

Article

Institutional Religion and Religious Experience

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Abstract: A number of empirical studies have shown the continuous lack of adherence and the growing autonomy of the population regarding religious institutions. This article reflects on the kind of relationship between deinstitutionalisation and religious experience based on the following hypothesis: the evident decline in religious institutions does not necessarily lead to the disappearance or the weakening of religious experience; rather, it runs simultaneously with a process of individualisation. Our aim is to provide empirical evidence of such transformations; therefore, we do not get involved in speculations, but take into account the contributions of scholars concerning three key terms integrated in the conceptual framework of “religious experience”: “experience of God”, “God image”, and “institutional belonging”. We analysed 39 in-depth interviews with a qualitative approach; interviews were conducted during the years 2016–2018 amongst Evangelical and Catholic populations in three Latin American cities (Córdoba, Montevideo, and Lima) and in the city of Bilbao (Spain). These interviews clearly indicate a growing autonomy from the religious institution, while evidencing a rich range of experiences of God and a great diversity of God representations. In both cases, they point to processes of individualisation of believers who elaborate their own religious experience in a personal and complex way.

Keywords: experience of God; God image; God representation; individualisation; autonomy; institutional belonging; religious experience; religious institution



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1. Introduction

It is not easy to draw firm conclusions from the empirical data currently available on the evolution of the percentages of belonging to different religious traditions, nor on their projection in the coming decades. There are all kinds of proposals in the specialised literature. It is also not easy to quantify the non-religious population (the so-called *nones*), agnostics or atheists, nor their evolution. Nevertheless, there seems to be a certain consensus among specialists on the following: we are witnessing a decline in institutional religious affiliation in world religions. This is particularly the case of the general population in Western Europe or China, Western academics and intellectuals, and young generations around the globe (Pew Research Center 2018, pp. 20–21).

On first examination, the empirical decrease in institutional belonging might be easily identified with the progress of secularisation, understood as the loss of social influence of religious institutions. However, data may also hide a more complex and ambiguous process, as disaffection toward religious institutions does not always lead to the disappearance of the religious experience. Moreover, such disaffection may be turned into an opportunity to initiate reconfigurations of the religious phenomenon, or it may even be the result of such a reconfiguration. Statistically, it is not easy to identify these issues, but the testimonies narrated in the analysed interviews may offer interesting pointers to pinpoint current trends.

In order to trace these possible reconfigurations of the religious phenomenon, we analysed three variables of the religious experience transmitted by 39 Evangelical and Catholic

interviewees: “experience of God”, “God image”, and “institutional belonging”. In Section 2, we provide the working hypothesis, the aim of the article and the methodology employed. Section 3 covers the bibliographic review of the three variables above-mentioned, which were used as key terms in the investigation. Section 4 presents the empirical references and is devoted to the qualitative analysis of the interviews, based on the key terms and their corresponding codes. Results are discussed in Section 5. The article concludes with a synthesis of our research, which is open to future developments and revisions.

2. Hypothesis, Aim and Methodology

2.1. Hypothesis

The starting point of this article is the hypothesis formulated in previous works, namely, the process of individualisation, and increasing deinstitutionalisation of the religious phenomenon does not necessarily entail the disappearance of the religious experience. In contrast, believers place themselves before the institution from their own experience, autonomously, but do not necessarily distance themselves from their respective institutions. Consequently, “deinstitutionalisation” and “religious experience” seem to be independent processes. This assumption is shared by several specialists (Ammerman 2013, 2014, 2016; Beck 2009; Davie 1999, 2015; Day 2013; Duch 1979; Elzo 2021; Gauchet and Ferry 2007; James [1902] (James [1902] 1986); Mardones 1996), but also debated (Taylor 2003).

As far as the process of individualisation is concerned, the academic consensus for decades was that a progressive subjectivisation of religious faith is taking place (Berger 1969, p. 171), which entails a process of individualisation. Day offers a summary presentation on how specialised literature understands such a process of individualisation, characterised by ambiguity (Day 2013, p. 23). For a typological description of the process of individualisation applied to religious experience, Beck’s presentation of the figure of Etty Hillesum (Beck 2009, pp. 12–20) is very suggestive.

With regard to the process of deinstitutionalisation in the Basque Autonomous Community, a previous article in *Religions* focused on the individual perception of religious pluralism, and how people locate themselves autonomously vis-à-vis religious institutions (Rodríguez et al. 2020). Deinstitutionalisation appeared as a generalised trend that should be reviewed.

2.2. Aim

After carefully considering these matters, the aim of the article was to provide empirical evidence that may shed light on the possible reconfigurations of religious experience and clarify the relationship (if any) between “religious experience” and “institutional belonging” in the case of the interviewees who declare themselves to be Christians, both Catholic and Evangelical. Therefore, we followed the penetrating intuition of Joas, who stated (Joas 2021, p. 235):

“There are no neatly distinguishable camps of a ‘critical’ or ‘apologetic’ scholarship of religion [. . .]. There is nothing to be gained from such pigeonholing. Instead, the goal must be to produce factual assertions that can be backed up with solid evidence”.

In order to achieve the general aim, we hope to answer the following questions in the Discussion (Section 5):

1. What is the relation (if any) between the process of deinstitutionalisation, the experiences of God, and the representations of God in the narratives of the Christians interviewed?
2. What are the differences (if any) in the experiences or representations of God between those who express strong institutional identification and those who express alienation from the religious institution?
3. What concrete evidence does the de-institutionalised expressions of the experience of God and God images provide on the potential survival of a meaningful religious experience of believers, beyond institutional belonging?

2.3. Methodology and Work Plan

We considered that the lived religion approach (Ammerman 2013, 2014; McGuire 2008; Rabbia et al. 2019) allows for an in-depth exploration of religious experience and its practices beyond institutionalisation (Morello 2020, p. 62). Our initial analysis was conducted based on 39 interviews conducted as part of the Templeton Foundation-funded Lived Religion research project led by Gustavo Morello (Boston College) over the years 2016–2018. Of the interviews analysed, 27 were conducted in the city of Bilbao (Basque Autonomous Community, Spain), and distributed as follows: 16 interviews were answered by the local population, and 11 by Latin American migrants. The remaining 12 interviews were randomly selected from the Latin American population living in Córdoba (Argentina), Montevideo (Uruguay), and Lima (Peru) to obtain six new testimonies from Evangelical Christians and six from Catholic Christians. They were added to the corpus obtained in Bilbao, with the aim of balancing the number of interviews conducted with Latin Americans living in different geographical areas.

The in-depth interviews were analysed using Atlas.ti software, which was used in a back-and-forth process between the reading of the in-depth interviews and the conceptual apparatus, a process that we will now describe.

The first step was to anonymise the resulting 39 interviews using the following identifiers listed on Table 1:

Table 1. List of identifiers.

Identifier	Concept
01–39	Interview number
C: Catholics E: Evangelicals	Religious affiliation
M: Female V: Male	Gender
B: Local population from Bilbao (Basque Autonomous Community, Spain) Ba: Latin American migrants in Bilbao	Residence
Co: Local population from Córdoba (Argentina)	
L: Local population from Lima (Peru)	
Mo: Local population from Montevideo (Uruguay)	

After the first reading of the interviews, three thematic cores captured our interest: “experience of God”, “God image”, and “institutional belonging”, which allowed us to focus the analytical scope of the interviews. All three variables are related to the more generic concept of “religious experience” and allowed us empirical access to the narratives of the interviewees; hence, we considered them as key terms. We coded a total of 1685 quotations and the following partial results: “experience of God”: 470 quotes; “God image”: 607 quotes; and “institutional belonging”: 1051 quotes.

The initial definition of the three key terms referred to above allowed us to narrow down the scope of the research as well as identify a series of indicators. During the second stage of the analysis, we established a set of initial codes for the Atlas.ti program that emerged from the literature review for each of the terms, which we explain in more detail in Section 3. It is important to note the following: we do not claim a priori that these key terms are the most important aspects for the study of changes in religious experience, nor do we claim to reduce religious experience to these three categories, but we do argue for their heuristic value. In the current state of sociological research, the weight and importance of the different variables that explain such changes need to accumulate empirical evidence, and scholars are far from reaching a consensus.

On one hand, “experience of God” has been widely discussed in relation to religious experience (Alston 1991; Armstrong 2002; Beck 2009; Counted 2015; Eliade 1967; Estrada 1994; Gellman 2001; Martín Velasco 1989; Mirman 2005; Nieuwenhove 2004; Otto [1917] 1996), so our research employed the expression as a key term. However, the questions investigated by phenomenology and philosophy of religion were outside our focus of interest.

On the other hand, the key terms “God image” and “institutional belonging” are based on accumulated research experience and deepen aspects dealt with in previous articles by many scholars. First, God representations are a relevant theme in the analysis of religious experience, which shows the need for further in-depth analysis (Counted 2015; Davis et al. 2013; Edwards 2013; Estrada 2003; Gibson 2007; Grimes 2007; Hall and Fujikawa 2013; Hill and Hall 2002; Hoffman 2004; Kunkel et al. 1999; Lawrence 1997; Morello 2019). Second, as far as institutional belonging is concerned, it has been widely analysed in contemporary literature (Bullock 2018; Davie 1994, 1999, 2000, 2015; Day 2013; Kauffmann 2015; Mardones 1996; Saroglou 2011) and is an issue in the Basque Autonomous Community (Rodríguez et al. 2020; Basterretxea et al. 2020). In this article, we focused on identifying whether the person manifested a greater or lesser degree of identification with the tradition or religious institution when narrating their experience of God and describing the divinity.

Returning to the work plan, in the third stage, new codes were formulated in Atlas.ti to adjust the theoretical conceptualisation to the experience reflected in the interviews and to tag the selected quotes. A second close reading and coding of the interviews was carried out by all team members. Over the course of several meetings, the team shared the formulation of the codes, resulting in a refinement and reconfiguration of the initial list. For each of the key terms, we identified several dozen codes that, taken together, seem to account for the complex levels and degrees of religious self-ascription present in the narratives as well as for the enormous richness of nuance in the experiences of God and representations of divinity that we read in the interviews.

Finally, based on this mapping, the team grouped the codes by semantic affinity until their number was reduced to allow for a synthetic description of the results produced by the Atlas.ti programme as seen on Table 2. The following “summary codes” were found in almost all of the 39 interviews and allowed us to elaborate an overview constructed from the concrete narratives of the people for this article:

Table 2. List of codes.

Key Term	Quotations	Codes	Description
1. Experience of God	470	Direct-Mediated	How the experience of God is lived.
		Ordinary-Extraordinary	How God is present in the lives of the interviewees.
		Positive-Negative	Subjective assessment of the experience of God.
2. God image	607	Positive-Negative	Subjective assessment of God representations.
3. Institutional belonging	1051	Strong-Weak	Degree of adherence to religious tradition or to its own institution.
		Convergent-Divergent	Form of adherence to religious tradition or to its own institution.

3. Bibliographic Review and Key Terms Description

It is necessary to describe, albeit tentatively and open to nuance, each of the key terms selected. We considered the different meanings found in the academic literature in order to then present the concrete sense in which they were used in the analysis of the interviews. Let us recall that our general aim was to provide empirical evidence from the three key terms on possible continuities, discontinuities, or transformations of religious experience today. As the reader will see below, we considered it appropriate to speak in the plural of “experiences” and God “images” in order to underline that in the 39 interviews, we identified diverse, heterogeneous, and even contradictory expressions.

Before going into detail, it is important to refer briefly to the concept of “religious experience”. We insist that our aim is not to propose a new definition, but to use it as a frame of reference that is difficult to replace when trying to understand the religious phenomenon. We are aware of the conceptual ambiguity and the difficulties that this expression presents,

something that many specialists take into account (Walach 2017). There is no univocal usage, and it often overlaps with other terms widely used in the specialised literature such as “spirituality”, “religiosity”, etc. For many authors, the religious experience of the Sacred, the Supreme Reality, the Absolute, the Totally Other, or the Mystery is a fundamental factor of religious fact (Croatto 2002; Martín Velasco 1989, p. 73; 1993; Otto [1917] 1996; Van Der Leeuw [1956] 1975). All of them insist on the irreducibility of religious experience to other spheres of human life, while at the same time, affirming the verifiable connection with different forms of social organisation (as in the case of institutional religious membership).

3.1. Experiences of God

It is an empirical fact that people interviewed report having experiences of God, a testimony that points to a significant religious experience in personal life. Regardless of the representation that the interviewee has of divinity (an aspect that we will develop in the following section), those who say they have or have had such an experience refer to a transcendent reality that, in some way, is present with a profound real meaning in the person’s life.

In the analysis of the interviews, we understand “experience of God” as the biographical experience that one person relates to a higher reality that transcends him or her, which he or she usually calls “God”. In the following, let us look in more detail at some of the nuances relevant to our research:

First, it is worth specifying what we mean by “experience” in the context of our work. We assumed Haight’s formulation in line with Rahner, when he defines “experience” as “human existence present to itself in the presence of the world” (Haight 2007, p. 194). It is, therefore, the self-consciousness of the person situated before a given reality, which is only accessible to us through its narration.

Second, we understand the term “God” in the sense that the person gives it from his or her experience as a believer. In our research, we did not assume a specific prior content, so we accepted as equivalent to “God” other expressions that the person interprets as a supreme transcendent reality. The interviews yielded multiple nuances and representations of the divine that are impossible to include in this text.

Third, the testimonies offered in the interviews indicate an evident heterogeneity of experiences of God, with diverse nuances. The experience of God may be associated with some extraordinary manifestation (Eliade 1967; Otto [1917] 1996), with a personal encounter in the manner transmitted by some great religious figures, as we read in the well-known text by James [1902] (James [1902] 1986, p. 552–61). Added to the previous, it can also be what Martín Velasco calls “experience of God in the midst of life” (Martín Velasco 1989, p. 57):

“I am referring to events, situations, experiences that are not infrequent in the lives of believers. They allow them to become aware of a force, a light or a help that comes upon them and allows them to do something that they would be incapable of doing on their own and in which they discover the presence of grace, of the spirit or of God”.

In the same vein, people interviewed often explain their experiences of God through mediations of various kinds (Durkheim [1912] 1968; Proudfoot 1987), but there also are those who claim that their experiences of God were in some way direct. This seems to be the approach to which James points in his definition of religion (James [1902] 1986, p. 49), to which we will return in the discussion of the results:

“Religion [...] shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine”.

Fourth, it is important to identify to what extent everyday life is affected by the experience of God. That is, to what extent is it a transformative experience with significant consequences for the interviewee’s life (Duch 1979, p. 56; Hermans 2020; Martín Velasco

1993, p. 310ff), whether in a positive sense (experiences of love, salvation, gift...) or a negative one (experiences of confusion, anxiety, fear, anguish...).

3.2. God Images

Generally, respondents who claim to experience God express one or more representations describing what they call “God”. We also find representations of God without religious experience, as agnostics, *nones*, or openly atheists often express their own God images, even if our work does not consider these last ones as expressions, as we exclusively analysed interviews of people who expressed some kind of religious conviction and self-identify as Catholics or Evangelicals.

The representations present in the narratives are not an abstract definition, nor the object of theoretical speculation, but to a large extent arise spontaneously in the personal account. It is not a rational and reasoned faith, but an existential faith in the here and now (Lecaros 2017). Precisely for this reason, they are very significant in qualitative analysis, since the person conveys the consequences of his or her experience of God in these representations, which are sometimes even incoherent or paradoxical. For example, the representation of a harsh, but just and all-powerful judge, the author of the world, coexists in the same person with the representation of a protective God and provider.

We used the term “image” because it is widely used in academic literature, mostly in the Spanish-speaking area, although it lacks a precise and fully agreed definition. Broadly speaking, “God image” usually refers to internal patterns of attachment to a specific divine figure (God, Allah, Brahma, Krishna, Jesus, Buddha . . .) as well as to how the inner self experiences its relationship to that divine figure. Representations are sensitive to socio-cultural context, and are mediated primarily by thoughts, memories, and knowledge, particularly implicit relational knowledge. It is a multidimensional and varied construct (Kunkel et al. 1999; Grimes 2007), difficult to define, which is sometimes interchanged with other terms such as “concept of God”.

Religious traditions provide different representations of the same God; for example, the representations offered by the great monotheistic religions (Armstrong 2002) such as in the case of the Christian Bible (Edwards 2013; Torres Queiruga 2000). Western philosophy also offers various representations of God (Estrada 1994, 2003), but in Hoffman’s view (Hoffman 2004, pp. 2–3), the representation of God would rather correspond to the emotional experience of God (“a person’s emotional experience of God”). More than an intellectual representation, God images provide an existential reality that provides guidelines for good living (i.e., they condition in some way the human being’s actions and the meaning of existence), aspects that are reflected in the interviews.

The expression “God concept” is more abstract and less linked to the person’s religious experience, and therefore seems to us to be less operational for the analysis of the interviews that gave rise to this research. From the view of several authors, the “God concept” is explicitly and intentionally learned, and is primarily encoded in a verbal-symbolic representational code (Davis et al. 2013; Hall et al. 2009; Hall and Fujikawa 2013; Hoffman 2004; according to Rizzuto (1979), the “God concept” would be an intellectualised, theological, or cognitive understanding. The relationship between the representation and the concept of God remains contested so that the concept can be conceived as a regulator of the representation, or else as a self-regulation of the religious experience itself (Counted 2015).

“God schema” has started to gain importance in recent years, but it is unclear to the English speaker. Fiske and Tylor define schema as follows: “an abstract representation includes the concept’s attributes and the relations among them” (Fiske and Taylor 2017, p. 205, cf. p. 785). Applied to God, a schema should include assumptions about God’s physical nature, his will or purposes, his modes of influence, interrelationships with believers, and of believers with each other (McIntosh 1995). God-schemas are not uniform or static; as Gibson (2007) explains, they are dynamic (a believer may have several changing schemas), hierarchical, and relational, an assertion readily apparent in the interviews analysed.

For the purpose of our research, we understood “God image” as the set of perceptions and representations (thoughts, feelings, conceptualisations, recreations . . .) that a subject manifests to have of the divinity for which he or she feels attachment or bonding, and the way in which this subject perceives God’s action in his or her life. The following considerations explain how we applied this second key term in the analysis of the interviews:

First, speaking of God images, in the plural, is very relevant for several reasons. The first of these is that the representations of God of many of our contemporaries are far removed from the academic, theological discourse, and even from the orthodox discourse on God presented by the various religious confessions or by the various churches. Indeed, throughout history, there have been tensions between popular representations of God and those of philosophers and theologians (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998).

The second reason is that, following Berger, every representation of God needs a plausibility structure, enabled and conditioned by the socio-cultural context (Berger 2016, p. 67). As K. Armstrong points out, each generation needs to elaborate a meaningful God image (Armstrong 2002, p. 23), for when beliefs lack plausibility in the social fabric and lack experiential support they lose credibility, leading to the search for alternatives (Estrada 2003, pp. 47–48).

The third reason is that, since the representation of God is constructed from subjective experience (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, pp. 145–50; Mirman 2005), Armstrong’s statement can be applied not only to every generation, but also to every social group, and even to every individual. The representations of God narrated by the people interviewed arise from their individual perception and are therefore situated in the realm of personal subjectivity, resulting in a wide range of representations that can be, as we said above, contradictory. Van Tongeren et al. (2019) also points out that experiences of personal crises (spiritual and religious struggles) lead to significant changes in feelings and representations of God. According to this author, the tendency is for believers to shape their images of God on the basis of life experiences rather than doctrinal beliefs.

Second, it is worth remembering that our work studies the representations of God of Catholics and Evangelicals, who claim to have an experience of God, which implies some kind of link, attachment, or relationship with the transcendent. Even if the person does not name “God”, the reference to a supreme transcendent reality is present in the narrative, as we noted in the section on experiences of God. Consequently, there is a connection between the “experience of God” and the “God image”, although the correspondences are very varied, and it is not possible to determine them a priori. In fact, the way in which experience and representation are linked can be a very revealing indication of how the respondents’ religious experience is transformed.

3.3. Institutional Belonging

Religious experience usually takes place within a particular religious tradition and with a certain degree of institutionalisation. Specifically, institutional belonging is an objective fact that is materialised in certain empirically verifiable practices and which, to a certain extent, are quantifiable in statistical analyses. Thus, some classical variables function as indicators and are easily transformed into questions. The most commonly used indicators in surveys are most likely to be self-ascription (membership) and worship attendance; for example, one of the latest Pew Research Center reports explicitly states: “In many places in this report, religious commitment is measured primarily by attendance at religious services” (2018, p. 80).

Scholars see a dialectical relationship between religious experience and institutional membership, a phenomenon that is also present in the case of the Basque Autonomous Community (Rodríguez et al. 2020, p. 9):

“British sociologist Davie (1994, 2013) opened the debate on the relationship between individual belief and belonging to a religious institution, and coined the well-known term “believing without belonging” to name the widespread British phenomenon of believers without institutional adscription. Her analysis led to

the converse possibility, i.e., “belonging without believing” (Davie and Hervieu-Léger 1996; Day 2013; Hervieu-Léger 2016). Gauchet speaks of the end of religion, although he claims that religious experience will prevail (Gauchet and Ferry 2007). Bauman includes the process of increasing individual autonomy in his concept of “liquid society”, the focus of several studies, and whose consequences in daily life are analysed in one of his last books (Bauman and Leoncini 2018).

Some authors emphasise the importance of individual religious experience. This is the case of James, who unilaterally vindicates the personal or subjective dimension of religious experience as paradigmatically reflected in the definition cited in Section 3.1 above. As we will insist in the discussion, James’s following statement has clear implications for the valuation of institutional membership (James [1902] 1986, p. 475):

“But in this course of lectures ecclesiastical institutions hardly concern us at all. The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast”.

Others, however, emphasise the pole of institutional belonging. The above one-sided assertion is open to Taylor’s critique in his re-reading of James. Taylor apparently claims the following *conditio sine qua non* of the religious fact (Taylor 2003, p. 23):

“What doesn’t figure here is the way what one might call the religious connection, the link between the believer and the divine (or whatever), may be essentially mediated by corporate, ecclesial life”.

Berger acutely points out that institutionalised tradition serves an ambiguous function with regard to religious experience insofar as, on one hand, it seeks to transmit it, and on the other, to “domesticate it” (Berger 2016, p. 75). Both functions are probably necessary for the permanence of a given religious tradition over time, although historical data show the difficulty in accommodating the experiential or subjective dimension and the institutional dimension. In this sense, the external manifestations of institutional adherence noted above (self-ascription and worship attendance) are somewhat equivocal in terms of their meaning for the individual.

Let us go through an example of “belonging” or “practising without believing”, which occurs in at least the following two contexts. A first context is that of more or less conscious or intentional “deception”: the person has no religious experience when participating in certain religious acts, but understands that this participation is advantageous to him or her for some reason (Allport and Ross 1967). We could call the second context “sociological religion”; it does not involve the intention to deceive, or at least the person is not aware of it, and allows participation in religious celebrations without the individual problematizing his or her belief experience, as it is taken for granted. In this case, religion and culture are more or less fully identified, which corresponds to the construction of an “ideal type” (in Max Weber’s language) for which we find historical concretisations very close to the ideal type: the society of Christianity, tribal religions, or some historical realisations of Islam.

In a society increasingly marked by cultural and religious pluralism, institutional belonging tends to cease being a sociological given (i.e., a given reality, something that is imposed as an objective fact) and to become a personal choice (Berger 2016, p. 24). From this perspective, belonging becomes a contingent phenomenon, subject to the choice of individuals, and is therefore problematic in at least two ways. On one hand, the individual may feel immersed in doubt about what decision to make, and whether to make it or not. On the other hand, it generates social uncertainty, since the decisions made at the individual level are an unknown quantity, an unknown parameter that makes social analysis and the establishment of future forecasts difficult (Innerarity 2018, pp. 9–10).

In this paper, we understood “institutional belonging” as the adherence a person shows to a certain religious tradition and, within it, to the degree of adherence of the believer to the guidance offered by the authority in the doctrinal sphere and in practices (worship attendance, compliance with rules). In order to properly understand its use in the analysis of the interviews, the following should be borne in mind:

First, we analysed the institutional belonging of the interviewees based on their own testimony. That is to say: the different levels of belonging were formulated in subjective terms and cover a continuum ranging from a believing subjectivity totally identified with the institution to a believing subjectivity totally disidentified with the institution. It is worth noting that a possible lack of adherence to the religious institution does not necessarily imply any form of agnosticism or atheism, although from the institutional perspective, it may be considered a deviant, inadequate, or even an unacceptable (“heterodox”) form of believing.

Second, the object of adherence is the particular religious tradition to which the interviewee self-ascribes (Catholic Church, Pentecostalism, etc.), which is interpreted by the particular religious authority within it (Magisterium in the case of the Catholic Church, the pastor(s) in the case of Pentecostalism).

Third, the description we provide presupposes the autonomy of the individual in deciding his or her degree or mode of belonging to the religious tradition. Although we do not explicitly analyse the ‘autonomy’ variable in this article, we should point out that it affects how different forms of institutional belonging are understood. In line with what we pointed out in reference to the representations of God, any practice of religious autonomy, whether it moves centrifugally or centripetally with respect to the institution, needs certain structures of plausibility that make it socially viable, as Berger has defended throughout his work and emphasises in his latest book (Berger 2016, p. 67).

4. Qualitative Approach

The presentation of the qualitative analysis is divided into two sections. In the first part, we present the three key terms using the “summary codes” that we selected after the analysis of the interviews. As seen in the second section, each of the “summary codes” is a variable that includes the two ends of an arc, but it would be a mistake to interpret it in a binary sense. The analysed narratives confirm a complex reality with a great diversity of nuances. To describe this diversity far exceeds the limits of this article, so we chose to provide quotations that typologically represent each of the coded extremes, so that the reader can see the complexity of the key terms.

In the second part, we offer the evidence provided by two co-occurrences analysed using the Atlas.ti programme on the type of relationship established by the interviewees between belonging to a religious tradition and their subjective religious experience.

4.1. Key Terms and Codes Used through Atlas.ti

4.1.1. Experiences of God

Not all interviewees explicitly explained an experience of God, but in most of the cases, we found one or more narratives, reaching up to 470 quotations. Catholics and Evangelicals, men and women, locals and migrants, spontaneously shared their personal experiences and inner feelings, which highlights the importance of subjectivity in evaluating the religious phenomenon. The experience of God is central and may have foundational character in some cases. It often modifies God image, institutional belonging, and/or personal journey in different ways; for this reason, people make a clear biographical distinction between “before” and “now”. The following quotation is a clear typological example:

“ . . . two very special moments where I felt that he said something to me, I felt that . . . I mean it was something that I wasn’t... I mean it was so... so true for my life that I can’t deny it, right? And, at that moment, I was also able to know what the peace of God is, that peace that surpasses all understanding. In that circumstance I was able to understand what it means, so I do know, I know that God is real, I know that God transforms lives, that he has done it in me, I mean, God makes me do things that I wouldn’t do by myself . . . ” (36 EM L)

The experiences of God are complex and multiform; therefore, we tried to organise the data by means of the three “summary codes” listed on Table 3:

Table 3. Experience of God. List of codes.

Key Term	Codes	Description
Experience of God	Direct-Mediated Ordinary-Extraordinary Positive-Negative	How the experience of God is lived. How God is present in the lives of the interviewees. Subjective assessment of the experience of God.

Direct-Mediated Experience

The experience coded as “direct” describes situations in which the person narrates being aware of some kind of personal relationship with the divinity, without explicitly referring to a concrete mediation. Usually, the believer is listening to God in prayer or reading the Bible, as the following Evangelical woman:

“When I pray, there are times when he tells me, I feel it, when I pray I feel the peace that he gives me. But in the Bible he answers me with some verse . . . ”.
(24 EM Ba)

The second quotation shows how the Catholic respondent finds God in the context of praying in solitude:

“[...] but of course, I remember when I was 15–16 years old, I must have had a very bad time and for family reasons and so on, and I asked God and the Virgin to help us and so on and I saw changes. I said well look, people are so right that they always ask God and the Virgin and things change . . . And from then on I started to believe a lot, I mean, yes, my parents taught me, Yes, I am a Catholic or so, yes of course . . . but, when I saw that I asked God for things and God helped me, from then on I realised that He does exist [...]”. (15 CM Ba)

However, people have also reported their experience of God through the most diverse mediations: people, life challenges, religious prints, sacred objects, places, etc. As the interviewee tells of his grandfather’s illness, he states:

“So, I often interpreted that sign in my solitude, in my moments of reflection, as God telling me through my grandfather that this was coming to an end and that maybe it was better for me to stay at home and not suffer, because it was . . . I was 12 years old, I was a little boy, it was the first near death I was going to face . . . ” (07 CV B)

The following is also an experience “mediated” by people that are not necessarily the official representatives of the institution. In this case, he appreciates ordinary people that treated him very well; he feels God’s presence and care in their deeds:

“He sent me to people I didn’t even know, nor did I plan to know either; he sent me, didn’t he? To give me support, because He does everything. I feel the presence. When I started to reflect, why this does happen to me like this. Wherever I go, I find people who are super nice, super cool, I don’t know”. (21 CV L)

Ordinary-Extraordinary Experience

Several testimonies relate their experiences of God as an event that takes place in everyday life, apart from religious rituals, as we read in the following testimony coded as “ordinary”:

“Yes, I think he is present in everything, I am not all day reading the Bible or all day listening, I listen to normal music and I read books, but come on, he is always present, my experience as a believer is in everything present. But, come on, I live a normal life”. (30 EV B)

The next Latin American example points in the same direction as the previous Basque one: the experiences of God take place far beyond the traditional rituals or institutional religious duties:

“I believe that faith transcends a temple, it transcends a rite, I believe that faith transcends these things and well, in the day to day, in the hour, in the minute, in the minute, one lives the faith and can give life to God at all times, that is a very important change”. (39 EV Mo)

At the other end, we also found several examples of people relating “extraordinary” experiences of the divine, whether in the specific context of religious rituals, or not. In some cases, miracles or exorcisms are central to the narrative; in other cases, we found experiences of God in the midst of biographical crises. We provide two typological cases: the first one reports a healing interpreted as a miracle during prayer; the second is the experience of God in the midst of a difficult decision-making:

“They closed themselves in a room to pray, they kept a vigil of pure prayer, prayer, and I saw how my mother was healed. My mother now tells about it, she lives it, she testifies. My mother now has nothing in her..., they do biopsies, they do tests, my mother has nothing in her liver, her liver is as if it had never been touched by anything, what more proof could there be?” (31 EM Ba)

“And one moment when I was like this, very troubled, anguished, the Lord said to me ‘Wait’ and it was something so beautiful... that even, I mean, I felt peace, I mean, it was like that... I mean, in moments like this of such turmoil I felt that ‘Wait’ and a supernatural peace came automatically, I mean, it was something supernatural wasn’t it?” (36 EM L)

Positive-Negative Experience

The vast majority of interviewees usually associate the experiences of God with positive deep feelings such as love, protection, healing, etc. (125 quotes), and directly affecting God representations. The first quotation is an example of a woman that feels cared for by God in everyday life:

“Well, at times I have realised the care that God has for each one of us. For example, when I had my five children, the first three girls were very close together, my husband wasn’t doing very well financially either, and God doesn’t abandon you. [. . .] And how God on the other hand helps you and carries you along and you don’t lack anything and if you lack anything I don’t know, he helps you to carry it with grace . . . ” (01 CM B)

The second testimony clearly states that the experience of God gives a sense of meaning to the interviewee that improved her life, stressing subjectivity once again:

“[. . .] it is an experience of feeling loved, and feeling that there is something bigger than everything I see and hear and touch. And that gives a different meaning to things. You can do the same without having an experience, but for me it is easier feeling loved, feeling that God is in many of the things I have lived, for me it is easier to give them a meaning, to be happy, to look for healthier relationships with others, I think”. (12 CM B)

On the other hand, but less frequently, the experiences of God made people fear, as in the following typological quote:

“Then my very loving father went to me and said: ‘You know that God loves you above all things and that you are to blame for that man’s death, because perhaps he already had his life arranged with God and you didn’t, you with your sin were going straight to hell, your soul was going to be lost, and God loves you so much that he preferred to take it away from you’. And it gave me, I became afraid, I began to be afraid of God, not love like I used to have for Him, but I began to be afraid”. (29 EM Ba)

In other narrations, the feeling that appears is pain, as in the following quotation that reflects an incomprehensible and, to a certain extent, unfair God:

“And going back to those months when I didn’t leave, I closed myself off and said: ‘My God, you are punishing me and I don’t know what to do’. I even prayed and I didn’t feel that feeling, I could see that I wasn’t sincere”. (31 EM Ba)

Summary Results

We were not able to identify a classification or specific patterns in the experience of God according to religious affiliation or geographical origin. It may seem unexpected in secularised contexts that testimonies expressing a direct experience of God are very frequent (110 quotations). There was also no lack of testimonies of experiences of God described as extraordinary at key moments in the person’s life, although in the interviews, the experience coded as “ordinary” was more common. Finally, all the quotations reflected experiences of God that were evaluated either in a positive way (the majority) or in a negative way (these quotations are in the minority, but intense), directly related to biographical data and God images.

4.1.2. God Images

This key term appears most frequently in the narratives; all interviewees conveyed God representations without being explicitly asked about their God images. We initially identified 65 codes in 607 quotations collected in Atlas.ti, to take account of the wide diversity of representations that emerged in the course of the conversation. A detailed description and analysis of the 65 codes were beyond the aim of this article, as it would merit a separate article. To achieve the aim of this paper, we summarised God images in the binomial “positive”–“negative” God images (see Table 4), which allowed us to establish links between religious experience, God images, and institutional belonging.

Table 4. God image. List of codes.

Key Term	Codes	Description
God image	Positive–Negative	Subjective assessment of God representations.

Positive–Negative God Image

Conventional positive God images rooted in Christian tradition are the most recurrent. The most frequent is the representation of a loving God, concerned for humanity as a whole and for the individual believer, which appeared in 162 quotations with different nuances: kind, compassionate, supportive, consoling, etc. Here is an example of this positive representation:

“And then God’s love for that humanity. That humanity that is limited, that has sin, that humanity that is imperfect and that it is beautiful that it is like that because there you realise that you have the possibility of being saved or loved in its imperfection and you don’t have to take on burdens or insecurities or anything, you show yourself as you are and I think that is the moment, and then, well, then I began to understand this representation of God the father and also of a God the son who gives himself and who loves you and who is in everyone, no one can be excluded”. (17 CM Co)

Next in order of importance, was the representation of God being active in people’s daily lives (110 quotations). We found generic characterisations where the Christian God is concerned with protecting, taking care, preserving... life in general, and others directly linked to the needs of the interviewee, associated with the immediate granting of material goods necessary or desired for the development of an ordinary life. Here is a typological quote from a man who lost his job and trusted to get a new one:

“... you really trust that God has something else prepared. [...] And when they announced the closure, I remembered that text [from the Bible]. And I said: ‘I’m going to trust in the Lord, he’ll give me something else’. 40 days later I was already working somewhere else”. (26 EV B)

On the other hand, as shown above, in the last two quotations referring to the negative Experience of God (see above), the negative God image is often associated with fear and punishment. As a former Catholic narrates:

“A punishing God that what . . . sometimes I remember in catechesis there was a nun . . . she was the . . . that God punished you”. (39 EVMo)

Summary Results

The interviewees expressed multi-faceted God representations linked to their experiences of God. On this occasion, we did not identify different patterns of representations according to religious affiliation or geographical origin. Undoubtedly, positive God images predominated, with a large number of variations and nuances: kind, loving, forgiving, saviour, etc. However, on more than one occasion, the representations expressed by the interviewee were contradictory, which is why we have to speak of “hybrid” representations, meaning those descriptions that include both positive and negative representations of God. They are often paradoxical and can generate confusion or discomfort in the person, as we can see in the following two examples. In the first example, the person is upset and angry that God, whom he describes as loving, has allowed his father to die in very difficult family circumstances:

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! Yes I was angry, yes . . . when I live through situations that are beyond me, I have not understood . . . apart from believing that god is in everything and in all things and god loves you, well . . . why on earth would he allow your father to die? It’s such a complicated moment and well . . . that generates anger, yes”. (39 EVMo)

In the second example, the believer describes a God who responds to her by “Wait” in a critical situation. Initially it brings her peace, but the passage of time without a clear answer that allows her to close the issue makes her feel trapped, she gets impatient and suffers. The first part of the quotation has been given above (see above), as an example of the extraordinary experience of God. Even if it is a little long, we give it complete in order to better reflect the “dynamic” of the situation:

“And one moment when I was like this, very troubled, anguished, the Lord said to me ‘Wait’ and it was something so beautiful... that even, I mean, I felt peace, I mean, it was like that . . . I mean, in moments like this of such turmoil I felt that ‘Wait’ and a supernatural peace came automatically, I mean, it was something supernatural wasn’t it? . . . But I’m still like no, I mean, it doesn’t allow me to close that, that’s why I feel a bit stuck in that because it doesn’t allow me to close it because I remember that ‘Wait’ because if He had said ‘No’ ah, yeah, I have to close everything or if He wouldn’t have said anything, well yeah, it’s over. But so much time has passed that I have to close this topic, right? There is no answer, things go from bad to worse, but they go from bad to worse and I remember the ‘Wait’ and . . . the ‘Wait’ keeps me there, doesn’t it? It’s trapping me, I mean I can’t move forward. What do I have to wait for? (laughs) but well then, let’s see what happens”. (36 EM L)

As with the negative representations (unfair, incomprehensible, distant...), the hybrid images are a minority among the interviewees, but they have a great weight in their personal biographies. Sometimes, the believer tries to justify God’s actions, although He seems unfair, to match the institutional doctrine; other times, the believer simply asserts his/her lack of understanding. These developments might be an indicator of a fluid perception of divinity linked to biographical circumstances, and might also be an indicator of individualisation and autonomy.

4.1.3. Institutional Belonging

This third key term adds 1051 quotations. We identified two “summary codes”, which underlie the processes of individualisation and autonomy with respect to the religious

tradition and/or the respective ecclesial institutions as seen on Table 5. These two pairs of codes are present in almost all the interviews analysed:

Table 5. Institutional belonging. List of codes.

Key Term	Codes	Description
Institutional belonging	Strong–Weak	Degree of adherence to religious tradition or to its own institution.
	Convergent–Divergent	Form of adherence to religious tradition or to its own institution.

Strong–Weak Institutional Belonging

The following quote indicates the interviewee’s “strong belonging”. The person argues his or her religious self-ascription to the evangelical faith by one of the most commonly used standards, worship attendance, which in their case takes up a good part of the week:

“... my day to day is every Sunday going to church; I am part of the worship team, which is the team that carries everything related to songs, to music. I am music, so I sing, I play, and apart from that at night I am doing, well at night, from 8 to 10 at night I am doing a course related to religion and psychology, it is to be able to be one to one and to be able to help people in related to character, with goals in their life, with problems and all that. That’s also based on Christian values. So my week is usually full of church activities in this sense, yes”. (23 EM B)

Although this is an important identity factor, interviewees also drew attention to other issues that demonstrate their affiliation. When asked about attendance at meetings, the person responded:

“They are ... very important, they are not the centre of my rituality or what I believe but it is important, also for the encounter with the other that we live the kind of worship of worship to God or Bible reading, it is important but it is ... it is not the core”. (39 EV Mo)

The opposite extreme, “weak belonging”, is well represented in the following testimony:

“... I grew up in a Catholic home, very Catholic and that is why I am Catholic, because I think that if I had grown up in another home with another religion well I would have submerged the religion of the place where I grew up. Although I grew up in a Catholic home I am not a practicing Catholic, because I don’t agree with many things, because of the inconsistencies that I saw, that I see, but that, for example, carrying I don’t know, a rosary, a cross, no, no, no, none of that”. (09 CM Ba)

Convergent–Divergent Institutional Belonging

By means of the code “convergent belonging”, we pointed out the case of people who feel fully identified with the official positions of their respective churches, as in the following quote:

“Then once a year I go on a retreat course and then a five-day fellowship that I have classes in doctrine or church doctrine or church history or theology or theology classes. That’s to form me”. (01 CM B)

Asked about the importance she attached to the observance of moral norms, she replied by emphasising the centrality of the Bible, a key element of the evangelical tradition:

“Evangelicals always go by what the Bible says. If it’s not in the Bible, it’s not right to do it, that’s what I understand. If the Bible tells you, for example, if to help a person I have to steal, not steal, maybe lie to help, then that’s not right. So I can’t go outside that norm or what the Bible tells me to help, because I know it’s wrong, I don’t know if I’m making myself clear”. (24 EM Ba)

In contrast, “divergent belonging” expresses a critical position toward one’s own religious institution or tradition. This code resulted into the most frequent of all with 229 quotations:

“ . . . women are undervalued, but undervalued. That is to say, here they are only nuns who help the priests, full stop, or deacons, deaconesses, whatever, or like us, committed laypeople and outside, but we are allowed to do simply what they cannot do. Because they cannot do it they leave it to you as if to say ‘There you go, but be careful, don’t meddle in my field’. It’s as simple as that, girl, as simple as that”. (04 CM B)

In the following quotation, when asked why she did not end up joining an Evangelical church, she expressed her disagreement with the pastor’s positions and claimed her personal freedom:

“My way of being is freer, so I am free from the Lord, I want the Lord to be the one who tells me and I do, and to be able to go and speak freely, that’s all . . . [But] you have to tell the pastor and the pastor has to give you permission, right? [. . .] I am a free soul, I don’t like to be pigeonholed [. . .] so I felt that that was cutting me off a lot”. (36 EM L)

Summary Results

Although the two pairs of codes used in the analysis might seem redundant, the results do not allow us to identify “strong belonging” and “convergent belonging”, nor “weak belonging” and “divergent belonging”. Strong belonging” often coincides with “convergent belonging”, but this was not always the case; we found testimonies of people who showed a strong and critical self-ascription to institutional positions, especially in the case of the Catholic Church (cf. below). Moreover, and in parallel with what has been said about the hybrid God images, we also found testimonies that combined the two poles of the binomial. The same person could make statements that were in agreement with the institution and others that express a strong divergence; he or she can show a strong belonging in the case of some practices or beliefs, and a weak belonging in the case of others. In this typological example, the person feels at the same time distant from the institution (in terms of ritual) and close to the Catholic tradition (because of her devotion to the Virgin):

“In terms of religious service I don’t feel . . . , I’m not one hundred percent committed to going to mass every day, I don’t know what, but I do have a kind of commitment here, I established it with the Virgin of Begoña, because she is the patron saint here, so I always go there and whenever I have a difficulty, I don’t know, “well, I have to register”. Ok, “mother Begoña”, I mean, I always ask her to go. “Mother, everything has to go well, everything has to flow, I don’t know what”. I mean, I’m always talking to her in some way” . . . (11 CM Ba)

There were no testimonies of Catholics who said that they came from another Christian confession or another religion, although there were some Catholics who came from a non-believing environment or who were far removed from religious faith. On the other hand, there were several evangelicals who came from other Christian confessions, in most cases from Catholicism. In the latter case, the interviews indicated that weak membership and/or divergence resulted in a conversion process at a time of life crisis.

In the case of this third key term, we did find differences that depend on religious affiliation. The first of these has to do with the emphasis on the understanding of adherence to the religious tradition. Evangelicals seem to place more importance on rituals and private spiritual practices (Bible reading, personal prayer), while Catholics focus on their responses to how Christian values are lived out in everyday life. Second, with regard to adherence to one’s own institution, divergent membership appeared strongly in the interviews with Catholics, although not exclusively. Because of their experiences within

the Catholic Church, or because of their immediate context, people were critical of the institution, although most of them did not consider leaving it.

4.2. Institutional Belonging, Experiences of God and God Images

In the following, we provide evidence resulting from the analysis of co-occurrences using the Atlas.ti programme around the three initial questions (cf. Section 2.2) that we tried to answer in the discussion, which concretised the general aim of the article: to shed light on the possible relationships between experience and institutional belonging. To this end, we first present the convergence between the key terms “experience of God” and “institutional belonging”, and second, between “God image” and “institutional belonging”. As we can see, experiences of God and representations of God are present in people’s narratives, irrespective of their adherence to their respective religious traditions or institutions.

4.2.1. Experiences of God and Institutional Belonging

When relating the key terms “experience of God” and “institutional belonging”, we found that the latter had little bearing on the religious experience of the respondents. In other words, we found significant experiences of God in all cases of belonging: strong, weak, convergent, and divergent. It would seem evident that people who express a strong and convergent belonging to the institutional postulates narrate experiences of God, a statement that was confirmed by the interviews. However, in the case of those who expressed weak and divergent belonging, we also identified testimonies of intense, generally positive experiences of God. Neither the criticisms voiced nor the problems they perceived in the religious institution led them to renounce the God they experienced.

The following is a quotation from a weak belonging that shows this experience of God during private prayer:

“[. . .] well, you don’t have to go to church to be with God. That’s it, I don’t know, there are times when I’ve been down and I’ve been helped all over the place, and it wasn’t because I went to church, but because I ask Him and because I talk to Him and I tell Him ‘you have to help me in this and in this’, and ‘help my son’ and also ‘help people, make them see things, make them don’t be so closed’”. (02 CM B 63)

The following quotes corresponded to cases of divergent belonging:

“So the two of us were very involved in the parish, in HOAC, obviously in marriage, clearly celebrating the sacrament of marriage and then with the children, from the very first moment, clearly the issue of education in the faith, and so in fact what we did was not to baptise them. That is to say, we believe that the sacrament of baptism is a sacrament of initiation and, therefore, the person has to be conscious, minimally conscious. So we have never believed in the sacrament of baptism for the little ones, for children. In fact, we trained ourselves, we reflected on it and we can say that we would have liked to have delayed the baptism of both of them much longer”. (10 CV B)

“Nowadays there is a lot of homosexuality, etc., isn’t there? The Bible tells you that this is not right, but I’m not going to reject a person because of that, it doesn’t occur to me. So I personally, my partner for example, doesn’t see it that way, but I do . . . I think I’m a bit more open-minded than what Christianity really says. For example, regarding abortion, you have to look at the needs of each person; the first thing I look at is the person’s needs”. (25 EM B)

4.2.2. God Images and Institutional Belonging

As in the previous case, we did not establish a direct relationship between the multiple God images and the different codes used in the analysis of institutional belonging. All forms of belonging reflect positive representations of the divine. Again, we offer two

examples of what we might consider less expected cases. The first quote shows a weak belonging associated with a God who cares for the interviewee in a dangerous situation:

“So the only thing that came to my mind was, my God, whatever will happen will happen, I trust. Look, but it had been two years since I had congregated, because I decided to be young, I decided to experiment, to get to know the world. And at that precise moment I didn’t pray, I didn’t read the Bible, I didn’t do anything. I was like a typical girl who wanted to know the world, and at that very moment after two years and a little more it came to my mind ‘my God, keep me and whatever will happen will happen and I promise you that if you allow nothing to happen I swear that I will come back to you’”. (31 EM Ba)

The second testifies to a divergent belonging while reflecting the representation of a loving God:

“... ho, but feel loved by Him, but if He loves you. And don’t you see, I feel quite the opposite, I do feel very worthy. When they prayed ... ‘I am not worthy of you coming into my house’, I thought, ‘I am worthy of you coming in’... I am worthy, of course I am, if he is my father”. (02 CM B)

5. Discussion

In order to interpret and assess the evidence provided adequately, it is very important to bear in mind that the interview panel did not specifically ask about any of the three key terms. Rather, the interviewees were generically asked to talk about their beliefs and practices. Consequently, the information we collected on “experience of God”, “God image”, and “institutional belonging” appeared spontaneously in the conversation. We assessed this spontaneity as a relevant empirical evidence for qualitative analysis in the framework of Lived Religion: it is highly significant that all interviews include narratives related to these key terms, in some cases with plenty of quotes (see the number of quotations above-mentioned).

The 39 analysed interviews shared in common that they were conducted with people who claimed to be believers, specifically Christians, and their narratives confirmed it: there were references to self-ascription in all testimonies, either to the evangelical tradition or to the Catholic tradition. At the same time, we identified a large number of quotations that showed processes of individualisation in the religious experience of Catholic and Evangelical believers, often with a clear tendency toward divergence. In many cases, there was also a low level of religious adherence or weak belonging among the Catholic population in a special way.

This does not mean, however, that the religious experience conveyed by the narratives weakened. There is ample evidence in the conversations that the interviewees had a rich experience of God and that they elaborated a complex symbolic world when it came to representing God. According to the set of interviews, we can conclude the following: believers elaborated processes of individualisation and showed their autonomy from tradition to develop their own religious experience.

Our analysis suggests that the religious phenomenon is facing formidable changes, both at the institutional and personal level (Castillo 2019). Beyond this general observation, the analysed testimonies allow for some detailed observations that critically respond to the contributions of the authors referred to in Section 3. Let us start with James’s proposal cited in Section 3.3. (James [1902] 1986, p. 475): “The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast”. In accordance with James, we appreciate that in most of the narratives, the subjective component of religious experience strongly appeared. We identified many narratives describing different times, places, and ways of personal encounter with the divine that confirm the centrality of this experience in the lives of the interviewees. James’ approach is ahead of its time as he emphasises and highlights this personal itinerary of religious experience, which is directly related to the processes of individualisation of religious faith.

James goes on to say (James [1902] 1986, pp. 475–76): “A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers”. While some testimonies convey direct experiences of God, most reflect a mediated experience. Overall, the profile of the interviewees does not identify with the “religious genius” that James considers the “ideal type” of religious experience. In his own words, they are rather “disciples”, “sympathisers” who self-ascribe to a particular religious tradition. Disagreeing with the author, we found no reason to conclude that the interviewees lacked a genuine religious experience, as it seems to be as genuine as the experience of the “religious virtuous”.

Contrary to James’ opinion (James [1902] 1986, p. 49), most of the testimonies combined pious feelings and religious practices in solitude, with the awareness of belonging to a religious tradition. James identified the first ones with genuine religious experience, the second one with “contamination” (James [1902] 1986, p. 476): “When these groups get strong enough to ‘organise’ themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing”. People often voice criticism of the institution, indicating a distancing from it, and express their individual freedom to go their own way. However, we did not perceive the radical rejection of the institutional component which, in James’ view, amounts to a false or treacherous realisation of true religion.

We also think it appropriate to qualify Taylor’s critique of James. The quoted text claims the necessary mediation of the corporation, of the church in the case of Christian tradition (Taylor 2003, p. 23): “the link between the believer and the divine (or whatever), may be essentially mediated by corporate, ecclesial life”. All the interviewees elaborated on their experience of God and translated it into representations within the framework of their own religious traditions. However, it should also be noted that these elaborations showed clear signs of individualisation and autonomy, often leading the interviewees to distance themselves from official institutional approaches.

The results obtained on experiences of God and God images illustrate the dialectic between the subjectivity of experience and the frameworks provided by religious traditions. The latter offers diverse representations (Armstrong 2002; Edwards 2013; Estrada 1994, 1996, 2003; Torres Queiruga 2000); for their part, subjective experiences appropriate and recreate such representations (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998; Mirman 2005) and express them in highly significant personal terms, linked to one’s own biographical circumstances (Lecaros 2017).

The questionnaires used in the quantitative research do not seem to consider the complexity that characterises the religious reconfigurations. In our opinion, the evidence collected supports the proposal of Ammerman (2013), who suggests overcoming binarisms, as they do not respond to the religious experience of current believers. On one hand, the interviews are filled with nuances that are located on a *continuum* between the poles proposed in Section 4, which are easily identifiable, but do not occur in a pure state. On the other hand, the narrations of religious experience include both poles, arising inner inconsistencies, and contradictions.

Moving on to other issues, the interviews point to the following conclusion: neither experiences nor representations of God are static, but fluid. In both cases, people narrate situations of everyday life, sometimes traumatic, which condition and modify, for better or worse, their experience of God and God representation (Castillo 2019, p. 4). As we noted in the Section 3, the plurality of representations shown in the interviews demonstrates that God representations are a multidimensional and varied construct (Kunkel et al. 1999; Grimes 2007). As Gibson (2007) argues in relation to “God-schema”, the narratives of God experiences describe dynamic, shifting, hierarchical, and relational representations, even paradoxical. These are not conceptual, theological, or propositional definitions of God, which are usually more static (as, for example, the doctrines of Christian denominations).

The dogmatic positions of the respective religious traditions seemingly play a secondary role in the experience of God and in the elaboration of God representations.

However, we are aware that we are far from fully understanding the dialectical relationship between personal experience and community or institutional tradition that characterises the religious phenomenon. The opposite ends of the spectrum seem clear. On one hand, we agree with James that subjective experience is a necessary condition for religious experience; on the other hand, all the interviewees elaborated their images and experiences of God based on a shared religious tradition, which is consistent with Taylor's approach. However, the characteristics of the sample and the qualitative approach do not allow us to generalize.

As institutional references weaken and individual autonomy grows, believers value their personal experiences of God and generate new or reformulated God images, thus increasing the variability of religious experience (Castillo 2019, p. 10). The evidence suggests that within the same religious tradition, such personal elaborations will necessarily affect the institutional framework. The interpretation of institutional belonging should consider the exercise of personal freedom. As Durkheim [1912] (Durkheim [1912] 1968) rightly points out, the processes of autonomy and individualisation affect the link between the person and the institution when the relationship moves from a mechanical to an organic one. This process of individualisation not only occurs when the believer decides to participate in this or that institution, but also in what Taylor calls the "expressivist" component (2003, pp. 102–4). This term underlines the sense of personal and spiritual growth of the religious experience. In Elzo's words: "religion as personal salvation made way to religion as provider of meaning" (Elzo 2017, p. 100).

Furthermore, ties to religious tradition or institution are based on personal decisions that need to be periodically reaffirmed. If Berger's approach to social structures of plausibility is correct, and we believe it is, not every subjective elaboration can be maintained over time, only those that are socially shared.

Finally, we should note two limitations of our analysis that became clear in the course of the research. First, the results of our analysis are not generalisable for the following two reasons (at least). The first is a methodological one: the difficulties stem from the limits of the qualitative approach. Our earnest achievement is to affirm that the processes outlined in the previous pages are present in our societies. The second reason is the population sample. As already mentioned, we only worked with people that defined themselves as Christian, which makes it impossible to establish generalisations. It is therefore necessary to analyse other populations such as the growing number of the so-called *nones*, members of other religions, etc. In addition, we limited ourselves to interviews conducted with Latin Americans from Argentina, Uruguay, and Peru as well as with the local and migrant population in the urban area of the city of Bilbao. Although the interviews were selected at random, this is especially limiting and makes it difficult to generalise.

Second, the detailed analysis of the interviews on the basis of the three selected key terms and their respective codes produced a large body of data: 1685 quotations coded through Atlas.ti. Each of the key terms would have allowed us to develop a major article, so we were forced to carry out a difficult exercise of data selection and synthetic reduction in the codes applied to the narratives in order to fulfil the aim of this article. We considered this was a reasoned work, but it led to a considerable loss of nuance, not least in the presentation of God images.

At the end of the discussion, we would like to include a final theological observation. Joncheray (2003) provides a lucid sociological synthesis of the processes we described, in our case, from the personal testimonies of the 39 interviews. The findings presented here, together with its evidence, are a real challenge for theological reflection. The changes in membership and participation within Christian Churches led Cardinal Danneels, a highly qualified representative of the Catholic Church, to ask about the meaning, consequences, and theological response these processes require (quoted in Joncheray 2003), a response that has yet to be consistently elaborated within the different Christian traditions (Castillo 2014).

6. Conclusions

Located in a world characterised by profound transformations, and in the absence of any convincing, tested theory, we gathered evidence to help us formulate possible answers to the question of how religious phenomena will evolve in the convulsive context of polyhedral modernity. Our proposal falls within Lived Religion, trying to systematise the testimonies of ordinary people.

The conclusions we reached are conditioned by the choices we made in the course of the research. First, we opted to look for verifiable evidence, without getting into speculative reflections on the concept of “religious experience”. We focused on three specific variables that we considered as key terms of religious experience: “experience of God”, “God image”, and “institutional belonging”. Second, we focused on people that defined themselves as Christian, namely Catholic or Evangelical. Third, we limited our survey to three Latin American cities (Cordoba, Lima, and Montevideo) and to the city of Bilbao. Fourth, we analysed people’s testimonies only using a qualitative approach.

In light of these decisions, which both defined and limited our scope, we summarily offer the conclusions of our work, which are partial and still awaiting revision and fine-tuning of the methodology and analysis tools:

1. The adherence shown by Evangelical and Catholic believers to tradition and/or religious institution is far from being uniform and homogeneous. However, there is a clear tendency toward progressive individualisation and religious autonomy in the spontaneous expression of the personal, original, and plural experiences. According to the data extracted from the interviews, this tendency seems to be more marked in the case of Catholics.
2. However, while recognising such tendency, the population interviewed shared the following three characteristics: (a) they did not express the desire to leave the institutional religious framework where they belonged at the time of the interview, even in the case of divergent institutional belonging; (b) most of the interviewees reported having experiences of God, and there seemed to be no difference among populations according to religious affiliation or geographical origin; and (c) believers expressed God images, which were varied and not always congruent. We cannot adequately explain the experiences of God, God images, nor institutional membership based on binary schemes or rigid pigeonholing. In contrast, we are faced with a fluid and dynamic reality, often directly related to difficult and even traumatic life experiences. It is not unusual for the interviewee to spontaneously fall into contradictions and inconsistencies; for example, in the case of God images, the same person may voice representations that are contradictory at first sight. As we pointed out in several references, we considered that God images could be the subject of a specific in-depth study. Regardless of the kind of belonging that the interviewees showed toward their respective religious institutions (strong, weak, convergent or divergent), we observed a rich diversity of experiences of God and a wide range of God representations. Such diversity cannot be explained by the different degree of identification with the religious institution. Compared to strongly or convergently affiliated Christians, God experiences were not less frequent, nor God images less positive, among weakly or divergently affiliated Christians. This phenomenon may be related to the process of individualisation already mentioned. One of the possible consequences is that crises of institutional belonging that might be interpreted as processes of secularisation can occur simultaneously with personal experiences of God that are far from being secularised (we are aware that this conclusion needs further evidence).

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