



God Images in the Cities of Bilbao, Cordoba, Lima, and Montevideo: a Qualitative Study

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Received: 19 October 2022 / Accepted: 10 December 2022 / Published online: 29 December 2022
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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze God images reflected in 57 interviews conducted among Catholics, Evangelicals, and other people without religious self-identification (“unaffiliated”). The interviews, which follow the Lived Religion approach, were carried out in three Latin American cities (Córdoba, Lima, and Montevideo), and in the city of Bilbao (Spain). In the latter city, both the Latin American immigrant population and the local population were considered. The systematic analysis of the interviews lets us identify a multi-faceted imaginary of the divine with diverse nuances in the images of the benevolent God, the authoritarian God and other hybrid God images. Likewise, it is striking to note what is, and what is not God, as it is reflected in various interviews. The analysis of the identified quotations suggests some differences in God images, based on geographical location and religious belonging, as well as the specific case of the unaffiliated to any religious faith.

Keywords God images · Lived religion · Benevolent God · Authoritarian God · Hybrid God images · Unaffiliated

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Introduction

People's religious experience often involves images of divinity (Rodríguez et al. 2021). Very frequently, these images are not the result of speculation or assimilation of doctrine, but have to do with people's life experiences that can lead to deep changes. God images and their transformations may be a good indicator of religion as a social phenomenon subject to profound changes in an increasingly global and evolving society. The nuances and contents of these transformations can be more clearly perceived in a methodological approach such as lived religion.

In fact, attention has already been turned to the study of God images within the lived religion approach (Lecaros 2017; Morello 2019; 2021; Rodríguez et al. 2021). The study presented here moves in the same line by systematically analyzing a large number of interviews and comparing Latin American and non-Latin American populations.

The first chapter details the method used and the decisions adopted. In Latin America, work on this topic has already been done. But when looking at the scientific literature overall, we find out that it has been a subject matter analyzed from different approaches and perspectives, as shown in the second chapter. The third chapter offers a detailed analysis of the quotations identified in the interviews as related to God images and suggests three main labels: "benevolent God," "authoritarian God," and "hybrid God images." Since people interviewed come from different cities and belong to different religious traditions (including some "unaffiliated" to any religious faith), the analysis of the data makes it possible to identify certain trends which are formulated as hypotheses, following the logic of a qualitative approach. These are systematically collected in the "Discussion" section. Finally, the concluding section contains the central ideas of this study.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to approach the images of divinity held by ordinary people. As people interviewed are mostly Christians and refer to their divinity as the universal God, "God" will be written with a capital G throughout the work. Only in clearly non-monotheistic references will "divinity" or "divinities" replace "God."

The content of 57 interviews was analyzed using a qualitative approach, following the path opened by the so-called lived religion approach (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). However, although the lived religion approach does not start from explicit prior definitions to analyze the narratives, a middle way has been chosen here. A flexible definition of the God images has been used to distinguish the comments in the narratives that refer to the "God image" and from which the categories of analysis are established. The interviews correspond mostly (45 interviews) to people who declare themselves to be believers, Catholics or

Evangelicals, without responsibility within their respective religious institutions or communities. The remaining small part (12 interviews) corresponds to people who declare themselves to be outside of institutionally supported beliefs, i.e., agnostics, atheists, or people with no specific religious affiliation, here collectively and generically referred to as “unaffiliated.” It was decided to introduce these interviews due to the interest that the academic literature has been showing in recent years in this heterogeneous group, both in the Anglo-Saxon sphere (Smith and Cragun 2019; Strawn 2019; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflame 2017) and in Latin America from the perspective of lived religion (Da Costa 2017; 2019; 2020; Lecaros 2015; Romero and Lecaros 2017). The percentage is not very high in Latin America, with Uruguay standing out with an “unaffiliated” percentage of 37% (Pew Research Center 2014), but it is in Bilbao (38%) (Prospección Sociológica 2017). This type of interview can serve as a contrast with those carried out with believers, in this case to see how the God images are defined in each case. As will be discussed below, there were signs of “spiritual hybridity” between the two groups.

The self-identification of the person, religious or not, was respected at all times. All the interviews were conducted following the same script, previously agreed upon by the researchers in the different cities.

All the interviews were conducted in 2016–2017 and form part of the database of a study funded by the John Templeton Foundation, conducted under the direction of Gustavo Morello, whom we thank for allowing us access to and use of his work. Of the interviews analyzed here, 28 were conducted in three Latin American cities (Córdoba, Lima and Montevideo) and 29 were carried out in Bilbao (Basque Country, Spain). Among those carried out in Bilbao, 13 correspond to Latin American residents in the city and 16 to people born in Bilbao.

Given the number of interviews carried out by the teams in Córdoba (Argentina), Lima, and Montevideo, the 28 Latin American interviews used in this article were chosen at random, without prior knowledge of their content, except, of course, their religious self-definition, but trying to maintain a balance between confession, city, and gender. The socio-economic level variable was not finally considered given that the socio-economic levels in Latin America and in Bilbao are hardly comparable and that the population interviewed in Bilbao generally had a medium socio-economic level, while in Latin America two levels had been established, high and low. With regard to the gender variable, 23 interviews were conducted with men and 34 with women.

Overall, 41 Latin Americans were interviewed and 16 were born in Bilbao.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the people whose interviews were used for this article.

Atlas.ti was used to work with the interviews. The interviews were not strictly speaking about God but about people’s lives and the place of their beliefs in them. On this basis, the comments on the God images are not found in a single point or question of the questionnaire guide of the interviews, but appear throughout the narrative associated with different moments in life. This is why, as noted above, it was considered important to establish a flexible definition or guide to make a first

Table 1 Interviews conducted

	Catholics		Evangelicals		Unaffiliated		Totals	
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
Latin America	5	4	4	6	4	5	13	15
Latin Americans in Bilbao	2	4	1	4	2	-	5	8
Bilbao	2	7	3	3	-	1	5	11
Totals	9	15	8	13	6	6	23	34

F, female; *M*, male

screening of the interviews by establishing the quotes that, in any of the questions, reflected a God image.

After anonymizing the interviews, a first reading was made in which this flexible concept of the God image was used to make a first selection of the quotes in which, at any point in the interview, the person was reflecting his or her image or God images. A total of 927 quotations were obtained. Then, in order to best capture what people were saying, we chose to code “literally” the attributes that people gave to God, i.e., what could be considered as synonyms (e.g., “friend” and “paw”) were included in the same code, but when the similarity was not so obvious (“friend” and “companion”) they were kept as distinct codes. This second step produced 103 different codes. This in itself reflects the complexity of the phenomenon under study here and the difficulty of trying to reduce this complexity to understandable and manageable schemes without betraying the message conveyed in the interviews.

As has been indicated, the approach to the object of study has been qualitative. The use of Atlas.ti and the inclusion of some tables generated by the program itself does not make it any less qualitative. In fact, the coding itself is a task of interpretation that inevitably conditions the results. Despite this, the authors hope that the transparency in the acknowledgement of the difficulties and limits of the work will contribute to highlighting what is interesting about it.

To conclude on this point, it should be noted that although the interviews contain numerous references to the past (“when I was a boy”; “I used to...”), an aspect that has been considered to confirm that people change, the analysis has focused on the current images, which reflect the situation of the people at the time of the interview.

Understanding What Is Meant by “Image/God Images”

Despite its frequent use for some decades in the academic literature, the concept of “God image” is not clearly defined. It is sometimes interchangeably linked or associated with other loose terms such as “concept of God” (Davis and Federico 2019) and “representation of God” (Lawrence 1997), and some even use all three terms interchangeably (Hill and Hall 2002). However, it seems appropriate to differentiate them in order to avoid terminological confusion (Moriarty and Hoffman 2007). Generally, *lived religion* works related to the God image in Latin America (Lecaros

2017; Morello 2019; 2021) do not explain what they mean by “God image,” something that also happens in many Anglo-Saxon studies, also from the perspective of *lived religion* (Ammerman 2014). It is not the intention of this paper to propose a closed and definitive definition, but rather to explain what notion of “God image” was taken as a starting point when analyzing and labeling the interviews on which it was based.

The Construct “God Image”

The “God image” is a multidimensional and varied construct (Grimes 2007; Kunkel et al. 1999), which is not easy to define. The construct of God image emerged from the work of Rizzuto, who drew on Freud’s psychoanalytic theories and object relations theory to develop a way of conceptualizing individual experiences of God (Rizzuto 1979). According to this author, the God image as a psychological construct is related to how individuals perceive God and how they consider that God perceives them. She proposes to distinguish between a *concept* of God at the propositional level and multiple, emotionally related *God images*. According to her, the “God concept” would be a theological or cognitive understanding of God based on what the subject has learned through parents, spiritual leaders, and religious texts. The “God concept” refers to a person’s set of theological beliefs about the traits of a specific divine figure to whom he or she feels attached, attending to how that figure relates, thinks, and feels towards people, and how people should relate, think, and feel in relation to that figure.

These concepts are mediated by explicit thoughts, memories, and knowledge, particularly semantic memory; are learned primarily through explicit and intentional learning; and are encoded primarily in a verbal-symbolic representational code (Davis et al. 2013; Hall et al. 2009). Put more simply, the “God concept” refers to more conscious propositional beliefs about God, while the “God image” refers to experiential visions of God (Hall and Fujikawa 2013) or the “experiential understanding of God.” In this sense, the “God image” would be the emotional experience of God (Hoffman 2004).

The relationship there may be between the image and the concept of God is also discussed, so that the concept can be seen as a regulator of the image of religious experience (Counted 2015). On the other hand, as seems logical, the “concept of God” is often more static and less variable than the “God image,” especially when it takes on dogmatic overtones or claims to universal orthodoxy, at least for the religious community or institution in which it is used.

Alongside these terms, a fourth has emerged and is beginning to gain prominence: “God-schema.” Fiske and Tylor define a “schema” as an abstract representation that includes the attributes of the concept and the relationships between them (Fiske and Taylor 2017, p. 205). Applied to God, a schema should include assumptions about God’s nature, their will or purposes, his means of influence, and the way he interrelates with his believers (McIntosh 1995). But, neither are God-schemas uniform or static. As Gibson explains, they are dynamic, i.e., a believer may have several schemas and these may be shifting, hierarchical, and relational (Gibson 2007). In

any case, it seems clear that even the constructs “God concept” and “God schema” are more abstract and elaborate than “God image,” these three concepts should not be confused with each other.

The term “God image” refers to internal patterns of attachment to a specific divine figure (God, Allah, Brahma, Krishna, Jesus, Buddha...) and how the self is experienced in relation to that divine figure. God images guide and integrate how a person experiences the divine attachment figure on an emotional, physiological, largely non-verbal, and usually implicit level (Moriarty and Davis 2012). Images are context-sensitive and are mediated primarily by thoughts, memories, and knowledge, particularly implicit relational knowledge. Hall and Fujikawa (2013) stress the importance of also considering contextual factors such as sexual orientation, gender, diversity, identity development, and the impact of religious teachings and authorities. Images are learned via implicit, emotional, and incidental learning, and are mainly encoded in sub-symbolic and non-verbal-symbolic codes. As is well known, emotional intelligence is of enormous importance for religion, as in general for all knowledge and instances affecting existential problems. There is an interaction between emotions and critical and reflective rationality, which is reflected in creative thinking as opposed to mere logical deduction. This aspect influences the God images (Estrada 2003). As Morello states: “The exploration of the lived religiosity of Latin Americans shows us how the subject (with his body, his emotions, his reason) is involved in the religious quest” (Morello 2017, p. 21).

Relevance of God Images

God images are of great importance to people, as shown by many studies and reflected in the interviews used in this work. It can be said that, mainly among Latin Americans, there is a “strong belief” in God (Lecaros 2020). In most cases, this is not something incidental or irrelevant in their lives. These images, together with religious or spiritual practices and beliefs, influence in some way a person’s own self-understanding and how he or she deals with life and its difficulties. In short, they influence how the person interprets or finds meaning in life (Morello 2021, p. 96). However, the God images that most of our contemporaries may have are often far from the academic, theological discourse, and even from the orthodox discourse on God presented by the various religious confessions or by the various churches. Historically, there has arguably been some conflict between popular God images and those of philosophers and theologians (Estrada 2015; Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998, pp. 136–159). As Estrada points out, “if religions and ideologies want to be relevant, they will have to show that their contents serve people to fight evil and generate meaning” (Estrada 2015, p. 167). In the interviews conducted, as will be discussed below, it is clear that the God image sometimes differs from the image projected from “orthodoxy” and is always linked to a meaningful horizon of meaning for the person interviewed.

The fact that God images are linked to particular religious experiences makes it easier for them to be adapted more freely by the individual as needed. This freedom of reconfiguration allows the God image to function as what Winnicott calls

a “transitional object” in the sense that it exists on the boundary between the internal and external worlds (Winnicott 1953). The God image is a transitional object, closely related to the person’s own image. In this sense, for example, it would be difficult for people with very low self-esteem to accommodate a God image that loves and accepts them (Lawrence 1997). Certain over-idealized, rigid and demanding God images can be intensely destructive and lock the person into a sterile self-understanding (MacKenna 2002). In contrast, a God image as a loving, benign, tolerant, and protective being, who offers unconditional acceptance, enhances people’s self-esteem (Rojas Marcos 2002). Since it is not a mere intellectual representation of God, God images affect the existential reality of the person, giving them guidelines and meaning for good living (Lecaros 2017, p. 589). As many research studies from the field of Health Sciences show, religious or spiritual beliefs and practices can play a positive role in emotional suffering and coping with illness, and even favor greater well-being, mental health, and a decrease in depression rates (Angus Reid Institute 2018; Chambers-Richards et al. 2022; Ellison et al. 2014; Huguelet and Koenig 2009; Kao et al. 2020; Koenig 1998, 2012; Loewenthal 2006; Pew Research Center 2019; Valiente Barroso and García-García 2020). God images are no stranger to this. A benevolent God image and an emotional connection to God can help a person cope with certain critical situations, such as a serious illness, the dying process or chronic pain (Rush et al. 2020). God can even be seen as “a friendly and protective entity” that helps to cope with the difficulties of a hostile urban context (Morello 2019). Conversely, a harsh, punishing, and blaming God image or simply an image disappointed by God’s lack of immediate response to prayers made in times of crisis hinders such coping (Dezutter et al. 2010, 2011).

God images, framed within their respective religious or cultural frameworks, condition in some way the actions and meaning of human existence and may even influence personal (and sometimes group) social and political decision-making (Ameigueiras 2014; Davis and Federico 2019; Morello 2014; 2021, pp. 96–120; Norenzayan 2013; Rubin et al. 2014). Thus, for example, in Johnson’s opinion, the image of a punishing and vigilant God might help people to overcome their immediate interests and develop moral behavior because of their fear of punishment (Johnson 2016), although it is also true that other studies show that individuals who emphasize this type of image tend to be more politically intolerant (Froese and Bader 2008).

Dynamic, Changing, and Paradoxical God Images

Religious traditions offer a wide variety of images of what they mean by divinity, absolute, or supreme reality. We consider, for example, the images offered by the great monotheistic religions (Armstrong 2002). The Christian Bible itself offers different God images (Edwards 2013; Torres Queiruga 2000); some of them are problematic because of their formal violence (Barriocanal Gómez 2010; De León Azcárate 2021; Seibert 2009). Even Western philosophy offers diverse God images (Estrada 1994; 1996; 2003).

As Rodríguez et al. point out, this is a process of individualization that shows people's autonomy from their own religious tradition (Rodríguez et al. 2021, p. 17). On the other hand, the socio-cultural context is subject to different interpretations, even within the same religious group or denomination. Thus, for example, in Catholic society in Argentina in the 1970s, different sensibilities and reactions to the dictatorship coexisted, all of them self-proclaimed as "Catholic" (Morello 2014). The God image held by each of these sensibilities was not irrelevant when it came to taking a stance.

The plurality of God images is not limited to the "supply" of religions and their institutions or groups; it can also be expressed at the individual or personal level. People often have multiple God images, and some images are used more than others (Gibson 2007). As Armstrong states, "each generation has to create the God image that has meaning for it" (Armstrong 2002, p. 23). This is logical, since when beliefs lack plausibility in the social fabric and have no experiential support, they lose credibility, which leads in the long term to the search for other alternatives, religious, or otherwise (Estrada 2003, pp. 47–48). In this sense, given that the God image is generally constructed from a subjective experience (Fiorenza and Kaufman 1998; Mirman 2005), which the person himself interprets, Armstrong's statement can be applied not only to each generation but to each social group and even to each individual. These dynamic and changing images can also modify the relationship between people and their divinity (Morello 2019, p. 100).

The God image is conditioned, above all, by one's own religious and vital experience, and, contextualizing this experience, by the religious training received and the level of institutional belonging, all of which can change throughout life, which means that the God image can also change. The images described in the interviews are not definitions resulting from abstraction or theoretical speculation, but mainly spontaneous narratives. As Clark points out, any God image is very limited and specific to each person at a particular moment in time, i.e., it is "his/her image." Just as a person can imagine "being a mother or father" only in the context of images of parenthood that they experienced or saw around them, or read about, they develop their own God image as an amalgam of personal, cultural, familial, and social experiences. And just as the image of motherhood or fatherhood may change, one's own God image changes and develops over the years, may also change in adult life through experience or may become stuck at a particular stage, or even several God images may coexist at the same time (Clark 2012). All this makes qualitative analysis very valuable for the study of the God images since they are often the result of the sometimes incoherent or paradoxical experience of God. In this sense, it is not uncommon to find in the narratives of the same person images of a harsh and just God coexisting with those of a beneficent and provident God. Hybrid conceptions of God, combining conceptions from different cultures or religions (McGuire 2008, pp. 185–213), and even apparently contradictory or at least paradoxical, are articulated to form a coherent Being that accompanies the faithful in their daily lives. It is not a rational and reasoned faith but an existential faith in the here and now (Lecaros 2017). However, people naturally combine and articulate these various dimensions, usually integrating, for example, the image of a critical and judging God into that of

a loving God (Davis and Federico 2019), or interpreting God as judging because he loves (Froese and Bader 2008).

In more than a few cases, people try to explain to themselves why God has not acted in their favor in certain circumstances. Some ways of overcoming such paradoxes or contradictions are explained by bad decisions made in life or as a pedagogical resource of God (Morello 2021, p. 117). Other attempts to explain or overcome this contradiction are reminiscent of those that, according to Sharp's study, some abused women believers use to explain why God did not intervene on their behalf despite their prayers: (1) appeal to higher loyalties (e.g., God does not act so as not to violate the abusive husband's free will); (2) assertion of benefits (God works in mysterious ways and does not act in this case so that the prayer learns from the experience and benefits from it); (3) denial of the prayer (the prayer was not sincere, the prayer did not hear the divine answer or was not able to understand it). In general, these justifications are cognitions that allow individuals to maintain their faith in an omnipotent, omniscient, morally good, and human-responsive God (Sharp 2013).

Several studies from the perspective of lived religion have shown the dynamism of God images in Latin America. Lecaros has studied in Peruvian Catholics and Pentecostals the God images as punisher, judge, and beloved and the relationships between them, concluding that these images correspond to a fearsome God who is a just, all-powerful judge, and yet close and attentive to his creatures (Lecaros 2017). In two works, Morello has shown the importance of the God image as a "fortress" among believers living in difficult situations in urban contexts (Morello 2019, pp. 99–108), and, without being exhaustive, he has offered a synthesis of Latin Americans' God images: while some feel disillusioned and experience what they understand to be an abandonment of God, the majority believes in a superhuman and personal, creative power, of which one can have sensory experience, who is described through relational metaphors (as a father, brother, friend, husband), and who generally acts in favor of people, sometimes miraculously and sometimes through everyday life situations (Morello 2021, pp. 96–120). For their part, Rodríguez et al. studied the God images from the binomial formed by the codes "positive images" (loving, consoling, protective God...) and "negative images" (unjust, incomprehensible, distant God...), and the relevance of the autonomy with respect to the institution shown by the interviewees when it comes to configuring these images (Rodríguez et al. 2021). All these studies have shown the dynamism, variety, and sometimes paradox of these images.

An Open and Flexible Definition of "God Image"

Since it is generally the most widely used concept in the academic literature, the analysis of the interviews conducted worked with the label "God image." As explained above, the term "concept of God" is more abstract, less linked to the person's religious experience and probably less appropriate to apply to most of the interviews that gave rise to this work. Finally, the term "scheme of God" is not very clear for the Spanish speakers, whether he or she is from Bilbao or Latin America, as is the case in this study. Given that the interviewees are all Spanish speakers, it

seemed more practical to work with the label “God image,” which is more encompassing and inclusive and easier for the interviewees to understand.

An operational definition of “God image” is proposed below, which is the one that has served as the basis for the analysis of the interviews used in this study. It follows that used by Rodríguez et al.:

we understand “God image” as the set of perceptions and representations (thoughts, feelings, conceptualizations, 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 (Rodríguez et al. 2021, p. 7).

It does not claim to be a closed, essentialist “definition.” Consequently, it also distances itself from what is generally understood as a “concept” or “scheme” of God. It is sufficiently generic and broad to be inclusive and to respect both what the interviewees themselves designate as “God image” and the dynamism of images. It starts from some previous codes, but its flexibility allows the definition itself to be enriched by what the interviews can contribute. The initial codes are the following: benevolent God image, authoritative God image, and hybrid God image. This last code, used in other research (Rodríguez et al. 2021), is made more explicit in this article and can have two meanings: those images in which people combine, without appreciating any contradiction, aspects that the “orthodoxy” of their own religion considers to belong to other religious or cultural traditions, and those images that can show perplexity, paradox, ambiguity, or even contradiction in the interviewee.

The codes used in this paper take up quite a few of the images presented by the aforementioned authors who studied God images in Latin America from the perspective of lived religion (Lecaros 2017; Morello 2019; 2021; Rodríguez et al. 2021), but also contrast and qualify them following the methodology explained above.

Data Analysis

This section is divided into three blocks. First, the coding obtained by grouping meanings is explained. Then, the content of the God images obtained from the narratives is described. This section includes both images of what God is and images of what God “is not.” Finally, given that one of the virtualities of qualitative analysis is the manifestation of new aspects which, although they do not have statistical value, provide clues for the elaboration of hypotheses that can guide future research, some standardized tables, obtained through the Atlas.ti program itself, are presented. When reading them, it is important not to forget that this last section is only intended to enable the elaboration of new hypotheses.

Grouped Codes

As mentioned above, the codes were grouped according to their semantic affinity. When classifying the images, it was first thought to label them as “positive God

images” and “negative God images,” images used in other studies (Rodríguez et al. 2021), but it soon became clear that this labeling could be clearly influenced by the researchers’ subjective conception of what a positive or negative God image is. There could be images that they found abhorrent that were nevertheless positively valued by the interviewee or at least not negatively judged. Since we tried to respect at all times the narrative about the God image told by the interviewees, in the end we did not want to evaluate these images as positive or negative. This shows the difficulty of using labels that include a certain evaluation (positive, negative, neutral...) in this type of interview, because there is a risk of projecting the researchers’ point of view onto these evaluations.

To try to overcome this difficulty and once the “literal” codes had been established, several readings were made of the quotations in their context with the aim of grouping codes that constituted an equivalent field of meaning. Through this process, four broad categories were agreed upon and labeled with a generic concept reflecting the God image expressed in each category: (1) benevolent God images, divided in turn into two groups, one reflecting a God who intervenes to help people, and the other reflecting a God who does not directly intervene but who is concerned about people and invites them to commit themselves in solidarity with others, thus fulfilling, in some way, his plan; (2) authoritarian God images; and (3) “hybrid” God images, further divided into syncretistic God images and paradoxical or contradictory God images. To these three main groups, a fourth was added, which included manifestations of what the divinity “is not.”

The four categories listed above group together 82 of the original 103 codes (cfr. supra pg. 3). This reduction in the number of codes is due to the fact that there were some codes that were not included in any category because it was not easy to include them and they had no affinity with each other to establish a category of their own (“God is a man,” “is the nothingness that contains everything,” “is technology”...). This fact reflects the vastness of personal God images and, consequently, some of the limits of this work.

In the following table (Table 2), before developing each of them, these categories are presented schematically, with a brief indication of their content and the number of codes covered by each one.

God Images: What God Is

Benevolent God Images (316 Quotes): God the Love and God the Guide

Benevolent God images are dominant in all the interviews. This benevolence of God is shown through different codes: love, friend, helper, kindness, creator, free giver, guide, healer, savior, forgiver, concerned about human beings... From the interviews analyzed, benevolent images can be understood as those that show a God who is concerned about human beings in a way that benefits them, either because he loves, protects, and cares for them, or because he guides them in a protective way throughout their lives. Alongside these images of love and guidance, it is important to highlight the way in which God acts in a benevolent way. In the interviews, two

Table 2 Grouped codes

Benevolent images (28 codes)	Intervening protector (22 codes)	Love, Guidance, Listens, Forgives, Accompanies, Comforts, Supports, Respects, Protects, Intervenes in many ways...
	Non-intervening (5 codes)	Love, Guidance, Non-intervention, Invites to social involvement, Human mediation
Authoritarian images (14 codes)	Gives rules, Punishes>Returns, Tests...	
Hybrid images (22 codes)	Mystery, Indefinable, Incomprehensible, Ambivalent...	
It is not... (18 codes)	Paraphernalia, Military, Troubleshooter, Vindictive...	

ways of how God manifests his benevolence are perceived: a direct protective divine intervention, mostly perceived by the interviewees in a simple and almost imperceptible way in everyday life, but which can sometimes be extraordinary or miraculous, and a non-intervention which, nevertheless, invites the believer to commit himself to a better world.

These images, as well as authoritarian and hybrid images, are not experienced as mere descriptions of an entity alien to reality. For believers in general, these God images accompany their daily lives and help them to cope with their various vicissitudes. In short, they help them to make sense of life and to cope with it.

Of all the God images, the first and most repeated is that of a loving God, of a God who forgives, who accepts human beings as they are, with their faults and weaknesses, and gives new opportunities. As 43EFCo¹ says: “He forgave me, he showed me with his forgiveness that I was still important to him and taught me that I could put the pieces back together and make a new life.” A loving God who is also perceived as a father who dignifies his children: “When they told me “I am not worthy for you to enter my house”... I am worthy for you to enter... I am worthy, of course I am!, if he is my father!” (02CFB).

They shows himself as a merciful and even joyful God, who gives the Earth for the enjoyment of human beings:

God is a merciful god, he is kind, he has created everything perfect and everything here on earth ideal for the human being to live, enjoy to the fullest because God is a joyful god (25EFBa).

At times, his benevolence is fundamentally consoling in difficult times: “I tend to seek God more when I am burdened” (13CMBa); “I feel that spiritually he is telling me, relax, things are going to turn out well” (21CML). The image of this benevolent God makes them closer and more personal, a close benefactor, and even a non-authoritarian teacher in life:

...a God who responds. He is not a distant God, he is a God of love, because no matter how many times you fail, no matter what, God always wants to keep getting closer to you and to give you the best, to teach you, he is a teacher, for me it is complicated to define him because he encompasses many things (...). He is a personal God (41EFB).

a) An intervening God

a.1. God image as a guide or inner teacher

¹ The interview code is indicated in brackets. First, the interview number is indicated with two digits. Then, in that order, the belief (C: Catholic; E: Evangelical; N: Unaffiliated), gender (F: female; M: male) and, finally, origin and residence (B: Bilbao-Bilbao; Ba: Bilbao-Latin American; Co: Cordoba; L: Lima; Mo: Montevideo) are indicated.

It is important and very frequent, more so in Evangelicals than in Catholics, the God image as an inner guide or teacher who accompanies them in their daily lives. Feeling that God is somehow guiding their steps helps these people to find meaning in their lives and even to establish healthier relationships:

Feeling that God is in many of the things I experienced, it is easier for me to give them meaning, to be happy, to seek healthier relationships with others (12CFB).

Some interviews also suggest that the person does not need human instances to guide them, as they already have God: “I do everything I do guided by the Bible, because the word of God is above the pastor, I do not serve men” (28EFBa).

Three levels of God images as guide can be distinguished. The first level is that of those who see God himself as guiding their lives, usually through prayer, on a daily basis and in a way that they know or can interpret, so they try to live or act accordingly:

I know that God speaks to me more than he listens to me and he listens to me and... well, I don't know, I have the faith that at all times he listens to me, he speaks to me, that is, he sees me. So, he knows, God doesn't need me to tell him anything, because he sees everything. So at some point I can ask him for something, but you do realize that he speaks to you when he says “hey, you're not doing well here”, “hey, that answer you gave”, “hey, you shouted at your husband today”, “hey, that..., I don't know, what criticism you made”. In other words, you do realize that, don't you? I believe that God speaks to you, you have to listen to him (01CFB).

A second level is that of those people who feel God's guidance mediated through the Bible, the example of Jesus or even through a saint. For example “Try to see where Jesus is walking and follow him that way” (34EMCo); “because it is the word of God, which gives me guidance in my life” (35EFCo); “Jesus is the one who helps me to be able to do things well” (28EFBa).

In this sense, God's pedagogical function is also shown in the adverse situations of life, which God uses to educate:

In those other situations God is also molding character. Even in my life, many of the frustrations in inverted commas were the things that left the best fruits in my life, on a spiritual level, on a character level. (34EMCo).

The third level is that of those people who do not immediately discover the God image as a guide in everyday life, but discover it later. Through this later discovery, they can find meaning in past life experiences that were lived as desolating: “the experiences of feeling empty, of feeling alone, God used it as if to attract me to his ways” (27EMBa).

Finally, from the interviews analyzed, it can be deduced that the God image as a guide can appear both in people who consider that God intervenes directly in people's lives and in those who emphasize that it is the believers themselves who must commit themselves to the well-being of others.

Example of the first case:

St. Jude Thaddeus I think he gives me a continuous and permanent miracle, a continuous miracle. Because for me, the fact that, as I said, he gives me light to make decisions, for things, for problems that I may have... I mean, you feel that he gives you light... Yes, he gives me light... he inspires you. Yes, I always ask him to give me light “give me a direction, give me someone”. For example, in the morning I had a professional issue and I was thinking “who should I call for such and such a thing”, I was thinking, I was thinking, I was thinking, when then, pin, he came to me, I said “hey man, a little help”, pin, he came to me...”... (20CML).

Example of the second case:

For me to be Catholic is to have God present in the decisions you make day to day, in how you act with other people. I think that being Catholic is a way of living, a way of thinking about other people, that I know that God is in them (22CMMo).

a.2. Direct or mediated “miraculous” God images

Generally, the interviews show that many people consider that God can intervene in their lives in a simple and sometimes imperceptible way (by guiding their steps, through prayer...), but sometimes there is a strong belief in “miraculous” or extraordinary God images, especially in the interviews with Latin Americans, where the word “miracle” appears frequently in the stories. It is also another way of manifesting God’s love for human beings, his concern for them; although in these cases there is, almost always, a prayer or request on the part of the believer. This type of “miraculous” God images can be direct and extraordinary (for example, God performs a humanly impossible healing); or indirect and mediated (God helps and resolves difficult situations through other people).

Example of direct and extraordinary miraculous intervention:

And I was, clearly to die, because already, I mean, the doctors had already evicted me, they wanted me to be baptized, they took me to the Church, they baptised me, because clearly, they thought I was going to die. And after the baptism, it says that on the second day I’m already recovering, the doctors were amazed by the thing that happened to me. I feel like that too, anyway, I feel like he’s always with me. (21CML).

While in this case it seems that the healing occurred as a consequence of the baptism, in other cases, the divine intervention seems to be an answer to the applicant’s prayers: “there are times when I was collapsed and they helped me all over the place, and it wasn’t because I went to church, but because I ask him and because I talk to him” (02CFB).

Examples of indirect or mediated miraculous intervention, either through the help of a person or participation in a church:

And I mean, the thing of, as I can tell you, of miracle, as you say, or the thing that God did for me is that, I thought, I was going to sleep in the street, in the end, I found a friend around, and he told me let's go to my house, sleep with me, I'm going to feed you, all of that. (21CML).

I was involved [in drugs] for about 3 years. And the only one who got me out was Him, and it wasn't that I went to a Catholic place and they put me in front of an image. No, I went to a Christian church, I gave my heart to God and They got me out. And I can prove it. (58EMMo).

b) A God who does not intervene and invites commitment

However, in many other interviews, God's action is neither direct nor even less extraordinary or miraculous. He manifests himself in a special way through people who show solidarity with others: "I believe that God manifests himself through the people who surround us, who care for us, who love us" (45EFMo); "my God is: always that I can, I do good" (08CMBa).

These people recognize in the interviews, explicitly or implicitly, that God is creator, but respects human autonomy, so that it must be people who commit themselves to a better world by following God's will. The task of transforming the world for the better is fundamentally human and extraordinary divine actions are not to be expected:

I believe that Jesus invites me to transform society, we have to be in solidarity and from there I try to get involved to do my little grain of sand to change (10 CMB).

Look, I am Catholic, but I don't believe that God has to bear all our burdens. We are the ones who have to carry things. Asking, sometimes I ask, but almost more I give thanks for what I have. I have a question[...] we blame God for everything when, in fact, it is not God. God is not an asshole. In other words, he tells us this is the path of good and this is the path of evil: you choose. You are the one who has to do things; it is not God who is going to take you. So then you choose. (23CMCo).

This idea that it is not so much to expect immediate action from God as to encourage a commitment to solidarity with others (whether or not they share the same religious beliefs) occurs more in the interviews with Catholics than in those with evangelicals.

Authoritative God Images (157 Quotes)

Authoritarian God images are understood here as those that show God as an authority who watches over people's moral and/or religious behavior and rewards them accordingly. This type of image implies that the believing person should behave in a certain ethical and religious way, following God's standards, in the expectation that God will reward Their behavior in this world or in the hereafter. This image is different from that of the teacher or guide in the previous section, who was more of a counselor than a moralist. Despite God's watchful and

scrutinizing gaze, which might seem to impose itself overwhelmingly, human freedom to act in one way or another is recognized: “God gives you free will which is your will, you choose what you are going to do with your soul, for the Bible tells you ‘either heaven or hell’” (44EML). Although at times this freedom may seem limited by God’s saving will:

I...when I go away from God...God always brings me back...one has to have the firm foundation, the certain belief that God exists and then that always makes you, no matter how much you want to go astray, it always makes you return to the ways of God (35EFCo).

However, the moral duty that comes from this authoritative and moral God image is not always conditioned by the expectation of reward or punishment. There are those who uphold this divine image regardless of future consequences:

You have to help in this world and you don’t have to expect that something will come to you in the next. (...). But for me the basis of being a believer is to practice what God has taught us and that is to help, to help our neighbor and to live by those simple precepts that God gave us (13CMBa).

On the other hand, God’s retributive action is not limited only to the future life. He can punish the sinner in this life. This is how an evangelical man understands it when interpreting the death of a woman who supposedly damaged his marriage:

I don’t tell God if you were right because I don’t wish evil on anyone, I always leave it in their hands, you see?, “Lord, you do what you have to do”. Well, there you have the woman, she died. She was healthy and everything, but well, there’s something. (38EMMo).

The references to the trials, the difficult and painful situations to which God sometimes subjects people can also be understood in this sense. As already noted, God can also punish in this world for actions which, being the fruit of human freedom, are considered unacceptable. A Latin American woman living in Bilbao tells how she split from a husband who physically abused her and years later met someone with whom she began a new relationship (which she describes as adulterous because she understands that, although separated, she is still married). When she was going on a date, he died in a car accident:

That day he died I got so angry that I said “I don’t care”. I left, I remember it was night and I went to a mountain and I started to blaspheme and [...] I can almost tell you that I had seen the hand of God snatching him away from me (29EFBa).

In these cases, whose images cannot be classified as “negative” since the interviewees do not express it in this way, they find a way to justify a divine action, which they experience as a punishment or cruelty, but whose final responsibility lies with the person (believer or not) and not with God. This is clearly expressed by 32EMB: “We punish ourselves; it is we who punish ourselves for not wanting to do what he commands us.”

However, sometimes the feelings of frustration or fear that this hard experience of God can produce are explicitly expressed: “I began to fear God, not the love I had for him before, but I began to fear him”; “... and sometimes you even feel betrayed by God” (44EML). In general, these manifestations of contradictions and justifications or rationalizations appear more in the narratives of evangelicals than in those of Catholics.

The image of an authoritarian God is not necessarily incompatible with the image of a loving God. Sometimes, both images seem to coexist relatively normally, although it is not always easy to harmonize them: “I have a God and I believe in a God who is a loving God (...) the Bible says that in death you either go to hell or to paradise, so to speak” (27EMBa). The following reference shows very well the difficulty of reconciling God’s mercy with his justice. However, despite the difficulty, it is not perceived as a seemingly contradictory paradox. God is simply not to be trifled with:

So I also understand God not as a..., as many people sometimes paint him, as a grandfather who is there, oh how affectionate, no, but as a truly powerful being, and then who also deserves that although he is thanks to his mercy and his love very close to my life, but also that he is not someone I can play with, he is someone I have to respect (33EFB).

“Hybrid” God Images (223 Citations)

Hybrid images are those that mainly fall into the following two categories: syncretistic God images and paradoxical or contradictory God images. Together, they form a very suggestive hybrid imagery.

a) Syncretistic God images

Syncretic or syncretistic images are those in which people combine, without appreciating any contradiction, aspects that the “orthodoxy” of their own religion considers to belong to different confessions or religions. This is the case, for example, of those who, considering themselves Christians, accept without difficulty the belief in reincarnation, the concepts of resurrection and reincarnation being very different from each other (Kehl 2003 [1999]). The following quote is an example:

but I believe that we are here because we asked for it, and I believe in reincarnation, the Church does not talk about it but I am convinced that it does, and that I am a total old soul (02CFB).

Another example of a syncretistic image is the case of a woman who, considering herself Catholic, establishes a connection between Amazonian and Franciscan spirituality:

... I don’t know if it is Amazonian religiosity, Amazonian spirituality, right? the otorongo, the feline beasts or the birds or the river or the moon, with the moon it is a very big connection that I also feel this way, super-powerful and

I also relate it a lot to Francis of Assisi with this way of seeing the world (25CFL).

Other interviews describe God not so much as a personal being but as a positive spiritual “energy” that dwells in each person, although sometimes the person does not perceive it because he or she is conditioned by an inauspicious social environment:

I think it is an energy, I don’t think it is flesh and blood, I mean, it is an energy and it is also in us, it is that golden aside, that spiritual part in us, that is God, what happens is that sometimes we don’t let it out, because here we are very conditioned by society (...) But it is a very beautiful energy that we all have (02CFB).

It is in the interviews with “non-affiliated” people, people who do not identify with any religious tradition, particularly agnostics, that the idea of the existence of an “energy,” sometimes diffuse and difficult to explain, which replaces the traditional idea of God, is most evident. An energy that somehow inhabits each person:

For me it is that I cannot prove that God exists but neither can I prove that he does not exist (...) I do not rule out that there is some kind of rare energy (...) I think we all have some kind of energy. (55NFL).

In other cases, in a similar way, there is talk of the transcendence of nature or the universe. A Cordovan who declares himself an atheist and “art mystic” states the following: “transcendence for me is the universe itself, the universe itself is transcendent” (52NMCo). In this sense, one could perhaps speak of a non-religious transcendent spirituality, although this study does not allow us to state this categorically. In the “unaffiliated,” another way of expressing the idea of God image is that of “mystery” or “something mysterious,” a terminology that evokes that of studies on the phenomenology of religion (Otto 1996 [1963]) and which also appears in other works (Ammerman 2014, pp. 23–55):

in dreams there are symbols, those symbols that speak to you without words it’s like it connects you to something that is mysterious that is wordless, mindless it goes beyond, well, all that for me is my way of connecting. (53NFCo).

In other cases, the image of mystery is one that evokes the mystery of life itself. In this sense, an agnostic states: “I feel that there may be something bigger than us, that can be called the mystery of life or whatever, but personally I find it hard to label it as a religion” (49NMBa).

This image of divinity or the divine as “mystery” is a way of saying that God is “not knowable” or fully graspable; a recognition of his total transcendence or ineffability. This God image is not a negative assessment, but a recognition that human beings cannot comprehend everything.

b) Paradoxical or contradictory God images

These are God images that can show perplexity, paradox, ambiguity, or even contrariness in the person. They occur particularly in those people who believe in a God who intervenes in human life and, logically, not in those who expressly trust in a non-intervening God who invites people's commitment to solidarity and respects human autonomy.

Some people recognize God's power and goodness, while at the same time showing disappointment at his apparent inactivity or lack of response to certain requests. For example, the following testimony:

that I was going to seek my refuge, my protection, my..., you don't know, I wanted to speak to God, just as I have made poems to him that I make him green, in the sense of anger. (04CFB).

Although the interviewees do not always explain clearly how they overcame or processed it, sometimes these contrarian images are overcome and resolved in various ways, in an attempt to find some kind of explanation. They are usually explained on the basis of God's wisdom (God will know why They have done it), as a consequence of their own actions being different from human actions, and even relying on some kind of compensation:

I said, no, only He knows why He does things. If He took my mother away it was for a reason, and I don't have to ask Him or claim all that from Him. He will know too, later on He will have something for me, something good. (21CML)

In some case, the explanation is to be found in a supposed and incomprehensible divine impotence:

He [God] sometimes can and sometimes cannot. There are many things that he could do but I don't know what happens that he can't. There are some understandings that I don't understand but well (38EMMo).

It is also noteworthy that the same characteristic is interpreted in a positive sense in some cases and in a negative sense in others. For example, the image of a God with a plan for each person or all-powerful is interpreted positively in some cases, but negatively in others: "Then I said and what use am I if God has done everything because he has willed it, I am superfluous in this world" (51NMBa). Something similar happens with the "incomprehensible" God image. In some cases, it is used to express perplexity in the face of situations that are considered unjust (as when 44EML says he feels "betrayed by God") while in others the term "incomprehensible" (49NMBa) is used to indicate that he is unreachable for human understanding.

Sometimes ambivalences can be experienced simultaneously. One can experience both a joy and a suffering that are interpreted as being caused by God, a "good part" and a "bad part":

So, [that day] marked me for the good and for the sad part, for the part that is not forgotten. The good part because my son was born, he was God's gift, the greatest gift I ever had, and for the bad part because my husband left. So, it's... the good part and the not so good part; we're not going to say the bad part,

because if God decided that it's because for him it was the best thing to do. So we're not going to say the good part and the bad part but the good part and the sad part. So... (18CFCo).

Along these lines, an evangelical woman from Lima describes how, faced with a situation of crisis and personal anguish, God told her to wait, which brought her peace. However, the wait is so long that it generates uncertainty:

...I was very distressed "Lord, what shall I do? What shall I do Lord, what shall I do?" I was like this, wasn't I? And one moment when I was like that, very troubled, anguished, the Lord told me "Wait" and it was such a beautiful thing... that even, I mean, I felt a peace, a supernatural peace came automatically [...] but I am still like that, it doesn't allow me to close that, that's why I feel a bit trapped because I remember that "Wait" because if He had said "No" ah, now, I have to close everything or if He wouldn't have said anything... so much time has passed, hasn't it? There is no answer, things go from bad to worse, and I remember the "Wait" but... what do I have to wait for? but well then, let's see what happens (36EFL).

God Images: What God Is Not

In some interviews, people show a rejection of certain God images and are very clear about what God is not or has ceased to be for them. Generally, these images reflect authoritarian stereotypes of God that are considered negative: he is not a militiaman, he does not judge us, he does not offend, he does not abuse people, he is not scary, he is not an asshole, he is not vengeful, he is not vigilant, he is not controlling. But, some people also reject the idea of an interventionist, problem-solving God: he does not "fix problems," he does not intervene in the world since the world is a human responsibility. Some even reject the idea of a creator and retributive God, especially when this retribution is oriented towards punishment. Some interviewees reject the image of the God who calls for heroes, needs rituals or is unresponsive to reason.

It can be said that the majority of people who clearly express a rejection of certain God images tend to be those who (a) moved from one religious denomination to another or who experienced some existential crisis, thus discovering different, more benevolent and humanizing God images, or (b) "unaffiliated" people who reject the "orthodox" God images of the religious denominations. The following is a testimony of an evangelical woman who was helped to discover a different God image:

It was on the corner of my house, they invited me and I started going. We started reading the Bible and I saw that there was a God of love, not of punishment but of love. It was important to discover that God is a God of love. That is very important. That he is not condemning us all the time is also very important. Love is everything in life. If you don't have love, if you don't have love for your neighbor and, first [of all], if you don't love yourself to love your neighbor and love God... They are not a God who punishes, who is not a God who condemns us. Jesus already did for us on the cross everything that needed

to be done: he shed his blood, we have forgiveness... So we are not condemned. If we repent of our sins and trust in God we will not be condemned or punished. (37EFMo).

Among believers, the God images that are most rejected are those that present him as controlling, authoritarian, punishing, or distant: “God is not there to say don’t do” (15CFBa); “he is not a distant God” (41EFB).

God is not a militiaman looking at the things you do right and the things you do wrong. He is not a God who condemns you and sends you bad things if you misbehave (45EFMo).

In some cases, it is rejected that God is omnipresent and is solving all people’s requests. Helping others is a human task:

God is not like the omnipresent God who is everywhere and grants you all your wishes, because some people get God tired. For me God is, just helping people (08CMBa).

That God does not devote himself to solving people’s problems is not always inferred from a discursive deduction. Sometimes it is the fruit of one’s own personal experience, a hard experience in which God has not intervened in any way to help the person. This resolute or saving inactivity of God does not necessarily lead the person to atheism, but to an indifferent belief. This image could be labelled as the “image of an absent God.” The meaning of this image is that God may exist, but for the person they are totally ineffective, irresolute, or passive. The following is the testimony of a woman who has suffered the loss of several loved ones and many financial shortcomings in her life:

I know that there must be something, there must be a God, because the world is made for something, but it doesn’t attract my attention very much, maybe because I’m very spiteful... (...) No, no, in reality I’ve always said that I knew there was a God but if he was somewhere, he never gave me any credit either, so... (57NFMo).

The image of a God located in specific religious or sacred spaces, such as churches, is also sometimes rejected. God can be everywhere and cannot be confined to specific spaces: “God is not in a church, God is not in a chapel, God is not in one place, God is everywhere” (23EFB).

Special mention should be made of the interviews of “non-affiliates.” Logically, they generally reject the God images that are traditional or common to monotheistic religious confessions. One Cordovan atheist responds as follows when asked what he thinks God is like: “No, no. Well, an all-powerful father who doesn’t exist” (52NMCo). A Montevidean who declares himself an atheist and a critical reader of the Bible but without faith, rejects, as unworthy, the image of a punishing and rewarding God:

So, if he is going to punish me for not believing in Them, then he is not such a clean and pure guy, he would have to punish himself. So if he pun-

ishes a person who is honest because he doesn't believe in him, and a person who is honest he favors and protects because he believes in him, then he is not worthy for me to believe in him. So, as a result of that, I developed my idea in that sense. (56NMMo).

This does not prevent the “unaffiliated” interviewees from generally showing respect or tolerance for religions, although they denounce their inconsistencies and contradictions or even find them to be based on irrationality or in a lack of culture. This respect for the religious beliefs of others is usually accompanied by a series of values that many of them share: coherence, honesty, solidarity.... Closely connected with these values, they generally show a marked social and/or political commitment, although, as mentioned above, this aspect is not part of the immediate object of this research.

It is interesting to note that some “unaffiliated” show a particular interaction with religion. Some of them do not accept the idea of divinity of religions and do not identify with any of them; however, they recognize that they may sometimes participate non-religiously in various religious practices or in different kinds of spirituality. This phenomenon seems to occur more among agnostics than among atheists, although can also be found among the latter. An atheist from Lima has no objection to going to church, even if he does not do so religiously:

I already identified myself as an atheist or at least an agnostic. I went to church to listen, to observe the tranquility, to feel a bit of spirituality even if I didn't believe in anything, but the church environment, the building and everything makes it possible to be quiet there, thinking something profound. (52NMCo).

Another Lima inhabitant, who declared himself agnostic and had received a Catholic education as a child, acknowledged some Taoist spiritual participation, as well as an interest in Buddhist spirituality:

So, that's what I did as a child but now I don't pray, I don't make the sign of the cross... being consistent with my discourse of being agnostic, I don't do any kind of Catholic religious practice but sometimes in the Taoist religion of the Chinese, because my mother is Taoist. (...) I'm going to look into Buddhism to see how it fits into the spirituality of religion, right? (54NML).

For her part, an agnostic from Lima who defines herself as a member of “the anime community” and acknowledges that she does not engage in spiritual or religious practices on a daily basis, values Japanese Shinto spirituality very positively and relates it to the anime (55NFL). A woman from Córdoba who does not believe in God but recognizes that there is “something mysterious,” considers that there has always been spirituality in her life thanks to the influence of her grandmother and her father, although in her family they are all atheists. She practices yoga in groups and is interested in different spirituality, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism (53NFCo).

Standardized Tables

To conclude this chapter, two tables obtained through the Atlas.ti data analysis tool are provided. It should be remembered that this analysis is qualitative and that these tables have no statistical value. They are not representative, but they give clues and indicate possible trends that allow the development of new hypotheses.

For those not familiar with Atlas.ti, Gr. refers to the number of citations associated with the code or group, and GS, in the case of the codes (first column), refers to the number of initial codes that constituted the corresponding final code; while in the case of the first row, GS implies the number of documents (interviews) that are part of each group. For example, the image of benevolent God has 316 citations and is constituted by the grouping of 22 codes. On the other hand, male Catholics make up 9 documents and express 394 quotations.

As indicated in the title, the data are normalized. As the Atlas.ti program itself indicates, “normalization makes the coding density of all the elements in the table equivalent. Each document is considered to have the same number of citations. The relative coding frequencies of documents that are not balanced can be compared with each other.”

Beyond the fact, already mentioned, that the majority image of those who declare themselves believers is that of a benevolent God who intervenes in people’s lives, what is striking in this table is that Catholic women seem to have a different God image from both Catholic men and evangelicals in general (Table 3). In particular, they seem to believe more in a God who invites human collaboration than in an authoritative God. Does this suggest that women, who tend to declare themselves religious in greater numbers than men, are also more autonomous with respect to religious authorities and their message? Quantitative studies should be carried out to assess the validity of this hypothesis. In this respect, the interview included a question on whether men and women were considered to live their faith differently and, in general, apart from evasive answers (I am not a woman/male, I don’t know how they feel about it), the responses generally considered that men and women lived their faith in similar ways.

It is also interesting to note the weight among the “unaffiliated” the idea of the need for people to be involved in responding to human problems. This group does not talk about God asking human beings for commitment, but they do talk about ethical responsibility.

The difference among women with respect to the authoritarian God image that appeared in the previous table is transferred here to Catholics in general (Table 4). Moreover, the image of the God who invites human beings to commit themselves to solidarity, who does not intervene on his own but, fundamentally, through people, seems to be stronger among Bilbao natives and among Catholics.

Another interesting aspect is the weight of hybrid images in almost all the groups: does this reflect the fact, at least among Catholics, that believers are distancing themselves from the institution? Or, rather, could it be thought that there may be different reasons behind the same image? These numbers make us to think, once again, on the need to combine qualitative and quantitative studies in order to better understand those processes.

Table 3 Gender/confession/normalized

	Men Cats Gr=394; GS=9	Wmn Cats Gr=588; GS=15	Men Evgs Gr=334; GS=8	Wmn Evgs Gr=682; GS=13	Men NA Gr=163; GS=6	Wmn NA Gr=236; GS=6	Total
Authority Gr=157; GS=14	53	27	82	81	12	25	280
Benevolent Gr=316; GS=22	140	144	136	129	24	20	593
Invites commitment Gr=103; GS=6	41	42	13	15	114	144	370
Hybrid Gr=223; GS=22	61	89	80	86	120	84	521
What it is not Gr=29; GS=18	18	11	2	2	42	40	114
Total	313	313	313	313	313	313	1878

Table 4 Dichotomies confession/territory/normalized

	Bilbao-born Gr = 348; GS = 16	Latin Americans Gr = 2049; GS = 41	Catholics Gr = 982; GS = 24	Evangelicals Gr = 1016; GS = 21	Unaffiliated Gr = 399; GS = 12	Totals
Authority Gr = 157; GS = 14	163	127	85	182	43	556
Benevolent Gr = 316; GS = 22	298	261	318	293	49	1170
Invites commitment Gr = 103; GS = 6	125	80	93	32	292	330
Hybrid Gr = 223; GS = 22	108	203	173	188	225	672
What it is not Gr = 29; GS = 18	5	28	30	5	91	68
Total	699	699	699	699	699	2796

Bilbao: refers only to those born in the village

Latin Americans: born in Latin America. Includes those still living in Latin America as well as those currently living in Bilbao

Discussion

First, the interviews analyzed show that there is no monolithic God image, but rather a great variety. This statement is also consistent with the results of other studies conducted on the Latin American context (Morello 2019; 2021; Rodríguez, et al. 2021), as well as with the academic literature that has reflected on this matter. A plurality of divine images coexist within the same social context, but also within any religious tradition. This polyhedral view goes beyond the social and cultural context and is part of personal biographies, i.e., the individual subjectivity: in general, interviews show that the same person tends to express his or her experience of the divine with a multiplicity of images. As Morello rightly expresses (Morello 2021, pp. 106–108), these images are rather metaphors of a relationship, such as God as father and friend.

In the examined narratives, this pluralism has some convergence points, such as the clear tendency towards images that symbolically convey divine benevolence towards human beings. This idea coincides with Morello's description of the divine in the case of Latin American populations, which tends to be understood as a protective supernatural power (Morello 2019, pp. 104–105; 2021, pp. 106–108). God is the creator of a world with purpose (by the way, in the interviewees' narratives this concept of creation is not opposed to a scientific interpretation). God watches people, shepherds them and becomes their strength. Sometimes his power intervenes directly by performing miracles (Morello 2021, pp. 108–110). This belief in God's miraculous power was already reflected in an earlier Pew Research survey (Pew Research Center 2014) and other studies (López Fianza and Suárez 2016; Suárez 2016). It also reminds what Marzal called "enchanted land" (Marzal 2002) and others "enchanted modernity" (Morello et al. 2017; Morello 2020; 2021).

The same tendency towards benevolent God images may be found in the research of Rodríguez et al., with the generic name “positive God images” (Rodríguez et al. 2021, p. 12). However, the analysis carried out in this work allows us to introduce some nuances that may be relevant. Although the protective divinity pointed out by Morello is evident, it seems important to distinguish within this image between two distinct cases: when this protection is carried out directly (miracles, support...), and when the believer receives it indirectly through everyday mediations. For some interviewees, divine benevolence is related to God’s action that leads him or her to goodness and eternal life. For others, especially in the case of those living in Bilbao and among Catholics, divine benevolence is not controlling, but leaves room for human responsibility and decisions. It is interesting to note that in several interviews, mainly with “non-affiliated” and Catholics from Bilbao, God’s action is omitted. Instead, the solidarity commitment in favor of humankind is emphasized.

Another characteristic of divine benevolence highlighted in the interviews is divine forgiveness and the offering of a second chance. This somewhat qualifies, but does not totally contradict, Lecaros’ study which argued that “very few” of the interviewees (Peruvian Catholics and Pentecostals) alluded to forgiveness (Lecaros 2017, pp. 589–590). It seems that the possibility of forgiveness is somehow present and relevant.

Furthermore, the perception of divine benevolence and protection analyzed in the interviews is fairly evenly distributed according to gender and religious tradition, an idea that was already pointed out (Rodríguez et al. 2021, p. 13). However, there is a significantly higher proportion of quotes referring to divine benevolence in the population interviewed in Bilbao than in those interviewed in Latin America.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that the reference to God and Their corresponding metaphorical expressions are proportionally more abundant in the Latin American interviews than in the Bilbao interviews. If this tendency is confirmed, it would need an explanation.

In addition, another characteristic already identified in other publications that is also displayed in this analysis is that the plurality of images is not necessarily coherent. Images that seem contradictory at first sight may coexist in one single experience narrated by the interviewee. These conflicting images were brought together in this research as “hybrid images” or “hybrid imaginary.” Morello does not apply to God images, but he also points out this idea of hybridization as he notes that several Christians believe in the incarnation and reincarnation at the same time (Morello 2021, pp. 113–114), a hybrid belief that is also reflected here. Rodríguez et al. note this hybridization of contradictory images of the divine, but do not elaborate it further (Rodríguez et al. 2021, pp. 13, 20). Both Morello and Rodríguez et al. suggest that these “hybrid images” often help people interpret why it is that a benevolent God does not intervene in experiences of pain and injustice. From another perspective, it has been noted above that other authors analyze how believers who show predominantly benevolent God images interpret the experience of unjust suffering (Sharp 2013).

In order to interpret this hybridization properly, another feature that appears in several of the narratives analyzed must be considered: the dynamism of the images. On the one hand, there is a contrast between past and present, which is also pointed

out by Morello (Morello 2019, p. 100). This contrast may well be related to the believer “in search” of Wuthnow (Wuthnow 2000) and Taylor (Taylor 2015 [2007], p. 340), as some of the interviewees explicitly mention: “this is a process, it doesn’t happen overnight.” This point merits further and more detailed analysis. On the other hand, as underlined by Rodríguez et al.: “believers elaborated processes of individualization and showed their autonomy from tradition to develop their own religious experience” (Rodríguez et al. 2021, p. 17).

Thus, hybridity and dynamism interact with one another. There is a multiplicity of images available in the socio-cultural context that the individual links (i.e., hybridizes) on the basis of his or her own personal journey, without concern for intrinsic coherence. But, these hybridizations can change over time. Both hybridity and dynamism express the autonomy of individuals to make their own syntheses beyond what the respective religious traditions to which they belong establish as a doctrinal body.

The “unaffiliated” who were interviewed also fall into hybridization, both in the case of expressions of divinity, and of spiritual and religious practices. Morello highlights that many unaffiliated Latin Americans do surprisingly believe in the divine, for example, between 9 and 10% in the Dominican Republic, Central America, and Brazil, and almost 50% in Uruguay and Argentina (Morello 2021, p. 97). This phenomenon is also seen in the interviews of this research, but less clearly.

To conclude the discussion, we will note three aspects that appeared in the analysis of the interviews that are not clearly identified in previous studies.

Firstly, the image of an authoritarian God is notorious although a minority. As described in the data analysis section, this image is expressed through a wide range of symbols: judge, retributive, punitive, punishing, vigilant, guarantor of morality, etc. It sometimes provokes feelings of fear, anguish, and dread, but these feelings are not always nor necessarily related to a subjective negative experience of God. This God image is indirectly displayed in Morello’s research, who points to it as one of the strategies for interpreting and giving meaning to the experience of suffering as a form of divine punishment or as a pedagogic tool employed by God (Morello 2021, p. 117).

This aspect is also reflected in some of the interviews of our research. On the basis of the quotations identified and analyzed, the mere description can be improved with the following information:

- a. There are notably more quotations of this God image in the interviews conducted in Bilbao than in those conducted with Latin Americans.
- b. The authoritarian God is more frequent among Evangelicals than among Catholics.
- c. In the case of Catholics, gender seems to play an important role since the number of quotations of the men interviewed is double compared to women.

Secondly, respondents refer to God by expressing at times what God is not for them. It is likely that this denial of what God is points to another relevant aspect in order to better understand people’s experience of the divine. The analysis carried

out in the previous section identified several images that caused rejection in some of the interviewees: interventionist, authoritarian, punitive. In this respect, there are several points that may be relevant:

- a. It is likely that a good proportion of the “unaffiliated” to any religious faith reject God and find reasons for their non-affiliation in these God images. Nevertheless, this statement needs further specific research. It was already noted that the study of the “unaffiliated” is drawing increased interest in both the Anglo-Saxon and Latin American spheres (Da Costa 2017; 2019; 2020; Lecaros 2015; Romero and Lecaros 2017). The results of the analysis conducted here suggest that those rejected images led some people to distance themselves from God during their personal journey, some others to modify their God image.
- b. The rejection of these images is related in several cases to what is referred to here as dynamism, i.e., it is part of a developing experience that more than once leads to change his/her religious affiliation. It is also an example of individualization of religious experience beyond institutional frameworks. During the process of personal change, the experience of God is freed from institutionalized frameworks, official practices, or sacred spaces. This phenomenon would be in accordance with Winnicott’s aforementioned concept of the “transitional object” (Winnicott 1953) applied to God images (Lawrence 1997): the God image is a transitional object, closely related to the person’s own image. In the already mentioned case, a believer who feels free requires a God who is unbound and respectful of human freedom. In a way, the self-perception and his or her state of mind, on the one hand, and the God image that he or she has, on the other, are mutually reinforcing.
- c. An interesting result of the analysis of the quotations expressing what God is not is that they are much more frequent in people interviewed in Latin America than in Bilbao. Similarly, they are more frequent among Catholics than among Evangelicals.

Last, the third aspect we want to bring out is the image of a God that invites believers to commitment and solidarity. This image is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of divine intervention, but underlines social or political commitment. In the interviews we worked with, it occurs more among Catholics than among evangelicals, but, in any case, this detail deserves further study.

Conclusions

God images are plural and ambivalent, as different images may coexist in one and the same person. In continuity with the results of the studies explained above, God images differ more between people than between Christian denominations. It is striking that the number of quotations of God images in the interviews of Bilbao residents is considerably lower than that of the Latin American interviewees.

Although there is a predominant image of a benevolent and caring God, the way in which this benevolence is understood varies. For some people, God intervenes in

the life of each person, whether helping or disciplining, to reach eternal life. For others, God is concerned about humankind, but has given the responsibility for human life and the world to humans; this is especially so in Bilbao, even more in the case of Catholics than Evangelicals. Some see God as a guide a priori while others interpret his will a posteriori, trying to understand what He expects of them.

The interviews analyzed display what has been called “hybrid God images,” a phenomenon that was already identified in previous studies. This hybridization has several aspects to consider. Firstly, it may be a sign of the autonomy of believers in respect of their own religious institutions, including different religious traditions. Secondly, it enables the believer to combine at the same time, without seeing it as contradictory, the benevolence of God and the contrariness, perplexity, and justification of God’s silence in the face of human suffering. Thirdly, hybridizations reveals a process of long life change of the religious experience as people have new experiences in the course of their lives.

On the whole, the image of an authoritarian God is little elaborated in the lived religion approach. However, it is significantly present in several interviews, although it is not distributed homogeneously when gender, geographical location, and religious tradition are considered.

In the study carried out, the description of what God is not was relevant. In the absence of a more focused study on this issue, the experiences reported suggest that the rejection of certain God images (interventionist, authoritarian, punitive) leads some interviewees to change their God image, and others to position themselves as “unaffiliated.” In the latter case, some forms of hybridization were suggestive; “unaffiliated” and believers share some spiritual practices, even in religious spaces, without necessarily sharing their religious meaning. This hybridization shows mutual respect among both groups and points towards future changes in the way believers and unaffiliated understand God image(s), an aspect that might merit further study.

Acknowledgements We are grateful to Gustavo Morello for allowing us access to and use of the interviews. We also thank the International Journal of Latin American Religions- Editorial Office for their invitation to submit an article for their prestigious journal.

Funding Open Access funding provided thanks to the CRUE-CSIC agreement with Springer Nature.

Data Availability All the interviews were conducted in 2016-2017 and form part of the database of a study funded by the John Templeton Foundation, conducted under the direction of Gustavo Morello to whom requests of availability should be addressed.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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