had to eliminate almost all the responses to two questions that were asked in this part due to the word restriction on the thesis. Those two questions were whether Christianity is the only true path, and whether there is a lower limit of what pastors must believe. The second part that dealt with language included questions such as whether there is language about God in the bible, the liturgies, and the creeds that the participants find problematic. The participants were also asked if they have ways to adapt their language or liturgies to avoid contradictions with their image of God. The third part that dealt with their experience as pastors included questions such as whether they feel like they can speak openly and honestly of their image of God with the congregation or with their colleagues, and how they feel towards, and deal with the instances where they feel like they for some reason are unable to speak openly and honestly of their image of God. There were finally a couple of questions regarding how they view the future of both CoN and their work as a pastor. Once again, the word limitation led me to exclude almost all the responses to questions about the future. The final question was an open question of whether there was anything else that they found relevant to the theme of this thesis. The average length of the interviews was approximately one hour and forty-five minutes.

The complete interview guide can be found as attachment 10.3.

4.7 Transcription.

While I was working on the transcriptions, I was storing the audio files and the password-protected word-files on an encrypted and password-protected partition on a password-protected computer. All the transcriptions were done with well isolated headphones to mitigate the possibility of overhearing. All the interviews were transcribed completely, word for word. It ended up being 128144 words.

The transcriptions were then anonymized and stored under the previously described safety measures. The relevant personal information was stored on a password-protected code key. The code key, the audio-files, and the original transcriptions were then copied to a password-protected USB-stick, which was kept in a locked safe. Those files were then deleted from my computer, and the files will be deleted from that USB-stick once this project is completed.

I have never during the whole process of this thesis had neither the initial nor anonymized transcriptions visible on my computer screen at a public place. All the work with sensitive documents were done in places where I was sure that no one could see my screen.

4.8 Analyzing the data.

There is of course already an analysis going on, both consciously and unconsciously, while the interviews are conducted, while the recordings are transcribed, and while the transcriptions are anonymized. While all this work gives one a good overview of the material, I nevertheless actively read through the anonymized transcripts twice before coding. The second of those times I wrote notes about themes, ideas, and observations that were brought up. On the third read-through I started coding. I was coding the anonymized transcripts in a word document, and the codes were added as searchable notes in the margin. I assigned all codes a hashtag followed by a number. I ended up with 100 codes (#1-#100) that were later grouped to thirteen topics. Almost all parts of the anonymized transcripts were assigned at least one code. The only exceptions were some digressions that were not relevant for this thesis. This coding and its thematization proved to be crucial for the analysis, especially since

the interviews were semi structured and the participants often changed the subject, made callbacks to previous topics, and made interesting digressions.

While analyzing the material I was looking for both similarities and contrasts on how different participants dealt with or thought about a given subject. Once the codes had provided me with an outline of an analysis of a given subject, I made word-searches of theme-appropriate words to make sure that I had not overlooked relevant data from any participants.

While trying to thematically analyze the data, I tended to provide quotes if one, two, or three participants dealt with the same subject. If four or more were in agreement, I tended to summarize the opinion and give a couple of quotes as examples. In the instances where my analysis either confirmed or contradicted the material presented in the literature review and the theory chapter, I commented on that and provided some theoretical analysis. In the same way I have used grounded theory to inductively develop theory from the interviews. These theoretical ideas are then thematized and expounded on in the concluding chapters seven and eight.

There is one clarification that needs to be done regarding my presentation of the quotes in the analysis. I assume that most people find it difficult to speak in depth of the divine. All the participants in this study to some degree agrees that it is difficult to speak of the essence of God. The answers of the participants are therefore often hesitating, slowly spoken, with several false starts and self-corrections. There are also many instances where the participants start an answer before it fades into silence and long pauses, only for that theme to be revisited a couple of sentences later. I have tried to present most of those things in the quotes by indicating pauses by using triple punctuation (…), and to keep most of the “false starts”, hesitations, and self-corrections. Some few times I have cleaned up the quotes a bit, but only in instances when the lack of tone and context in a hesitating quote fails to communicate the intent of the participant. I also believe that the nature of the answers justifies a rather frequent use of triple punctuation in square brackets ([…]) in the instances when the participants revisit a theme after having made a digression. If the digression is longer than about a minute, I have usually opted to break it up to two quotes with “the participant later went on to say” or something similar.

I have tried my utmost to not be normative about the beliefs, ideas, and practices of the participants.

4.9 Research ethics.

In this sub-chapter I will firstly discuss some ethical concerns regarding anonymization, and especially gender and gender-inclusivity in heavily anonymized texts. Secondly, I will discuss whether the interviews had a potential to trigger negative emotions in the participants.

While preparing the interview guide, I assumed that there would be no major differences in the responses based on the gender of the participants. I never initiated discussions regarding gender during the interviews, and neither did the participants. But based on their names and appearances I believe that it is safe to assume that more than one gender was represented by the participants. None of my findings suggest any patterns or leanings based on gender. I therefore find it unnecessary to even disclose my assumption of the gender distribution of the study. The assumed gender of the quoted participants has been withheld to further protect their anonymity. I frequently refer to them in gender neutral terms, such as "the participant" or "the respondent" as a way of avoiding gendered pronouns. I have opted to not simply use *they* as a gender-neutral encompassing pronoun for singular and plural participants, as I was afraid that it would make it unclear as to if I was referring to a single participant, several participants, or the whole group of participants. To avoid this confusion, I have chosen to use "they", "their", "them", and "themselves", including the quotation marks, to indicate that I am in those cases referring to a single anonymized individual. The pronoun *they* and *them* (without quotation marks) have only been used when I am referring to two or more participants or an abstract person. I understand that some people might find the extended use of "the participant" repetitive, or perhaps even annoying. In the same way the extended use of "they" might sometimes seem unintuitive. Those are sacrifices I am willing to make since I believe that the use of the options "he/she" and "(s)he" can be taken to imply a gender-binarity that is exclusive.

I have opted to not use numbers or fake names to refer to a particular participant. It would be possible to construct some sort of profile for a participant by looking at all the

quotes assigned to a number or a fictitious name. This would severely weaken the anonymity of the participants. I sometimes state that two or more particular quotes within a sub-chapter stems from the same participant, but I tend to try to start with a clean slate in each sub-chapter, and seldom refer to what a quoted participant has said regarding another subject. These strict measures to ensure anonymity sometimes has negative consequences for the analysis. It is for example impossible to make a detailed and specific typology of the images of God of the participants. But I claim that it nevertheless is a necessary decision to sacrifice both some details, and some ability to paint a bigger picture, to assure anonymity for the participants. I do however in chapter 6.1.6 attempt to present a more general typology that I incorporate to a limited degree in the analysis. I am aware that it would benefit the analysis to incorporate it more frequently and more detailed, but the utmost importance of anonymity prevents me.

Another ethical question is whether the interviews could have triggered negative emotions. The probing questions regarding their image of God might have the potential to bring up difficult existential questions. The question of whether they are able to speak openly and honestly of their image of God might in a similar way bring out insecurities about their role and employment as a pastor. I believe that the information letter adequately informed the participants that I would probe them with these questions. They knew the premises for the interview and still chose to contact me. My impression after the interviews was that even though many of the participants have questions and ambiguities regarding their own image of God and their role as a pastor, they nevertheless seemed to have some sense of security and stability in their position and role. This sense of security and stability seemed to have slowly grown on the participants over time. There is however one participant who has had a more recent move towards these non-theistic inclinations. This participant spoke to some degree of difficult existential questions related to “their” image of God, and of some insecurities regarding “their” role and employment as a pastor. In all interviews, but especially in this instance, it is possible that they experienced negative emotions because of the interview. But it is also possible that they experienced the interview as somewhat therapeutical. Several of the participants expressed some form of release that the interview-setting enabled them to speak freely regarding a topic of which they seldom speak of.

4.10 My positionality.

The only things that were revealed about me in the information letter was my name and that I was a master student at MF. Those details did not likely affect the respondents in their choice in whether they wanted to contact me or not. My positionality came more into play during the interviews. I decided to go for a "normal" dress code, wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and an open shirt.

The participants almost certainly picked up my Swedish accent, But I am quite certain that my seventeen years as a habitant of Norway has made me proficient enough in the Norwegian language.

I was born in 1981, and I believe that the fact that my age is higher than the average age for master students might have had some influence on the participants. Several participants mentioned that an openness to view God outside of the framework of orderliness and routine comes after the years of young adulthood has been passed. This can be exemplified by one participant who spoke of Rohr´s (2011) work "Falling upwards", wherein Rohr claims that the almost inescapable occurrence of some sort of dramatic crisis or "fall" in adult life can be used as an experiential base for a "growth" in one's perception of the divine for the latter half of life. Whether the participants´ non-theistic inclinations is a sign of growth or not is largely a matter of subjective opinions, but the participants overwhelmingly described their move towards non-theistic inclination as a process of growth. I find it plausible that some of the informants found it easier to discuss their experiences of both crises and their transformation toward a non-theistic view of God since I can no longer be dismissed as young.

My religious marker is complicated and partly unknown to myself. I am not a member of any religious organization. My belief is a complex intersection of progressive Christianity and atheism. But I have experience with several stances on belief. I was brought up as a conservative evangelical Christian, spent many years as a progressive Christian, and also many years as an atheist. I have in the last couple of years tried to accommodate my selective longings for some forms of religious experiences, and I am now trying to find a suitable language for something that might be considered "undeconstructible" (Caputo & Vattimo, 2007; Caputo, 2016, p. 28-30). I started all the interviews by asking the respondent if they had

any questions about either the research project or about me as a researcher. In about half of the cases the question about my religious leanings came up. I would briefly explain my transition from an engaged evangelical Christian to an atheist, and my recent longing to explore the concept of a non-theistic divinity. I believe that my answer helped to build rapport with the respondents.

Of even greater importance is how my religious marker has potentially influenced the research question, the methods I have chosen, and the way that the data is analyzed. My own complicated sort of non-theistic inclinations might position me as an insider. I, myself has experienced how my language of the divine sometimes changes according to my perception of the desire for orthodoxy in the person I am in conversation with. I have also completed the first three years of cand.theol, and have experience as a pastor in practice, both in a congregation and at a hospital.

For this research it might be helpful to view insider-outsider positions more in terms of how Knott describes them as "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts (Knott, 2010, p. 259). In a similar way I believe one could describe Jensen's stance on the insider-outsider problem in terms of "knowledge-near" and "knowledge-distant" concepts (Jensen, 2011). I do believe that my positionality is "experience-near" and "knowledge-near" when it comes to experiences with being a pastor, and of finding a language for non-theistic inclinations. Even though the discursive turn has made it clear that we can never be sure of precisely what our language communicates to the other, I still believe that being an "insider" in the sense of "knowledge- and experience-nearness" can lead to a more effective distribution of information. Both in me formulating the questions, and in me analyzing the data.

Finally, I should be aware of the possibility that my own experiences and beliefs might cause a propensity to extrapolate my ideas of non-theistic interpretations in the data, and that I need to be vigilant to listen to the experiences of the informants. Especially when they differ from mine. (The last 14 lines above is a part taken from my unpublished method report in MET5010 that was made in preparation for this thesis.)

5 Theory

I want to begin this chapter by saying that it is sometimes hard to distinguish what should be presented as theory. There are for instance ideas or even anecdotes found in the literature review (chapter 3) that I will make use of, both as minor theoretical points and as larger theoretical frameworks, such as Dennett´s and LaScola´s ideas regarding the "head" and the "heart" expressed in chapter 3.1.1. Many of the ideas presented in chapter 3 will be used both to directly analyze the material, and as a springboard to inductively develop theory.

In this chapter I will present, or sometimes continue to present, different sorts of theory. I argue that it is sensible to group these theories into three categories, namely methodological theory, sociological theory, and theological theory. The distinctions between these categories are not watertight. There are especially many theological and philosophical elements in many of the theories labeled as sociological. But there are two reasons as to why I still prefer this separation of the theory into three categories. Firstly, I want to signal what elements of a theory that I emphasize, even though I consider all the ideas and elements of the theories presented. Secondly, it worked as a reminder for me to consider both methodological, sociological, and theological elements while I analyzed the material.

5.1 Methodological theory.

5.1.1 Grounded theory.

I have made use of grounded theory to inductively develop theory from the interviews. That is to say that I have applied inductive reasoning through the collection and analyzation of the data with the aim of constructing hypothesis and theories.

Barney Glaser, who together with Anselm Strauss developed grounded theory in the 1960-ies, have stated that few researchers make use of grounded theory as a total methodological package. Neither do I. I "adopt and adapt" and mix methods by jargonizing, as Glaser describe those that do not adhere to what he calls "the pure or orthodox view". Glaser states that grounded theory often take a few research studies to learn (Glaser, 2022), and I simply do not have that experience yet. One of the instances where I have not adhered to

the classic grounded theory is regarding pre-research and details regarding the literature review. I am aware that some downplay the need for those things, but Glaser and Strauss seem to have called for an extensive and broad review of the literature (Nathaniel, 2022). The question is rather when and how the review should be done. Glaser and Straus suggest that one effective strategy is to delay the review of the empirical and theoretical literature, so that the initial analyzation will not be too influenced by other ideas that are less suitable or relevant for the study at hand. The initial review should instead be broad with the intent to enhance theoretical sensitivity, and to not pre-conceptually contaminate emerging theory (Nathaniel, 2022). Time-restraints have been a major issue in preventing me from taking this approach. The application-process to NSD and the recruitment took some months, and during or even before that time I read much of the literature presented in the literature review and in this chapter. The most obvious example is probably how my reading of Dennett´s and LaScola´s work have informed my analysis. I did, as an example, delve into my material looking for signs of the concept "belief in belief", just to find myself adapting that concept later to better suit my material. But this aim of reading broad to enhance theoretical sensitivity is complicated and involves some informed guesswork. I did, as an example, read quite extensively on Erving Goffman´s idea of frontstage and backstage behavior, just to later find out that I did not find it very applicable to my material. On the other hand, I was well into the analysis before I realized that I could benefit from using the theories of D. Z. Phillips. One of the main ideas of grounded theory is to not begin with a prior hypothesis, but to analyze the data to induce your own hypotheses (Silverman, 2011, p. 67). That has been my aim. But it should be stated that I went into the analysis suspecting that my material would be "same but different" than that of Dennett and LaScola, which after all were the studies that inspired this project in the first place. This statement is an attempt to show transparency, since grounded theory have been criticized by some for its failure to acknowledge implicit theories that have guided the initial analysis (Silverman, 2011, p. 73).

In this study I have considered symbolic interactionism in my attempt to construct comprehensive theories of the respondents' linguistic strategies in their communications of the transcendent (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 211-212). Even though I will not make much use of Erving Goffman´s idea of frontstage and backstage behavior, I will nevertheless in this thesis assume that even though individuals´ impression management might be predictable, it is not deterministic. There is still creativity to be explored in a slight "lifting of the veil" to reveal a

calculated peek of the backstage persona from the front stage, such as for example in a sermon. (Furseth & Repstad, 2003, p. 72-73; Aakvaag, 2008, p. 73, 75). This is to say that I am repeatedly trying to analyze and theorize the instances where the participants use, sometimes sudden, linguistical or liturgical “tricks” or methods to correct or nuance how the ideas of the divine is communicated.

I have made use of many methods and strategies that are frequently used in grounded theory, such as theoretical sampling, coding, comparative methods, and grouped codes into categories that are then the basis for theoretical frameworks (Silverman, 2011, p. 68-72). These processes are detailed in chapter 4.1 and 4.8.

5.2 Sociological theories.

5.2.1 Theories of Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola.

As previously stated, there are some theoretical ideas of Dennett and LaScola that has already been presented in the literature review, such as their ideas regarding “leading with the head” vs. “leading with the heart”, and their idea that some “liberal” believers make a distinction between “factual” and “true” (see chapter 3.1.1). In this subchapter I will present three other theoretical ideas in Dennett´s and LaScola´s work, that I will make use of in my analysis.

The first idea is the previously mentioned "belief in belief". This idea is further explored in Dennett´s book "breaking the spell" (2006). Dennett claims that "Most people believe in belief in God; they believe that it is a state one should aspire to, work strenuously to remain, and foster in others – and feel guilty or dismayed if one fails to achieve it." (Dennett & LaScola, 2010, p. 125). Dennett makes the comparison that faced with the threat of nihilism, it is understandable that people promote a “belief in belief” that something matters. He also points out that another vigorously protected vision is the “belief in belief” in free will (2006, p. 202). These are examples of things that are arguably not provable, but it is nevertheless widely believed that a belief in these things is more advantageous than disadvantageous. Dennett and LaScola states that a "belief in belief" is shared by some of

their informants. Although it is in no way abundant, there are some signs toward "belief in belief" in a couple of my informants. I do however note that many of the participants in this study put a larger emphasis on belief as the praxis of belief rather on the intellectual assent, and that will be explored in my analysis.

The second idea is the occurrence of something that they describe as "use-mention errors". The works of Dennett and LaScola shows instances of where their respondents express usefulness and affection for the symbol "God," and that the respondents widely employ the symbolic "God" in a "use-mention error" to conflate the concept of a thing with the thing itself to hide or soften their unbelief in communication with their congregation (2010, p. 147). It is obvious that the concept of God exists. And Dennett states that some people find that this concept is worth fighting over since they believe that their concept of God is better than others concept of God (2007, p. 216). One pastor might, for instance, prefer to speak of a loving God rather than of a zealous God. While the pastor knows that both the loving and the zealous God conceptually makes sense, they might to some degree believe that even the preferred concept of God is more symbolic than in accordance with reality. Instances of conscious employment of the "use-mention error" in relation to God can be seen in a couple of instances in my data. I believe that it is both possible and fruitful to expand the use of the concept and apply it to other theological concepts like for instance "answers to prayer".

The third idea is merely a short anecdote in Dennett´s and LaScola´s work (2010, p. 147), but I find it very interesting and useful. I have chosen to call the idea "those before have said". This is a kind of linguistic method where quotation marks are used to shield the pastor from assertion. This method came up several times when discussing the creeds with the informants. One variation, when leading up to a creed in a church service, might be to say: As our fathers and mothers in faith have said … Stated like this, the pastor has insinuated that the creed was believed by its authors, and by Christians in the past, but the pastor has omitted whether they believe in the creed. There are several variations of this theme in my data, which I will explore in the analysis. Some use of quotation marks as a shield from assertion is very subtle. Other informants are more confident to clearly state that the creeds were written in a specific context, and that parts of it makes little or no sense to us today.

5.2.2 Theopoetics.

Amos Niven Wilder, who did groundbreaking work in the development of the idea of theopoetics in the seventies, stresses that the aim for whoever who wish to write or speak theologically should not merely aim to put words to ideas and doctrines. They should, even more significantly, put words to "the images and dreams, the archetypes and symbols, by which individuals and groups live." (Hunter, 1978, p. 2). Wilder stresses the experiential dimension of religion (Hunter, 1978, p. 6). He and other proponents of theopoetics, such as Rollins (2006) and Caputo (2013), thus downplays the rigidly worded statements of God found in systematic theology, and instead urges us to find poetic articulations for our lived and embodied experiences of the divine. According to David L. Miller there can be made a useful distinction between theopoetics and theopoetry. Miller defines theopoetics as "… strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith." (Miller, 2010, p. 8). He defines theopoetry as "… an artful, imaginative, creative, beautiful, and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in our possession and a part of our faith." (Miller, 2010, p. 8). Theopoetry, according to Miller´s definition, presupposes that theological knowledge is possible. Theopoetics is a more postmodern approach in its denial of fixed and ultimate meanings. This means that embracing theopoetics is more than just believing that poetry is a useful tool when it comes too communicating theological ideas. A complete embracement of theopoetics is to deny that language, including the language of both the creeds and the bible, is able to provide us fixed and ultimate meanings.

The application of the theory of theopoetics will be quite wide in the analysis. I will look at how some participants prefer the use of poetry both in the liturgy and in how they generally speak of God. I will also look at how theopoetics influence some participants views of the creeds and the bible. I will finally argue that some of the participants have a view that might be described as somewhere in-between theopoetics and theopoetry.

5.2.3 D. Z. Phillips ideas of religious language and religions as practices.

D. Z. Phillips (1934-2006) was a proponent of the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. As such he saw little use in trying to prove the existence of God. He claimed that we are profoundly confused if we claim that God exist in the same way that we claim that "this room" exist. The depth-grammar between those statements differs. "God" and "this room" should not be referred to in the same way, because they do not exist in the same way. Phillips claimed that philosophy of religion should rather focus on different forms of how humans engage in religious practice, and to focus on the possibilities of meaning therein (Eikrem, 2013, p. 15-16). We shall later see that this Wittgensteinian argument against the objective meaningfulness of the claim of God´s existence will reoccur among thinkers that will be presented later.

Religious practice can take many forms. Phillips speaks of how religious language, e.g., the practice of saying something about God, is a refined form of religious practice (Eikrem, 2013, p. 22). But for this thesis I will focus on the forms of religious practice that are either without words or practices that involves something beyond just words. Theologies are established through religious practices, such as hearing stories, or participating in rituals. These rituals can be wordless, such as folding hands or kneeling. They can also be practices that include words, such as prayer or worship. The deeds, i.e., what religious people do, is the beginning. Language, e.g., what we say about God, is a refinement of the initial practice or experience. Religious concepts are "… formed as pre-reflective "expressive reactions" of which the linguistic ones are the more refined." (Eikrem, 2013, p. 22). Emotions can also sometimes be conceptualized as religious if they are a reoccurring part of a religious praxis. A religious community can in this sense be described as a community that have coordinated practices. But it is important to state that religious beliefs do not emerge from practices. Nor does practices emerge from religious beliefs. It is rather that religious beliefs are structured as religious practices (Eikrem, 2013, p. 22-23). To come together in a religious community is not to refer to the same object called God, but it is to refer to a common experience of what a belief in God amounts to for them (Kim, 2022, p. 107).

To find God is, for Phillips, an emergence of spiritual awareness. It is not to find God as an object, but to find God *in* praise and thanksgiving. It is to recognize a new kind of reality. God is not found in a general metaphysical thesis. God is found in the practices in

which belief has its sense. This is what Phillips labels as the reality of God (Kim, 2022, p. 104, 108). If I were to say that “God is love”, it would constitute what I mean by the reality of God. This is to say that the statement “God is love” is not ascribing love to God. It is not a factual description of a divine subject, but a grammatical rule for the use of the word God. The same would be true if I were to speak of God as creator, redeemer, goodness, grace, and so on (Kim, 2022, p. 121-122).

5.3 Theological theory.

I have so far mentioned the term non-theism several times and have given explanations of how I understand and use the term in this thesis. In chapter 1.1 I briefly described it as an inability to fully commit to traditional notions of theism. In chapter 1.4 I clarified that non-theism lacks a (psychological state of) belief in the definition of theism as "the view that all limited or finite things are dependent in some way on one supreme or ultimate reality of which one may also speak in personal terms." (Lewis, 2019). In chapter 4.1 I refer to the information letter (10.1) wherein I use the term “non-theistic inclinations” to describe Christians who are uncertain to whether God is a personal God who concretely interacts in the reality of humans. I go on to exemplify that some view God as an impersonal force, and that some are uncertain as to whether we as humans can say anything meaningful of the essence or existence of God. Finally, I said that some might experience that the biblical and traditional church-language of God communicates problematic connotations. This summation of what has been said so far shows that the “non-theistic inclinations” are mainly described in terms of negations of other beliefs. One could perhaps say that it is described as a radical form of negative theology. That would be in line with Gianni Vattimo´s claim that an admission that all language is hermeneutical and metaphorical hinders hermeneutics from bringing forth positive arguments for theological thinking. This negative theology is thereby not merely a negation of what other believers affirm. It is a negation of all propositional language, both in positive and negative terms. This negation also leads to a skepticism that we are able to have exhaustive knowledge of what constitutes reality. But this “negative” philosophy enables a positive power through mythological and poetical discourses (Svenungsson, 2004, p. 32-33, 41). I will in the following sub-chapters explore further what have been said, and what could be said of non-theism, both in negating and some attempts at affirming ways.

The development of non-theistic theological thought in western Christianity is a topic that could easily fill several books. This brief and partial presentation will in no way do justice to the nuances and intricacies of different non-theistic theological viewpoints. But I deem it necessary to give this very limited overview for two reasons. Firstly, it will provide a clearer view of what sort of theological ideas of the image of God that I characterize as non-theistic. Secondly, it will place the beliefs and ideas of my informants into a bigger perspective of different non-theistic thinkers. Before I conducted the interviews, I assumed that the informants would frequently refer to theologians and writers that has informed their thinking. This referment occurred to a lesser degree than I supposed it would. Only half of the informants mentioned writers or theologians that had influenced their thinking, and the list of mentioned theologians is rather short. The mentioned theologians, or philosophers who write theology, were Marcus Borg, John D. Caputo, Paul Tillich, and Jayne Svenungsson. This list of theologians is far from an obvious framework for a short presentation of non-theistic ideas. But they will be the basis for my presentation since they were mentioned by the informants.

5.3.1 Jayne Svenungsson´s presentation of postmodern philosophy of religion.

I begin with Svenungsson (2004), since her book Guds återkomst ("the return of God"), which deals with the conception of God in postmodern philosophy, includes a history of philosophy of religion that to a large degree goes hand in hand with my definition of non-theism. Svenungsson then goes on to argue for her novel ideas later in the book, but for sake of brevity I´ve had to focus on her presentation of the conception of God in postmodern philosophy, mainly by looking at Lévinas, Derrida, and Marion.

Svenungsson´s project is to show that while philosophers like Nietzsche claimed that the western God have been reduced to an abstract idol, new philosophers like Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion have enabled the "return of God" to philosophy. What enables this return of God is once again not mainly a newfound ability to make positive claims about God, but a widespread realization of the undermining of the conception of a neutral, objective, or universal rationale. The postmodern loss of a meta-perspective has eliminated the ability for philosophy to deny theological claims. The insight of the hermeneutical character of all knowledge enables us to argue that poetical or religious

discourses should not be discarded just because some might have a preference for another specific ideal for truth or objectivity (Svenungsson, 2004, p. 13, 14, 16, 37). Svenungsson goes on, using Vattimo´s thoughts as an example, showing that Christianity must be viewed as a continuous process of interpretation. But Vattimo goes further than the "death of God theologians" (such as Altizer & Hamilton, 1966; Altizer, 2002) and claims that the theological language cannot be reduced to existential truths. Vattimo´s God, in which he believes that he believes, is more than an "antiquated symbolic expression of some deeper existential truth." (Svenungsson, 2004, p. 45. My translation). Svenungsson then goes on to describe the development of this sort of postmodern image of God, and thereby also the requirement for her idea of "the return of God", by describing the theological influences of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lévinas. These three philosophers were chosen because of their influence on Jaques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, who Svenungsson sees as key figures of the "return of God" in contemporary philosophy (p. 51).

Svenungsson states that when Nietzsche proclaim the death of God, he is not affirming the atheism of his present time but is rather announcing his search for a more authentic conception of the divine. According to Svenungsson, Heidegger proceeds to say that Nietzsche has shown us that western thinking has reduced God to that which upholds the metaphysical order. Heidegger suggests the possibility of a more divine divinity beyond the God of philosophy (p. 51-53).

Svenungsson goes on to describe Lévinas´ ambition to make space for the divine in the ethical sphere, a sphere where the divine might be unreducible to philosophical knowledge (p. 51-53). Lévinas´ search for the meaningfulness of the idea of God goes beyond the potential existence or nonexistence of God, and beyond ontology. The idea of God is for Lévinas only meaningful in concrete situations, where one is in a face-to-face encounter with an other, and that encounter demands a radical responsibility (p. 111). It is also an idea of God that is radically transcendent and wholly other (le tout Autre) (p.155).

Svenungsson continues by describing Derrida´s critique of negative theology. Derrida claims that the negation of all positive claims of God are meant to aim toward a kind of hyper-confirmation of the essence of God as higher being beyond being. This view of the being beyond being is for Derrida a confirmation of a God as presence, or perhaps hyper-

presence, and therefore fails to go beyond the ontotheological structure. Derrida´s concept of God is rather something that is prior to all names and terms and has nothing to do with neither presence nor absence. It is something meta-ontological or meta-metaphysical (p. 145-146, 149). Derrida´s thoughts of God are related to Lévinas´ ethical thoughts of the face of the other and theological thoughts of the wholly other by saying that "every other is wholly other" (tout autre est tout autre). That is to believe that all encounters with creatures demand the same responsibility, respect, and dignity that should be given the divine. The unconditionally open phrase "tout autre est tout autre" also hints at an apophaticism so radical that one can never be sure that the wholly other is God or any "other other" (p. 150-153). This radical apophatic view also seems to prevent us from having a knowledge of divine revelation.

Derrida´s view seem to be a bit too radical for Marion. Svenungsson claims that even though Marion would never admit it, he is nevertheless reintroducing metaphysics into the heart of phenomenology by indicating a transcendent giver through his reduction of all phenomena as gifts (p. 154). Marion proposes that we can imagine a phenomenon that stands forth with such an abundance that our intentions are completely inadequate. These "saturated phenomena" are so forceful that we are neither capable to turn them into objects of our consciousness, nor conceptualize them. The quintessential form of a saturated phenomenon is revelation, and Marion uses the incarnation as a paradigmatic example. Marion claims to not be interested in whether this event is factual or not, but he does claim that the event is possible in a phenomenological sense (p. 161-165). Marion speaks much of two (out of his four) types of saturated phenomena, namely what he calls the idol and the icon. Svenungsson sums up the difference of the terms as:

> The idol designates a phenomenality that has it outermost base in the beholder, a phenomenality that is limited by the contemplators´ expectations of what they will see. The opposite circumstances are true concerning the icon. The icon expresses a phenomenality where that which stands forth have no base in the beholder, but is *given* the beholder independent of his or her expectations. (Svenungsson, 2004, p. 171-172. My translation).

The idol is permeated by the desire to make God present as an object for our thinking. The icon on the other hand suggests a defense of all forms of radical alterity of God. Marion argues that God, seen as an icon, is separate from our logic, language, being, thinking, and concepts. There is much here that is similar to the other thinkers presented above in this chapter, and it might seem as if the radical alterity of God eliminates all possible points of contact between the divine and humans. But where Marion differs is in his faith (in catholic Christianity) that a revelation is possible. Marion believes that we should be open for God to be revealed in whatever ways God choses to make himself revealed. That potential revelation will be beyond the limitations of our thinking and language. But Marion believes that we can respond in true love, praise, and worship, because the essence of this response is beyond the predicative language as such (p.172-178).

This has been an extremely condensed summation of several thinkers that truly deserve more space if I had it available. The intent with this sub-chapter is to give a brief show of some of the ideas that obviously have inspired the participants who cited this book, and arguably inspired the image of God of several other participants in this study. I am not claiming that all the participants in this study agree with all the ideas outlined in this sub-chapter, but it is my hope that this summary, dense as it is, can show examples of thinkers who have influenced many non-theistic ideas. Examples of such ideas are that it is difficult to without reservations claim that God exists, that it is difficult to claim that we can say anything of the essence of God, or that it is difficult to without reservations claim that God intervenes.

5.3.2 Marcus Borg´s "Speaking Christian".

Marcus Borg (1942-2015) was an American New Testament scholar and theologian and was an influential voice regarding what might be labeled liberal Christianity. I will limit my presentation of the thoughts of Borg to his work Speaking Christian (2011), both since it is the only one of his works that is translated to Norwegian (2017. The page-references in this subchapter will refer to this edition), and because it is the work that was mentioned as an influence by a couple of my participants.

The book Speaking Christian deals with a vast array of Christian concepts, but for this thesis I find it sufficient to focus on Borg´s view of the bible and his image of God. Borg critiques an infallible and literal view of the bible. He instead argues for what he calls a historical-metaphorical approach, which is to both look at the text through its historical context, and to have a willingness to take a metaphorical approach to the text, such as allowing figurative and symbolic interpretations that holds an abundance of meaning (2017, p. 30-35). Borg states clearly that he views the bible as the holy scripture that is the foundation for Christianity. But he is equally clear that he views the bible as a man-made document that reflects the authors experiences and thoughts regarding God. This explains, at least for Borg, why the bible is full of both wisdom and profound insights on the one hand, and atrocities and seemingly arbitrary demands on the other (p. 59-63). Borg argues for a seemingly Barthian view, namely that the bible is reliable, true, and faithful in its witness to the Word of God. And with the Word of God Borg refers to the incarnation, the Word made flesh (p. 66-67).

This thesis will not go in depth with the participants´ view of scripture, but I firmly believe that if one agrees with Borg, especially regarding the metaphorical and human nature of the bible, one is then arguably more likely to accept theopoetics as a viable theological and liturgical tool.

Borg critiques the view of God as a being that is beyond the universe. He claims that this view often results in the view of God as “the highest being”, and in extension is viewed as something real that can be claimed to exist, a being with personal attributes, and as one who intervenes from its place beyond into our reality. Borg instead argues for a view of God as an all-encompassing holy presence. Borg embraces the panentheistic view of God as both transcendent and immanent. In this view the question of God´s existence, and intervention are rendered meaningless. The question is rather what constitutes reality, and if that reality is the presence of God we can no longer speak of an intervention from outside. Borg nevertheless states that there is nothing wrong with personifying God in our language, as long as we understand that the personification is metaphorical (p. 69-78).

Borg´s image of God is arguably not as radical as the views described by Svenungsson in the previous subchapter. Some participants stated Borg´s image of God as an inspiration, and it will hopefully be clear that even those who didn´t state Borg as a clear inspiration

nevertheless are sympathetic to some of his views. Especially the proposed meaninglessness of speaking of Gods existence and intervention.

5.3.3 Paul Tillich´s "God beyond God" and "God as ground of being".

Tillich´s ideas of "God beyond God" and "God as ground of being" were both mentioned in the information letter (see chapter 4.1 and 10.1) and alluded to by some of the participants. These terms were never expounded upon by any of the participants, but since it was mentioned, I will give a very brief explanation. These terms were a big part of Tillich´s theological work, and he spends time to expound the ideas in his work "The Courage to Be" (2014) and volume one of his systematic theology (1951) among other places. These ideas have been influential to later thinkers. Especially the view of God as ground of being, to which also Borg pays homage when he describes his image of God (2017, p. 74).

Regarding "God as ground of all being" Tillich states:

> The being of God is being itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. If God is *a* being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. (1951, p. 235).

This "being itself" can also in a circumscribing phrase be expressed as "the power of being", or "the ground of being". It is further expressed as "the power of resisting nonbeing" and is described as immanent transcendent by being said to be "the power of being in everything and above everything" (1951, p. 235-236). Hopefully it is now clear how this image of God hinders us from speaking of God as existing or intervening. Tillich views the divine as both personal and transpersonal. He therefore also believes, as described in the previous subchapter, that we are warranted to relate to God´s self-revelation in personal terms. This "paradoxical character of every prayer" is warranted as long as we remember its metaphorical nature (2014, p. 172).

The concept of the "God above God" is linked to the "God as ground of being" but is more precisely connected to Tillich´s idea of "the courage to be", which is the courage of one´s self-affirmation while being faced with the threat of the anxiety of fate and death, guilt and condemnation, meaninglessness and emptiness (Tillich, 2014). The "God above God" is a form of "absolute faith" that transcends both theism, mysticism, and personal encounter (p. 171). In a somewhat esoteric way, Tillich sums it up as being "… the accepting of acceptance without somebody or something that accepts. It is the power of being-itself that accepts and gives the courage to be." (p. 171).

5.3.4 The non-theistic ideas of John D. Caputo.

John D. Caputo (b. 1940) is an American philosopher who is influenced by Jacques Derrida and the French phenomenology presented in chapter 5.3.1. Caputo has developed a distinctive approach to religion called weak theology. Some details of Caputo´s weak theology, and its relevance to this thesis will be expanded upon at several instances in the analysis. This section will serve as a brief introduction to Caputo´s ideas. Caputo´s theology is a theology of the event. The part of Caputo´s definition of the event that is of most interest to this thesis is that the event is "… something going on *in* what happens, […]; it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present." (Caputo & Vattimo, 2007, p. 47). Caputo goes on to explain that the name of God is the name of an event. He says that "The name of God is very simply the most famous and richest name we have to signify both an open-ended excess and an inaccessible mystery." (p. 53). Caputo further describes this weak power of God as the power of powerlessness. That is to say that it is more of a potency than of a power. It is a "… restive possibility that makes the world restless with hope for justice and impatient with injustice, while the actuality or the realization is assigned *to us*…" (p. 64). This definition of God leads Caputo to deny that God is a cosmic force, or a physical or metaphysical energy or power. This definition of a God as a claim without a force does not intervene. This denial of intervention leads Caputo to emphasize the ethic responsibilities of humans. Caputo´s God is to be found in the weak call *in* what happens, and it calls us to work for justice (p. 64-65).

6 Analysis

6.1 *The participant´s image of God.*

It might seem unintuitive to begin a presentation of the participants image of God with a presentation of their rejection of judgmental concepts of God. But I will begin here because that is how almost all participants began. I began the interviews with me saying: Tell me about your image of God. Most of the participants replied: I used to believe in a judgmental God, and I no longer do. Another reason for why I begin here is that the rejection of the judgmental God is by far the most recurrent theme in the whole thesis. The dismissal of an image of God as judgmental is by no means unique for Christians with non-theistic inclinations, but the rejection of the judgmental God permeates the material in such a way that it requires an analysis both of what it means, and of why it reoccurs so frequently.

6.1.1 The judgmental God.

I must begin this section by discussing translation. The Norwegian word that was used by the informants was "dømmende". It is usually translated as "judging". But the following quotes will likely show that most of the informants´ use of the word "judging" have negative connotations, and therefore enables the translation to "judgmental". This is especially clear in how often the participants used the word “dømmende” in relation to the concept of hell. I will revisit the discussion of the terms judging/judge/judgement/judgmental at the end of this section.

The first form of divergence for most of the participants came when they came to see their former image of God as a judgmental God, or at least a God with problematic judgmental elements. Half of my informants spoke concretely of how they perceived this judgmental element of God being communicated in the congregations in which they were raised. One informant spoke of “their” disdain of the forensic language regarding God as a judge, Jesus as a lawyer, or as one who has paid a ransom, and us humans as not worthy enough to be in union with God. When speaking of some parts of the liturgy, the participant said:

> I can´t stand it. This idea that I love you, but I hate what you do, but since I killed my Son, we can be together. This psychopathic image of God ... if you take this seriously, then you must be ... well, it´s not healthy in my view.

Another participant said:

> When I grew up, I had this theistic view of God, and one part of that view depicts God as strict and stern. As one who abides in heaven and watches over us. Not necessarily in the good way, but makes sure that we do everything right, and pounce on and partly punish any wrongdoings. I call this God "the school inspector". One who watched and pointed out our faults.

The rejection of hell, especially the view of hell as a place of eternal physical torment, is not uncommon among neither pastors of CoN, nor clergy in neighboring countries (Leer-Salvesen, 2005; Niemelä, 2005; YouGov, 2014). But in many cases, it seems like the informants' critique of the image of God as a judgmental God is not limited to the afterlife. Several informants spoke of a now rejected image of God, wherein God´s love, protection, or intervention was conditional. The insistence on a divine unconditional love is once again not unique to my informants, but it is a recurring and prominent theme that will serve as a backdrop for further analysis several times at later stages of this thesis.

The informants take different approaches in their dismissal of hell. Some of them are clear in the interviews that hell is an outdated mythology. But only two of my informants have had the courage or desire to say that clearly from the pulpit. Several others opted for silence on the matter, some stating that "they cannot be blamed for what they do not say". In the context of the use of John 3:16 in the funeral liturgy, one informant described an unwillingness to speak about perdition in the following way:

> We [the pastors] are talking about things, of which we must speak very carefully. We are really talking about things that we cannot manage to grasp (ikke har greie på). How could we speak with certainty of the eternal fate of those who are not Christians, when we are uncapable of saying anything with certainty about God?

The informants were rather unanimous in their rejection of hell, perdition, and perishment, but their beliefs or hopes about a potential afterlife differed a bit more. A couple of the informants voiced a hope or belief in apokatastasis. A couple of others expressed a hope for some sort of good afterlife but said that we are likely totally unable to express or know anything of what it will or could be like. Two of the informants goes to a place which might be considered a step further. One says:

> I have become agnostic about the afterlife in the last couple of years. Sometimes I think that this reality is all there is. The presence of God is here, and no other place. Other times I have thought that I will die in God. That is my hope. Though I have no idea of what that means. But you will be wrong the moment you start saying things about the afterlife. You will be wrong, no matter what you say. You cannot say anything about it.

The other one said:

> I do hope that we are taken care of in some sense, but I do not imagine a heaven. It is fine by me if we just disappear. Or perhaps heaven is us having rest. This life is cumbersome, and it would be nice to just not have to [do anything]. To be allowed to rest.

By now it is hopefully clear that the translation "judgmental" is justified. But I would like to make one further observation. In my experience, it is common for Christians who critique the image of a judgmental God to do so in a context of the term's "judge" and "judgement". The argument often goes that God is not judgmental, but is nevertheless the perfect, fair, and loving judge, who will administer some form of necessary final judgement. I find it interesting that all but one of my informants critiqued the judgmental God totally without any mention of either a perfect judge, nor a necessary judgement (the one exception briefly said "there will be a judgement, but…" while critiquing the judgmental image of God). We should be careful to draw conclusions based on omissions or lack of mention of "the judge" or "the judgement", but I find it interesting that these terms were not brought up considering the length that was often used to discuss the judgmental image of God. It at least makes me wonder whether the terms "perfect judge" and "necessary judgement" might be viewed as problematic or uninteresting by some of my informants.

6.1.2 Does God exist?

One of the structured parts of the interviews was to ask about God´s existence. I raised the question by saying: In colloquial speak it is common to speak of God as one who either exists or does not exist, but what are your opinions on that matter. Does God exist? The question was intended to acknowledge the common, simple, and clearly dualistic view that the theist claims that God does exist, and the atheist either does not claim that God exists or claims that God does not exist. But the use of "but" in the question might also hint toward a non-dualistic third option, wherein one reflects on what is meant with both "God" and "existence". I tried to bring up this question early in the interviews, just as I am now bringing it up early in the analysis, since I consider one's view of "God´s" relation to "existence" to be fundamental in relation to one's possible non-theistic image of God.

There was only one (out of the 6) informant who chose to affirm a belief in the existence of God without further discussing the possible nuances of either "God" or "existence". Most of the other participants reflected on how that question is ambiguous. Some even stated that the question is meaninglessness.

One of the informants brought up the Latin etymology of the word "exist", and how it means to stand forth (or to step out, emerge, or to appear). “They” said:

> God does not stand forth such as a horse stands forth, or such as a human or a chair stands forth. So … we cannot use existence in regard to God. This has been the basis for the critique from atheists. They believe that we are trying to sort of prove that God exists. […] But God does not exist. Not according to the definition of existence. But that does not mean that I do not believe. Because I believe that I do believe. I inquire (henvender meg til) this something of which I do not know what it is.

This quote demonstrates two notions or beliefs that seems to be held to a large degree by all participants. Firstly, God´s appearance or interactions with our physical world cannot be measured or proven. Secondly, the nature or essence of this "divine something" is not known. At least not well known. It might not be totally unknowable for most participants, but that will be discussed at a later stage of this thesis.

One of the informants claimed that there are images of God whose God´s existence should be rejected, and images of God whose God´s existence might be believed. “They said:

> If someone were to come to me and ask whether God existed, I would have asked what they mean with that word. What do you mean with the letters G O D. If they were to say one who has created all, who sits and watches over the creation, who sends his Son, who sends his Spirit, and then sits and wonders how it´s all going to play out. If they were to say one who creates and upholds. […] Then I would say that I do not believe that such a God exist. But if someone were to ask whether there is something more, something deeper that we do not catch, some reason that things are coherent, something that we will never catch, but nevertheless makes us contemplate, and that we are a part of. Then I would say yes. I believe that there is such a thing like something like that.

The quotes above hopefully illustrates the informants´ reflections on the difficulties of speaking about the existence of God without further defining what is meant by both "God" and "existence".

It might be tempting to conclude that the informants that claim that we cannot speak of God as one who exist deny that God emerges or appears to us humans in any way, but that is not true. It seems to me like they believe that God´s potential emergence or appearance is not measurable or provable. But most of my informants nevertheless believe that God, or aspects of God, can somehow be somewhat experienced. That there is some sort of contact point between the God beyond existence and us humans.

One of the informants brought in the difference between ontology, theology, and experience regarding this topic while speaking of mystical experiences. “They” said:

> The theistic image of God is ontologically limiting in a way. In my mind ontology is theology. When people are making use of [theology] I must ask if they are talking about ontology or experience. We must be very careful at once someone starts to speak of ontology. Because then they are defining the world and reality for others. That is why I consider the theistic image of God to be ontologically incorrect. But God does not vanish once that [theistic image of God] crumbles. It´s more like … well, that is how long that lasted. Because we have to take our experiences seriously (ta erfaring på alvor).

This quote not only problematize ontological claims of God´s existence. It also to some degree legitimizes our mystical experiences of God. The mystical experiences are not able to secure a definition of the world and reality, but they should not be taken lightly.

I will return to the topic of how the informants believe that the divine might be inferred or experienced in a later section. But firstly, I must account for one participant,

whose views on the existence of God diverged from the others. This participant described the belief in God´s existence as something that comes and goes. “They” said:

> I believe that there is a God who has created it all. But I am not so sure whether that God is present and is able to do stuff. … I believe that God exist between us people, and in what happens between us and within us. But I do not mind if someone says that God does not exist. Because I can relate to that as well. It´s at a level wherein I hope that there is something after [death]. That we are taken care of. But here and now I … No … No, I´m uncertain.

The informant mentions several times during the interview that there have been several periods where this informant does not believe in God. Later in the interview this informant said:

> I have during my times of unbelief hoped that my unbelief would pass away. And it has. I have realized over the years that my belief comes and goes as waves.

It seems to me like this participant most of the time have belief in at least a deistic image of God. This participant also seems to be skeptical of whether God can stand forth, appear, or emerge in our physical world. The statement that God exist between and within us people is interesting, but ambivalent. It is unclear to me whether this participant believes that this existence of God between and within us people is of such nature that it cannot be experienced by us people, or if it is an expression of the God manifested in the face of the other, or any other concepts of God presented previously in the theory chapter.

There is, in summary, a range of views regarding the existence of God among the participants. One had no problem with stating a belief that God exists. Four of the participants said that the question of God´s existence is problematic or meaningless until the terms "God" and "exist" were clarified. There seems to be a consensus among the participants that God cannot be said to exist if we define existence as something measurable or provable. There were also many participants that voiced the idea of God as something that does not stand forth, emerge, or appear as most other things, and therefore can be said to be beyond existence in some sense. The question of God´s existence also brought forth many claims that there are images of a God with certain characteristics, wherein those characteristics prevent that God to exist. The most prevalent example was the image of the judgmental God, and how that God does not exist, but there were also some questions whether a "personal" or "interacting" God could be said to exist. The "personal" and "interacting" God is also tied to whether and how God can be experienced. All participants, except perhaps one, believe that we are able to experience God in some sense, but the workings of that point of connection between God and human will be expanded upon in a later section.

Finally, there is the one participant who shares many of the ideas described above, but in addition have experienced some periods where “they” do not believe that God exists at all, or in any sense.

6.1.3 Does God intervene?

In the previous section I mentioned that all participants, except perhaps one, believe that we are able to experience God in some sense. That there is some sort of contact point between the God beyond existence and us humans. A potential experience of God can take many forms. Can we experience miracles, wherein God intervenes in such a way that God´s actions, or the result of God´s actions, goes against the laws of nature? Or is God able but not willing to perform such miracles? Does God intervene in such a way that there is something within us, perhaps our spirit, that can receive things like emotions, intuitions, instructions, or messages from the divine? Sometimes in ambiguous or unclear ways, and sometimes clear as day. Does God hear our prayers? Does God not only hear, but also considers our wishes and desires in our prayers, and sometimes intervenes in accordance with our prayers? And if God

hear and consider our prayers, and communicate to us in some way, can we then claim to have a personal relationship to God? Or is God something that can be likened with a weak force? Something that is barely detectable but is nevertheless something that somehow faintly pulls us toward something divine. All those questions are explored when the informants speak of their view of God´s potential intervention.

As I stated earlier, I began the interviews by asking the informants to tell me about their image of God. About half of the informants included their views on prayer, intervention, interaction, and miracles in their description of their image of God. I asked the other half whether they prayed, and if so, how. I also asked them whether they believe that God Answers. If their answer said nothing about miracles, I followed up by asking whether God intervenes in our physical world, and whether God performs miracles that goes against the laws of nature.

I find it interesting that none of the informants chose to speak of their personal practice of prayer. At least not practice of prayer wherein they somehow direct their wishes, desires, or thoughts toward God, in a hope that God will listen, and perhaps also interact in some way. Once again, I must state that we must be very careful to draw conclusions from what is not said. It is absolutely possible that some of the participants have such a personal practice of prayer. I nevertheless find it interesting that none of the informants chose to speak of prayer in the way recently described. But at the same time, we must remember that prayer is not easily defined. Most of the participants spoke of some sort of practice that might be considered a form of prayer. I will shortly analyze some of those practices. But firstly, I shall consider the thoughts of some participants, and of ways that prayer is not practiced by them, or their ideas of how prayer is considered to not work.

Two of the participants clearly stated that they do not pray, but quickly went on to define what that meant to them, and how some things they do still might be considered prayer. In response to whether they prayed one participant said:

> To be completely honest, right now … no. [Long pause] If prayer is to sit down, to fold your hands, to close your eyes, and to spend time in that fashion, then I do not [pray].

The same participant goes on to speak of experiences of the divine while doing things like being physically active, being out in the nature, listening to music, or preferably all the above at the same time. “They” said:

> Sometimes I can be surprised by a song on my playlist, where I connect the memory of some faith-encouraging experiences to that song. I might be caught by surprise in the moment, and when I in addition am filled with endorphins it can be overwhelming. In those instances, I have sort of allowed myself to be overwhelmed, and it is my belief that those experiences are fully positive in that moment. One could say that I pray in this sense. But in regard to a traditional definition of prayer I would have to say that I do not pray. Whether God answers when we pray about concrete things or for things to happen … it has sort of faded out for me. I might have been able to do that in the past, but I have just sort of stopped doing that, because … I think that nothing comes out of it. It creates a false hope, and that is based on experience.

I interpret the "nothing comes out of it" as a belief within the participant that God does not intervene. That the participant has previously prayed for divine intervention but has been disappointed when the hope for divine intervention has not been met.

There are a couple of other things that I want to point out in these quotes. Firstly, the participant began the first quote with "to be completely honest". This might indicate that the participant has some form of idea that this participant should pray. Or it might indicate that the fact that the participant does not pray should not be spoken openly about. This is the only instance in my material wherein a participant makes a potentially value-laden comment about their lack of a personal practice of prayer. This single statement can be viewed as a potential

expression of a “belief in belief” in prayer. The other informants who said that they lacked a personal practice of prayer made no such remarks toward their lack of prayer.

The second thing that I find interesting is this participant´s description of an overwhelming experience as a form of prayer. It leads me to assume that the participant sees this overwhelming experience as somehow, and to at least a degree, a spiritual experience. But it also seems like the participant is aware that these spiritual experiences can be triggered, and perhaps even provoked, by emotional manipulation through music, memories, nature, physical activity, and endorphins. The participant also speaks of "allowing myself to be overwhelmed", indicating a belief that this spiritual experience is to at least some degree something that is controllable.

The way that this spiritual experience is described leaves it, for me, up for interpretation whether the spiritual experience comes solely from within, or whether there is an interaction with an external divine element that is a part of the spiritual experience. The quote above is not the only instance of descriptions of spiritual experiences worded in ways that might imply that there might be sufficient natural causes for the experience.

When asked about personal prayer, another participant said:

> I pray to God in the church services and funerals and wedding services. Beyond that I do not [pray]. I do compose prayers. Intercession in the service for example. I most often write those in advance. But I bring in things from prayers that has been prayed before. And I pick up phrases that I used in the sermon. So that might be my most personal form of prayer, if I have such a thing.

When asked what they believe happens when we pray, the same informant goes on to say:

> I believe that we are made aware. We put words to something that is important to us humans. It thematizes something that is important. It makes us conscious of what things we deem to be important. But I do not believe, nor have I ever experienced that there is someone who receives on the other side.

These two informants are not only saying that they do not believe in divine intervention. By these quotes, and by the rest of their interviews, it seems to me like they are considering the option that the experiential effects of our prayers have merely internal causes. That the experiential effects are not necessarily caused by an interaction or contact with an external divine something.

Half of the participants also referred to the age-old problem of God´s justice in relation to suffering. This problem was formalized and termed "theodicy" by Leibnitz in the seventeenth century. The problem involves these three short assertions:

God is all powerful. God is all loving. There is suffering.

The problem is of course that if those assertions are true, they appear to contradict each other. The proposed solutions to this problem can be divided in to two main categories. The first, and most common, is to introduce an extenuating circumstance that explains or dissipates the contradiction. A very common extenuating circumstance, also proposed by Leibnitz, is that us humans are endowed with free will. Our freely willed actions have necessary consequences. Some of those consequences are bad. But the assumed necessity of both our free will, and its consequences, somewhat limits God´s possibility to intervene. The second category of solutions is different ways to dismiss or soften at least one of the three assertions (Ehrman, 2008, p. 12-18).

Two of the participants directly dismissed the image of God as all powerful, or, in other words, God as omnipotent. One of those informants was speaking of overhearing questions about why specific bad things happened and why God did not intervene in that specific instance. That informant said (and here the informant is speaking of God as "He"):

> And then I think to myself: (sigh) no. He is not able. Like … and why He is unable I do not know.

In this case there is no mention of an extenuating circumstance for why God is not able. There might exist one, and there might not. The informant simply does not know. The other informant is perhaps even clearer in "their" statement.

> [Some might say] that we must pray for this [bad thing] to stop. In that case they do not believe the same way that I do. Because I do not believe that God is in control. And I think this is a key issue. I do not think that God is almighty.

This informant mentions several times during the interview that the informant does not believe that God is in control. Later in the interview, while talking about how to react to the fact that God did not stop the atrocity of the terror on Utøya, the informant said:

> That image of God makes no sense. It makes no sense (det går ikke ann) to have an Image of God wherein God sees everything and is in control. Or a God who can send angels, regardless of whether we pray or not.

In this quote it is not only God´s lack of omnipotence that is brought forth. It also suggests that God is not omniscient.

The last participant who brought up the theodicy and the subject of God´s almightiness or omnipotence has a somewhat ambivalent view on whether God intervenes. This informant makes it clear several times that "they" believe that in most instances God limits His

almightiness by not intervening, and thereby maintains a more predictable world for us humans. This participant says:

> I have thought a lot about this, but I am sort of unable to conclude. I find it difficult and provoking at times … when we are in prayer groups, as an example … and I am unable to make sense of it … that God would intervene in these puny things that we are sitting here praying about. […] But it becomes so arbitrary. So strange. Why would God intervene with this simple cancer-thing, while horrendous things are happening elsewhere? […] So … Is God able to intervene? Perhaps. I believe that God laid down the laws of nature in creation. So that we, as humans can have something to relate to. […] He has sort of resigned from His almightiness to preserve the laws of nature. So … No … Perhaps God does not intervene. At least not in the ways we think … Perhaps in small things … Perhaps God could possibly create something larger [through those small things].

There are a couple of things that I want to point out in this quote. I believe that there are many ideas and thoughts expressed here that many Christians would agree with, regardless of whether they have non-theistic inclinations or not. The theodicy is for many Christians admittedly a difficult problem. It is also clear for probably all Christians that intercessory prayer does not guarantee divine intervention. These are in my experience not uncommon thoughts for Christians to have. The part in the quote that in my estimation separates the thoughts of the informant from traditional Christian belief is the part where this informant says "Perhaps God does not intervene. At least not in the ways we think … Perhaps in small things …" There is no dismissal of intervention. But the "perhaps" rings loudly. The "perhaps" lingers.

This participant spoke a couple of times about orthodoxy. “They” admitted that some of “their” ideas might sometimes be within a minority view, but still within orthodoxy. From what was said in the interview I would agree with the informant. This informant is far from an individual who checks all non-theistic boxes. But this "perhaps" seems to have far-reaching

consequences. Not only for “their” image of God, but also on “their” image of the role of the pastor and the church service. Later in the interview the same participant said:

> One could in a way legitimately ask: what in the world are we doing in intercessory prayer? In the church? In liturgy? And all that. (Long pause) And I do not actually have a very good answer, (laughs) to put it like that. Like … is it just like … thoughts and prayers … light a candle? Or is it like a collective consciousness? It´s not really that important. […] But regardless of one's view [on divine intervention], all will agree that the way God intervenes is very often by forming, inspiring, or leading Christians, so that they may become God´s hands and feet. If you view it like that, the intercessory prayer makes sense in that it inspires believers to be hands and feet.

The uncertainty is once again very much present in this quote. But the informant still says "the way God intervenes" seemingly without hesitance. There is some form of intervention. Maybe in the small things, to connect to the previous quote. Maybe through some form of connection within that inspires us to be hands and feet. This lingering uncertainty seems to be carried over to the informant´s views on whether God is personal or not. Not very much later in the interview “they” said:

> It is difficult for me to imagine God as personal. It´s like … I imagine God as bigger. As beyond … but in another way omnipresent. But as a bigger … different … love … all-embracing. That sort of thing.

We can detect some hesitance here as well. But hesitance is almost expected when one tries to define God. Perhaps with the exception for the first sentence, there is nothing in the following definition of God that is clearly non-theistic, or that necessarily points toward an image of God as impersonal. The informant soon thereafter goes on to speak of theosis, and how God shall become all in all, and how we shall become all in God. “They” said:

If the goal with our Christian life is to become divinized by God, and in a way be all in God … Then it´s hard to make sense of a personal God .

There are of course precautions we need to take while analyzing an interview. We should be weary to read too much into expressed uncertainty of the nature of the divine. But it nevertheless seems to me like this is an expression of a "mild but distinct" form of non-theism. The informant says that “they” do not feel restricted to other people’s desires for “them” to stay within orthodoxy, but still considers “themselves” to be within orthodoxy. But it seems to me like this informant has a proclivity to take the uncertainty surrounding these questions with a seriousness not widely found. Perhaps especially the uncertainty surrounding divine intervention.

There is one other informant who might be said to fit the description of a "mild but distinct" form of non-theism, but in a very different way. This other participant has clear ideas about our ineptitude to talk about God as one who exists. This informant is embracing some uncertainty to whether we are able we are able to say anything meaningful about God. “They” seem to be comfortable enough with some forms of uncertainty about the nature of God that the informant has self-described “themselves” as an agnostic Christian amongst some friends and colleges. But this informant is nevertheless clear about “their” view of intervention. “They” told an emotional and touching story of how “they” were in a very difficult situation, and a very unlikely, concrete, and physical thing happened that solved it. It is clear, both from that story and other remarks, that this informant believes that God is able to intervene in a concrete way in our physical universe. This participant is the only one of my six informants that was explicitly saying: Yes, and I´ve both seen and experienced this kind of miracles.

Even though most of my informants are either clear that there is no clear divine intervention into our physical world, or uncertain about said intervention, they are nevertheless open about the possibilities for some sort of interaction between some form of divinity and humanity. There is one story from one of the participants that I find particularly

interesting. This project has some criteria for what could be considered non-theism, and this participant is quite clearly checking most of those boxes. There has also been some duration, in which this participant seems so have been quite at peace with most of these non-theistic inclinations. Then the participant was taken by surprise by a couple of deeply overwhelming mystical spiritual experiences. There seems to be nothing concrete in the retelling of these experiences that indicate a clear intervention in our physical world, as in anything that defies the laws of nature. But these are vivid internal experiences that makes a deep impact in the informant. This is what the informant has to say about the experience:

> I started to cry. It was so powerful. In a way I found a sort of … I do not want to call it a theistic view of God, but it's like … it is possible to think like I used to think, but still have an intimate… like a God that I could call You (en Gud som jeg kunne si du til).

The last sentence is hard to translate, but it is very clear that these experiences shifted the informants view of God from an impersonal God to a personal God. During the interview it becomes apparent that this shift in view regarding the potential personalness has consequences for the participants wider image of God. It seems to have become somewhat harder for the participant to speak in ambiguous terms about God´s existence when God is also a "You". It seems to have become somewhat easier for the participant to define some features of the divine, and to say: this something is God.

I suspect that some people might think that there is no way back for most of the people who have started the transition toward a clearly non-theistic image of God. It might be true that it is less common for non-theists to transform into theists. There does not seem to be any studies that speak to the matter. Many of my participants spoke of a journey from an early childhood-belief to a belief that progressively became more abstract and non-theistic. This story stands out in my material as the only instance of a person who has become less non-theistic in “their” recent years.

There is, as I have hopefully shown, a wide range of views toward both divine intervention and interaction amongst the informants. Belief in divine intervention, here seen as the view that God can and does step in and clearly intervene in our physical world, is a minority belief amongst the participants. Only one of the pastors clearly state "their" belief in it. The rest can be placed on a spectrum between uncertainty and disbelief. But a small majority of the participants seem to believe in the possibility for some form of interaction between them and the divine. There are the above mentioned two participants who seem to be considering the possibility that our experience of an interaction with the divine might have merely internal reasons. That those experiences have value but might be caused solely by natural and psychological reasons. Then there are the two above mentioned participants who described their experiences of divine interaction. But there is an interesting middle ground expressed by the two remaining participants. A view that seems to assume some sort of divine interaction, but that we might not be able to grasp the nature of the interaction. The interaction´s ability to make an impact is also downplayed. While talking about "their" process to work theologically with these ideas one participant said:

> I´m working a bit with weak theology right now, and I find it really exciting. So … like … OK … Perhaps God is this weak … the call … right, OK. Perhaps that´s what it´s like. Now days I define my faith and my image of God as an immanent transcendence. That is sort of my starting point nowadays. Previously it was either transcendent or immanent, and you had to choose. And that does not make sense in my view. Because it is not like this [God] only abides in heaven, and then there is nothing else. But there is also a transcendence in the immanent, and that is the place where we sort of find … that which we do not know what it is. Which sort of is the concept of God.

This quote expresses a critique that was also found in a couple of the other interviews. It critiques the Neoplatonic idea that God completely transcends all our categories, ideas, and concepts of the divine, which in turn negates, or at least strongly hinders the potential for a form of interaction between God and humans. This quote is also an example of a view that is

held by a small majority of the respondents, which is that they do not follow the example of theologians like Paul Tillich (2014) who through his image of God as ultimate concern suggests that God can only, or at the very least mainly, be known through participation in or with a very immanent God. The quote above dismisses the dichotomy that God is either transcendent or immanent. The amalgamation is expressed as "God as an immanent transcendence", and "a transcendence in the immanent", but this amalgamation is not further neither well explained nor described by the participant, but I do notice the similarities with Borg´s (2011) description of panentheism. In this instance it is only suggested that this "that which we do not know what it is" might be described as "this weak … the call". It is clear that the participant is referring to J. Caputo´s work with weak theology in books like "The Weakness of God" (2006), "The Insistence of God" (2013), and "The Folly of God" (2016). This participant does indeed briefly namedrop Caputo in the interview right before the place where the quote was taken from, and “they” are not the only participant to mention the influence of Caputo. It seems clear to me that at least two of the participants are influenced by Caputo´s ideas of God as a weak force that calls us, and that they use it as a potential starting point when they consider whether and how God interacts with humanity.

I think it is fair to say that the respondents are basing their beliefs on God´s potential intervention or interaction on their experiences or lack thereof. As a sidenote I think this focus on the importance of their experiences is corroborated by the fact that a majority of the respondents spoke to some length of their love and desire to participate in retreats, and how many of their experiences during retreats have shaped their image of God. But when it comes to arguments for or against God´s potential intervention neither dogmatic theological statements, nor Bible verses were brought forth by the respondents, with the exception of some informants mention of God´s intervention through the incarnation. This emphasis on experience is most clearly stated by an informant who in the context of how to give spiritual counseling said:

> I give experience a priority for interpretation to a larger degree than I give a passage of Scripture priority for interpretation.

This informant then goes on to say that “their” experience of divine grace and unconditional love often can become invisible when one emphasizes Scripture as a starting point.

Another participant spoke of how “they” have used spiritual retreat to practice the act of taking experience seriously. To truly feel the experiences. When “they” a little later spoke of the progression of “their” image of God, “they” said:

> My intellectual [belief] has often been adjusted by my experiences. […] When I went to [seminary] … it was like … the experience was not taken seriously in regard to the dogmas. It was like … the dogmas were supposed to be cookie cutters. If the experience did not fit the shape of the dogmatic cookie cutter, then the experience was incorrect. When I graduated from seminary, I was like, sorry, you know what? I take my experiences seriously, so I´ll just have to find cookie cutters of other shapes. I do not want to follow that tradition. The tradition that states that the dogmas can dictate what you cannot feel, what you cannot mean, and what you cannot believe.

At the same time, I must make clear that the informants are in no way treating their experiences as a reliable indication of truth. Our ability to have experiences is not a secure source of truth in regard to neither our nor God´s reality. One participant stated:

> I have a friend who says that you must believe that which you are experiencing. And that is sort of true. But I don´t want to say: yes, I have experienced it, and that makes it true. Because … what then is truth?

That last question: What is truth? It can summarize the general thoughts of the participants regarding God´s potential ability to intervene. No one claims to be certain. Knowing that their experience is an insufficient tool to ascertain truth, they nevertheless to a large degree rely on their experiences and their intuition in answering the question.

Two of them seem to trust their experience, and concludes that God intervenes, or at least interacts with us humans. Two of them seem to be uncertain. The final two seem to dismiss divine intervention, and furthermore seem to entertain the idea that our experiences of divine interaction are nothing more than a natural internal psychological experience.

6.1.4 Can we say anything meaningful of the essence of God?

The question of whether we can say anything meaningful of the essence of God is a theme that most of the respondents dealt with in reaction to my initial request for them to tell me about their image of God. Four out of the six respondents gave some variation of the common statement that God is "that which we cannot speak of [but is nevertheless] the one thing about whom […] we must never stop speaking." (Rollins, 2006, p. 10. The quote is slightly adapted to fit what I perceive to be the essence of what my participants communicated).

While all the participants spoke of how they rather speak of their experiences of God, four of the participants were straight forward in claiming that we as humans have no ontological or objective knowledge of the essence of God. All we have is our subjective experience.

The first example of a participant with this view is arguably the one who is most cautious in “their” claim. This participant is considering the possibilities that ontological or objective truths about God might exist, but that they, if they exist, are unattainable for us. “They” said:

> Is truth completely relativistic? Can all humans just invent their own truths? That is not true. The truth has a close affiliation with the self. We must use subjectivity to find

> the truth in our self. I do not believe that truths do not exist. […] It is entirely possible that objective truths exist, but we have no knowledge about it. […] They might exist, but we cannot say anything about it.

Based on the rest of the interview with this participant I am inclined to interpret "we must use subjectivity to find truth in our self" as an expression of the view that we are limited to our subjective experiences. But the rest of the interview also leads me to be cautious in my interpretations. This participant is often hesitant to clearly take sides and has shown great ability to keep two thoughts in “their” head simultaneously. This participant is also the only one who used Bible verses to exemplify “their” image of God. But the quote is nevertheless clear in that the potential objective truths are completely inaccessible to us.

Another participant was more direct when “they” said:

> A possible trap to fall into is to believe that we can say something true about God that goes beyond our experiences. […] We have no access to anything ontological in any sense, but we have access to our experiences. We are able to say "my experience is that [God] is lifegiving" or "my experience is that God is love". […] I do not know whether it correlates with God´s essence, but it is my experience.

This sentiment is also expressed by one other participant who said:

> Whatever we might say [of the essence of God] is of course a subjective interpretation of our experiences. Right? Whether we want it or not.

The fourth and final participant who claimed that we lack access to objective truths about the essence of God said:

> I find it very hard to say that God is like this, or that God wants this. I don´t think I ever would … It´s like … Whenever anybody says something like that I go: how do you know that? Like … we are unable to have such knowledge. […] I cannot handle [statements such as] this is how it is, and that´s the way it always will be. […] I have no truth or any other thing of which I think: this is correct, and that´s just how it is.

This quote is arguably a bit blunter in two ways. Firstly, this is the only participant who somewhat critiques others who openly claim to have objective knowledge about the essence of God. The rest of the interview makes it clear that the critique is at least directed toward other pastors of CoN. Whether the critique is aimed broader is unclear from the data. Secondly, this participant is clear that we can have no objective knowledge about the essence of God, but "they" do not mention how our subjective experiences can affect our assumptions or ideas about the essence of God. This quote can be seen as a more direct statement of our total inability to say, or even know, anything about the essence of God, in any way at all. Once again, I must be cautious to make assumptions based on what is not said, but based on the rest of the interview I find it not unlikely that this is correlated with how this participant seems to be uncertain to whether God is able to interact with us humans. "They" are also, at least at times, uncertain to whether there is a God at all.

But this does of course not mean that the informants above totally refrain from talking about God. As stated above, God is the one thing about whom they must never stop speaking. Both because it is a big part of their vocation, and because a majority of the informants feel a desire to try to speak of God. The informants have different ways of coping with the problem of how (not) to speak of God, and these strategies will be further analyzed at a later stage. But there are a couple of things that can be said at this stage. The above mentioned fourth and final participant further said:

> When I preach [about God], it is more like a retelling… perhaps. I don't make any solid claims. […] It is more like … questions. It´s more like I´m asking questions. Like … I´m not [asking questions] directly. It´s more like I talk about my wonders, and I speak more openly. Because whatever my image of God might be, what I say must still accommodate many different ways to believe in God.

This is an example of one or perhaps two previously mentioned strategies described by Dennett and LaScola (2010, 2015). The first one is that which I have labeled "those before have said". When the participant preaches about God, "they" retell what others have said about God and uses that as a basis for further wondering and questions. In this instance this linguistical method seems to serve two purposes. Firstly, the participant is both able to say something about God without asserting anything about the nature of God. Secondly, the retelling, the questions, and the wondering makes it possible to accommodate a wide variety of images of God of the parishioners. The parishioners are then free to individually assert whatever they want about what "those before have said". The second strategy that might come into play in this instance is the "use-mention error". It is not very clear in this quote but based on the rest of the interview I find it reasonable to at least suspect that this "retelling of God" is a way to conceal that this participant is referring to the concept of God, rather than to Divinity itself. But it is retold in such a way that it enables the parishioners to choose whether they want to engage the substance of the retelling as conceptual or concrete.

One other theme that was brought up by two participants was the need or desire to use poetry or poetic language when trying to say something about God. One participant said:

> I have great faith in Poetry. Because it is not factual. It is more open in a sense. Wondering. Searching. And it is not threatening in the same way.

I find this participants idea about the openness of poetry to serve much of the same intention of the previously mentioned participant who spoke of the openness of the retelling of what "those before have said". The poetics also accommodate many different images of God.

The second participant said:

> We must use the language of poetry and mythology when we speak of God. […] God is in a sense … the force … the super force who … well … controls the world. It can be unpersonal and it can reveal itself as something personal, but it is not as if we can understand it with our head. […] Finally, we end up with knowing nothing at all. But we have to, in a sense, use our language to describe something, but we cannot describe it ultimately.

This second statement about poetics is more focused on poetry´s ability "speak of the ultimately indescribable". The first statement about poetry also includes this notion, but is in addition explicit about the "non-factualness" of poetic language about God. I deem it proper to view these two statements (especially the first one) as descriptions of the theopoetics described in the theory chapter. None of the participants used the term theopoetics in the interviews, but the work of Caputo was mentioned as a source for theological inspiration by one of the above cited participants. I find parts of the theology of Caputo to be a very useful reference both in the participants use of poetry, and in the more questioning and open retellings through the method of "those before have said" previously mentioned. The participants use of poetry is, as previously stated, in line with the idea of theopoetics. But both the use of poetry and the questioning retelling is in line with Caputo's "theology of perhaps" (2013). Not only are many of the participants using a "perhaps" as a general expression of their uncertainty of whether we are able to say anything about the nature of the divine. Many of the participants are also attuned to Caputo´s theology behind the term "perhaps". The

perhaps, in Caputo´s view, means that God does not exist. God insist. There is an insisting event in the name of God, this weak call, to which we might perhaps respond.

Here I would like to offer a speculation that is related to both the above-mentioned work of Caputo (2013) and Dennett´s and LaScola´s (2010) concept of the "use-mention error". This speculation might propose a possible tool to make a division in the before mentioned cases where Dennett and LaScola seem to have difficulties to distinguish between a "believer" and a "non-believer". One part of this speculation that I assume is rather non-controversial is that there is a link between Caputo´s ideas of the insistence of God through theopoetics and his idea about the theology of perhaps. The idea of the weak call in the insisting event in the name of God is itself a theopoetical articulation of a lived and embodied experience of the divine. Caputo´s idea of God´s insistence negates God´s existence. But this form of denial of God´s existence does not equal "non-belief". I believe that Dennett and LaScola are right in that there exist non-believing clergy who uses the "use-mention error" as a linguistic trick to hide their unbelief to their congregation. But I believe that it might be a mistake to take those who feel like they want to speak of the concept of God and to assume that this concept of God is merely theoretical and lacks any real mode of intervention with reality. I find it plausible that when some Christians talk about God, whether through theopoetics or through a retelling or reciting of biblical texts or liturgy, they are merely talking about God as a concept. But this concept of God is not powerless. It has the power to insist. To call, however weakly it might be. The concept of God can be perceived as real enough to render God´s potential inexistence as meaningless. I argue that this might be a possible form of belief that lies in-between Dennett´s and LaScola´s attempt to draw a more rigid line between belief and non-belief. I must clarify that there is no concrete basis for the speculations above in my material. It is merely an attempt to theorize some of the ideas that the participants have regarding both the existence of God, and whether we are able to say anything meaningful about the essence of God. But my attempts to speculate is greatly inspired by the underlaying perceived nuances in my material, and it would be interesting to further do empirical research to whether this idea of the "insisting concept" is a viable way to help clarify the murky distinctions between belief and non-belief.

The participants did, as I have described above, show great hesitation to the question of whether we are able to say anything meaningful of the nature of the divine. But, as I have already stated, they also feel a need to try to speak of it. The approaches by the participants to say something meaningful of the divine can be divided into two categories. Firstly, four of the participants spoke of the incarnation. An attempt to analyze the Christology of the participants is beyond the scope of this thesis. But what they said can very briefly be summarized in two steps. Firstly, the Bible, and especially the gospels, somewhat illustrates the nature and deeds of Christ. Secondly, even though Christ is separate from the Father, Christ still somewhat manifests the nature of the Father. One of the participants stated:

> We speak to boldly (tar munnen for full) when we speak of God. God sort of becomes too vast. So, I have to sort of go through Christ. Because God is sort of … as if I could say anything about God [participant laughs].

It seems to me like these participants are deeming God to be too subjective to easily speak of. Christ, or at least the biblical stories of Christ, are more objective, and it is therefore easier to speak of Christ´s manifestation of the divine. Christ can be seen as a phenomenological possibility, and might by some participants be seen as the quintessential revelation, to use Marion´s words.

Secondly, most of the participants nevertheless suggested a word or two that in their mind served sufficiently as a descriptor of the nature of God. Four of the six participants claimed that the word "loving" is a true and correct description of God. One of those four specified that the loving nature of the divine is unconditional. Two out of the six participants claimed that God can be said to be the creator. One participant claimed that God can be said to be lifegiving. Here I believe that is reasonable to recall the theoretical ideas of Phillips. I believe that it is plausible, or at least possible, that some of the participants do not see these words as factual descriptors of a divine subject, but a grammatical rule for the use of the word God (Kim, 2022, p. 121-122). Their experiences lead them to believe that these descriptors are part of the reality of God. Finally, one participant claimed that God can be said to be "bigger".

This idea is not greatly expanded upon by the participant, but from the context I find it safe to assume that it is referencing the thought of "Deus semper major", the thought that God is always bigger. I therefore claim that the word "bigger" in this context does not function as a concrete descriptor. It rather admits that all possible descriptors are inadequate.

6.1.5 A summation of the participant´s image of God.

The participants have a strong tendency to denounce the “judgmental God” (see 6.1.1). Their insistence on a divine unconditional love, and the almost complete omission of a necessary judgement speaks of an image of God that is inclusive and “open”. These descriptions of images of God are not necessarily directly connected to the definitions of non-theistic inclinations in this thesis. But I find it very interesting that it is a very prominent theme amongst the participants.

Regarding the question of whether God exists (see 6.1.2), there seems to be a consensus among the participants that God cannot be said to exist if we define existence as something measurable or provable, and many of the participants stated that God does not exist as in that God stands forth. Most of the participants said that the question of God´s existence is problematic or meaningless until either the terms "God", "exist", or both were clarified. The most common way for the participants to clarify the term “existence” is to relate it to God´s potential intervention or interaction.

In sub-chapter 6.1.3 it becomes clear that 5 out of 6 participants seriously questions whether God intervenes, as in an intervention in our physical world where God performs miracles that goes against the laws of nature. This is related to their view that God is unmeasurable and unprovable. If God where to intervene as in suspending the laws of nature, then God would, at least in theory, be measurable and provable. And if this sort of intervention in addition comes as a result of prayer or intercession, this call and response could arguably be considered somewhat of a personal relation. Even though almost all participants problematized this sort of intervention, they nevertheless mostly believed that God is somehow able to interact with us humans, even though some of the participants were open to the idea that this interaction was merely an inner psychological process.

The term God also needed to be clarified. In the sub-chapter of whether we can say anything meaningful of the essence of God (6.1.4) the participants are generally deeming God to be too subjective to easily speak of. Most participants stated quite clearly that objective knowledge about God is inaccessible. Most of the participants nevertheless suggested a word or two that in their mind served sufficiently either as a descriptor of the nature of God, or as a grammatical rule for how the word God can be used. The two most common words were loving and creator.

I will try to further summarize and exemplify the views of the participants by constructing answers to four questions. There are certainly participants who might object to one or more of these constructed answers, but they nevertheless express a view that is held by a clear majority of the participants. The questions and constructed answers are:

1. Q: Are we able to somewhat define God? A: Objective knowledge about God is inaccessible. Our definitions of God are highly subjective. It nevertheless makes sense to speak of God as a loving creator.
2. Q: Does this God exists? A: God´s being is beyond existence as it is not concrete or provable. There nevertheless seems to be something divine.
3. Q: Does God sometimes intervene? A: God may not or may intervene on a seldom occasion. We might nevertheless be able to experience a sense of interaction with the divine. Whether this interaction is real or merely psychological is not of utmost importance.
4. Does God´s interaction enable us to have a personal relationship with God? A: This divine interaction might not qualify as a personal relationship. Our experiences of these interactions can sometimes nevertheless enable us to experience or envision God as an interacting person.

These questions and answers are so brief that they hardly convey necessary distinctions. But my intended point here is rather to show that the participants of this study seldom deals with clear negations. Instead of negating these admittedly poorly defined questions, the participants have a desire to enter into dialogue, where they question and try to define, or perhaps sometimes redefine, language about the divine.

6.1.6 An attempted typology.

I have in previous chapters written about the utmost importance of keeping the participants anonymous. One of the means to secure anonymity was the decision to not use fictional names for the participants, so that the reader will not be able to construct a "bigger theological picture" of any participant by compiling the views over several chapters. The decision to "start fresh" in each subchapter, and to very seldomly refer to the participants´ views in earlier chapters have consequences. Firstly, it secures a greater degree of anonymity. Secondly, it severely hinders my ability to make a detailed typology. To be able to construct, argue for, and analyze a detailed typology I would have to present a picture of how each participant viewed all, or most of the topics described in the chapters about their image of God. I could then go into a deeper analysis of whether some aspects of non-theistic images of God are related to other aspects of non-theistic images of God. I am quite sure that such detailed typology would clarify some aspects of the research, and that it could provide suggestions to patterns in different forms of non-theistic images of God. But I must adhere to my measures to preserve anonymity, and I am therefore not able to give a detailed typology.

It is however possible to give a less detailed and more general typology, even though the constraints regarding anonymity forces me to be rather vague at times. Even though it would have elements of subjectivism, I could probably make a list of all the participants ranging from most to least non-theistic. But in this general typology I would like to argue that the participants fall into three categories of non-theistic image of God.

The three categories are:

1. God might not exist in any sense, and if He does, He is almost fully objectively unknowable.
2. There is something divine, and even though we can have no objective knowledge of the divine, we can nevertheless somewhat experience the divine. Some of those experiences might give us good indications of the nature of the divine.
3. There is something divine, but our objective knowledge of the divine is severely limited, and divine intervention is rare.

There is only one participant who makes up the first category. That participant was quite clear in “their” non-theistic views in all the topics dealt with in the subchapters above.

I would place three of the participants in the second category. They all have a lot in common in that they broadly think that it´s very problematic to speak of God as one who “exists”. Even though there are details that differentiates them, they are nevertheless in agreeance that the term “God” is very difficult to define, and that the term ”exist” is probably not the best for this God that somehow is. They are also in quite large agreement that it is very difficult for us to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. They are further in agreeance that it is unlikely that God intervenes in our world (disregarding the possible intervention that is the incarnation), or at least a strong suspicion that God does not intervene in our physical world as a result of our prayers and intercessions. The largest, and to me most interesting difference between the participants in this category is how they view divine interaction. One of these participants seems to value the experience of divine interaction, even though “they” believe that it is possible that those experiences are no more than internal psychological experiences. The second of these participants have had (at least) one profound and overwhelming experience of what “they” consider to be divine interactions, and that experience has moved this participant to the view that it might be meaningful to see our relationship to the divine as a personal relationship. The third of these participants is somewhere in between. “They” speak of the “weak call” of God and seems to put this in context with Gods´ interactions. “They” seem to actively seek out experiences of divine interaction and speak of “their” intent to have “their” image of God informed and shaped by those experiences of interaction. But this participant never describes these interactions as overwhelming. The experiences seem to be profound at times, but the participant only described them as more subtle or “weak”.

I would put the final two participants in the third category. These two individuals are the least non-theistic of all the participants. They have thoroughly considered the non-theistic subjects that are dealt with in this thesis, but they affirm some and reject others. But these two participants differ to a large degree on what they reject or affirm. One finds it unproblematic to speak of God as one who exist. The other finds it very problematic. One seems quite certain

that God intervenes. The other finds it unlikely. One finds it unlikely that we are able to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. The other seems more hopeful that philosophy of religion can enable us to make at least a few meaningful statements.

6.2 *Can they speak openly of their image of God?*

6.2.1 Use of the attempted typology in further analysis.

One might assume that the degree to which the participants are able to speak openly of their image of God is dependent on the degree of how much they are inclined towards a non-theistic image of God. In chapter 6.1.6 I proposed a three-tier typology, wherein the first tier was the most non-theistic, and the third the least. That means that if the assumption is correct, the participants in tier one would find it harder to speak openly of their image of God, the participant in tier three would find it easier, and the participants in tier two something in between. But that is not necessarily the case in this study. There are several other aspects that determine how easy or hard the participants find it to speak of their image of God, and those aspects will be explored further on in this chapter.

There are nevertheless instances where the typology of a particular participant might be interesting regarding the question of whether they can speak openly of their image of God. But here there are once again considerations toward the anonymity of the participants. Sometimes I will disclose the placement in the typology of the participant that I am quoting. Other times I am unable to do so due to the strict need for anonymity. I will be especially cautious to disclose whether the quote comes from the first tier in the typology, since there is only one participant in that tier. As a solution to that problem, I will sometimes state that a quote originates from a participant in the first or second tier.

6.2.2 Pastors do generally not discuss image of God with colleagues.

When I asked the participants whether they felt that they could speak openly of their image of God with colleagues, four out of the six began by saying that pastors never, or

hardly ever discuss their image of God with colleagues. Those four participants are represented in all three tiers. One participant says:

> We really don´t talk much about it amongst colleagues. […] It´s not as if it suddenly becomes a topic of conversation during lunch hour, or anything like that.

Another participant said:

> The personal faith is very rarely a topic that is brought up. It´s more like … We have no problem talking about larger academic topics. But … what we as individuals advocate, and what image of God we hold as individuals, and the experiences connected to that … is spoken about very seldomly.

The theme of how pastors of CoN are able to talk about academic topics, but not personal images of God is brought up and expanded upon by another participant. (From the context it is clear that the participants see our image of God as the prime example of "the fundamental deep things").

> Even though we work as pastors and work with theology, we seldom discuss or try to articulate the fundamental deep things. […] We spend enormous amounts of time on … ingenuities (spissfindigheter) regarding wedding ceremonies, or … liturgical curiosities (krumspring), or whatever it might be. We can talk a lot about those things. But the deep stuff … And that´s also because it´s difficult, right. It´s … It´s noticeable in a way as we converse now. Like, it progresses in circles, and via things, and … it´s sort of unclear. It´s not as if it functions well for conversations at the lunch table, or at a party.

While the first quote is merely a short statement that these things are hardly ever discussed, the second and the third quote share a notion that pastors of CoN are willing to, and perhaps even enjoy, talking about academic topics, such as details regarding ceremonies and liturgies. I find it reasonable to assume that those discussions regarding ceremonies and liturgies include the use of language. This is especially clear in Norwegian in the third quote where the words I have translated as "ingenuities" (spissfindigheter) and "curiosities" (krumspring) indicates a creative and perhaps even playful use of language. But all the quoted participants agree that they do not speak of their image of God. There are no discussions of the ways to speak of God, creative and playful or not. And the quoted third participant offers a reason. Because it is difficult to speak of God. It is arguable difficult to find creative and playful language for the ceremonies and liturgies as well, but the participant seems to think that it is distinguishably harder to speak of God. The topic is elusive. There are several other reasons for why the participants often choose to withhold information of their image of God, and reasons for why they seem to think that the lack of discussion of images of God is a good thing. Those will be discussed in the upcoming subchapters. But there is one participant who express a desire to have more discussions of images of God with colleagues. In response to the question "Should there be more place for discussion regarding images of God amongst colleagues?" this participant said:

> Yes. Sometimes, I think … Yes. Because … and this is perhaps more about, are there others … that thinks … that struggles with these processes as I do?

A couple of minutes later the same participant said:

> I wish that there was more openness regarding [images of God] amongst colleagues, and as to how one deals with it, when one is in such a process.

I have previously mentioned that there is one of my informants who has "transitioned" to a more non-theistic image of God in recent years, and the processes of finding out the impacts of that transition is still ongoing. Both quotes above is from that participant. The rest of the interview make it clear that this participant has some desire for collegial discussions regarding images of God through an "academic lens". But even more "they" desire the opportunity to speak about the process of how to discard old images of God, and how to find or construct new images of God, in a healthy way. I once again want to say that we must be careful to draw conclusions based on what the other participants did not say, but I nevertheless find it interesting that the other participants who have held their non-theistic image of God for a longer period of time expressed no direct desire to have more collegial discussions regarding images of God.

6.2.3 Can they speak openly of their image of God with colleagues?

I will begin by analyzing the general statements regarding this topic made by the two participants from tier three in the attempted typology (the least non-theistic). They differ a bit. One seems to be quite comfortable in "their" discussions with colleagues. The other is more hesitant. The more comfortable participant said:

> I have been more honest amongst colleagues. And I realize that this has made them a little bit afraid. I use the word afraid. Because … it´s also a bit cowardly, to not be willing to speak truly of God. But many share my sentiments. But they dare not speak as openly of it as I do.

The same participant also made this statement a couple of minutes later:

> I am … call myself a Christian agnostic. I have even said it in a devotion … here at … amongst close colleagues. I have dared to say it there. Then I have received no protest.

This participant then goes on to describe how “they” defines agnostic. “They” said:

> … an agnostic is not against God, but simply knows nothing of … of things in an intellectual manner. Therefore, I think it´s important for me to call myself a Christian agnostic. But it sounds completely crazy, to sort of … to say it very loudly.

By the context it is quite clear that the “very loudly” refers to this participant´s unwillingness to describe “themselves” as a Christian agnostic very publicly, such as from the pulpit. But “they” feel comfortable to do so amongst the closest colleagues. And it is clear from the interview that the people this participant considers to be “their” closest colleagues include at least one person higher up in the clerical hierarch.

The other participant in this tier is, as previously mentioned, more hesitant. When asked whether “they” could talk openly with colleagues “they” said:

> Well … That is a sort of difficult thing … the question is whether any … of those who are ordained does that. Like, because sort of … all of us have taken a vow of ordination […] and there are obligations, sort of. And I assume that most people … in one way or another at least struggles with one or more things (punkter) therein, and … right. And … and then there is sort of something to it. To talk openly about those things … it does not only threaten … it´s not only sort of difficult to expose oneself personally … and all those things. But, like, it threatens the livelihood in a way, and … the basis of income for one’s family and such … like, potentially, that is. But I think … this makes it sort of … a topic that is hardly ever talked about. […] But considering all the things I have said … I don´t think that [what I have said] is in opposition to my vows of ordination. I don´t think it´s difficult in that sense. It´s more like it is difficult because there is no tradition for it. To talk about those things, that is.

This participant seems to assume that most pastors struggle with details of their vow of ordination. We have earlier seen that it is at least not uncommon for pastors to have disagreements or lack of belief in some details of the vows (see 2). This participant also seems to think that there is a potential for losing one's job if the pastor talks to openly about their problems with the pastoral vows. This participant then goes on to say that the views that "they" have disclosed, including "their" image of God, does not oppose the pastoral vows. This could be interpreted as a perception of having no oppositions to the pastoral vows. But I think that a more likely interpretation is that this participant consider "themselves" to have no more opposition to the vows than most other pastors. Finally, this participant claims that the lack of tradition to talk about "these things" makes it harder to speak openly about. The context makes it rather clear that "these things" refers to not only images of God, but all theological views that might be seen as sensitive or contrarian. The hesitancy of this participant to speak openly with "their" colleagues therefore seems to stem from a perceived lack of openness for constructive discussions regarding the beliefs of pastors, including questions and oppositions to details in the pastoral vows.

Now for the participants in tier one and two. One of the older participants spoke of how "they" perceived the situation regarding openness with colleagues a couple of decades ago:

> … the church was very focused on one way only (ensrettet i kirken). You had to put things into words in a smart (finurlig) way. […] I used to say: There must be lots of time available if you are to say what you truly mean. Otherwise, you might become entangled in a long discussion about how wrong you are. And as it turned out, that is what happened to me.

Immediately following this quote the participant described an incident that I cannot quote for the sake of anonymity. But “they” describe some confrontations from colleagues resulting from the participant speaking openly of “their” non-theistic image of God, but the material isn´t clear about the outcome of those confrontations.

I find the emphasis on having large amounts of time at the disposal to be interesting. I assume that there are two “wrongs” with a non-theistic image of God that this participant believes to be able to mitigate with a large disposal of time available for dialogue. Firstly, there are differences in connotations and assumptions depending on how God are talked about. I will try to show this using two imaginary pastors. These examples are admittedly somewhat assumptious, but I nevertheless believe that they can illustrate a plausible interpretation as of why this participant desires lots of time available. If the first imaginary pastor was to speak of “God´s strength”, I find it likely that most theistic Christians will assume that this utterance communicates something with good connotations, such as God´s loving protection as an example. If the second imaginary pastor was to speak of “the weakness of God” I find it likely that many theistic Christians will be uncertain of what that communicates but assume that God lacks strength, and that weakness has bad connotations. The difference between positive and negative assumptions and connotations are arguably true for other utterances from our two imaginary pastors. The first one might say that God is alive. The second might say that God is dead. God exist versus God does not exist. The point here is that the underlaying meaning behind these non-theistic statements is esoteric for many theistic Christians. They do not always know what to make of the statements, and I strongly suspect that they often interpret the non-theistic statements as a statement that the non-theistic God lacks a trait which the theist finds positive. Secondly, the non-theistic Christian has no negative connotations to their descriptions of the divine. A prerequisite for that that is that they have knowledge about the sometimes somewhat esoteric assumptions behind the statements, such as how the weakness of God can relate to the ideas of Caputo (2006), the death of God to Altizer (2002), and the non-existence of God to the idea that God´s being is beyond existence. Not only do non-theists likely have positive connotations to these and other non-theistic statements, but I believe that the quotes above shows that the participant believes that the theistic dialogue-partner likely will come to view the non-theistic views and terms “less wrong” if the non-theist gets the time to explain the underlaying assumptions, and how these non-theistic statements can have positive connotations. To summarize, it seems to me

like this participant believes that given enough time “they” will be able to provide the necessary assumptions behind the statements to enable the dialogue-partner to see how the non-theistic statements can have positive connotations, and in effect perhaps making them “less wrong”.

When asked to elaborate on whether “they” feel like “they” can speak openly about “their” image of God lately, the same participant went on to say:

> Oh yes. And I have been able to do that for quite some time. Because … I was [about two decades] in [a specific congregation], and during that time I had a stable college of pastors who all knew what I meant.

In light of the general secularization of Norway in recent decades, it might come as no surprise for many readers that this participant finds it easier to speak of “their” non-theistic views in recent years. But one other thing that need to be accounted for is that this participant is also the one aforementioned participant who has become less non-theistic in recent years. So, the participants perception of it being easier to speak openly of “their” image of God is not merely an effect of the changing times.

Another of the participants in these tiers have some similar experiences. Both the experience of it becoming easier to talk openly in recent time, and that “they” at large feel comfortable to share “their” non-theistic beliefs among the closest colleagues. Speaking of how it was in the beginning many years ago “they” said:

> I felt very alone … in [my belief]. I found few … pastors … which I felt safe talking with about these things.

This participant then goes on to say that “they” generally do not feel afraid, and that “they” has been open about other matters which was controversial in CoN at that time. But it was nevertheless not an option to speak openly of “their” image of God.

> These things are fundamental in such a way, and it would bring about a lot of consequences for me personally if I … well … were to speak publicly about it too early. So, I did not dare to. I have been very … both angry and afraid … that they would … Well … Really … I surely could not … Well, I was afraid of the bishop (laughs). […] It would have been really scary if I were to go public and say: no, I do not always believe that God exists. I know that some pastors in Denmark did that, and that resulted in huge media coverage.

This participant then goes on to tell how things have changed, and how “they” feel able to speak more openly nowadays.

> I used to live in [a small place] at my first job. And, this place is bigger, and there is a lot of openness amongst those who work here. That is the reason why I have been here for [quite a long time]. Because I … do not dare to switch congregation (laughs), plain and simple. I need to have the openness that I experience here. With all my beliefs and disbeliefs, and all that I am. Because … we have such a … well, not completely without a hitch (knirkefritt), but I feel like we … we respect each other, and we solve things before conflicts arises.

Here we once again see the perception that a non-theistic image of God is significantly more difficult to speak of compared to other controversial and difficult subjects, or at least that is what this participant felt in the past. We can also see that the participant feels like it has become much easier to speak openly nowadays. But once again there is no mention of how the theological milieu has changed in line with the general secularization. It is once again the

large degree of openness and respect amongst colleagues that seems to be perceived as the biggest reason that this participant feels more able to speak openly of "their" image of God nowadays. This becomes very apparent during the interview, as this participant mentions several times that "they" do not dare to move to another congregation. But this participant brings up another reason for it being easier to talk about non-theistic images of God nowadays. "They" said:

> And I have become [significantly older]. I have a lot of experience that tells me that … things will be alright. It´s like … You can …You can say stuff. But that I don´t have to … It´s not necessary all the time. I do not have to, but I … I feel a lot safer.

It seems like this participant has had the opportunity to slowly experimenting with opening up regarding "their" image of God. The fact that most of those instances of opening up have been met with an "alright" perception leads to an increased feeling of safety over time, but also a sense of when it seems beneficial for the participant to open up, and when to stay silent. To summarize, this participant has come to a place where "they" feel safe to speak very openly with "their" closest colleagues. The participant feels secure in "their" employment, and seriously considers staying in this safe local environment, perhaps until retirement.

The next participant is the one who finds it hardest to be open about "their" view of God. "They" said:

> My experience is that it is rather difficult to be … to be able to speak wholly and fully openly about it … perhaps in fear of being sort of defined as an outsider. […] When I am alone within my four walls I dare to go much further. Very far away from the official belief of the church.

I asked the participant to clarify what “they” meant with “within my four walls”. “They” said:

> I was referring to my diaries. Yes, when I am alone.

This participant mentions several times during the interview that “they” can only be truly open in “their” diaries. This participant´s fear of being defined as an outsider by “their” colleagues is expanded on not much later.

> I find the fact that I am unable to speak openly about [my image of God] to be a problematic experience. Because it´s … in a way … Well, I feel like it is looked down upon in a way. Or … it´s like … We tend to label (plassere i bås) each other. (Laughs). And it´s not an option to bring it up in the local low church environment in which I work, because … If I did, I would be lynched. (Laughs).

The comment about being lynched by pastoral colleagues is obviously tongue in cheek and should not be taken literal. But it is nevertheless an expression of the underlaying fear of being seen as an outsider. I asked the participant what “they” meant by outsider. “They” said:

> It might be about … to be … to be placed outside of the church-fellowship. Perhaps sometimes … I don´t necessarily know what sort of arguments I have. Not all the time. Because this … it goes so deep, right. And it is about a personal process of faith. And there are many times where I don´t know if I can justify things … biblically. And I feel an expectation that I should be able to do that as a pastor. […] Perhaps I have not dared to go full out since the process is ongoing.

It is very clear that this participant is afraid to speak openly of "their" image of God. The part of the quote "placed outside of the church fellowship" is a bit ambiguous. From the rest of the interview, it seems like this participant is not necessarily afraid of being fired, but there is definitely a fear of becoming an outcast amongst "their" closest colleagues. It seems to me like there are three underlaying reasons for this participant´s fear. Firstly, the rest of the interview confirms that this participant seems to be quite certain that "they" are surrounded by a large or total majority of pastors who adhere to a low church ideal. The participant strongly suspects that an openness would make "them" an outsider. Perhaps even ostracized. The participant does not seem to be sure that an openness would be met with a lack of respect, but "they" seem to fear that outcome. Secondly, the participant is uncertain to whether "they" have biblical arguments and justifications for "their" image of God. The data isn´t clear, but I think that it is possible that this participant views "their" arguments and justifications to be satisfactory for "themselves". The problem seems to be that this participant fears that "they" are unable to formulate biblical arguments and justifications that will please "their" colleagues. The question of whether the participants can argue from Scripture for their image of God is not a prevalent theme at all in my material. This is one of the very few instances where a participant refers to the Bible in the context of their image of God. One might have thought it would be more prevalent, since there is a lot of focus on their duty to "preach the word of God clearly and purely, as it is given to us in the holy book" (Den Norske kirke, 1992, p. 169. My translation) in the pastoral vows, and the further focus that it is given in the guidelines regarding the duty of office and loyalty (Asheim, 1980, p. 12-15) (see 2), but the subject of biblical justification is, as I said, very rare in my material. Thirdly, this participant is still in the middle of an ongoing process. This participant has therefore not been able to envision where "they" will land when it comes to "their" image of God and is therefore not able to see the implications of such an image of God.

6.2.4 The role of the dean and the bishop.

Before doing the interviews, I hypothesized that pastors with non-theistic inclinations had a fear of being confronted by the bishop. But there were wildly different views on that matter. I will begin by presenting the materials from members of tiers one and two. Firstly, I

will look at the one participant who said that at this time “they” are not comfortable at all talking of “their” image of God with “their” colleagues. “They” said:

> … there are large local differences all around Norway as to whether … there is a space to … ponder [images of God] while working as a pastor. […] During my time in [geographical region], there was a larger degree of openness … It was all right to work with that. While I was at [another geographical region] it was very … It really depended on specific deans, I think. And … and the specific community (felleskap) one was a part of. The challenge where I´m at right now is that there are even bigger differences … within the local deanery. So, it really comes down to what congregation you work in.

This participant went on to say:

> It is difficult to speak with my colleagues about my [image of God]. Especially in regional meetings arranged by the dean (prostisamlinger).

This participant doesn´t say whether it is the dean or other things in these regional meetings that makes it more difficult to speak of “their” image of God. But looking at what this participant has to say about the bishop might give us a clue.

> I would not say that I have significant fears of [being confronted by] the bishop (laughs). But … Or … And that generally has to do with the general state of the church (kirkelandskapet) in Norway. There are several people who has gone further down this questioning line than me, really. It might be more about a fear … here, locally.

The data is inconclusive, but I think its plausible that this participant does not necessarily claim that "they" do not fear a clash with the dean or bishop. It is rather the fact that this participant has enough difficulties with finding out how to possible be able to open up amongst "their" closest colleagues. The relationship with the dean, and especially the bishop seems more distant. The idea that "there are several other people who has gone further down this line" is expounded on a bit later. The participant said:

> I know that there are … others … occupationally active pastors who, in a way, actively entertains (jobber) these questions. But my impression is that it is … almost taboo to state (målbære) these things, because I … I have read stories about those who have done so publicly (laughs). And they have received criticism from many fronts, right … where it has been demanding … where people have quit as pastors.

I don´t know which pastors the participant is referring to in the beginning of this quote, but the context makes it rather clear that "they" are referring to the somewhat recent situation regarding Ivar Bu Larssen at the end of the quote. The incident involving Larssen is relevant for this thesis. Larssen worked as a pastor in CoN for ten years. He claims to always have been a ponderer, and one who has always lacked a stable faith to settle with. He no longer believes in a heaven absent of suffering and death. He no longer finds meaning in the church´s traditional understanding of Jesus´ death and resurrection. He feels like he has a relationship with something bigger. A source for life. He calls this something God. He feels like he has finally found peace in embracing the doubt and absence of God. But he also feels like there is a chasm between what other people assume that he believes, and what he actually believes. In 2016 he realizes that he can´t be a pastor any longer. He sets up a meeting with his bishop Halvor Nordhaug, and they agree that the best thing for Larssen to do is to quit his job (Bjørke, 2016). Bishop Nordhaug commented the situation after the story had gone public. He said: "Larssen had settled on a point of view. He agreed that his belief was different than that of the church. And that is something different than to doubt, which is normal for both Christians and pastors. If you cannot preach the faith of the church, then you cannot be a pastor." (Lindvåg, 2016. My translation).

The incident with Larssen was brought up by another participant. “They” said:

> … And then I began to work here, and I went from [one bishop] to [another bishop]. It was sort of like two different churches, right. […] The things I say would sort of not be accepted by another bishop. Because they feel like this is not in accordance with the creeds. Or it would sort of end up being the same conversation that [Ivar Bu Larssen] had with [Halvor Nordhaug]. And instead of challenging me to think well, challenge, work theologically, take your experiences seriously, work with the congregation, be honest … Instead, they might say: find another place to be at, sort of, because I have no use for people such as you.

Larssen´s situation has been food for thought for both of these participants. It seems to serve as a backdrop for the first participant, while “they” struggle to find ways to communicate with “their” closest colleagues and the dean. It seems, for the second participant, to serve as sobering reminder of what could happen if “they” had another bishop. My interpretation of the quote above is that this participant has been challenged in a positive way by “their” bishop to work theologically and to be honest, and the other things mentioned. But this participant also seems to say that if “they” were to be in another diocese, it might not only feel like a totally different church, but “they” might risk being advised to resign. This participant´s mentions of how CoN differs from setting-to-setting correlates with what the previous participant said, and it is brought up several times by this participant. Not only from bishop to bishop, but on a smaller scale as well. “They” said:

> The bishop, the dean, the congregation, like, there are sort of severe differences … tolerance limits.

This participant feels lucky to be approved where “they” are at now. But “they” know that very much could be very different in another place. But this participant also rejects the

idea that the level of approval towards a non-theistic image of God is decided in a top-down structure by the bishop. “They” went on to say:

> I haven’t sort of had any negative reactions here. But if I had been in … [adjoining deanery] … like … then I think there would have been … it´s a lot of … It would have been a major battle (kjempekrig). Because conservative pastors feature more strongly there.

Perhaps this can be seen as an indication that even though the bishop has an influence on to how openly the non-theistic pastor can speak, it is nevertheless the degree of acceptance from the dean that is the biggest factor as to whether the non-theistic pastor feels free to open up to colleagues outside of the closest circle. There is another participant who is even more clear on how the acceptance of the dean is more important than the acceptance of the bishop. That participant said:

> … And we have a dean that I talk to on a regular basis, and [“they” are] also very … I can tell [“them”] anything, without it being scary. I have not met our bishop. So it´s … Well, I have never had a conversation with [“them”], so … I don´t know. But it has been long since I … stopped thinking that the bishops … Yeah, it´s sort of nice to get a letter for Christmas, but … They can keep on doing their stuff. Like, it sounds a bit cynical, but I just don´t care (gidder ikke). Like, what are they going to do? I work locally. And that´s that. And then … It´s the same with the church council, and like … I have nothing … I don´t need it. The important thing for me are my colleagues and the dean.

This participant has not met “their” bishop. Perhaps this participant´s view had been different if “they” had a closer professional relationship with “their” bishop. We don´t know.

But this participant is very clear that currently "their" focus is solely on the local church, the nearest colleagues, and the dean.

There isn´t much to say about the two participants in tier three. One of them seem to be quite comfortable to speak relatively openly to both dean and bishop. The other one does not speak specifically about either deans or bishops.

There is one other aspect as to how the bishop have an influence. Three of the participants mentioned their appreciation for Kari Veiteberg, bishop of Oslo. All three of them commended her refusal to read John 3:16 during funerals. These participants all have reservations against the use of the word "perish" during funerals and were happy that Veiteberg had taken a public stance against the formal liturgy (this will be expanded upon in chapter 6.3.4). One participant went further in "their" commandment of Veiteberg and said that the way she fronts a more progressive approach to theology has been helpful for their own process.

6.2.5 Do they desire to change the images of God of their congregants?

It seems to me like the question of whether the participants desire to change the images of God of their congregants is very complicated. As we shall soon see, there are many of the participants who claim that they do not want to change the images of God of the congregants. Not much later, many of the same participants go on to speak of specific instances where they have been in conversation with a congregational member and have desired to guide them toward an image of God that is more in line with how the participant views God. And even further out in the interviews, the same participants speak of how they chose to say certain things, and to not say certain other things from the pulpit in order to at least nudge the congregants toward the image of God that the participant holds. I believe that two of the potentially many factors that complicate this issue are, on the one side, our general belief that our beliefs are more correct or advantageous than other beliefs. As one participant somewhat humorously and ironically said: "I have come to believe that my current image of

God is the best." On the other side, the participants show a great amount of the common attitude that one should respect the religious beliefs of others. As a matter of fact, four out of the six participants spoke directly of that, and they come from all three tiers. Here are some quotes related to that matter:

> I´m not in the business of robbing people of their naïve childhood belief. I don´t do that. That belief poses no threat. […] We [as pastors] are supposed to take care of the people … who have simple conceptions. […] They live well with their God. I live well with mine.

Also:

> I have no problem talking about God in a theistic manner if I speak with a person who have that traditional view. […] If they relate to God as one who is outside of this reality, but who takes care of them … well there´s no harm in that.

Also:

> I should not force my image of God into all circumstances to try to make them think like I do. […] I respect the images of God of others. And it might also be the case that what I view as problematic images of God might be positive for other people.

The first two quotes speak more generally of how there is no harm in a naïve childhood belief. The final quote starts to bring into light that there are some images of God that the participants have problems with, but they nevertheless realize that those same images

of God might be experienced as unproblematic by others. The following quotes from three participants exemplifies this regarding whether God answers intercessory prayer. The first participant said:

> The prayers in the context of a service … The words that are used there … are in a way … the words of the community … to the divine being that each person believes in. And each person is of course allowed to pray as concretely as one wish for things to change. Even though I believe that one should be careful to adopt an instrumentalism understanding of how God intervenes.

The second participant said:

> When I hear people say that they have experienced [that God answers prayers], then I think: Well well, but it can also be interpreted this and the other way. But I don´t tell them that. Because … if they have experienced something nice, they should be allowed to keep that experience in peace. It´s not … It´s not that I can´t say what I mean. But I should not. The stories that they tell are often very personal. But I reserve the right to mean something different.

The third participant said:

> It might be the case that people have a need for a hope that God might intervene, and … heal them from MS or something. Like, it would be a horrendous thing to say that … that´s not going to happen. Especially if one were to invoke authority as a pastor. […] That would be horrible.

Even though these participants seem to believe that the implications of Gods potential interventions are possibly problematic, they nevertheless think it´s ok for their congregants to believe or hope for those interventions.

There are, as I have said, instances when the participants desire to change the image of God of some congregants. And most of those instances are in situations when there is some form of dialogue, and it becomes apparent that the congregant has some form of judgmental image of God. All six participants spoke of this in some way. One participant said:

> I try to oppose the forensic image of God. […] This image wherein God is a judge, Jesus is sort of the lawyer who defends us, and we are guilty, in a way. […] This is not healthy. […] I would ask: Do you hear yourself?

Another participant said:

> There are people who have unhealthy images of God … in the sense that … it hurts them … gives them anxiety … they become afraid … makes their lives worse. They might have been brought up in a context of a strict and judgmental God with strict rules about right and wrong. And they might not live up to it. In that case it must be our mission to help those people towards a better image of God.

There were two participants who were clear that, at least in conversations with congregants, they reject the idea of hell. One of them said:

> Sometimes during discussions before baptisms some people ask whether an unbaptized child ends up in hell. Then I must tell them that … they are God´s children … both before and afterwards. So, yes … I correct [beliefs].

The other participant is even more direct and dismisses the afterlife completely. “They” said:

> If a grown person is … afraid of [hell], I just tell them that it is all nonsense (tull). You should not believe in the perdition. And you should not believe in heaven, because the heaven up there does not exist. If there is a heaven and a hell, then it is present here in our existence, and that is all.

All six participants have their own angle on the subject, but I argue that there is a clear common line of thought, and that is that all participants are quite direct whenever they have a dialogue with a congregant who seem to have an image of God as one who is judgmental.

The desire to combat judgmental images of God is admittedly not unique to pastors with non-theistic inclinations. But this analysis hopefully helps to strengthen the perception of how important this notion is for the participants. The notion of the judgmental God was, as explained in chapter 6.1.1, the very first thing discussed by most of the participants when asked to describe their image of God.

Finally, there was one participant who seems to have an additional justification to step in to correct images of God. “They” said:

> I believe that I have a [correcting role], and that is one of the tasks we have … also. Because … I´ve been studying for more than six years. I have been working with this for [a long time]. They can´t just … no … that´s just wrong. I am … I am a professional (fagperson). […] Like, if they have an image of God that is destructive. […] Then I try to work things out in spiritual care. [I could ask:] is this good for you? And then say that it is possible to think differently.

I find this quote to be interesting. It is in many ways in line with the previous quotes about correcting judgmental images of God. But this is the only quote that explicitly refers to long studies and theological competence whereas the other participants more generally pointed toward an emotional experience that the image of God as judgmental was harmful, and "just couldn´t be right". This is of course not to claim that five of the participants do not use their theological competence. I presume that they do. But only one participant explicitly mentioned it.

The participant quoted above went on to speak of how discussions of destructive images of God in spiritual care can serve as inspiration for sermons. "They" said:

> The path from spiritual care to sermons is important. The things said in spiritual care shall not be made public. The duty of confidentiality is total. But I can bring up and talk about the themes from the pulpit. […] I am allegedly a very direct preacher. And even though I am preoccupied with dialogue … it´s still like … there are quite a lot of things that cannot remain unchallenged. So, I talk about it.

Even though I have tried to limit this sub-chapter to dialogues between the pastor and a congregant and will deal more with sermons and speaking to groups in the next subchapter, the quote above demonstrates that the "dialogical" and the "proclamatory" role are not insulated but inform each other.

6.2.6 Can they speak openly of their image of God with the congregation?

It very quickly became clear that there are two main categories of reasons for the instances where they were hesitant to whether they should speak openly with the congregation of their image of God. The first is where they don´t desire to say too much about their image of God because they for some reason want to keep their thoughts private. This desire to keep some things private was mentioned by three of the participants. Those participants did not single out their image of God as *the thing* that they want to keep partly private. It was rather a

part of their general stance that a pastor does not have to share too much of what is going on in their inner life. The second is where they had a desire to say something about God but censored themselves for some reason. The rest of this thesis will focus on those instances.

Once again it seems reasonable to assume that the degree of openness toward the congregation is predicated on the degree of non-theistic inclinations. I will therefore begin to analyze the data from the participants in tier three (the least non-theistic), and thereafter I will analyze the data from the participants in tier two, and finally the participant in tier one.

The first participant in tier three didn´t say much about whether "they" can speak openly specifically with the congregation. One possible reason for that is that this participant is not currently working in a congregation. This participant has done so for many years previously, but currently holds another paid position in CoN. The second participant in tier three had more to say.

> To say that God does not exist … that is like detonating a bomb. We cannot say such things as pastors. People will not understand what we are talking about unless we spend at least five minutes to talk about what that means. We can´t expect … we get no chances to explain these things for ordinary members of the congregation, or … folk church-people who only visits the church for services.

Here we once again meet the notion that these topics demand lots of available time. And this participant either seem to think the ordinary church service is not a suitable setting to devote the necessary time, or that there are other unspoken reasons for why they get no chances to explain these things. The same participant went on to say:

> The Sunday service … there I speak rather traditionally. But as I´ve said, I omit the things that I deem not proper. And you can´t get blamed for the things you do not talk about. I believe that I have the ability to gently try things out (føle seg frem), and I can

> speak more openly when I realize that I am in a context … where I can speak more openly.

So, it seems like the general approach of this participant is to speak traditionally. But "they" nevertheless seem to gently try things out to see if the audience seems responsive for subjects that might be more non-theistic.

The next three participants are, as I said, from tier two. The first of those participants had one comment that was specific to communication to the congregation. That participant said:

> I believe that I have comforted the doubter. Because I have … I have spoken about my doubts and my objections toward God, and how I experience … It´s not as if I´ve been very private, but more generally … how I experience that it´s not easy for the pastor either. And I can be angry with God. That is against my theology per se […] but it´s healthy (veldig godt) to be able to get angry at God. To have a target, right.

This notion that communication of non-theistic ideas is good for the doubter Is something that we will be indicated further out. This is also the only time in my material that a participant talks about anger toward God. My data is not clear about this, but I believe that it is reasonable to hypothesize that there are less "traits" in a non-theistic image of God that one can direct one's anger against. This is assumably especially true if one believes that God does not intervene in our physical world.

The next participant in this tier is sometimes afraid that "they" have said too much. The participant said:

> My sermons and my image of God are connected. Like, I must be authentic, and that means I must talk about that which is true. […] I believe that the congregants can sometimes hear something that is within me that I try to withhold. I have felt that many times. I sort of … know what I should say, and then I say a bit more, and then I become afraid that they will hear … and I´m afraid to receive reactions afterwards. […] Like, if I oppose the theistic image of God that they have … like, the comfort they find in the idea of a God in control. Many of the times that I have preached I become gradually afraid … afraid that they´ll get really angry this time. Like, it´s going to explode, damn it! But the times where I have been very uneasy, those have also been the sermons that people feel touched by.

This is a participant who feels like "they" must be authentic about what "they" say in the sermons. But it seems like the participant is still in the process of experimenting with what can be said by slowly pushing the boundaries. It almost seems like there are instances when this participant almost unconsciously says something that "their" conscious mind wants to withhold. The rest of the interview shows that this process has been going on for some years. It seems to me that this participant is very aware that "they" are taking risks by challenging the status quo by preaching these non-theistic ideas to the congregation. But so far there seem to have been no major protests or confrontations. The same participant went on to say:

> I can see that I am fortunate … that I´m still here, and not everybody has left. Like, it´s not empty when I preach. That I actually can … and I feel that it´s actually … important for the church. Not to scare away others, but to manage the heritage you are a part of in a good manner (forvalte den arven du står i på riktig måte).

I find the last sentence interesting. When "they" speak about managing the heritage, that might be an indication that "they" do not see this as completely reformatory work. It might indicate that "they" do not see these non-theistic views as new or innovative, but that they are a part of the heritage of the situation that this participant is in. The data is unclear of

what the “part of” refers to. The congregation? CoN? Christianity? I don´t know, but based on this participants tendency to challenge the status quo I presume that it refers to something bigger than “their” congregation.

The third participant in tier two finds the whole situation a bit complicated. “They” said:

> It is demanding. On the one hand in the setting of the church service it comes down to loyalty to the church and what it stands for. But in my sermons, on the other hand, I might be able to say things in a somewhat different way so that I can avoid the biggest compromises with what I think.

Not much later the same participant goes on to explain what “they” mean by loyalty to the church.

> It´s about respect. Both for the church history, and in a way … both on the local and on the national scale.

Just as the previous participant, this participant tries to bring in some non-theistic elements in the sermon. But this participant is a lot more cautious than. There seems to be an internal fight between this participant´s desire to be respectful and true to the doctrines of the church, and “their” discomfort with stating something that opposes what “they” think. But where the previous participant seems to think that there are quite a lot of non-theistic ideas about God that are part of the Christian heritage, this participant feels like many of “their” non-theistic ideas opposes something. What it opposes is not entirely clear. Is it opposing church history? Or the local church? Or CoN in a broader sense? The rest of the interview confirms that it is at least the local church. Speaking of integrity “they” went on to say:

> Integrity is important to me. When these things are colliding, I feel the need to feel integrity for it to work at all. If I don´t … than it takes its toll on my psychological health.

During the interview it becomes clear that this is very much a struggle for this participant. One instance came up while we were discussing the concept of perdition. “They” said:

> Sometimes I have noticed that I have let myself get pulled into it. That I sort of add on an extra sentence to sort of appease parts of the congregation, so that it seems like I hold to the so-called correct theology. […] In the instances where that has happened, it has sort of happens like on autopilot. And then I sort of hear it after I have said it. And I know that I would have formulated it completely different if I was alone. Or I might not had formulated it at all. Because it sort of evokes images of the God that I am trying to discard. (Laughs). Like the judgmental God. It feels unpleasant … painful … when that happens. But I notice that it happens more and more seldom. But I have also gotten direct questions from members of the congregation … who have asked why I don’t talk more about what Jesus has done for us. My interpretation is that they want me to talk more about … to sort of allude to ones need for repentance, to get saved, and to get to heaven. And to avoid perdition.

This quote makes it quite clear that the participant feels like some of the active local members of the church wants a “so called correct” theology preached to them, and that some of desires more preaching about salvation, heaven, and perdition. This leads the participant to add on sentences that “they” feel very uncomfortable with. And it seems to happen in a somewhat unconscious way. The fact that the participant claims that it has happened on autopilot, but nevertheless seem to be certain that the reason is to give of the appearance of having “so called correct theology” makes me lean toward the interpretation that this is a very

interesting mechanism for self-preservation in order to not be branded as a theological outsider.

The final participant is from tier one (the most non-theistic). This participant often has the experience of having to hold things back. A quote that summarizes much of that is:

> There are times when I feel like all this is mere nonsense. It´s MERE NONSENSE! But I can´t stand in the pulpit and say that. (Laughs).

But the solution for this participant is not to be quiet. "They" went on to say:

> It´s like … I may … During the periods where I feel like there is no God. But then it´s like … I have also been thinking … Perhaps I should, in one way or another, talk about (målbære) that as well. Because I´m not the only one who feels that. So, the question is how one could communicate that without making the people lose hope … or lose belief.

There are several things in this quote that I find interesting. Based on the rest of the interview this participant´s statement "the periods where I feel like there is no God" could very well be interpreted as "the periods where I have lacked a belief in God". This participant tells of several instances of lack of belief in the past. But when "they" said "talk about that as well" I am assuming that "they" are not referring to preaching that there is no God, but more like being open about the fact that "they" sometimes feel like there is no God. To be open about sincere doubt, in other words. I interpret "their" statement that "they" are "not the only one who feels that" as an assumption that those in the congregation who feels the same might feel understood, seen, and validated by the pastor. But "they" are at the same time worried that an admission of sincere doubt might make "the people" loose hope and/or belief. It is uncertain exactly what "the people" refers to in this quote. It might refer to all the congregants present hearing this hypothetical sermon on sincere doubt, or it might refer to the part of the

congregants that share, or have shared, this feeling of sincere doubt. So, the question is if this participant is afraid that "the people", as in the congregants, will lose hope and belief, or if this participant is afraid that those of the congregants who already doubt will lose their hope and belief. This participant has, as earlier stated, had previous instances of lack of belief. But there is nothing in the material that indicates that this participant has lost hope in those instances. The word "hope" is not well defined in this instance, but I would argue that it is possible to have a lack of belief without necessarily having a lack of hope. It seems like this participant thinks that there is a potential for "the people" to lose hope and/or faith when hearing of the sincere doubt of the pastor, and I think it´s quite clear that this participant views a potential loss of hope and/or faith as a bad thing. All this is to say that I see this quote as an indication of what Dennett (2006) and Dennett and LaScola (2010) identify as "belief in belief" (see 5.2.1). This participant seems to be afraid that "their" congregants should lose their hope/belief, and is seemingly restraining "themselves" from expressing sincere doubts to prevent that. "They" seem to view belief (and hope) as a state that should be fostered in others. I consider this quote to be slightly different than the instances where participants do not want to correct images of God out of respect for the faith of the congregants that was discussed in chapter 6.2.5. In those instances, the participants chose not to speak of their image of God because they did not think that the dialogue partner needed to be presented with an argument that might or might not change their image of God. In this instance, this participant chose not to speak of "their" image of God (or perhaps lack of image of God, if a lack of belief could be described as that) because "they" did not want the dialogue partner to change (as in losing hope and/or faith). To some it might seem that it goes without saying that a pastor should try to preserve faith and hope in their congregants. It is after all arguably a part of the pastoral vows (see 10.4). But we must remember that there are many who believe that doubt, and even sincere doubt, is not a bad thing in itself. Many of the respondents have, as we have seen, expressed that they feel validated in both having and openly expressing doubt. I earlier quoted bishop Nordhaug that also expressed that doubt is normal for both Christians and pastors. But perhaps this participant believes that there are different levels of justification for sharing different types of doubts. A pastor might be in their full right to share doubts about for instance whether God is going to intervene in a specific situation. But this participant seems to doubt whether it is right for "them" to share sincere doubt of whether there is a God. It is also important to point out that this participant does not seem to believe

that an expression of “their” sincere doubt necessarily leads to a loss of hope and/or belief. But “they” seem to think that the chances are big enough that “they” have decided to not be open so far about “their” sincere doubt that there is a God.

The possibility of the quote above being an instance of “belief in belief” is in my estimation made more plausible due to this participants willingness to adapt the role of a vicarious believer. The participant directly went on to say:

> I believe that the pastor becomes a kind of symbolic figure for people. Or for many. […] There is quite an amount that think of us as a kind of middleman. And I´m not saying that they … whether it´s right or wrong. But there is a point in (det er noe med å) cherishing (ta vare på) that in people. And if they … They do come to me and ask if I can pray for them. Then I sort of think: Couldn´t you do that yourself? (Laughs). But then I think … alright … I can do that if that is important for them. And I believe that we must be aware of that when we preach. That middleman-figure. The members of the congregation have an expectation or a hope that I will believe on their behalf. And that is why it becomes so scary. To say something about not believing. Because it might lead to them having a crisis of belief. And I do not want to inflict that on others.

Once again, the “something about not believing” is not well defined. It could mean to express sincere doubts. It could mean to state periodical states of non-belief in God. It could mean something else. Here it nevertheless seems clear to me that the participant consider “their” openness about “something about not believing” to pose as a risk of inflicting not only doubt or loss of belief, but a crisis of belief for some of the congregants. This participant does not want that. So, to foster belief in the congregants, this participant is willing to not only be a vicarious believer, but also to pose as a vicarious believer in the instances when the participant lacks faith. The belief in belief becomes visible in the participants sacrifice of openness about doubt to foster beliefs and to avoid crises in the congregants. But the participant does not seem to view the lack of openness as dishonesty, as “they” seem to

believe that others can believe vicariously for “them”. Later in the interview the same participant said:

> … when I have had periods where I believe that it is all nonsense […] it has helped me to know that others have done this before. It´s like … I believe that it is possible to believe in a vicarious way. It doesn´t all come down to me as an individual. But … but … the community of faith (troens fellesskap). […] I believe in that. Even though I have lacked belief in God, I have still believed … that I can do these things. I can wear the garment, read the prayers, preach the sermon. And then I might think: Alright. I´m an actor today. But I know how to do this. I have done this many times. The people won’t be able to tell.

In an interesting way this participant does not seem to think that “they” are required to have a belief to believe vicariously for other congregants. It is enough that others in the past have believed vicariously for the participant, so that “they” can believe vicariously by extension. So, it seems like this participant is, at least some of the time, choosing to be carried of a historical community of faith.

The quotes above are the only places in my material wherein a participant speaks directly about having vicarious belief for the congregants. But there is one other participant from tier three who touches upon the subject, although more indirectly. It came up while we were talking about the function of intercession lead by the pastor during the church-service. “They” said:

> … it is obviously something collective, that is, it is something that we do on behalf of the collective. And I don´t think it´s necessarily that important what other people think of it (legger I det). […] Because when I stand there as a pastor, I do so on behalf of the Church. That is, I am representing the church.

From the context of the quote, it is clear that the participant believes that during the act of pastorally led intercession during the church service, “they” can act as a vicarious believer for those congregants who might doubt or disbelieve, but nevertheless wishes to believe in a God that intervenes. But like the previous example, this participant lacks the belief that is supposed to work vicariously. This participant seems to view intercession as a valuable collective experience. Perhaps “they” see it as a poetic expression of hope. The material is not clear. What is clear is that this participant has sincere doubts that God ever intervenes. But this participant seems to be perfectly fine with the fact that some members of the congregation falsely assumes that the pastor beliefs in divine intervention, and that these members use the participant´s falsely assumed belief vicariously.

While reading, categorizing, and analyzing my material I was on the lookout for possible instances of “belief in belief” (Dennett, 2006). The reason for that is that “belief in belief” seems to be somewhat prevalent in the work of Dennett and LaScola (2010). The idea of “belief in belief” is, as I previously stated, not very prevalent in my material. Once again, I wish to stress that we must be cautious to draw to many conclusions from things that are not said, but I do find the fact that the idea is so rarely expressed in my material interesting, and it indicates a difference between my material and the material of Dennett and LaScola (2010). The fact that the occasions of tendencies toward “belief in belief” were so few in my material hinders me from even speculating of why my material differs from Dennett’s and LaScola´s (2010) in that regard. I would like to see more research on whether the idea of “belief I belief” is rarer in a Norwegian or Scandinavian context, or whether it is more prevalent than my data indicates when utilizing a different research approach. My speculation is the latter. There is nevertheless one other instance from the previously quoted participant from tier one that relates to the idea of “belief in belief”. Even though I believe that my question was not leading in the setting it was asked, I must state my question for the sake of transparency. The participant was talking about there being instances in the past where “they” stood in the pulpit lacking belief. I asked: During those moments, what, if anything, have you believed in? The participant answered:

> It´s like … I just do the things. (Laughs). Well … I´m just present with the people. No … I think … I think less and less about that. I am just present … to see what happens, in a way. […] You might say that I believe in doing that which should be done. […] It´s nice to just do it. It might be a bit banal. But it´s possible to find rest in it.

I argue that this quote is at least indirectly connected to the idea of "belief in belief". It does not specifically talk of an aspiration for a state of belief, but I claim that it is an expression of an aspiration to find rest in a praxis of belief. It is in other words a "belief in the practice of belief".

6.2.7 A summation of the participants ability for openness.

It seems to me that the most important factor for whether pastors can speak openly of non-theistic images of God is the openness and respect amongst the closest colleagues. Even though it seems like images of God are hardly ever discussed, it is still clear that all but one of the participants felt like they at least had some of their closest colleagues that they could talk to. Some even felt like they could speak openly with many of their colleagues. But they nevertheless expressed some restrictions. They might for example hesitate if there is not enough time available to discuss the finer details. It is also clear that at least some of them are "trying out the terrain" so to speak, by being more cautious when they meet new colleagues. There are also a couple of participants that claim that it has become easier to speak openly in recent years. In explaining why that is, they have not appealed to a changing theological and cultural milieu, but instead mentioned a more open and respectful group of colleagues, or an individual maturity and security, and in one case a shift toward a less non-theistic view of God. There is also the one participant, whose experiences indicate that it might be easier to be open if one has "landed" in a non-theistic image of God, that is, that the process of finding the implications of a shifting image of God is not still ongoing.

Half of the participants speak of how they perceive there to be major differences from place to place in how much openness there is toward non-theistic images of God. The closest colleagues seem to play the biggest role. But a dean that is open and respectful towards non-

theistic images of God seem to be crucial for the participants to feel safe to speak somewhat open beyond the closest circle of colleagues. How they perceive the role of the bishop differs amongst the participants. Half of them seem to not think too much about the bishop in relation to their image of God, and how openly they can speak of it. Out of the remaining three, the first participant state that "they" have stopped caring about the bishop. This participant is happy about "their" ability to speak openly locally with colleagues and the dean, and that is all that seem to matter. The second seems to believe that it might be risky to speak openly with the bishop, but that seem to be irrelevant since this participant is still unable to speak openly with "their" colleagues or the dean. The final participant seems to feel quite safe with both colleagues, the dean, and the bishop. But that participant is very aware that things could be very problematic if "they" were in a different diocese.

When in dialogue with parishioners, the participants were in unison that they should respect and not correct most of the beliefs of the parishioners, even if they for the participants seemed naïve. This respect included the instances where the parishioners believed that God can intervene as a result of intercessory prayer, even though a majority of the participants sees that belief as harmful, or at least possibly harmful. All the participants did agree and were very clear that they tried to change the views of parishioners who have a judgmental image of God.

All participants mentioned that they restricted themselves in some ways in their communication of their image of God while interacting with the congregation. A couple of the participants especially mentioned that they would never speak of the non-existence of God during a sermon. Others mentioned that they speak a bit more openly about their doubts and objections of God. Almost all spoke of a process of trying the boundaries of what they can say. Some are very careful in that process. Others push a bit harder. Two of the participants directly mentioned the importance of integrity. One of those spoke of how that integrity had pushed "them" to be honest to a degree that was a bit frightening. The other spoke of how it takes a toll on "their" mental health when "they" feel like they cannot speak freely. There is also one participant who restricts "themselves" greatly, especially regarding expressions of doubt. This participant seems to hold a "belief in belief" and is afraid that "their" expression of doubt will cause doubt in others. Finally, there are two participants who say that there are

instances when they really don´t care if what they say doesn´t make sense to them. They seem to find both importance and rest in the practice of beliefs, or in "just doing it".

6.3 Problematic Scriptures, language and liturgical elements.

6.3.1 Perceived problems with the Bible.

I have previously stated that the participants very rarely refer to the Bible when talking of their image of God. This sub-chapter might be able to provide some hints of why that is. The interview did not contain specific questions about the participants view of Scripture, but this subchapter will provide some views of Scripture, and how it should and shouldn´t be used, especially from the pulpit. Before looking at specific themes found in the Bible, we should probably look at how some of the participants view the role of the Bible more generally. I will provide one example from each tier. Beginning with tier three, one participant said:

> I remember [one other pastor]. He read the text [assigned for that Sunday], and then he said: God´s word is truth. Or something like that. I have heard similar things several times. And I believe that this is sort of a recipe for … like … you are putting the message … on the same level as God. And then you can say anything … and that sort of also becomes true.

It is clear that this is a critique towards pastors who imply that their sermon is automatically true because it refers to the text. But I argue that this quote likely also implies that it is wrong to claim that the text is truth in the same way that God is truth. This quote does not provide many details as to how this participant views the text, but I claim that it indicates that this participant believe that the text must, at least sometimes, be "questioned through the truth of God", as in that the essence of the divine trumps the text whenever there is a contradiction. This might not neither be a radical view, nor exclusive to pastors with non-

theistic inclinations, but it somewhat questions the Lutheran idea of sola scriptura (by Scripture alone).

The next example is from tier two. It is a bit more direct in its demotion of the role of Scripture. The participant said:

> One of the biggest challenges is that we always start with text. I think that is hugely challenging. I believe that the church should be much more thematically based. It´s like … we have assigned texts that you have to … And it takes such a long time to get to your points, because you have to correct the errors in the text. You hardly have time to say something true or smart or socially beneficent about God, because the text is sort of … That´s at least how I feel sometimes.

Not only is this participant saying that the Bible does sometimes contains errors. "They" are saying that those errors are of such character that they need to be thoroughly corrected, and that this correction can be so time-consuming that it sometimes would have been better to not have been bound to that text. This participant seems to believe that an uncorrected text would contradict, or at least misalign, with what the participant deems to be true, smart, and socially beneficent statements about God.

The final example is from tier one. The participant said:

> There are many [texts] which at first glance looks like mere nonsense, or that they are completely horrible. But then I think … Alright, I will give this a chance. So, I analyze, and bring in sources. And then they are revealed in a different light. So, I think … I give most texts a try. But … there are many instances … where I think: I feel sorry for you if you believe this.

When asked to provide examples of such texts, the participant went on to say:

> There are the texts that speak of the judgement. And there are a few of those. And then it is very important that I discuss that theme in the sermon. There are different sides … and such. The text cannot be left without comments (teksten får ikke stå alene).

These quotes can be interpreted as a rather common view that it is important for the pastor to work both exegetically and hermeneutically with the text. But I argue that the quote communicates a level of skepticism toward the text not seen in most pastors. It does not seem as if this participant believes that the apparent nonsensical and horrible aspects of the text disappear once the necessary work of exegetics and hermeneutics is done. From this quote, and from the context of the rest of the interview, it seems to me like this participant believes that some texts include truly nonsensical and horrible aspects, and that it is a challenge to communicate them in a positive light.

The last quote brings up the perceived problem with texts about the judgement. And this participant is not alone. Most of the participants speak of how they find biblical passages that speaks of the judgement to be problematic. Especially when the texts can be interpreted as speaking of a judgmental God or of hell. The perceived depiction of a judgmental God continues to be a problem for almost all participants regarding the creeds and the liturgies.

6.3.2 The historical context of Scripture, creeds, and liturgies.

While trying to deal with the parts that the participants deem difficult in the Bible, the creeds, and the liturgy, they all mentioned the need to view all these things through the lens of its historical and cultural context. This view is not exclusive to the participants in this study. Pastors of CoN generally have knowledge of historical and cultural contextualization. Here are some snippets of quotes to illustrate the idea:

> "… [the liturgies] we are reciting are just fragments of historical dogma and culture."
>
> "I usually say that the creeds are structured religious experience."
>
> "… the path from the text to me is like … like 2000 years. And another culture. […] so, it´s okay if I disagree with the text."

And the final example:

> We do have a liturgy. […] And the history behind it is really absurd. I can´t explain it, but I can take part in it. It is a part of the community of the church. And the community of the church is the meaningful thing.

The first snippets highlight how the text, creeds, and liturgies are both shaped by the historical and cultural context that they were written in, and by the subjective experiences of those who wrote them. But I want to look a bit closer at the last quote, since it brings up a new interesting theme. I´m unaware of what the participant means with the "absurd history of the liturgy", but I assume it relates to how we should look at it through a historical context. When the participant speaks of the "it" that can´t be explained, "they" seems to refer to the liturgy. The participant says that by taking part in the liturgy, "they" are a part of the community of the church. This participant goes on to say that being a part of the community of the church is "the meaningful thing", assumably in opposition to the liturgy in itself since it is, at least partly, not explainable. While speaking of the creeds, the same participant said:

> As a pastor I have simply … followed [the creeds]. And belief is me following and practicing this thing. By doing so I follow in the footsteps of faith. In the footsteps of the patriarchs and matriarchs of belief. Those who have created these creeds.

I argue that both these quotes suggest that this participant values ritualistic participation higher than assent to the truthfulness of the liturgy creeds. I find this to be connected to Phillips´ theory of practice of religions. The participation in the liturgy is a clear example of one of "the deeds that is the beginning". It is a participation in a religious practice that can, and through repetition probably will, generate common experiences of what a belief in God amounts to (see 5.2.3).

6.3.3 Perceived problems with the creeds.

The participants brought up several perceived problems with the creeds. The first one deals with understandability. One participant said:

> There is even in the creeds a fumbling with words to speak of God. There is an admission that what we say is not communicating this thing in a complete way. […] It´s like … consubstantial (av samme vesen) with the Father? But it doesn´t define what essence the Father is of. These things are in a way … not unclear, but it´s like … they define by using undefined terms in a way. I mean … Light of light? What does that even mean? (Laughs).

I believe that the point of this participant is that the creeds does not communicate very well. But that is not necessarily because they are badly written. One reason is that the themes of the creeds are somewhat incommunicable. Another participant said:

> The discussions [regarding the details of the creeds] were in a way meaningless. They might have felt necessary during that time. […] This is what they were able to agree on, and then it just remained. […] So, the point should not be if we [pastors] can assent to the creed point by point.

Both quotes above deals with another reason why the creeds are not communicating well. The creeds deal with ancient theological conflicts that many people don´t find relevant nowadays. These two quotes also affirm the idea from the previous chapter that the creeds are from a different historical and cultural context. The second quote additionally makes the argument that they do not communicate objective truths about God, so we are not required to assent to all points.

The theme of the judgmental image of God was brought up again regarding the creeds. One participant said:

> It´s unfortunate that it says: come again and judge the living and the dead. That sentence is very unprotected. I read it in the same way as I read the other sentences. But I find it difficult … to just speak that sentence into the room.

I am rather confident that what this participant means with "the unprotected sentence of judgement" is that the participant feels unable to comment that sentence. This is an interesting aspect that makes the creeds differ from the biblical texts. Whenever a participant finds a biblical text to be problematic, they can situate, comment, or even correct the text in the sermon to soften or delete the problematic aspects of the text. But the creeds are different. This participant seems to think that here is no natural way or place to comment the creeds to mitigate or delete the problematic aspects of the creeds.

The last quote that I want to analyze contains some of things that has already been dealt with in this chapter. But it also brings up some new aspects and is perhaps the most radical quote regarding the creeds. This participant said:

> The creed we have is unfortunately … Well, we have big problems if you believe that it portrays the real world. I wish that we would recite it in Latin … because … nobody understands Latin. We recite the creeds in church. That is the function it has. But don´t listen to it. Don´t believe that it describes an ontological reality.

Once again, we are presented with the view that the creed does not convey objective facts. This quote also claims that the creed has problematic parts, but the specifics of what the problems are is not expressed. Or perhaps it is the whole idea that the creed could possibly convey an ontological reality that is the problem. What is clear is that this participant would rather have the creed in Latin. It seems like a reasonable interpretation that the creed would give us no less information about an ontological reality if it was in Latin, and the Latin version would have the added benefit that it would not give us any false or weird ideas about the essence of God. But perhaps this quote above is even more radical. This participant says that the function of the creed is in the reciting. This is in line with the aforementioned idea that ritual participation is "the beginning", and perhaps the most important thing. But it might also suggest that a ritual participation in a meaningless thing, such as reciting unintelligible Latin, would be preferable over the ritual participation in reciting the creed. If that is a valid interpretation, it further shows signs of the idea that participation, or the practice of religion, is more important than assent to the truthfulness of the beliefs.

6.3.4 Perceived problems with the liturgy.

The main perceived problem with the liturgy is once again that many of the participants do not like how it sometimes speaks of judgement. Four out of the six participants spoke of how they found it problematic to include John 3:16 in the liturgy for the funeral, due to the occurrence of the word "perish". They all feel it communicates an unnecessary image of a judgmental God. One participant went so far as to say:

> It does not matter what they say. I will never read it. I would rather get fired. I won't do it.

Three out of these four participants also spoke of how there is a general theme of how one should consider the possibilities of the afterlife in the liturgy for the funeral, and how that

felt both wrong and not pedagogic at all towards those who are grieving. Two out of the six participants also mentioned that they are uneasy with the use of forensic or juridic language in the liturgy surrounding communion. They seem to believe that this perpetuates an image of a judgmental God.

One participant mentioned the confession of sin. “They” seemed to be pleased that a member of the parish council wrote a new version of the confession of sin that got approved for use in the congregation. But this participant did not say anything about the standard version, and what “they” thought to be more problematic in that one. But this participant did say that the new version was “inclusive and relatable”.

6.4 Proposed ways to communicate their image of God.

6.4.1 Preferred words and styles of language.

Quite a lot has already been said about the participants´ use of language, and what sort of language that they find problematic. When they were asked what sort of language they preferred, many of the participants were hesitant. After they thought for a while, many gave answers that at first sight seem to be no different than what I would expect most pastors would say. Some spoke of how they want to portray God as loving, and the general importance of love. Some spoke of how God is full of grace. Some spoke of how they want to give people hope. One mentioned God´s preferential option for the poor and powerless. One mentioned a preference to speak of God in gender-neutral terms. But there are nevertheless a couple of details that are worth exploring.

While speaking of grace, one of the participants said:

> The most important thing in life is grace. That is, that I am accepted just as I am. And I have fought with those who disagree. I claim that you are accepted just as you are, but the orthodox don´t want to say that. They say that you must repent from (gjøre opp med) your sin.

This is, as I see it, another expression of the disdain for the image of the judgmental God. I believe that this quote refers to Gods radical acceptance of all humans. This expression of radical acceptance seems to have been questioned more than one time. I also find it interesting that this participant describes those who disagree and insist on the need for repentance as "orthodox". This might be interpreted as a sign that this participant is comfortable to self-identity as outside of orthodoxy.

While speaking of hope, another participant said:

> I focus on the hope. Well … It´s not a kind (snill) God, but a God that one can place one´s hope in … Yeah, I might believe that. Or a God that is with us. Is with … Yeah, I think I use that a lot. That´s it. But not looking out for us (passer på oss). Because … if something goes wrong, does He not look out for us then? But one who is with us, through thick and thin. I use that often. And the hope … That God is one that we can put our hope in (håpe på).

This participant does not elaborate what is meant with "place one´s hope in", or one "that is with us". But it seems clear that this participant uses these terms because "they" don´t feel like these sayings communicate an interventionist God. I also find it interesting that the participant said "Yeah, I might believe that" after mentioning a God that one can place one´s hope in. It´s far from certain, but it might indicate that the belief in a God that one can place one´s hope in might be a stretch for the belief of this participant. But it is nevertheless a preferable choice of words.

Two of the participants also spoke of how it is okay to not have the answers. One of them mentioned how "they" have been critiqued after a sermon for seeming too uncertain. The other participant said:

> I tend to ask questions [during my sermons]. Like, not concrete questions, but I am more wondering and open in what I say. No matter what kind of image of God they have, I want what I say to enable many ways to believe in God. […] I want to preach and communicate … in a way that is recognizable for people. Or that it might inspire new thoughts, or … in a more open way. I can´t stand statements like: This is how it is, and how it always will be.

Not much later in the interview, the same participant elaborated on "their" views. Note that this is a response to the question of how "they" preferred to speak of God.

> I´m not very fond of speaking of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. I very often speak of God, who … It´s like, when I speak of God, I use the word God. […] Because I like to speak as openly as possible. And it´s hard to say something concrete about God.

Previously we have seen how some other participants have mentioned how they rather speak of the incarnation since it in some ways is more concrete than God the Father. But this participant seems to prefer to speak of God precisely because it is hard to say something concrete about it. I don´t know why this participant isn´t fond of speaking of the Holy Spirit, but it seems likely to me that the participant finds Jesus a bit to concrete. The participant want the language about God to be open for several interpretations, perhaps even with a suggestion that God is, at least to a large degree, unknowable. Unknowable in a sense that no one should say "this is how it is".

Another participant spoke of how "they" preferred to speak of belonging to the church. "They" said:

> I often speak of … the church. That is an important concept when I preach. I use that concept a lot more than other pastors. Others speak about finding God. I rather speak

about … for instance finding one's place in the church. […] To be a Christian is to be a part of the community, and the community is God. That is, the church and God are intertwined, in a way.

I find it interesting that this participant is not only saying that the church and God are intertwined, but actually says that the community is God. Unfortunately, the material doesn´t reveal details as of how the community is God, but this statement seems to put a lot of significance of participation in the community. Even to the degree that it seems like this participant suggests that if you find your place in the church, you have found God in a sense.

6.4.2 Ways to adapt the liturgy.

One participant spoke of how they had made a deliberate choice in where they place the confession of sin. "They" said:

The confession of sin as we do it in our church is alright. It´s like … we must pull ourselves together. Things will go wrong if we don´t act right. So, I would say that it´s good. […] But I have integrated the confession of sin into the intercession. […] So, we pray the confession of sin. I don't say "let us confess our sins", as if we didn´t, God would not let us in. It´s more like a prayer. For yourself, in a way.

Here it is very clear that this participant has chosen to integrate the confession of sin into the intercession in order to prevent it to possibly seem like the confession of sin is a requirement for being accepted by God. The confession of sin is moved into another context so that it hopefully evokes a desire to take responsibility and be better people. I should clarify that this placement of the confession of sin is not a deviation from the prescribed liturgical order. It is an option that was provided through the most recent reformation of the liturgical guidelines ("gudstjenestereformen" from 2011). To some it might seem like a small thing to

move a liturgical element to another place in the service, but I claim that small adaptations such as the one described above can have severe effects on how God is portrayed in the liturgy. This participant, like every other participant in this study, is very concerned to not portray God as judgmental. I believe that this participant is concerned that the other option for placement of the confession can evoke a sense that confession is required for salvation. It also seems like "they" believe that "their" preferred placement of the confession can evoke a desire for the betterment of humankind, and this seems to be more in line with both the theology and the perceived function of the church service for this participant.

The same participant spoke of other ways "they" adapted the liturgy to better convey an image of God that is more in line with the view of God of the participant. "They" said:

> My solution is that we sing the renunciation. We sing it, because we must have it. We never recite the creed. At least not in the liturgy. We sing it. Because when you sing it, you realize that it´s actually not meant literally.

The renunciation is a small part of the liturgy of baptism. It is recited just before the Apostle´s creed, and it goes: I renounce the devil, the ways of sin, and all evil works. The statement that "we must have it" likely indicate that this participant might have omitted the renunciation if it was optional. But it must be included, so the liturgical adaption is to sing it. This participant unfortunately never expands on how singing affects how literal the renunciation is perceived. Perhaps the participant feels like a reading is more formal, and that the added musical dimension gives us a freedom to interpret the text freely in the same way as many people feel free to have personal interpretations of the lyrics in songs. It is furthermore clear that this participant believes that we should not take the renunciation literally, but this participant does not clarify what elements should be understood as figuratively. My guess is that a figurative understanding of the devil is quite common for pastors of CoN, so I find it likely that this participant is in that camp. Unfortunately, the material doesn´t say whether this participant views "sin" and "evil" as terms that should be viewed figuratively. But based on the rest of this interview, I find it likely that this participant would like to qualify those terms

rather extensively if “they” were to talk about them. The creed is also sung. I have previously dealt with the participants´ views of what they see as problematic parts of the creeds (se chapter 6.3.3). I´m confident that the “he will come to judge the living and the dead” is one part that this participant thinks should not be taken literally. For the rest of the Apostle´s creed, the material is unfortunately unclear.

The last example of liturgical adaptation deals with the creeds, and it is from the same participant. “They” went on to say:

> I rotate the creeds. Sometimes we have other creeds. And I often say: This is what they believed. These are creeds that are contextually situated in the fourth century. And in my sermons, I often give examples of the faith of roman Christians from the fourth century, Chinese Christians from the ninth century, and Celtics from the twelfth century. And then I ask: Who is God? And there are different answers, informed by their culture, informed by the settings, and by images of the world. It’s the same way with creeds from different settings.

In chapter 6.3.2 I delt more in depth with problems concerning the historical context of the creeds, so I will not comment much on it here. But a problem that was mentioned was that the creeds are often read without any comments or clarifications. Here we see that this participant chose to often preach of how the cultural and historical context informs one´s image of God. It seems plausible to me that the underlaying message is that our assumptions of the nature of God are informed of our time and place, and therefore uncertain. But this participant is not only situating and commenting the creeds in “their” sermons. This participant also uses many creeds in rotation. It seems to me like this liturgical adaptation is an attempt to take the focus away from a strict need of assent to the creed, and more toward showing that these creeds are different attempts to describe God. It might be a bit speculative, but it seems plausible to me that this participant wants the rotation of the creeds to show the diversity in how God is defined, and in extension perhaps allow the congregants to believe that diverse images of God is not only acceptable, but unavoidable.

6.5 *Settings wherein it is easier to be open.*

There are two settings mentioned wherein the participants felt that they could speak more openly of their image of God. The first setting is a more unformal gathering, wherein dialogue is encouraged. For privacy reasons I will not go into much detail of how these gatherings are arranged. The second setting is amongst confirmands.

6.5.1 Unformal gatherings.

There are two participants who spoke of unformal gathering. The first of these participants mentions that these unformal settings are more suitable to bring up what is for "them" perceived to be more complex theological themes, such as how we should not talk about God as of one who exists, or of negative theology. While speaking of why it is more difficult to speak of these themes during an ordinary church service, the participant said:

> People will not understand what we are talking about unless we spend at least five minutes to talk about what that means.

This quote provides a clue as of why the unformal settings are more suitable to speak openly of their image of God. Within this more unformal setting it seems more appropriate to spend more than five minutes to try to explain subjects that are perhaps more complex, or subjects that the adherents have not heard much of before.

The second participant went into more details while explaining the function of the more unformal setting. "They" said:

> I start with a lecture where I speak of these things. Then people sit in groups and talk about it. And you don´t have to agree with me. But I try to open up the room, so that

> those participating can feel like they´re allowed to say what they want to without being shut down. […] It is not important that they all agree with me, but there are many who feel like it´s important that I speak out. It´s like … when the pastor says it, they feel allowed to think it. Then they feel like there is indeed room within the church for them. And these things embolden me.

I think it´s fair to assume that this pastor participates/arranges in these unformal with a desire to at least provide the adherents with possibilities to view God in a more non-theistic way. It also seems as if this participant strives hard to provide a space wherein there is a great openness for differing views. I believe that the latter part of this quote strongly indicates that this participant has been given positive feedback from several congregants, who seems to say that these unformal settings have provided them a sort of affirmation to believe what they believe, and that the church is accommodating of their views.

6.5.2 Amongst confirmands.

Three of the participants spoke of how confirmands can be very direct in their questions about God. One of these participants said:

> The confirmands ask a lot of questions, and they can be very real. They can ask questions like: Do you believe in God? Do pastors have to believe in God? Stuff like that. So, I answer. I don´t believe all the time. It comes and goes during life. It´s like that for most believers. I try to take them seriously. If they ask direct questions, they shall receive proper answers.

This quote affirms Niemelä´s (2005) observation that confirmands tend to ask very direct questions (see 3.2.3). Niemelä further speaks of those she labels as doubters and non-believers, and how they sometimes might try to avoid direct questions from confirmands,

since a proper answer to those questions might create conflicts with other congregants or colleagues. My material shows no indications of the participants trying to avoid direct questions from confirmands. My material shows several instances of how the participants take the direct questions seriously and try to give proper answers. The quote above shows how this participant honestly shares that belief in God comes and goes for “them”. There is one other example where a participant details the direct question from the confirmands, and it has to do with the problem of evil. The confirmands asked why there are earthquakes, and the participant answered that God might not be able to intervene. Once again there seems to be no sign of avoidance, but a desire to answer properly. And the reason seems to be that the participants want to be true to themselves. The other congregants might not be as direct in their questions, but when a direct answer is asked, they seem to think that it deserves a proper answer.

7 The analysis in light of theory and literature.

I have tried to regularly bring in both theory and references to the literature review in the analysis presented in the previous chapter. I have especially tried to constantly consider grounded theory, and to inductively develop and present hypotheses and theory along the way. In this chapter I intend to switch the focus. I want to look back at the literature review and the theories and look at the ways my analysis is different or similar to the literature, or how my analysis confirms, opposes, or enrich some theoretical ideas, and how it might fit into some, and question other theoretical frameworks. But there both have been and will be exceptions. There have been sections in the analysis where I have taken the approach described above. There will similarly be sections in this chapter that continues to analyze with the literature and theories in a more peripheral view. I nevertheless believe that that the switched focus in this chapter will be apparent.

7.1 The quantitative studies.

I will begin with the previously presented quantitative studies. Since this is a qualitative study with few participants, it is impossible to make direct comparisons. But there are still some interesting reflections that can be made in how it relates to those studies. I especially want to look at whether we can make any presumptions of the prevalence of non-theistic views of God amongst pastors.

Firstly, I want to reflect on the number of participants in this study. The six participants are not a random selection of a larger number of pastors with non-theistic inclinations in CoN. They are rather a deliberate selection out of the only nine who responded to the information letter and who met (or believed that they met) the criteria for participation. The six participants in this study constitutes about 0,4% of the approximately 1472 pastors of CoN (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2020b). This is not to say that approximately 0,4% of the pastors of CoN have non-theistic inclinations. The method chapter lays out several possible reasons as to why some pastors would be unaware of my study or unwilling to participate therein. It is speculation, but I believe that the percentage of clergy with non-theistic inclinations is slightly higher, but my material is insufficient in so many ways to even enable me to speculate as of how much higher this percentage could possibly be. My main point however is that I am

convinced that it is safe to say that non-theistic inclinations is a minority view amongst pastors of CoN. Even though there are huge differences between my study and the study of Willander and Blåder (2016), I nevertheless find it interesting that 0,6% of their participants reported a “big difference” between their belief and the faith, confession, and teaching of the Swedish church. This “big difference” is not necessarily connected to non-theistic inclinations. Niemelä´s study (2005) of the Finnish church labels 2% of vicars and 1% of other ministers as non-believers. This is to say that they are described as not committed to the Christian faith at all, and either strongly doubt or do not believe in either "crucial" nor other doctrines (see 3.2.3 for further details). This might indicate a slightly larger amount of non-theistic inclinations compared to Norway and Sweden, but it is very uncertain. We must be very careful to make comparisons between mine and their studies. But considering these studies, and the many similarities between the churches in these countries, it seems plausible that pastors with non-theistic inclinations are about equally uncommon in the Swedish, the Finnish, and the Norwegian church.

There are some interesting comparisons that can be made to the YouGov (2014) survey of Anglican clergy. 17% of the Anglican clergy respondents did not opt for a personal God, and that 2% are not sure if "God" is anything more than a human construct. This denial of a personal God and the uncertainty of whether God is merely a human construct is somewhat in line of my definition of non-theistic inclinations, and this might perhaps indicate a higher prevalence of non-theistic inclinations amongst these Anglicans. There is unfortunately no research to compare the beliefs and images of God between the clergy of Norway, Sweden, Finland and England. But I would argue that my research is an indication that the rate of non-theistic images of God amongst the pastors of CoN is more similar to the church of Sweden and the church of Finland than the Anglican church. That might not be very surprising, since CoN is both theologically and culturally more similar to the church of Sweden and the church of Finland. There are many possible reasons for these arguably higher percentages amongst the Anglican clergy. Some of those are presented in chapter 3.2.1. Another potential reason that I find interesting is the influence of Anglican theologians and pastors who I consider to be arguing for non-theistic views, such as John Robinson (2013), Don Cupitt (1980; 2003), and Richard Holloway (2001; 2013). Some of these works has had a quite large reach amongst theologically interested individuals. In contrast I can only think of one pastor of CoN who has published a book that I consider to be arguing for non-theistic

views, namely Per H. Andersen´s (1977) work, which title translates to “Broken wells: will Christianity survive the death of “God”?”.

The study by Willander and Blåder also suggests that the younger pastors of the church of Sweden tends to be more liberal than the older. The low number of participants in my study makes me unable to neither confirm nor reject whether this is true in CoN. Even though it does not contradict Willander´s and Blåder´s findings I nevertheless find it interesting that my respondents all described a journey from a more conservative toward a more liberal view of God as they grew older.

Before we move on, I want to comment on a couple of qualitative findings in Niemelä´s study (2005). Niemelä claims that silence, omittance, or avoidance are a common coping strategy in face of theological conflicts. She uses blunt and controversial questions from confirmands as an example of a potential cause for a theological conflict (Se 3.2.3). My material supports Niemelä´s claim in that my participants sometimes use silence, omittance, or avoidance as a coping strategy. Especially in their sermons. But our findings also seem to contradict in one detail, since some of my participants especially mentioned that they went a long way to give honest answers to the confirmands.

7.2 Theological theories.

All the participants in my study seem to take what Borg (2017) (se 5.3.2) would call a historical-metaphorical approach, not only to the bible, but also to the creeds and the liturgy. That is to say that they view all those things through their historical context, and they have a willingness to allow figurative and symbolic interpretations of the bible, creeds, and liturgy. We have also seen many instances of when participants show that they view the bible, creeds, and liturgies as a man-made construct that reflects the authors experiences and thoughts regarding God. I believe that this is a major reason for why my participants to a large degree do not feel bound to let a literal interpretation of the bible, creeds, and liturgies dictate their image of God. It is also presumably the reason that they very seldom refer to the bible while describing their image of God.

Either five or all six would almost certainly agree with Borg that God is no being that is beyond the universe. Borg argues for a view of God as an all-encompassing holy presence. I find it interesting that even though I believe there to be many similarities in the images of God between Borg and the participants, there is no indication in my material that the participants prefer neither the words "all-encompassing", nor "holy", nor "presence" when they speak of God. A couple of the participant do however seem to agree with Borg in referring to God as both transcendent and immanent, and in describing their view as panentheistic. I strongly suspect that this, and the aforementioned claim that God is no being that is beyond our universe, is a major reason of why many of the participants find the question of both God´s existence and divine intervention to be meaningless.

Tillich also describes God as in everything and above everything (1951). Tillich states, and Borg agrees, that we are warranted to relate to God´s self-revelation in personal terms, as long as we remember that the personification is metaphorical (2014) (se 5.3.3). I believe that the analysis has shown many signs of the participants agreeing with this. Many of the participants claim that we are unable to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. They nevertheless oftentimes feel warranted to speak of God in both theistic and personal terms. Tillich´s ideas of "God beyond God" and "God as ground of being" were, as I have previously mentioned, both mentioned in the information letter. These ideas were never explicitly referred to by any of the participants, but I would say that they were alluded to. I would go as far as to say that if a person that is familiar with the works of Tillich read the analysis, they would suspect an abundant influence of his thoughts.

In Svenungsson´s (2004) presentation of Lévinas and Derrida we are shown that they both disagree with Borg´s and Tillich´s view of God as transcendent immanent. Derrida seems to believe that "being beyond being" fails to go beyond the ontotheological structure, and Lévinas claims that God is radically transcendent and wholly other. These radical apophatic views seem to suggest that we can have no knowledge of divine revelation (see 5.3.1). My analysis does not show any signs of these arguably radical ideas amongst my participants. Many seem to agree that the idea of God is meaningful in face-to face encounters that demands a radical responsibility, but I see no evidence that any of the participants believe that God is *only* meaningful in those encounters. It is possible that they forgot to bring it up, or that they agree but lack the language to express these views. But I feel rather confident that

all, or at least the majority, of the participants disagree. Even though many doubted divine intervention, most spoke of the possibility for some sort of interaction. Some spoke of mystical experiences or of awe. Some spoke of retreats or of beauty. To stay on the theme with Svenungsson, and her presentation of Marion, we might suspect that the participants believe in a "giver" of those experiences, or that they believe in the possibility of some form of revelation. It is a simplification, but most of the participants seem to believe in the possibility of divine interaction in a similar way that Marion believes in the possibility of divine revelation. I also believe that my analysis has shown that many of participants would likely also agree with Marion that this potential interaction or revelation would be beyond the limitations of our thinking and language.

7.3 The theories of Dennett & LaScola, theopoetics, Caputo, and Phillips, and how they might interact.

I have so far been able to present the different studies and different thinkers rather systematically one by one. But during the analysis I have made several attempts at both contrasting and integrating such differing theories as those of Dennett and LaScola, theopoetics, Caputo, and Phillips. To highlight both the contrasts and the potentials for integration I will go a bit back and forth in this final part of the chapter.

Let´s start by looking at the analysis in relation to the works of Dennett (2006) and Dennett and LaScola (2010, 2015). The analysis has dealt with a couple of instances of the concept that I have labeled "those before have said". That is to say that the participants quote or refers to a statement of belief made by another person. In that way the participant can communicate a commonly held religious belief without having to disclose "their" disbelief or problems with the statement. My analysis has also provided suggestions for how to explore and define a middle ground between belief and unbelief. Dennett and LaScola claims that the beliefs or lack of beliefs of the liberal "believing" (their use of quotation marks) Episcopal priests that they were interviewing were not unlike the beliefs or lack of beliefs of agnostic or atheistic clergy. They also claimed that the beliefs of their liberal clergy were inexplicit. They claim that the "believing" liberal clergy lead with their heart while the agnostic or atheistic clergy lead with their head. That is to say that the "head" values logically coherent substance,

and the “heart” values the mysterious spiritual dimension of poetry and myth. Finally, they observe in their material that the “believing” liberal clergy distinguishes between the words “factual” and “true”. That is to say that their liberal “believers” do not necessarily care whether details in a biblical story actually happened or not. The story is still capable of delivering importance and truthfulness (2015, p. 126, 128, 134). Looking at my data, there are some interesting similarities, but also one instance where I want to challenge Dennett´s and LaScola´s conclusions. Dennett and LaScola claim that the beliefs or lack of beliefs of the liberal “believers” were not unlike the beliefs or lack of beliefs of agnostics or atheists. I lack data of self-proclaimed agnostics or atheists and is therefore not able to make comparisons. But many of my participants state that they are not agnostics or atheists and try to explain how their beliefs distinguishes them from agnosticism or atheism. One of those distinguishing factors is in line with the findings of Dennett and LaScola. Many of my informants speak of their affinity for the mysterious spiritual dimension of poetry and myth. I have already analyzed some of their use of poetry and myth in the light of theopoetics. I claim that this use of theopoetics is in line with what Dennett and LaScola describes as leading with their heart. Many of my participants claim that there is a disconnect between our words and an objective truth about the divine, if there is such a thing. They claim that we can only hold subjective beliefs. But my contention is that subjective theopoetical statements are not entirely inexplicit. Those subjective theopoetical statements may not clearly express or explain the essence of the divine. But those theopoetical explorations are expressions of desires to express or explain it. I argue that if one finds it desirable and meaningful to explore the subjectivity of the divine, through theopoetics or not, that is in itself a distinguishing factor in favor of what Dennett and LaScola call belief. This desirableness and meaningfulness might not make the belief explicit, but it makes it not entirely inexplicit. My material has further inspired me to suggest a way to make the belief of the likes of Dennett’s and LaScola´s liberal “believers” even more explicit. In chapter 6.1.5 I argue that Caputo´s (2013) theology of perhaps implies that the idea of the weak call in the insisting event in the name of God is itself a theopoetical articulation of a lived and embodied experience of the divine. Dennett and LaScola seem to think that when their participants merely speak of the concept of God (2010, p. 147) they are expressing nonbelief. I claim that there is a, if not a correlation, at least a deep connection between what Dennett and LaScola labels “the concept of God”, and What Caputo labels “in the name of God”. We might have “believers” who believe that God is merely a concept. But as I have

previously argued: this concept of God is not powerless. It has the power to insist. To call, however weakly it might be. The concept of God can be perceived as real enough to render God´s potential inexistence as meaningless. This form of "belief" counters Dennett's and LaScola´s inexplicitness. That is to say, I claim that different forms of "belief" in a "insisting concept" can work as viable distinction in a place between belief and unbelief.

I just mentioned theopoetics, and I want to continue by comparing my material with the theory or idea of theopoetics. But to get to that we must first look at the statement that all language necessarily has a metaphorical character, and how that is manifested in my analysis of the material. The participants´ hesitations to readily affirm claims about God is seen in all the sub-chapters pertaining their image of God, but it is perhaps most clearly seen regarding whether we can say anything meaningful of the essence of God. Their hesitations to claim that truths can be told about the divine is mostly in line with Gianni Vattimo´s form of postmodern thinking in the sense that they have an increased hermeneutical awareness, that is, an awareness that our relation to reality is conveyed through language, and therefore always in need of interpretations. Language therefore has a metaphorical character. This is, according to Vattimo, true of all language, the religious language included. It is hence very difficult to claim that any word about the divine is a foundational truth that lies beyond the language game. The fact that four of the participants spoke of it as almost a necessity to go through the incarnation to be able to speak of the essence of God is also in line with Vattimo´s focus on the idea of "kenosis", wherein the word "God" does not constitute a metaphysical foundation. God is perpetually self-emptying itself through the incarnation and the Holy Spirit. (Vattimo, 1994, p. 3, 57, 60-62. See also Fovet´s Swedish translation from 1996, p. 13, 65, 67-69).

I want to continue by exploring the connection between theopoetics and the metaphorical nature of language in another direction. There seems to be (at least) two opinions amongst the participants. In the first one some participants seem to think that there is an unbridgeable chasm between our metaphorical descriptions of the divine and the essence of God (i.e., theopoetics). In the second opinion some other participants seem to think that there is at least some sort of connection between some of our words and the essence of God (i.e., theopoetry). While looking at the data from the participants, it is sometimes hard to distinguish whether they believe that their metaphorical language regarding the divine is devoid from the "fixed and ultimate meanings" described above, or if they are expressing the

"theological knowledge" described above. I would, based on my data, argue that when the participants use metaphorical language about the divine, they are mostly leaning towards Millers´ definition of theopoetics (in contrast to theopoetry). But as I have stated before, the participants seldom have clear negations, and in this case most of the seem unwilling to negate all connections between their words and the essence of God. This becomes perhaps most clear in where a word or two, such as "loving" and "creator" are used in reference to God, especially if my assumption is true that some of the participants believe these words to be more than "strategies of human signification" or a grammatical rule for the use of the word God.

I want to continue by looking at Dennett´s theory of "belief in belief", and how my analysis both affirms and challenges it. The challenge to "belief in belief" becomes clearest when one also considers my analysis through Phillips´ theory of religious practices. While Dennett (2006) might have good reasons to limit the idea of "belief in belief" to mental states of belief for his purposes, I argue that to understand the religiousness of the participants, and most humans for that matter, we must also consider *behavior* and *belonging*. Though distinguishable, I claim that belief, behavior, and belonging are interconnected. The analysis has shown several instances amongst several participants where they "just do it". There might be many theological ideas in the liturgy that they do not assent to, but they nevertheless find peace in the "performance". The *behavior* to "just do it" increases the feeling of *belonging*. The analysis seems to indicate that it is possible to generate a mental state of a belief by "engaging" in behavior and belonging. Even though the material does not give enough information, it is not unthinkable, for example, that the participant who has had periods of non-belief has so far always returned to a mental state of belief partly because of "their" continuous engagement in a behavior that strengthens belonging. To just do it. It should also hopefully be clear that this is very much in line with Phillips theories of religions as practices. Phillips does, as previously mentioned, claim that the deeds is the beginning. I find it likely that some of the participants commit to the deeds, e.g., the liturgy, without a mental state of assent because they believe that there are possibilities of meaning therein that goes beyond what the liturgy communicates about God.

So even though my analysis only shows sporadic instances of "belief in a mental state of belief", the analysis has a lot of instances of belief in practice, belief in belonging, and a belief

in just doing it. I claim that this "belief in finding rest in just doing it" is a clear statement of "belief in religiosity" or "belief in religious commitment". Or perhaps even more clearly "belief in the practice of belief".

7.4 A suggestion for further research.

Here is where I must admit that I have come as far as the theories has been able to take me. There are still many unanswered questions. The participants engage in many things that they either claim are incomprehensible, or lack a mental state of assent to. This can, as we have seen, be a cause for predicaments. But we have also seen that engagement in these practices can cause a sense of meaning and peace. It seems intuitive that a person finds peace in engaging in a practice that they somewhat comprehend and assent to. To me it seems more unintuitive how a person finds peace in engaging in a practice they somewhat find incomprehensible or lack assent to. Phillips claims that religious beliefs do not emerge from practices. The following question is a bit unfair to the thoughts behind Phillips´ claim, but I wonder what it is that emerges from the religious practices of some of the participants, if not a form of belief. The questions above leads me to wonder about a bigger theme regarding clergy with non-theistic inclinations. What function does belief and the practice of belief have in their lives, and what function do they want their pastoral work to have for their congregants. Perhaps there are satisfactory theories or works by others regarding this that I am unaware of, but I think that these might be fruitful questions for further research.

8 Conclusion

So, how does pastors with non-theistic inclinations interpret and communicate their image of God? The participants in this study are very aware that parts of their image of God differs in some details from the images of God that is most prevalent in CoN. They generally not only agree that God is not provable, but that the question of God´s existence is problematic or meaningless until either the terms "God", "exist", or both are clarified. Most participants stated quite clearly that objective knowledge about God is inaccessible, and that we are therefore unable to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. All believe that we are nevertheless warranted to use words such as “loving” and “creator” as either a descriptor of the nature of God, or as a grammatical rule for how the word God can be used. Most of the participants either seriously doubts or denies that God intervenes. Most still believed that God is somehow able to interact with us humans, even though some suspected that this interaction was merely an inner psychological process. All the participants had a strong aversion against anything that implied a judgmental image of God.

None of the participants felt like they could speak completely freely of their image of God. A few felt very restricted, but most mentioned how time, maturity, and careful trial and error had helped them find settings and ways as to partially open up. The participants also stated that they hardly ever or never had discussions regarding images of God with their colleagues, mainly because there is no culture for such discussions. One spoke of the stress and pain of not being able at all to speak openly with any colleagues. A couple of them spoke of a balance where they felt like they could only partially open up. Half of them said that they felt like they could be very or completely open with their colleagues, including the dean. None of them fears confrontations with the bishop at this point, but half of them are aware that there might be problems, and that they might even be advised to resign, if either the bishop knew more of their image of God, or if they were to have another bishop.

We have seen that a non-theistic image of God can in many ways be described as a somewhat radical negative theology. The participants are aware that this approach to theology might be interpreted as either severe doubt or a negation of divine traits that both many of their colleagues and congregational members finds desirable. Some participants said that given enough time and a suitable setting they might try to discuss or explain parts of their image of God, but most participants feel like the sermon is not such a place for many of the

non-theistic themes. None of them used either the sermon nor spiritual care to speak of how God might not be said to exist, nor about how objective knowledge about God is inaccessible, nor about how we are unable to say anything meaningful of the essence of God. There are three non-theistic themes that most of the participants were comfortable talking about in spiritual care and to some degrees in the sermons. The first is that the liturgy, the bible and the creeds must all be seen through a historical-metaphorical lens as to understand both the contextual nature and the abundance of meaning made possible through symbolic interpretations. The second is to consequently reject judgmental images of God. A couple had clearly rejected hell from the pulpit. Most had done so in spiritual care. The third is to suggest that God might not be able to intervene, but this seems to mostly be done in spiritual care.

The participants have found and use several linguistical strategies and liturgical "tricks" to correct or nuance how the ideas of the divine is communicated. One is an extended use of poetry and metaphors as a strategy for human signification, and amongst many of the participants this use could probably be labeled as theopoetics. About half of the participants make use of a strategy I have labeled "those before have said". In its basic form it is to introduce biblical texts, creeds, statements of God, or liturgies as what others have said. This is a way to not disclose the lack of assent of the participant, or as to suggest that our assent is not important. A variation of this that sometimes occurs is a "use-mention error", wherein a participant speaks of a concept of God in a way that might sound like "they" are speaking of divine attributes. Other participants make deliberate choices regarding the liturgy. A few participants omit things, such as John 3:16 during baptisms. Others have deliberate placements of parts to soften judgmental elements. Some use extensive singing, as they believe that the congregants sense that what is sung should not be taken literally. Another rotates the creeds to signal that they represent what different people have believed in different contexts.

Finally, we have seen how some participants find meaning and peace in engaging in religious rituals that they either find unintelligible or that they lack a mental state of assent to. There are still questions as to why that is, but I find it to be an indication that many, or perhaps all, of the participants have a belief in the practice of belief.

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10 Attachments

10.1 Information letter.

The information letter has here been translated from Norwegian to English.

Do you want to participate in the research project "an empirical study of pastors with non-theistic inclinations"?

This letter will give you information about the goals of the project, and what participation will look like for you.

Purpose

The purpose is to analyse experiences and use of language of pastors who are considering, or subscribes to a non-theistic inclination, or who considers themselves to have a liberal image of God, an image of God that is represented among many of the members of the church, but nevertheless is considered controversial among the "inner circle" of the members of the Church of Norway (CoN).

The term "non-theistic inclination" can be interpreted in many ways, but I use the term describing people who identifies as Christians, but who are uncertain to whether God is a personal God who concretely interacts in the reality of humans. Some view God as an impersonal force. Some are uncertain as to whether we as humans can say anything meaningful of the essence or existence of God (e.g., Tillich´s "God beyond God" or "God as ground of being"). Some are uncertain as to whether they really believe in God, but nevertheless has a "belief in belief", and a belief that the church as a positive force. Some might also experience that the biblical and traditional church-language of God communicates problematic connotations.

I do not demand that the participants shall have a clear theological conviction regarding any of the previously described ideas. It is enough that the participant privately considers a non-theistic or liberal view of God.

It is my presumption that pastors who hold a view of God described above experiences difficulties with being open and direct about their personal image of God in some or many instances within CoN, even though they have an image of God that is represented by many members of CoN.

The main goals of this study is divided between experience and use of language.

I wish to analyze the experience of liberal pastors as to whether other people are accepting of a pastor with a liberal image of God. Do they feel like they have to hide parts their image of God in conversations with colleagues or parishioners? To whom, and in what situations, do the speak openly about their personal image of God? Do they feel like they are balancing others' expectations for a traditional preaching, and their own desires to communicate thoughts of their own image of God? What are their ambitions as pastors?

Are there parts of a traditional language about God that they experience as problematic? Do they customize their language to communicate an image of God that do not clash with their personal image of God?

This research is for a master thesis.

If you have questions or want more information, but wish to hide your identity, you are welcome to contact me (my email) though a throw away mail address.

Who is responsible for this research project?

MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society is responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

Your participation is desired if you are a pastor in CoN and feel like you fulfill the criteria described above.

Information about this study has been distributed through the Facebook group Pastors in the Church of Norway, and through some of my contacts of both current and former pastors.

I do not receive, and do not wish to receive, recommendations for potentially fitting participants. If you know someone who you think might be a good fit you are free to inform that particular pastor, but do not inform me.

What would it entail if you were to participate?

If you choose to participate in the project, you will be interviewed. The duration of the interview will be 1-2 hours. The interview includes questions about image of God, your view on your role as pastor, and use of language in CoN concerning image of God. There will be made an audio recording of the interview.

Considering that this might be viewed as a sensitive theme, I wish that we shall collaborate to find a time and a place for the interview that feels safe for you.

Participation is voluntary.

Participation in this project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can at any time retract your consent without providing any reason. All your personal data will then be deleted. There will be no negative consequences for you were you to decide to not participate, or if you chose to retract at a later stage.

Your privacy – how we store and use your data

We will only use your data for the purpose described in this letter. We treat the data confidentially and in line with regulations regarding privacy.

- I am very aware of the sensitivity of this project. Privacy and anonymity will have the highest priority.

- Only I (my name) have access to the data.
- Your name and contact information will be substituted with a code. The list of names and their contact information will be stored on a file separated from all the other data.
- Contact information, sound recordings, and transcriptions from the interview will be stored on a password protected USB-stick that will be stored in a locked safe.
- Anonymized transcriptions will be stored as a password protected file on a password protected computer.
- My advisor (Harald Hegstad) will not have access to any data. We will only discuss my analysis of the anonymized transcriptions, and some anonymized quotes from the interviews.

The participants will not be recognizable in the publication. I will publish an analysis of the interviews, exemplified by some carefully anonymized quotes.

The participants can, if they desire, read a late draft before the thesis is delivered.

What happens with the data when the research project is completed?

The data will be anonymized when the thesis is approved. That is planned to happen at July 1st 2021 [This was later changed to March 31st 2023]. Personal data, recordings and transcriptions will be deleted when the project is completed.

Your rights

As long as you are identifiable in the data, you are entitled to:

- Insight to your registered personal data, and ability to receive a copy of that data.
- To correct your personal data.
- To delete your personal data, and
- To send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the treatment of your personal data.

What gives us the right to handle your personal data?

We handle your personal data based on your consent.

On commission from MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data has reviewed that the treatment of personal data in this project is in compliance with the regulations for privacy.

Where can I learn more?

If you have questions regarding the study, or want to exercise your rights, please contact:

- MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society at (my name), (my email), (my phone number), or at supervisor and prof. Harald Hegstad, (Harald's email), (Harald's phone number).
- Our privacy contact/ senior advisor: Berit Widerøe Hillestad, (Berit´s email).

If you have questions regarding the Norwegian Centre for Research Data´s assessment of the project, you can contact:

- Norwegian Centre for Research Data via email (their email), or via phone (their phone number).

Kind regards.

Harald Hegstad (my name)

(Researcher/supervisor)

10.2 Declaration of consent

The declaration of consent has here been translated from Norwegian to English.

Declaration of consent.

I have received and understood the information regarding the project “An empirical study of clergy with non-theistic inclinations”, and I have been given an opportunity to ask questions. I consent to:

- Participate in an interview with audio recording.

I consent to my data being processed until the completion of the project.

(Signed and dated by the participant of the project).

10.3 Interview guide

The interview guide has here been translated from Norwegian to English.

Interview guide to a semi-structured interview.

An empirical study of clergy with non-theistic inclinations.

Introductory questions

- For approximately how long have you worked as a pastor?
- Approximately how many congregations have you been assigned as a pastor?

The faith

- What is your image of God?
    - Is there anything regarding your image of God that differs from what you perceive to be a traditional image of God amongst pastors in CoN?
    - Does God "exist"?
    - Do you pray to God? In what way? Does God answer prayers?
    - Does God interact in our reality? Does God perform miracles (as in breaking the laws of nature)?
    - Can we say anything meaningful of the essence of God?
    - Is Christianity "the only true path"?
- Has your image of God changed over time?
    - Is it different than the image of God that you had at your ordination?
    - Is your image of God still in a state of change?
- Do you believe that an image of God with non-theistic inclinations is wide spread amongst your pastor colleagues?
    - What is the limit for an image of God within CoN?

The language

- Are there parts of a traditional language about God that you experience as problematic?
    - (If there is) What is it in this language that can give negative connotations?
    - Are there examples of problematic language about God in the Bible, the creeds, or the confession of sin?
    - What are your experiences and feelings when you use that language?
- Are there ways of speaking, words, or phrases that you avoid, reformulate, or change when you speak of God?
    - Do you adapt your language to communicate an image of God that does not contradicts (går på kompromiss med) your personal image of God?
    - Do you ever have the feeling that you have to watch your steps (holde tungen rett i munnen)?
- When you have chosen how you want to communicate about God, does it nevertheless happen that that the hearer takes something essentially different to heart about the essence of God?
    - Are you self-aware of unspoken reservations and clarifications when you talk about God? (When I say God, I mean … and not …)
    - How does that make you feel (both in regard to colleagues and members of the congregation)?
- Are there "traditional" images of God that you as a pastor tries to modify?
    - How does that make you feel (fear, impotence, empowerment)?

The experience

- Do you feel like you can speak openly and honestly of your image of God within CoN?
    - In communication with pastoral colleagues, other employees of CoN, Bishops, parish council, members of the congregation?

(In case you do not feel like you can talk openly and honestly in all situations).

- What does it feel like to not be able to talk openly and honestly about your image of God?
- Who are you able to / choose to talk openly and honestly about your image of God?

    - Within and outside of CoN.
- What would have happened if you were to talk openly and honestly about your image of God?
    - In communication with pastoral colleagues, other employees of CoN, Bishops, parish council, members of the congregation?
- If you were to be open about your image of God, how do you think that would have been perceived by members of the congregation that do not hold a traditional image of God, who doubts, or who do not believe in God?
- Has your image of God had consequences for how you view the role of the church or the faith?
    - What do you wish for the church to convey or achieve?
    - What is, for you, important elements of faith that you wish to convey?

The future

- How do you view your future as a pastor?
    - Do you wish to continue to work as a pastor?
    - Do you perceive that your conveyance of your image of God will look different in the future?
- What are your thoughts regarding the future of CoN?
    - Are there changes regarding attitudes toward images of God that you wish for / fear?

Concluding question

- Is there anything else relevant to share regarding your role as a pastor with a non-traditional image of God?

10.4 The pastoral vows.

The pastoral vows are found in Gudstjenestebok for Den Norske kirke :2: Kirkelige handlinger (Den Norske Kirke, 1992, p. 168, 169). It is under point six in the liturgy, and the point is called “urging (formaning) and the making of vows (løfteavleggelse)”.

The bishop: You have heard the word of God regarding the ministry (tjenesten), its demands and its promises, how rich it is in glory, and how necessary it is for God´s kingdom on earth. Now as the Lord confides the pastorally service in our church, I impose (pålegger) and urge you to

- preach the word of God clear and pure, as it is given us in the holy Scripture, and as our church bear witness to it in our confession, and to administer the holy sacraments according to Christ´s institution and the order of our church,

- in spiritual care and in confession cares (drar omsorg) for each individual and lifts them up to (bærer dem frem for) God in prayer and invocation with thanks,

- faithfully guides and admonish to true repentance, living faith in Christ, and a holy life in love to God and neighbor,

- also by heart strives to (også selv av hjertet legger vinn på å) live by the word of God, and in study and prayer penetrates (trenger) deeper into the holy Scriptures and the truths of Christian faith.

The bishop asks each ordinand: (The name of the ordinand), do you promise before God and in the presence of this congregation that you will do this faithfully, by the grace that God will give you?

The ordinand: Yes.

The bishop: So, give me your hand as affirmation (gi meg hånden på det).

The ordinand confirms their vow by shaking hands with the bishop.