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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE OF GOD DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EATING DISORDERS AND EVENTUAL THERAPY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

Background: According to addiction researchers, there are two categories of addictions: addictions to psychoactive substances and behavioral addictions. The latter generally comprises gambling; however, a range of compulsive activities sustain pathological behaviors due to both the intensity of their occurrence and consequences that are borne by the individual. The prerequisite is that they are performed compulsively and persist even with negative consequences for the individuals and their environment. Eating disorders fall into this category. They are a cause of suffering and disordered well-being for individuals, whereas for social entities they pose a threat to social interactions (Tułowiecki 2018).

Eating disorders are never limited solely to the problem of nutrition. Nutritional deficiencies are only a visible symptom of the existence of other problems that are related to and even directly responsible for these disorders. There are several distinct types of eating disorders: bulimia (nervosa) (suffered by 1–2% of the population), anorexia (2–4%), and binge eating (i.e., hyperphagia, polyphagia; 4–5%). Classifications also include “eating disorders not otherwise specified,” which are characterized by episodes of binge eating and purging (less than twice a week), re-

peated chewing of food and spitting it out without swallowing, normal weight, and usually older age (Woronowicz 2009).

Eating disorders concern predominantly young women. However, it should be noted that the number of ailing men is steadily increasing. Although eating disorders can affect any person regardless of their gender, age, background, social class, or culture, the adolescence period is undoubtedly predominant for the expression of eating disorders (Nicholls & Barrett 2015).

Treatment of eating disorders is a difficult, long-term commitment, and its course is very diverse. The basic form of eating disorder treatment is psychotherapy, but pharmacological support is also sometimes required. Therapy involves identifying the causes and mechanisms of the disorders, mechanisms of compulsiveness, and an attempt to develop new eating habits. The effects are verified and applied in real life, especially in relationships with close family and friends (Murphy, Straebler, Cooper, Fairburn 2010).

Overeaters Anonymous (OA) offers support for people with the problem of overeating. As may be read in their informational materials, they constitute “a fellowship of individuals who, through shared experience, strength, and hope, are recovering from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors by working the Twelve Steps” (Overeaters Anonymous 2018).

In Poland, a network of OA groups has existed for a few years. These groups, as can be read on their website, describe themselves as “a community of people – from all social backgrounds – who meet to help one another solve a common problem: compulsive overeating. The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to quit compulsive eating.” The path of therapy leads through the Twelve Steps Program, which assumes the explicit role of a Higher Power – God – which each participant can understand individually. For believers it is God in terms of religion, for others it is some external force, the energy of the world, the group and the strength for abstinence experienced through the group (OA 2018).

The idea of God is also present in the second among the Twelve Traditions, i.e. rules for functioning of a group that is to realize its goal: abstinence, that is freedom from compulsive eating. This tradition reads as follows: “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God, as much as He may express Himself in our group conscience; our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern” (Overeaters Anonymous 1995).

Research aims: The current research aims to identify and describe an interviewee’s perceptions of God, i.e., a Higher Power. The interviewee was a 36-year-old woman recovering from eating disorders. The main research question was: how does someone’s image of God – a Higher Power – change during the process of

eating disorder therapy? Along with the main question, the research problem was outlined by supporting research questions: Who is God to the interviewee? What is a Higher Power? Are these terms equivalent? How do Overeaters Anonymous define a Higher Power? Is it a Person defined in a religious sense? Is it more the force found in the universe, the ethereal energy, the power of the group which can “restore our health?” How did the interviewee perceive God at the stages of her life that led to the eating disorder? Who was God at the peak of her disease? Was this a present or absent God? What events affected the transformation of her perception of God? Did the acknowledgment of addiction deepen the relationship with God-Person, or did it result in rebellion and distance?

Methodology: The research was placed in a qualitative context with the use of an interpretative paradigm (Schütze 1983, Rubacha 2011) using the case study method. At the time of interviewing, the informant had been suffering from eating disorders for 15 years. During that period she had already tried individual therapy for 8 years, which was followed by behavioral disorder therapy in an OA group for two years. It cannot be concluded that the therapy had been fully completed at the time of interviewing, or that the interviewed person had already worked through all of the Twelve Steps and accepted the Twelve Traditions. She herself said that she was in the middle of the Twelve Steps of her path in the OA group, with some steps being completed thoroughly, and some still left to be fully experienced and implemented. However, the researchers concluded this was acceptable because the recovery process sometimes takes a lifetime. Putting the examined case in time perspective is essential as, the researchers argue, case study examination is inevitably historical in its nature (Strumińska-Kutra & Koładkiewicz 2012).

The current case study focused on a 36-year-old woman who, for a number of years, had struggled successively with anorexia, orthorexia, and bulimia. At different stages of her struggle, she resorted to various therapeutic measures, with varied self-involvement. During that time, she experienced submissiveness toward the disorders, helplessness, and inability to face the disease. The woman has a university degree, lives in a large city, and at the time of the research was following the Twelve Steps path. It is essential for the research that as part of her participation in an OA group she acknowledged being powerless in the face of an eating disorder (Step One), believed that a Higher Power could restore her sanity (Step two), turned her will and life over to God’s care (Step Three), and confessed the essence of her mistakes to God and to herself (Step Five).

In a broadly understood qualitative interview, it is possible to study the way individuals experience and perceive their world (Schütze 2016a, Chase 2009). The distinctive feature of a narrative interview, on the other hand, is the focus on

specific elements of the interviewees' biographies. The current research was conducted in the form of a free, non-standardized, unstructured interview. There was a clear formula of autobiographical-narrative interview present in this form (Gudkova 2012) which allowed for a deep understanding of the interviewee's experience (Maison 2022, Schütze 2016b) through the telling of personal stories as experienced and interpreted by her, with her individual style, the form chosen by her, and personal means of expression. This is because this form of interview represents a form of constructing a story, telling it in one's own voice by assigning their own meaning to events (Scârnecki-Domnișoru 2013). Indeed, she was explicitly encouraged to verbalize her experience, emotions, and states (Kaźmierska 2013, Schütze 2006, Konecki 2000). The information provided in the course of the interview was strictly biographical, and specifically concerned the evolution of the perception of God and discovering Him as the Higher Power.

A series of six interviews were conducted between January 28, 2018, and February 28, 2018. Each of them lasted between 38 and 58 minutes, depending on the time availability and the tension created during that period. They were held in a place selected by the informant (her apartment), ensuring confidentiality and freedom of expression.

Case characteristics: The object of the analysis is the case of a 36-year-old woman suffering from eating disorder, who at the initial stage (from the age of 20, when she was slightly overweight) struggled with lack of acceptance of her body, considering herself "too fat" and "unattractive." Her impression of unattractiveness and disturbed acceptance were reinforced by a lack of love she experienced as a child of an alcoholic father. After moving from a small town and starting her studies in a large university city, she wanted to quickly achieve a commonly accepted weight level and make herself look more attractive. Starving herself for weeks let her reduce her weight, but the achieved state, despite the admiration of those around her, did not result in self-acceptance. Achieving her once longed for weight began to be accompanied by the fear of gaining weight, concern about her skin condition, appearing stretchmarks, and other traces of past excess kilograms. Her response to the anxiety was initially further starvation and then addiction to dieting. The number of calories provided to the body and obsessive weight control dominated the informant's life more than the obsession with losing weight. Dieting entirely dominated her life. The way of release was bulimia: the possibility of vomiting became a response to uncontrolled eating and the need to prevent weight gain. At the onset of bulimia, the interviewee entered into a relationship that after three years became a formalized marriage. However, the interviewee was subjected to emotional abuse, and after five years she broke off the relationship and moved away from

her husband. In the meantime, the informant behaved in a self-destructive manner, the details of which she did not wish to reveal. After some time, the marriage was dissolved by divorce.

After the marriage ended, the woman started individual therapy with a psychiatrist as she could no longer cope with the compulsive eating and vomiting. After a few years, in various circumstances of functioning in new emotionally unstable relationships and failing to be fully honest with the therapist, relapses occurred. Uncontrolled bulimia took complete control of her life, causing her to lose faith in her chance to recover. This state was interrupted by her contact with a friend who was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). This friend showed her the possibility of recovery through group therapy and the Twelve Steps.

The current case study, however, is not focused so much on the informant's eating disorder, but on her idea of God during the stages of her addiction and therapy. To embrace this case comprehensively, which is a methodological prerequisite for a case study (Strumińska-Kutra & Kołodkiewicz 2012), life events and episodes that may define the way of perceiving a Higher Power must be indicated. These events allow researchers to specify the examined case and outline its uniqueness, its detailed, atypical, and characteristic nature (Stake 2010). The events marking the informant's generally described religiosity, and defining the originality of her case, were her upbringing in a moderately religious Catholic family, where practices were not regular, a strong connection with parish life, especially away retreats, the experience of attempted sexual violence by a clergyman at age of 15, being blamed for the attempted harassment after disclosing the situation during her confession, her acquaintance with a few kind-hearted clergymen, distance to religiosity during her anorexia and bulimia, her divorce, a 4-year emotional relationship with a Catholic priest, and finally entering the Twelve Steps path and seeking spirituality, faith, and religiosity there.

THE IMAGE OF A HIGHER POWER

Admitting a defeat in the fight against one's addiction is a starting point for the addict's recovery. Acknowledging helplessness is the beginning of a new life, in which one can be happy and free. Only unconditional surrender allows people to take the first steps toward liberation and recovery. Admitting one's helplessness, consequently is a solid foundation on which one can build a happy and meaningful life (OA 1995). Since this moment is considered by the interviewed woman to be the turning point and most important in her life, her discovering and defining the Higher Power as liberating from helplessness will be the focus of this analysis.

The entire narrative of the autobiographical interviews began and focused on that stage of her experience, and her life story was viewed from the perspective of her present experience of God as a liberating Higher Power. For this reason, this view determines the shape of the present analyses, and the image of God at the stages of her therapy will be a constant point of reference.

The informant acknowledged her being powerless during a nighttime conversation with a friend, and member of AA, who had already gone through the Twelve Steps in an AA group during the holidays in 2016. She says, “2016 was a breakthrough, it was that July, the night of 17th /18th... It dawned on me... It was the day when I realized I couldn’t cope with anything... Realizing that I am helpless against what is happening in my life”

During that conversation, a friend told her about his struggle, his surrender, about a group therapy, and trips to Zakroczym¹. He told her about all these things after sensing her problems, indicating that his experience was strongly related to her helplessness. It made her “surrender.” She confesses, “For some time I hadn’t been able to cope with bulimia, so I decided to act like a lawyer: if you can’t fight with somebody, you can’t eliminate somebody, you must accept them.” At this stage, acceptance meant putting compulsive eating and vomiting on her daily timetable. She recalls,

I wrote all this puking into the schedule of my daily life... and I made throwing up at certain times a habit, and I already took it for my normal life, I had already gotten used to it, I already accepted that this was the way it was, that this was my life. But basically, I was tired of it... and somehow [my friend] started the subject, and I somehow got it off my chest... everything totally: how I felt bad about myself, how I felt bad about throwing up, ... that I had tried many times but there, in fact, I had never succeeded, ... and [my friend] gave me his Big Book of Alcoholics, it opened on the page with the Twelve Steps... I thought that was it. It was for me. It was what I lacked. And I felt with my whole self that it was what I needed...

The conversation and the discovery of the Twelve Steps were related to the automatic recognition of her powerlessness. In the course of her narrative, the informant even claims that the encounter with the Twelve Steps took place already on the ground of experiencing her own powerlessness, her bankruptcy, her helplessness, and the ineffectiveness of her previous actions, therapies, and lies to herself. She says, “And that’s how I managed to admit that powerlessness of mine for the

1 Zakroczym is a small town near Warsaw where the Therapy Centre for the Addicts and Co-addicts is located.

first time.” It was a moment of remembering God, for whom there had been no place among anorexia, orthorexia, and bulimia. She adds, “It was that moment of such reminding myself of God and it is this moment... it had been earlier... I had had this long period without religious practices, without God [...] and here it came back to me all at once like this...”

Acknowledging helplessness did not increase her low self-esteem. Admitting to bankruptcy, to impotence, was not equivalent to accepting bad judgment on the part of God – a Higher Power. Quite the opposite: it gave the interviewee freedom. She states, “There came the moment of encounter with the Twelve Steps... that I allowed myself to admit I had made a mistake... I fucked it up, yes...” In doing so, she did not feel negatively judged by God. On the contrary: she carried a conviction that no mistake would make God misjudge her, condemn her, write her off, or leave her alone. She adds, “I realized that whatever was going on, I was not alone. I gained a sense of security. There is Someone next to me. Someone who just always loves me and will always be there for me.”

According to the Twelve Steps, it is not the addict’s struggle that sets one free, but the helplessness that is the foundation for establishing a bond with a Higher Power. “True humility and an open mind can lead us to faith” (OA 2018). Acknowledging powerlessness is the beginning of facing oneself and reality. Admitting to helplessness opens one up to oneself, to the world, to others, and to the help of a Higher Power – God. “I began to see the world and be closer to myself,” says the informant.

Since then, I have been guided through life by the prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. I have had this prayer on my wallpaper and smartphone for a long time.

The interviewee claims that the discovery that she must no longer fight with being powerless, but that there is God who liberates her, gave her freedom. She explains, “It changed my life. I saw there was a way out of my hell, but a completely different one from what I had thought so far.” Up to that moment she had seen an exit in lying about her state, lying to herself, lying to those closest to her, lying to her therapist. Now she noticed she had to lie no longer. She is helpless and powerless. She cannot hide it from God and herself. This is the truth, but God accepts her nevertheless and even loves her.

From the very start, a Higher Power was identified not so much as some external esoteric energy, not as a group, not as a cosmic force, but as God – Person.

And it was specifically the Christian God, the God of her youth and childhood. She confirms, "God is the Higher Power. Definitely." Indeed, in her narrative, the informant admits that going to her first AA meeting with her sobering alcoholic friend, and then attending OA, she did not know that the Higher Power of the Twelve Steps could be interpreted as a group. She says,

Going to the first meeting I didn't know that the Higher Power could be something else than God. Only there I met first people who said they didn't believe in God, but that the Twelve Steps were close to them. It made me wonder if I could see it this way, that my group is the Higher Power. Because for many people, I came across such interpretations while reading the Big Book of AA, a group is the Higher Power. But I saw a group of people with similar problems... the same problems. [...] Though in my opinion, from time perspective, it was easier for me to see the Higher Power in God than in other people who had the same problems as mine...

The informant calls merely reading the Twelve Steps for the first time a meeting with God. She observes,

Reading Twelve Steps itself inspired me and made me realize: that could be the return to religiousness, to God. My first impression after having read the Twelve Steps was a feeling that it was nothing new, but... God, that's it! It is close to me! This is what I have lacked! It was coming back to the values I knew from the past, from my childhood...

The period of childhood and young age was, according to her, the time of being close to God and herself.

Most probably, it was the upbringing in a small town, family religiosity, including the religiosity of her parents and grandparents, as well as the local community that from the very beginning made her define the Higher Power in her mind as God, and God in the Christian sense. She states,

Yes, God in the Christian sense... [...] I find it easy, I simply believe it ... This is such an element... It is so that... there could be only one God, but in three Persons. in my opinion there is and that's it. That's what I get, I accept, God is like this...

This view was not even disturbed by an intense 3-month relationship with a Muslim man. Learning about Islam and establishing relationships with his friends did not change the Christian concept of God, but gave her some sense of religious tolerance. She sums up, “We came to the conclusion that my God and their God are the same. It could be the same father.”

During the individual and group therapy, the interviewee was exposed to Buddhist meditation. This resulted from her search for harmony, for herself, for time to experience herself, for tranquility. It was, as she claims, a transitional phase before discovering Christian meditation and adopting OA meditation style. However, it did not make her change her idea of God or abandon the Christian perception of Him. “I believe there is only one God. [...] There is only one God above us,” she claims, and “one can arrive at the truth within the framework of any religion.” On the other hand, she interprets religious differences as the result of historical processes and cultural developments. She argues that “all religions are equal,” but emphasizes, “my God is the Christian God.”

This image of God was discovered and strengthened during the OA group meetings. While she was talking for the first time about her life, her failures, about anorexia and bulimia, the young woman didn’t experience any judgment or condemnation, but only kindness and acceptance. She translated this experience into the attitude of God – the Higher Power. She says, “It must have come from the group. Nobody lynched me. Nobody said I was a bad person. I realized that even if I was to fall ten thousand times, God would still be with me.” The experience learned from the group helped her to gain confidence about God’s attitude of approval. According to the experience of acceptance acquired in the group, God does not find you bad, does not leave, does not abandon, does not get offended, does not leave anybody alone, but forgives, loves, and gives a sense of security. She adds, “I realized that whatever happened, I wasn’t alone. I was given a sense of security, there was someone next to me who just always loved me and would always be there for me...”

The informant compares that new relation to God to the relationship between a parent and their adult child. Parents whose children are grown up can no longer correct the behavior of their adult children who live their own independent life. She notices, “Parents may support their children, it’s difficult to control their behavior and decisions, but above all they can love them.” This love toward adult children is permanent, accepting, not associated with constant correction of behavior, but independent of mistakes, bad decisions, and hardships in life. In order to illustrate the above, she mentions the first time she joined an OA group, when she failed to suppress her emotions and had a major public conflict with a partner she had at that time. She recollects,

When I let my emotions go, I had a row with my partner, I told him off... I remember that was the first time I couldn't manage. [...] It was about some trivial things... I came home. I started berating myself about what I was doing... Yes, it was in August, a month after discovering the Twelve Steps... [...] The first time [since I joined the group] when I was so behaviorally drawn to vomiting. I was already thinking how bad I was, how nothing worked out for me... I remember I opened the phone. I took a glance at Facebook. The first thing that appeared there was a passage from the Bible: «Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you» (Iz 54,10) I looked at it and thought: fuck, I am not alone... Simply, I buggered it up. I did the wrong thing, but right... Keep going down that road! Don't turn back!

At another moment of hardship and return of bulimic behavior, the rosary became a sign of God's love, acceptance, and help. Since then, the woman has always carried one in her purse or pocket. She recollects,

I thought I was going to throw up. That's how I wanted to relieve my emotions... And somewhere there I put my hand into my purse, and there was a rosary... I always carry it with me... And that's when the rosary made its way... into my hand. And then I remembered that there was Someone next to me. I was not alone. Some piece of sense of security...

YOUNG AGE AND THE TIME OF EATING DISORDERS

God had not yet been the Great Absent at the first stage of her life – before the young woman discovered the Twelve Steps and along with them the image of the Higher Power – God as a Father. Brought up in religious conditions, having fairly religious but unsystematically practicing parents, attending school catechism lessons and herself practicing with varying regularity, she carried a deep conviction of the existence of God. Her view of God was strictly Catholic, drawn from her family home, conversations with her grandfather, and from the local parish. She says,

During my childhood and early adolescence, this God was there all the time and very intensely, even though my parents at that time were not regularly practicing. They were believers maybe always, but not exactly practicing... And in me, there had always been this need for such a contact.

And when I was at the age of maybe 15–19, it was the time of high school that was very much infused with the relationship with God...

The woman assesses that her subsequent image of God, by virtue of being rooted in childhood, always had a Christian and strictly relational character.

Important individuals at this stage of generating her own image of God were two men: a monk – Catholic catechist, and her grandfather. The monk created a kind of meeting place for young people in her hometown. Anyone could come there and be listened to. She says,

He liked us. His name was Roland. It was his religious name... I know he joined an order because his girlfriend had broken up with him. I think that's how he wanted to forget her. But I have recently found out that after some time he left the order and got married. He didn't fit into Church.

The informant has very fond memories associated with the monk, but she did not want to reveal them in full. She stressed repeatedly that “he had time” and “knew how to listen.” “He was genuine, sincere,” she says. “He was not afraid of difficult topics and difficult questions. He didn't pretend like other priests. He was honest. That's probably why he left, because he didn't fit into the institution.”

The other figure was her grandfather. “I always went to church with him, even when I no longer attended [the mass].” She claims, “He is the most important figure of my childhood.” The interviewee did not want to talk much about her grandfather. Memories of him reminded her of the unhealed pain of losing him. She adds, “He was someone extremely important to me. Incredibly!”

Asked in the course of the interviews about her personal image of God, the woman indicated the image of a father, a good, accepting one, who does not make his judgment dependent on one's success or virtues. The interview revealed that this was precisely the kind of father the informant lacked. She confesses,

My relations with my dad were rather difficult... When I saw my dad in such a post-alcoholic delirium and had a feeling of how hopeless, weak he was... I developed such contempt for him... I have never had such a father who could demonstrate something to me with his stance, with the way he is like, some kind of a role model...

The informant's father, as she sees him, was primarily demanding, always strict, always having expectations, he was never able to praise or appreciate her efforts either in public or in a face-to-face conversation. He set demands, he judged. On top of that, he was at that stage a drinking alcoholic.

The experience of an alcoholic father affected her childhood very strongly. There was a clear shortage of fatherhood and fatherly love. Perhaps this is why God was defined during the interview as a figure of an ideal father. She explains,

My God is good, full of love, forgiveness. And this very element I missed in my dad. My dad is a person who has a drinking problem, a person with a diseased soul, with ill emotions. And he has always been very strict with me when it comes to grades. Due to the fact I have always wanted to show him that I am worthy of love. I wanted to show him that I was better than I really was, that I did everything better than I actually did. But at the same time, with a note of resentment and revenge, I wanted to show him that he was not perfect, that he himself was weak... And my God simply allows for mistakes. I realized that no matter how stupid and hopeless things I would do, He would not leave me.

In the informant's own opinion, her overall view of God as good and loving was not affected by another traumatic event. At the age of 15, the interviewed woman experienced attempted sexual harassment by a local diocesan priest during her away retreat. He was taking care of a parish youth group and at this particular moment, he was leading a weekend retreat meeting several kilometers away from the parish. The priest's assault took place during an evening one-on-one conversation. "I hit back. I grabbed a crystal ashtray that was lying around and hit him so hard that he walked around in bandages for weeks," she recollects.

I ran away from that place. Instantly. I only took my jacket or a jumper and ran home through the woods. I ran all night long. In the morning I got to my grandpa's house. Everybody was horrified by my presence... Dad went to pick up the rest of my stuff at noon... I just couldn't stay there for the night. Everybody kept asking. I didn't want to talk about it.

As a result of the incident, up till now she has borne a grudge against clergymen, but this did not dominate her attitude toward God. Nor did the pathological reaction of the church world to her youthful confession of attempted harassment shatter her relationship with God. A trusted nun said it was impossible and that she had made it up herself. At the same time, the priest she made her confession to concluded that she herself was to blame as she "had provoked the priest." "After that I stopped going to confession," she says. "The next confession was before the wedding, but I didn't take it seriously. After all, this priest didn't take me seriously

either.” During the interview, the woman said she was more prejudiced against the institution of church, against priests, against rituals, rather than against God.

After graduating from high school and beginning her studies in Warsaw the informant started a new phase of her life. She wanted to be like the girls from Warsaw: to have a good figure and be found attractive. However, she was a little overweight. She says, “I had to lose weight at once. And I did... But I didn’t like myself. I had stretch marks. My hair started to fall out from starvation. Ringworm [of the skin] appeared... Horrible...” Then there was the dysfunctional commitment to diet. Followed up by “eating and throwing up” to maintain weight.

After “getting infected” with bulimia, religiosity was out of her life. She observes, “With each step closer to bulimia I was further away from God... The more bulimia there was, the more bulimia ruled my life, the more this God was pushed away... He was simply redundant...” When asked why He was pushed away, she concludes that in the life of a person whose existence is governed by compulsive eating and vomiting, there is no room for other values. Life is “managed” by food and vomiting and only by it. She points out, “It seemed to me that I, during this period, did not need this [i.e., religion].”

The lack of God, the disappearance of religiousness and bulimia meant a void in life. She recollects,

Over the years of being in bulimia, I lost myself. I walked around like such a dummy. I lived for things that had no value. The money that I earned I spent on food that ended up in the loo. Senseless! Senseless! Pointless. A [vicious] circle... And tiring... And living without such values... Focusing on food, on looks... Living without values is pointless for me...

The weakening of religiousness was associated with an axiological breakdown. She confesses,

During that period I completely changed my morality, the values I held dear... It was very easy for me to break even those values that I had previously been close to me. And the moments when I realized this were hard.

The change was accompanied by a kind of longing for the past world, for religiousness, for the God of childhood. It stemmed from a sense of deprivation of herself, missing harmony in life, lack of control over compulsions: “God! Take me away from here! I want things to be the way they used to be!” However, axiological change and compulsion-oriented priority left no room for religiosity. Instead, any

manifestation of it reminded of her “past” life, gone “stability,” loss of control over herself, getting away from “her own self.” She talks about the juxtaposition of those times with the past not in terms of “remorse” or “moral hangover,” but a painful, sad, and even helplessness-filled reminder of a normalized and balanced past. For her, religious reality and the reminder of the idea of God meant becoming aware of the painful contrast between the better “former days” and the dramatic “now.” She says, “Because God’s proximity was difficult, because it reminded me that I used to be a different person, just like that, with different values. Contact with God on a daily basis was a reminder of what values these were.”

Entering the path of eating disorder and losing control over one’s life also means losing touch with reality, with oneself, with one’s emotions, with the ability to feel oneself and the world. Compulsions, “like a greedy creditor, literally suck out all independence and our will to resist [their] demands” (OA 1995). Eating disorders, like any kind of addiction, mean escaping from life, creating for oneself one’s own inner, unreal world in which the addict tries to live. But it’s impossible to completely ward off reality. It gets into this internally created project. A denial mechanism is then created whereby the addict fights with reality. And since this is a fight doomed to fail, the escape route is provided by compulsions: eating and vomiting. This was experienced by the young woman in the bulimia stage. On the one hand, she lied to herself that “somehow” she was controlling her eating and vomiting; on the other hand, she had a sense of “losing herself,” of “walking away from herself.” “There was no room for God in such a struggle,” she confesses. “At the point when addiction cuts you off from emotions, from thinking, from experiencing difficult things... So during that period when this bulimia of mine was so active basically God was not there.” The woman talks straightforwardly about the period when bulimia completely took over her life. “There were also times when I threw up eleven times a day, and in such a life there was really no room for spirituality, for God...,” she says. With hindsight, she assesses that time as lost. She comments, “And I have taken a good dozen years of life from myself, a good twelve years...”

The time of her marriage was also a period devoid of religious manifestations. The interviewee states that both premarital confession and occasional religious practices did not construct her reference to the Absolute. There was even manifestation of irritation; for example, the failure to obtain absolution during an occasional confession at the time when she was living with her fiancé. The time of marriage, reinforced by experiencing emotional violence from an emotionally immature partner, was described as a very bad period for her well-being. At that time, there arose only the need for the husband to take control of the bulimia and force her to do “something.” She comments, “I wanted him to help me. And he was afraid ...”

Having her life dominated by bulimia, the climate of emotional violence present in the marriage provided her with a sense of despair, emptiness, helplessness, and a desire to escape. It was a world without hope, with no meaning, without life. It was a period without any relationship with God, despite occasional symptoms of religiousness. She confesses,

I just realized that it was in such a crap ass that I didn't have the strength to get up, I had no reason to get up. Why get up? To throw up? And I didn't have the strength to pretend anymore. I didn't want to pretend. I thought: 'I have to escape from here. To escape from the marriage, from these emotions, from all these things'

As a result, she moved away from her husband. However, the mere change of external conditions did not bring freedom or liberation from vomiting, and it did not restore well-being. Further lies to herself appeared. These involved the false belief that loneliness was terrible, that in any relationship it would be easier to control bulimia. She says,

Such a moment came after half a year... Oh fuck! What had I done? I was left alone! Alone! And we had even tried to get back together later, but it didn't work out anymore. It didn't work and that was it. Each of us bore such a grudge against the other that it just didn't work out anymore...

In retrospect, the woman views such thinking as lying to herself that a new relationship, the mere existence of a partner, would help by taking the initiative in healing her emotions. This attitude was a kind of shift of responsibility for healing to external factors. Casual emotional-sexual relationships, however, did not serve as a health-giving and motivating factor for therapy. She admits, "Yet I have always craved for something more." At that time she also held God responsible. The thought of him emerged at the moments of helplessness as a cry for help. She thought, "This is some kind of a disaster... God, what am I doing here?"

In the woman's assessment, the relationship that resulted in abstinence and health was the relationship with God – the Higher Power. It was a relationship unexpectedly discovered, novel in its own way, the existence of which she had not previously thought of in this respect. She says,

Certainly during this period of active bulimia, when the longing for my old self would return to me, I didn't miss God. God? No - I just pushed

that away completely. Atheism - not either. To me, God never disappeared. I did not doubt that He existed. He was just not present in life. I felt that I didn't need that. I missed myself, I missed being so full, enjoying life, enjoying all that it gives... it can't be hidden that this period I missed was characterized by Christianity, so I thought it would be nice to feel it back.

A positive aspect of such loneliness and feeling of helplessness was the desire to fight for herself. She recalls, "...that was the moment when I realized that I had to fight for myself. I started looking for a psychologist for myself. I started fighting for myself after I had moved out." At that stage, it was an individual therapy without reference to any Higher Power. After discovering the Twelve Steps and restoring the reference to God, the woman suspended the individual therapy she had undertaken. She says,

Since I started going to the Twelve Steps, I stopped attending the individual therapy. I found that there was no point in analyzing so much, digging into the past. I must forgive myself, forgive my father. I didn't feel the need to constantly learn why there are such psychological mechanisms in me. I no longer needed to chew it over to the full...

Entering the path of the Twelve Steps was a restoration and new start of a relationship with God. This relationship is about "entrusting life" and regaining well-being, harmony, peace. Individual therapy did not offer this. In the interviewee's opinion it is not even possible through group experience. She concludes, "It has always been easier for me as a believer in God to entrust myself to God than to other people."

EXTERNAL DISTURBANCES OF THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE HIGHER POWER

While analyzing the empirical material obtained during the interviews, it may be concluded that, in the informant's opinion, her relationship with God was not affected by various external events. It was her personal choices rather than external circumstances that defined her religiousness. From among the external factors, it was the traumatic encounters with clergymen that gave rise to her lasting conviction about the "inhuman" face of the church institution and anti-clerical and anti-institutional attitude toward religiosity. This was not changed by her contacts with "positive" clergymen in Zakroczym during Adult Children of Alcoholics and

Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families meetings.

One aspect of the anti-institutional dimension of religiosity is her distance toward confession, only partly motivated by traumatic events from her youth. She says, "I don't go to confession." However, this is not so much conditioned by previous unpleasant confessions as by the reluctance to recognize one's own experience as sinful. And since there is no evaluation of certain incidents as sinful, there is no desire to improve. This is what the informant in her sincerity sees as excluding her from confession. She admits,

Although I would love to have gone to communion at those stages when I most needed confession and taking the communion so physically, I would not have been able to say in agreement with myself that I would arrange everything in my life so that I could go to communion. I would have had to lie.

The kind of experience which she views positively and which she does not consider sinful, even though Church considers it as such, is her former emotional relationship with a priest. She says, "When I met him, he was ideal to me. [...] I bore a grudge against God for the impossibility of fulfilling this relationship." Unable to judge the relationship as a sin, the woman cannot confess the sin she does not recognize. She cannot say, either, that if she could turn back time, she would most likely not have re-engaged in the relationship. She confesses,

I would have to lie that I regret it and consider it wrong. I would have to lie. By saying that I regret it and I promise to improve. And it's hard for me to promise to improve if deep inside I just don't believe that my relationship was wrongful.

While discussing the relationship with the clergyman, she does not hold it against him that he has not left "the firm", as she calls it. She claims that he didn't leave, even though he had been preparing to do so. This relationship was interrupted, but she does not present a coherent narrative as to how it ended. Instead, she claims that there are still feelings in her for the priest. "Those were four emotional years which were and still are reflected in my life." And she recalls the feeling of resentment towards God for not letting her fulfill this relationship. She says, "I argued with God many times. [...] God who can do everything, why wouldn't He arrange things the way I wanted to?" Regret and complaints were her predominant emotions in relation to God at the time. She adds,

I hold it against God that the man was a priest..., that we met at such a point and not at another... Since God knew that he had always wanted to leave priesthood but was not yet ready at that time, why the fuck did He put him on my way?! Then, not a fucking moment later?! Or, since He's so good, He could have made us meet at a good time... at a good time for both of us.... Of course, there were giant complaints to God....

The very possibility of relating to God united, rather than divided, the woman and the priest at the time of their relationship. She observes, "On the other hand, we wouldn't have had common values that united us... the relation with God." Nevertheless, their religiousness was different. She says, "Some element of shared religiousness appeared in our relationship, because we would go to church together..." There were also heated disputes and even fierce arguments over religiousness and church religiosity. "He, who had experienced so much evil from those people and that institution, suddenly defended it... I couldn't quite understand it." The woman even admitted that at the beginning of the relationship she hoped they would both have a common relation with God. She mentions,

I had such good moments in this regard in the beginning... such proximity to God... I also made no secret of the fact that I wanted us to have it together. On one side me – him, on the other side – God....

Concluding, however, the woman emphasizes in her narrative that the relationship did not so much affect her relationship with God and her religiousness as it strengthened her anti-institutional stance. She observes, "That relationship rather contributed to the negative perception of Church...." This resulted from getting to know the intra-church mentality, the popish mentality, conversations about the formation of future clergy in seminaries, relations with superiors, homosexuality, and facts of sexual violence on the part of other clergymen. She admits, "This relationship, long, deep and intense... this relationship had an impact on the negative evaluation of this institution, on the attitude towards priests in general."

Thus, as the informant herself declares, it is not external factors but the internal choice that defines her relationship with God. And this aspect was the main and constant theme in each interview.

INTERNAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Apart from the encounters with the church institution and priests, the woman clearly and specifically identifies the factors connected with building her own religiousness, her personal relationship with God, and the support she experiences during the recovery stage. Zakroczym is a key to this segment of her religiosity. Hidden behind this name used repeatedly in the narrative there is the Sobriety Apostolate Centre in Zakroczym run by Capuchin friars. Located north of Warsaw, it provides individual and group support for addicts, co-dependents, and those coming from dysfunctional families (Prejs 2018, Florek-Mostowska & Racicki 2018).

The interviewee arrived at the Sobriety Apostolate Centre for the first time a few weeks after joining OA. She had been informed of the possibility of staying at the center, and was driven there by the same friend who had introduced her to OA. She explains,

Zakroczym was an idea of a friend who had gone through the Twelve Steps in AA much earlier, and who actually handed the Twelve Steps to me [...]. After the first meeting [my friend] gave me information that there were these ACA retreat days in Zakroczym [...] I went to these retreat days.

The woman attended weekend retreat days for Adult Children of Alcoholics and Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families, which included meetings, common and individual prayers, and thematic conferences, as well as day and night meetings for the participants. Attendees could freely choose which activities to attend. The interviewee usually went to mass, but never went to confession. She took advantage of one-on-one conversations with individual clergymen. She says,

It was there that I met Peter. He is such a monk who is a confessor [of my friend from AA], and a friend of him. That first conversation I had, it was long and difficult, it was so... it could have been a kind of confession....

She even made friends with the clergy of Zakroczym. She always referred to them by name and with great kindness. She mentions, "There I was shown such a somewhat human face of priests... They didn't judge me... They listened... When I said that I was in a relationship with a priest, no one there condemned me...." Zakroczym strengthened the informant's spirituality and religiousness. She also claims that it did not weaken her anti-clericalism and negative anti-church stance. "It didn't make me less anti-Church and anti-priests," she says.

Zakroczym became her constant support in the construction of personal abstinence, harmony, well-being, and religiousness. Depending on her needs, the woman took advantage of the various offers of Zakroczym. However, she finds the experience of community and spirituality to be the most important. She explains,

That was the human side of this Zakroczym that allowed me to develop my spirituality... A break from everyday life, work, shutting myself away for four days and being with people who have the same problems..., and combined with prayer. I realized that praying together could be fun....

An important factor in strengthening her religiousness was praying at mass among people who were not anonymous to one another. After getting to know other people's difficulties at the meetings, after preparing meals and doing the dishes together, after numerous daytime and nighttime conversations, in the informant's opinion, such a mass had a deeper meaning than Sunday mass in church, when you don't know anyone. She observes,

At the meeting, you get to know people, from the kind of side that is innermost, closest to them, most sensitive to them, most difficult. ... And there is that element that you stand at mass and feel such unity. I know the priest who says [mass]... [Mass participants] join hands...

According to the informant, in such situations "you listen to their speeches and pray in a completely different way... [...] There you have a feeling as if you prayed with your own family, so close, just like that..."

Apart from the group experience, the young woman also refers to her direct search for spirituality, God, and His harmony in Zakroczym. For this reason, she regularly participates in an annual four-day retreat in silence. There are no noisy meetings there; instead the emphasis is on tranquility, prayer, meditation, and silence. She explains, "Everything is done in silence, even eating and cleaning after it." She considers the time very creative and internally uplifting. She adds,

This is something that was very cool and complementary [...] such short meetings, reading a text, some brief commentary and parting to our rooms for an individual conversation with God... And here there were a lot of these individual prayers...

It is, above all, time for reflection, silence, and praying to God created on her own, not by church formulas. She says,

There, I didn't need to pray through fixed prayers, but through reflecting on my own life, conduct, emotions [...]. In such a reference to God... so, then there were definitely more such elements of individual prayer... These retreats in silence built my spirituality. [...] On a daily basis, I'm not able to devote so much time to myself... I felt my batteries recharged...

The interviewee repeatedly stated that the austere decor of the center and chapel in Zakroczym helps her in her prayer. The woman in general does not like paintings and sculptures that are representations of God the Father, and of Jesus. However, in Zakroczym she found a painting that helps her in her prayer. She observes,

There is the only image of Jesus that I like... [...] I saw this painting in the chapel upstairs... of Jesus, which, as I realized, was the first that didn't disturb me... this painting spoke to me... I realized that this God of mine had such a face [...] I even brought myself a copy and it is the only one that stands in my bedroom. And this is the only personalization that suits me. Others – not really....

Zakroczym and the time between the OA meetings constitute a kind of space for building a relationship with the Higher Power – God. It is done by means of personal prayer, daily devotion to God, prayer for serenity, and daily Bible reading. Assistance in prayer is provided by meditations from publications for AA groups. She says, “They remind of this spiritual aspect, reference to a Higher Power. There are comments there....” These meditations are sometimes supplemented by reading “The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous.” While not recited according to Church mysteries, the rosary carried in her purse is also a tool of assistance. It occupies the hands, and is a means of calming down and meditation – a mantra. She adds,

I try to pray every day. My prayer is talking to God. Proximity. Such building of such intimacy... I need such talking harder. I started picking up meditation by patting beads [...]. First, I started meditating on the beads, then when the moment came for the rosary, I changed the beads to the rosary.

The woman also claims that daily Bible reading is important for spirituality. She reads one passage every day. It's not always a text from the printed Bible, but often an app with the Gospel for the day. She assures, “I try [to read] every day....”

A religious ritual that the woman rarely practices is mass. It is rather occasional participation. She admits, "I don't quite find myself in church at such masses. I go to church occasionally. Either I don't need it at all, in which case I don't go, or I go regularly for a while..." In the woman's opinion, mass does not help in her relationship with God. However, there is, beside Zakroczym, a place for her to attend mass. The selection of the place is not based on experiencing mass in a communicative group, but on conditions matching individual needs. She says,

I used to like to go to Freta² at 9:00 pm, in the evening. The lights are out. There is less of that chatter. There is some different atmosphere.... It's easier for me to pray... During mass, I just catch such moments when I'm praying ...

In meditation, the woman is aided, in her opinion, by music. She has her own place in the apartment for meditation and her favorite songs. She explains, "Music, what I discovered at Freta [church] is that duduk. This kind of listening is a break from thinking... It's a bit of meditation, yes... It's the way I feel God very intensely in this music..." Beside music, meditation is facilitated by nature. She adds,

What makes it easier for me to get in touch with God and brings me closer [to Him] is nature... Getting away from everyday life, going to the forest, going for a walk, hugging some tree... And such a feeling: God is also here. Because there is God in nature, too... and in nature it's easier than in the middle of the city... at work...

The tools mentioned above, that are of both an individual and collective experience in nature, construct the spirituality of the informant. Therapy and group experience made it possible to know and feel acceptance, which was transferred to God – the ideal father. Spirituality is defined by the interviewee as relationship with God – the father. He gives free will as well as forgiving and accepting love. The woman is reminded of this, especially at times of crises and trials. She doesn't hide that "when in fear, God is near." This love brings harmony and emotional peace. It motivates, frees from accumulated emotions, and gives strength to reject compulsions. God and meditation are the way to calm emotions, to find yourself in a state of "normality" and emotional stability. She confesses,

2 At Freta street in Warsaw there is a church popular among young people.

When I'm so jittery, I'm aware that what I should do is go to God and contact Him in some way. [...] When I'm demotivated, I screw up any kind of work. So I need to be brought to that kind of tranquility. And at such moments I let myself play music... God, give me some peace! Let me not think about a thousand things at once...

Prayer and God are her means to calm the rush of emotions associated with the overload of tasks or responsibilities at work. They are a way to overcome pressure at work. She says,

Sometimes, when a lot of things accumulate, I get so delirious simply, I feel such an existential panic: I won't manage! Taking on anything in such a state is doomed to failure. I'll start doing three things at once... I won't focus on any of them... And I'm dropping everything... And I need to catch a moment for myself... God give me at least a little peace of mind!... even... And this God of mine is so close to me and so companionable a bit. It is not that I come to him on my knees and ask. Rather, I say, 'Come here and do something with me... Give me a hand... [The goal is] to release some of these emotions and calm down a bit...'

Faith and God also give meaning to life. After years of living with the sense of emptiness and meaninglessness, lack of direction, it was the encounter with the Higher Power that made it possible to discover meaning. The sense of life is, in her own words, "God, faith... My choices that follow, looking for such moments close to myself and close to God." Therefore, in the connection to the Higher Power she sees the meaning of life and the sense of recovery from bulimia, her struggle for abstinence. For her, "abstinence means being normal...I want this eating not to occupy my mind, as much as it used to." The meaning of life is taking care of oneself, which is assisted by God. This is also the object of her prayer, because the woman does not want to lose the well-being developed after recovering from addiction, as she puts it, "... Praying to God to help me with this..." This prayer also covers other, existentially less important issues. It is based on the acquired conviction that God is a father, that He is good, He is strength.

CONCLUSIONS

The current research, which utilized the case study method, allows us to conclude that the 36-year-old informant has an idea of the Higher Power as a rela-

tional entity, equivalent to the Christian vision of God. The interviewee's own words make it possible to confirm that the Higher Power for her is the Christian God, the God of the Bible, the God called charity in Christianity. It is difficult to determine unequivocally to what extent the image of the Absolute she actually carries in herself is Christian. This certainly requires a more detailed and comparative analysis. However, it is certainly God with whom one can enter into a relationship. This term, moreover, dominates the narrative about the Higher Power, and is confirmed by stories about specific situations in which the woman turns to God and expects to receive help from Him and sometimes gets it. The informant reinforced the important experience that let her perceive God as an accepting and non-abandoning father in a group by experiencing acceptance despite her flaws, mistakes, and life missteps. However, this is God, who as "trapped" in the church institution, is "blocked" by her through the constraints of clerical, outrightly pathological reality.

Analysis of the empirical material allows us to conclude that life experience has a clear impact on the dynamics of transformations of the idea of God, on the way God is perceived, and how God's features are defined. Emotional absence of the father, his distance from the adolescent girl, frequent criticism, and high expectations devoid of support, as well as the lack of love experienced due to the alcoholism, have left an imprint on the way God is described. God is defined by the young woman as an ideal father who has those qualities that the biological father was short of. In contrast, the definition of God lacks any characteristics and reference to the figure of the mother.

According to the obtained narrative, the image of God was not influenced by negative experiences in her youth and her life as a young adult: attempted sexual violence by a priest, reaction at confession to revealing an attempted act of sexual violence, foolish priests, or her relationship with a priest. These factors have impacted the informant's anti-clericalism and her strong distancing from the church institution. Church is viewed by her in a very negative way as a place of hypocrisy and influence, rather than as a religious community. The interviewee herself states that despite encounters with some good, kind, and humane clergymen, this has not reduced her distance.

Her religiosity, freed from being church-like, however, takes some institutional forms: she makes use of conversations with clergymen, the center run by the Capuchin order, church buildings, items such as the rosary, the AA prayer book, the AA and OA meditation manual, and the painting with the figure of Jesus. The tools for building her relationship with God – the Higher Power are retreats and meetings in Zakroczym (the retreat house), AA and OA meditation, serenity prayer, the rosary, the Bible, Gospel for every day reading application, meditation music,

and nature. In the course of this relationship-building, there is restoration of spirituality understood as a relation with God, in which one experiences unconditional acceptance, harmony, and emotional peace. For the interviewee, the Higher Power, defined as the Catholic God, is a necessary condition for recovery from eating disorders. She had already experienced the ineffectiveness of fighting on her own, and the turning point in her life, in regaining herself and normality, was recognizing her powerlessness and turning herself over to God's care. This experience is crucial for the current moment of her religiousness, as well as for the evaluation of any former experience and past states. This experience also provides a future prospect: building her life on abstinence, for which only the rediscovered God gives strength.

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE OF GOD DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EATING DISORDERS AND EVENTUAL THERAPY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

SUMMARY

The text aims to present the image of God – a Higher Power being discovered as part of eating disorder therapy and the changes in the informant within her life. The text is based on empirical material obtained through a case study of a person experiencing eating disorders, who started therapy in an OA group. Her eating disorders took the form of anorexia, addiction to dieting, and bulimia. While attending the group, the respondent goes through the 12 steps of OA, which assume acknowledging one's powerlessness against eating disorders, discovering a Higher Power which can make one recover, committing one's life to God – the Higher Power, and building a bond with God through prayer, regardless of the way God is perceived. The case study was conducted by means of a series of interviews with a young woman who declared herself to be a Catholic with a strong distance from the institution of church. She is a believer, occasionally practicing, with a high level of religious tolerance, anti-clerical, for whom God is a relational creature who comes to the rescue and gives acceptance – an idea of a perfect, unconditionally loving father.

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