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SUMMARY

God images and their role in the life stories of female incest survivors

This research examines the role given by adult women who have experienced incest, to their images of God in relation to their incest experience and in relation to their possible posttraumatic growth. The report of this research consists of four parts.

The first part, containing six chapters, describes what is already known in the field of core concepts which are addressed in this query namely, traumatization, coping, posttraumatic growth, incest and images of God. In a brief introduction in chapter one the boundaries of the study are indicated, namely Christianity as has taken shape in the Western world, and specifically in the Netherlands, and the confusing terms spirituality, religiosity, religion and belief are defined.

The second chapter discusses theories and research on traumatization. Traumatization is a more or less 'normal' reaction to an extreme, unexpected and very threatening event or situation, which has a large impact on the psyche and makes normal mechanisms of adjustment and/or reactions impossible. Traumatization is seen as a continuum with at one extreme a violent but restorable traumatization, and at the other extreme a structural and lasting traumatization. Incest is located somewhere along the continuum but where exactly is dependent on many factors. There are many psychological theories on traumatization and more recently neurobiological explanations have also been explored.

The psychodynamic 'Assumptive World' theory by Janoff-Bulman (1992), containing three basic assumptions, namely benevolence and meaningfulness of the world and the value of the self, is used to explain the effects of traumatization on the images of God, and vice versa the possible impact of the images of God in the process of traumatization and recovery. In fact, the religious variant of these three basic assumptions is to be found in the images of God.

In trauma, there are three complex factors which play a role, namely factors related to the event, to the person and to the context. These three are in constant interaction with each other. As well, the whole social context has a multi-faceted role. Traumatization can have many and long-lasting effects on cognitive, emotional, biological/physiological, behavioral, and interpersonal terrain. Recovery can be long and difficult.

Chapter three contains an overview of theories on coping and research accordingly. Coping is a complex process in which someone experiences a threatening situation or event, and then uses all kinds of conscious or unconscious mechanisms or actions to address the threat. Coping is distinguished from resilience, recovery and posttraumatic growth, and contains likewise a complex set of event-related factors, personal factors and contextual factors. Reli-

religious coping is a form of coping using elements of a religion. Religion and faith can be both a personal and a contextual factor. They can function as a source for coping or as a method of coping, they can contribute to achieving goals of coping or they may be the result of coping. They are an influential contextual factor because they belong to the macro system and the orientation system. Religion and faith are also a system of giving meaning to one's life. Coping and religion and faith are process variables of each other, they can mutually influence each other. Images of God are a core focus of Christian religion and Christian faith. This allows images of God to play a part in the coping process as well as that the coping process may have affect on the images of God.

Chapter four discusses the tricky concept of posttraumatic growth. This growth can be intertwined with processes of resilience, coping and recovery, but should be distinct there from. Posttraumatic growth, i.e. stable and positive changes after experiencing a traumatizing event, can occur in many areas. In connection with the three basic assumptions and their religious variant, the three broad areas of self-perception, interpersonal relationships and life philosophy were selected. Just as with traumatization and coping, in the process of post-traumatic growth we can distinguish event-related, personal and contextual factors, and the intertwining of these three.

Chapter five discusses incest in detail. Firstly incest is defined after which the history is discussed, a history composing of theory and research which only begun in The Netherlands in the 80's of the last century. The prohibition of incest is almost universal, but it's occurrence is also universal in all cultures and in all ranks and walks of life. According to a Dutch law passed in 2013, incest is a crime that is no longer subjected to a limitation period.

In The Netherlands an indication is that one out of seven women or girls has been a victim of incest. In at least 95% of the cases a man or boy is the offender. Incest is one of the most traumatizing events that can affect children. It is often experienced as extremely threatening and confusing

In cases of incest, we can also distinguish event-related, personal and contextual factors, albeit that with incest they are almost completely intertwined. Incest has characteristics that promote traumatization. Usually incest is repetitious or the threat thereof is ongoing, and it is almost impossible for the child to escape. Coping options are limited due to the (young) age of the child and the relative secrecy and close-lipped atmosphere within a family or relatives. Additionally, the first source to reach out to for help, which would be the child's parents, the family and relatives, is cut off by the act of incest. Incest takes place in relationships of dependence and trust, and occurs in an intimate area which is still largely unknown to a child. Talking about incest is therefore hampered. Incest is characterized by silence of offender, of victim and of the environment. Incest can inflict major damage to a child's personality as it is still in a developmental stage. Coping after a period of incest is a bifold task, first of all coping with the incest itself, and secondly coping with the effects and consequences. Incest can have many large and long-lasting effects on a victim, i.e. (psycho)somatic, intra-psychic, relational,

behavioral and on spiritual grounds. As indicated in Janoff-Bulman's model, mainly the basic assumptions of benevolence of the world and the value of self are damaged. When dealing with incest, it is better not to speak of "recovery" but to focus on "learning to deal with" the events so that victims may once again live their life.

Chapter six deals with images of God. The terminology is discussed, and concepts of God are defined. Formats of God images are indicated and compared to what the Christian faith or the Christian doctrine says. Different dimensions or aspects of God images can be determined from both psychological perspective and from theological perspective. Theory and research from a psychological perspective is about the formation and development of God images, about the psychodynamic object relations theory and the attachment theory. Important factors in the development of God images are parents and the relationship with them, age, gender, religious socialization and self-esteem. From a theological perspective, God images know a deocentric source, the revelation, and an anthropocentric source, the human experience. The relationship between these two is an exciting one, because the deocentric source can only be expressed in human language and images, metaphors and analogies. The risk that this brings with it is that God is limited to human concepts, making his variegation and being very different constrained. Another risk is that God imagery brings with it associations that are decisive for God, so God resembles man. Human language and image is time- and culture-bound, and may therefore lose its eloquence or can change its contents. Theological God images are primarily transmitted cognitively. Much research on God images and all kinds of factors that play a role in the developments is known.

The religious variant of the three basic assumptions is to be found in God images. This means that traumatization, i.e. damage to basic assumptions, could also lead to damage of God images, i.e. to his love, kindness and goodwill, to his love and concern for mankind and to his justice, control and meaning. Research on traumatization and religiosity shows varying results. Religion and faith are among the underlying schemes and are therefore more difficult to change, but a large number of variables plays a role in this. For traumatization as a result of incest, this can have a major affect on the child's (and later adult's) faith and on God images. Religious development can stagnate. Distrust, anger, insecurity or offender characteristics can be projected on God. Specific Christian notions of guilt, shame, forgiveness, abuse of power or justice may translate from the psychological to the theological field, in this case the image of God. The women's movement has characterized patriarchal Christianity as bad for women, especially for women who have been abused, stating that it contributes to the existence and legitimacy of incest. Moreover, this patriarchal Christianity was labeled as prohibiting a good recovery. Within the feminist theology these criticisms have been taken up and submitted to theological research for a deeper meaning. Hierarchically-dual relationships, strong androcentrism, exclusion of women, including language and images (of God), a negative vision on women, and a dangerous connection of love with violence (Jesus' death on the cross), are the main points of criticism with respect to this research.

God the Father takes a special place among the images of God. Association with one's own father is unavoidable, creating a high risk of reversal of the analogy. Moreover, in the Bible (as well as in theology) Father and father are regularly linked. It is a very strong metaphor which on one hand gives high risk of idolatry and on the other hand a high risk of meaninglessness. The dominance of this metaphor has in it the risk of dominating at the expense of other metaphors and is at the same time the least able to change.

In traumatization as a result of human behavior such as incest, the question arises of the role of God in all of this. This is discussed briefly in the theodicy and the different models. Within the mentioned theodicy models there is no room for man as one who deliberately wreaks harm. With incest survivors, the question arises what role they give to their God image with respect to the human evil they have experienced. This will become apparent in the empirical part of the research.

The second part, containing five chapters, starts with chapter seven and first of all shows and justifies the methodology and methods of research. The choice was made to conduct qualitative research from a narrative and hermeneutic perspective. The analysis focuses on the roles in the stories (the roles of God and of her) and the socio-cultural dimension in which, after all, the images of God are embedded. This research fits with the narrative and hermeneutical approach within the philosophical currents of social constructionism. In the field of practical theology, the field in which this research is located, there are several roles for the praxis in relation to the theory possible. There is a brief outline why was chosen for this investigation regarding the conversation between theory and praxis without prior normativity (of the Bible, Christian doctrine or theology). Ethical aspects of this research are also briefly mentioned. Data were obtained through written life stories and of eight stories (also) using a semi-structured interview. The nature of the data and its relationship to the literature are briefly discussed. The research ultimately used 57 stories.

In chapter eight, many elements appearing in the total scope of stories are shown, sorted by event(s), person and context, and illustrated with quotes. It is striking that about three-quarters of the respondents grew up in the 50's, 60's and 70's of the last century. The stories regarding the childhood of the respondents consequently show a relatively uniform image of society. Despite the different denominations to which the respondents belonged, a fairly uniform image is given of the churches, of the Christian doctrine and of God images from that period of time. Most important and most common (critical) points here are the power relations, the negative view on women, the taboo on sexuality and physicality, the separation of learning and living, the emphasis on guilt and sin, and the appropriate fitting image of God as the strict and punishing Judge. At the time of telling the story, the main bottlenecks in regards to the church and faith are the fourth commandment (honor your father and mother), the doctrine of guilt and forgiveness and silence in the Church and by the Church regarding sexuality and sexual abuse. Moreover, we can read that there is a lack of a positive, affirming

and reinforcing vision on women within the church. These women searched for (biblical) role models and meta-narratives who could connect their life story with God's story. These are hard to be found.

In chapter nine, the God images in the life stories are analyzed. First of all, an outline is given regarding which God images are included in the total scope of stories and how they have evolved over time. These God images are then broken down into the four dimensions that match a personal image of God, namely: attributions, relationship, passive acting and active acting. In the stories are also included abstract and impersonal characteristics, as well as characteristics befitting a pan(en)theistic or deistic God image.

The main issues that emerged from the stories are the love of God, his presence, being allowed to belong to Him and that He sees and knows her. God's active acting (support and assistance) after the incest experience is often mentioned. Of the 57 respondents, 23 of these relate positively to the afore mentioned aspects; 21 of the respondents are still experiencing difficulties with these four aspects, and 13 respondents experience these aspects very negatively (no love, proximity, etc.). In 19 of the stories, other aspects of God images are present in addition to the four dimensions. In a considerable amount of the stories can be read that no role for God had been found or foreseen which was complementary to the role of the victim. At that point, a meeting between victim and God was non-existent which then caused role fragmentation or role discrepancy for the role of God.

Subsequently the stories were divided into four groups, based on the perception of the God images at the moment of telling the story, namely: positive, negative, problematic or non-existent. For each group an assessment was made regarding which role was given to the God image, how the God image had developed since childhood and if there was a possible connection between the God image and the incest experience. Finally, we look at other factors than the incest experience, which have affected the images of God, either positively or negatively. At all points, there is wide variation in the stories, but it is clear that incest strongly damaged especially the relational dimension of the God images and vice versa that stringent images of God had a negative impact on the perception and incest recovery.

The Father image of God is analyzed separately. In 35 of the stories was told about this image. For seventeen of the respondents this has a positive image, for twelve a very negative image, for five it has tilted from a negative to a positive image and for one respondent the image has no content because her father was never there. It is clear that the comparison with one's own father is almost always made. The God image as Father appears to function in two ways, namely as identical to the victim's own (abusive and/or inadequate) father, or as a substitute for the earthly father. This applies to fathers as offenders as well as to brothers as offenders. The Father image appears to be relatively independent of the (other) God images and may or may not be damaged by incest.

In 50% of the stories, Jesus is mentioned spontaneously. He is mentioned in an almost exclusively positive manner, in his love and proximity, and in our relationship with Him. Rarely

his image is damaged by the incest experience. Jesus operates almost entirely independently of the God images, including the Father image of God. When talking about the role of Jesus, there is a large role differentiation.

The Holy Spirit is rarely spoken about. It is seen as a positive presence as it is not experienced as a person. It is a presence which is felt to be near, contrary to God who is characterized frequently as being far away.

The respondents were asked what God had to do with the evil actions that had happened to them (theodicy). A variety of answers was forthcoming. It is clear that many victims (still) struggle with this. The most pressing question was related to God's presence at the actual time of incest: "Where was He?". Then came the question: "Why did He allow it to happen?". At the same time, the knowledge that He was there and saw everything seemed to comfort most. Many respondents in one way or another "answer" to the suffering that has been inflicted upon them, by serving others who are suffering abuse or have suffered abuse, and also to bring about awareness of and to organize opposition against sexual abuse. However, this is not identified by the respondents as giving meaning to what happened. There simply is no meaning or sense to be made of incest, even within the framework of religion and faith. The role of God in this meaning making is almost non-existent.

Chapter ten tells us about posttraumatic growth. This appears to occur mainly in areas of self-perception and philosophy of life. God hardly has a role in the first (self perception), but in the second (philosophy of life) the changes and growth are often attributed to God and his help. The fact that little growth is indicated in the area of interpersonal relationships, is consistent with what is known about the damage caused by incest, namely in the field of trust and security, the basic assumption of the benevolence of the world. This damage appeared to have continued into the relational dimension of the God image.

Chapter eleven ultimately contains a short summary of the major results of the research.

Part three contains a reflection on the main results. First of all, we look at the three basic assumptions, then the religious variant and the three growth areas. Subsequently we look at the links between these three groups of concepts. These groups are connected, both in injury as in recovery, but the strength of the connections differs. The application is made to the possible impact of society and the Church for the restoration of the basic assumptions and the religious variant thereof for survivors of incest. For both society and the Church there is a role in the prevention of sexual abuse. Incest is not an individual problem, but (also) a social and ecclesiastical, i.e. a Christian problem.

We then reflect on the God images as encountered in the stories, and the roles they play in light of the Bible and Christian doctrine. Strong and supporting roles are those of God as a helper, as being loving and close by. For incest survivors, especially the love of God is under pressure, both on the part of the survivor's experience as well as on the part of revelation (explanation). Victims show that they see the role of God in the Bible and Christian doctrine as

being limited to that of the Merciful and Forgiving. The only role the victim sees for herself is the complementary role as being Guilty. There is no place for her as a victim, which hampers her connecting with God. However, there are many other roles for God present in the Bible, some of which may indeed be complementary to her role as a victim and a damaged person. A larger role differentiation for God is thus necessary.

Subsequently, the risks of the dominant God image as Father are discussed. In psychological terms, there is the obvious confusion of father and Father, which can develop negatively for incest victims. In theological terms there are few opportunities for differentiation in the Father image of God which can lead to role rigidity. This can then cause a clash between image and reality, with the result that it becomes a dead or empty metaphor.

In Jesus, in his image, the supporting and healing roles for God become concrete. In the differentiation of his roles, it appears to be possible for most respondents to meet Him, and through Him, to sometimes meet God. Roles of Jesus have healing aspects.

The Spirit is especially positive because its proximity and because of its lack of personal characteristics. Moreover, the Spirit can add a feminine aspect to the strong male images of God.

There is much reflection on the role of God in human evil (incest), in light of the Bible and Christian doctrine. God's providence is then raised, and as well his revelation and mystery, the biblical complaint and indictment against God, the appeal to his justice and the call to duty, the consolation of a future without evil and suffering. Of the existing theodicy models, not one is equitable or just. The women struggle with the plan or objective model; the compassion model seems to be the most comforting. But then two new models are discovered: the model of distance in which God and incest are kept completely separate, and the model of use, where it is believed that God can use the evil and suffering of incest, but without Him being agent in it, and without any preordained plan or objective is thought or mentioned. In the first model, God has no role, in the second model God may be a positive presence. Both models offer room for mankind, for Satan, for fate or for coincidence as agents of evil. The answer to human harm must be one of protest and resistance, and the pursuit of justice and righteousness. In the life stories the process of meaning making to incest mainly concerns "doing something good with it". Except in considerations about theodicy, God images hardly receive a role in the process of meaning making.

The central and dominant Christian doctrine of guilt and forgiveness, which in psychological sense turns out to be devastating for incest victims and survivors is much criticized. Possible other more wholesome lines and aspects of the Christian doctrine are mentioned, such as brokenness and reconciliation, liberation of (evil) powers, right and justice, recreation and hope. Extensive discussions were held on the central Christian notion (or requirement) of forgiveness, and the practical implementation thereof. Forgiveness in light of incest is a very complex issue, which poses questions regarding the Christian interpretation of this concept. Forgiveness between God and man, and forgiveness in human relationships cannot be com-

pared or confused. Forgiveness is a process, a path that can/should be taken and psychologically can be healing for the victim (and maybe the perpetrator as well). The ancient penitential and confessional practice of the Roman Catholic Church does justice to the complex process of forgiveness between victim and offender, in which God (the absolution) is only involved in the latest stage.

The research contains a brief mention of the vision on women within the Church and the Christian doctrine, as well as the major lack of supportive and empowering meta narratives for women.

Finally, some characteristics of the stories are compared with what is known and can be found in present literature.

Part four first sets out the conclusions. These relate to the impact and consequences of incest, the damage to faith and to God images, the elements from the Bible and the Christian doctrine that damage an abused child and hamper recovery, and the effect of narrowing the biblical message to that of guilt and forgiveness. Next, the research question is answered. Finally general recommendations are made as well as recommendations for further research, and recommendations specific to the ministry, for theology and preaching, for the Churches, and for professional assistance.