WHEN GOD FEELS ABSENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SEARCHING FOR GOD IN ADOLESCENCE

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Counselling and Human Services, Columbia Bible College, 2017

Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

in the

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

November, 2020

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experience of searching for God from the perspective of adolescents in Christian communities. Hermeneutic phenomenology was the primary method that was employed to complete this investigation, though it also drew from Personal Existential Analysis (Längle, 2003) and personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019). Five individuals were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, yielding results that took the form of six key features of the phenomenon of searching for God. These features revealed that searching for God appeared as a relational, paradoxical process that involves: (a) suffering, (b) questioning and doubting, (c) longing for authenticity, (d) saying "yes" to the process, (e) unburdening, and (f) striving to help others. These findings revealed that searching for God is akin to the adolescent's existential task of becoming oneself as they move away from old understandings of God to find something that is more congruent with the emerging self. The results of this study are an invitation for counsellors and church leaders to support and encourage the unfolding of this process in the adolescents they work with.

Keywords: searching for God, religion, spirituality, Existential Analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology

PREFACE

This research project was approved by the Trinity Western University's Research Ethics Board on November 23, 2018 (REB file #18G19).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Derrick – Thank you for always inviting me to become more fully human and more fully myself. Your gentle guidance and consistent support have left an indelible mark on my personal and professional development. I am so grateful that we were able to work on this together for the past few years.

Mihaela – Thank you for helping steer this project toward the version that it is today. I am so glad that you always listen to your 'gut' and have let yourself be challenged by this work. I'm thankful for the rich discussions that it has yielded, and I hope they don't end here!

Raela – You have been by my side from start to finish. Thank you for encouraging me on the frustrating days and for helping (or forcing?) me to celebrate the small victories along the way. And thank you for the sacrifices you have made as you've supported me through it all. I love you!

Kristin – I think back to our many chats in the rain after research lab, and one specific conversation during a Crisis Counselling class. You have helped me get closer to my own experience of searching for God. Thank you for being there, for listening, and for letting me support you in your own thesis work.

Existentialism & Spirituality Lab – This lab has been my home for the past three years. It has stretched me academically and expanded my knowledge in countless ways. But more importantly, it has been a space to 'show up' and be honest about the challenges of being human. To everyone, past and present, who is a part of this lab, I am deeply grateful for you. I will miss you all.

Mom, Dad, and Jen – I always know that home is a place where I can receive your love and kindness (and food!). This has been such a respite for me over the past few years. Thank you for your questions and curiosity about this project and for being my cheerleaders along the way.

Community Group – Justin, Tatiana, Josh, Makaela, Russ, Kyleigh, and Emily. Thank you for inviting me to be vulnerable with my ongoing journey as I've wrestled through what it means to live authentically. And thank you for supporting me through the ups and downs of this project. You all are so important to me!

The CPSY Faculty and Students – I feel so much gratitude in my heart as I reflect on the past three years at TWU. This program has been my home. Thank you, faculty members, for your endless care and commitment to our learning. And to my peers—Ajay, Daniel, Dave, Seb, Matt, Céliane, Carli, and everyone else—I have so much love for you all. It was a joy to go through this program with you all by my side.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the lonely, spiritually-desolate, questioning adolescents who simply want to be seen and accepted for who they are. To my brave participants, and to my younger self. Thank you for your honest struggle; you have truly amazed and inspired me.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One—Alone. The darkness is so dark—and I am alone—Unwanted, forsaken—The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable—Where is my faith?—even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.
>
> - Mother Teresa

God, where are you?

Why can't I feel you here with me right now?

Have you left me?

I scribbled these questions in my journal as I sat alone in the dark basement of my parents' house, too afraid to tell anyone that I was not OK.[1] Tears filled my eyes, but they were not tears of sadness. They were tears of bitterness, of exhaustion. And the wrinkled pages of my journal reminded me that this was not the first time that I longed to conform to the darkness around me. It felt like the pain was unbearable; I wondered how I could keep going like this. I used to feel alive, connected, secure. But now things were different; the God that I was told would meet me in my pain was nowhere to be found, and the people around me did not know how to help. I felt hopeless, desolate, numb.

Looking back to that time in my life, I can now see that much of this turmoil was rooted in a deep-seated desire for connection and belonging amidst an ever-increasing flurry of questions and doubts about faith and spirituality. I was looking for answers about who God was

[1] I will be referring to myself in the first person in this study. This is consistent with the methodology utilized in this study, as a main tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology is that the researcher impacts and is impacted by the research process.

and what I was supposed to believe, but even more prominent was my desire to have a community around me that supported my quest for answers. What resulted was a tumultuous, disorienting adolescence that left me wounded and aching, but with a passion for joining with others during this confusing time of life.

My Background

Although my experiences will be shared in detail later in this thesis, here I will provide a summary of where I came from to provide you, the reader, with a frame of reference for what will follow in this study.

I was born into a family that maintained a strong evangelical Christian identity. Consequently, I found myself existing within a social world that was heavily influenced by Christian customs, beliefs, and values. From a young age, I was taught that God was my true father and that the teachings of the Bible were the authoritative source of truth. I was told that I did not need to fear death, because Jesus' sacrifice conquered death, and that a relationship with God would be the only thing that could truly satisfy my soul. So, when I entered adolescence and found myself feeling utterly empty and dissatisfied, I wondered what I was doing wrong. Shouldn't I be happy that my salvation was secure because of Jesus' death and resurrection? Shouldn't God's love fill me with an overwhelming sense of peace and fulfilment? Shouldn't I have some sort of certainty that any of what I was raised to believe was actually real? This flood of questions proliferated as I started to become more critical of my worldview. And with these questions came an overwhelming sense of isolation, sadness, anger, and hopelessness. I thought that I was losing my soul; I feared that everything I had known to be true was a lie. And I felt unable to tell anyone about my experience because I feared that in doing so, I might lose the only community that I had.

Present Study

With my experiences as a struggling adolescent in mind, I set out to uncover how others wrestle with religious questions and doubts during this time of life. I wondered if other teenagers would report similar experiences or if people's unique contexts would change how they grapple with these issues. It seemed to me that if the phenomenon that I experienced in my adolescence was, in fact, prevalent during this time of life, then it would be important for us to understand it at a deeper level so that we can help those who are currently in the midst of it.

As such, I settled on the language, "searching for God" as a foundation from which to explore this phenomenon and begin an investigation. I found that the psychological literature contained a number of constructs related to searching for God, but that overall, there was a notable absence of qualitative research on religious and spiritual concerns. In reviewing texts from within the Christian tradition, I came across far more experientially-rich notions, such as the dark night of the soul. The present study was therefore designed to address the gaps in the psychological literature by adding phenomenological descriptions to the largely theoretical constructs. This was done through the guidance of the research question, *what is the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities?* In answering this question, my aim was to: (a) respond to the notable gaps in the psychological literature on religious and spiritual concerns, and (b) offer counsellors, youth workers, and pastors descriptions of searching for God that might inform their work with adolescents. Perhaps if such individuals had a deeper understanding of the spiritual situations of their questioning clients or students, they would be able to adjust their approach accordingly to better serve this population.

Thesis Outline

I will begin this thesis by providing an overview of the situation of the literature on constructs related to searching for God. I will then turn to pastoral and religious writings to survey writings within the Christian tradition for similar notions to what I experienced as an adolescent. This will transition into a discussion about how spiritual issues show up in adolescence and how spiritual concerns are handled within certain psychotherapeutic frameworks. I will then discuss how the current situation of the literature has led me to design the present study and where this project will fit in the broader context of the field.

Following this, I will highlight the method that was used to conduct the study: hermeneutic phenomenology. Here I will also include an outline of the various procedures that supported this project as well as the ways in which this study followed guidelines to ensure its overall rigour and trustworthiness. Next, the findings will be presented, followed by a response to the findings that includes the theoretical and clinical implications of what was found. The thesis will conclude with a chapter that outlines the various ways that I practiced reflexivity throughout this project.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

I began this project wondering if the world of psychological research had anything to say about my experience of searching for God. I was curious if previous research had revealed anything about the felt sense of spiritual dryness and disconnection that plagued my adolescence. Had this topic been grappled with already? Was there a need for one more voice amongst those that already exist in this field? What was the context for my investigation? These questions undergirded my journey into the world of research on religious and spiritual issues. In this chapter I will describe what came of this review and how the present study is situated amongst the extant literature.

I will begin by discussing how God is widely understood in evangelical Christianity. I will then define the terms religion and spirituality, as they will be used frequently throughout this project. I will then outline the present context of research on religious and spiritual issues in psychological research, paying specific attention to Pargament's (2013) developmental model of spirituality. I will highlight how various constructs—quest, religious and spiritual struggles, and religious doubt—fit within this model but ultimately lack experiential, qualitative depth. I will then turn towards pastoral and religious writings to show how some of the notions used in these texts more adequately describe the felt sense of disconnection from God. A discussion of the importance of studying this topic in the adolescent population will also be included, followed by a brief review of how spiritual issues have been addressed in psychotherapy. I will conclude by discussing how the present study exists to bridge the gap between the religious/pastoral and psychological worlds by producing a language for the experience of searching for God that can be useful for counselling psychologists and others. Ultimately, this chapter will help you, the

reader, understand the backdrop of the present phenomenological investigation of searching for God in adolescence.

Key Terms

To situate the present study within the context of the existing literature, key terms will first be defined. First, I will discuss various understandings of God, including how God is perceived in evangelicalism and how, for some, this has shifted with the rise of faith deconstructionism. Then, I will take a look at terms that have garnered much debate and discussion in academia and elsewhere: religion and spirituality. Here I will discuss the varied definitions of these terms throughout psychological research as well as the existential-analytic tradition. This section will help clarify the meaning of these terms when they appear in future parts of this paper.

God

Who is God? Is God a male-gendered father? Is God an all-powerful being in the sky? Is God a person? A spirit? A force? The conversation about who, or what, God is has been had across worldviews for centuries; as such, it cannot be fully represented here. However, given the religious and cultural context of the participants in this study—evangelical Christianity—I will make a few notes about how God is understood in this tradition.

God in Evangelical Christianity. Evangelicalism[2] is a trans-denominational movement within Protestant Christianity that emphasizes the centrality of the Gospel as a means of achieving salvation. Its origins can be traced back to the Christian revivals of the 18th century, with leaders such as John Wesley and George Whitefield paving the way for later influential proponents like Billy Graham and John Stott (Wolffe, 2015). The movement has overlap with

[2] It is important to note that in this section I am making statements about evangelicalism as a whole. The core tenets of evangelicalism are in constant flux and therefore cannot be fully represented here (McLaren, 2010).

other branches of Christianity that highlight the experience of salvation being solely possible by grace, through faith in the atonement of God's incarnate son, Jesus Christ (Stanley, 2013). In other words, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are of utmost importance to evangelical Christians, as they offer humans an opportunity to restore a previously-estranged relationship with God. Therefore, in this tradition God is often perceived to be the source of love. The act of sending Jesus to die for the sins of the world is seen as the greatest sacrifice, which evangelical Christians often consider to be the outpouring of God's deep love for the world (e.g., 1 John 4:7; John 3:16 English Standard Version).

Aside from being the source of love, God is also understood to be a creator who is triune and relational (Grenz, 1998). God is seen to be a creator because the Christian scriptures open with the declaration that, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). This creation narrative considers God to be the source of all created things; God is the one who created something out of nothing. But, according to evangelical Christianity and various other Christian worldviews, this creative God is not simply one transcendent being who looks down upon creation. Rather, this God is triune. God the father, God the son, and God the holy spirit makes up this Trinity, presenting God as paradoxically one person and three persons at the same time. And with this belief in the triune God comes the concurrent belief that this God is inherently relational. Because God is three persons, God is thought to be the perfect representation of community.

These descriptors—love, creator, triune, and relational—are not the only words that have been used to describe what God is like in evangelicalism. Countless other attributes have been attached to the concept of God in this tradition over the years (e.g., omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, immutable, eternal, etc.). Yet, these words still do not tell us who

or what God is. Though this is a difficult question to answer, it has been broached through the writing of various Christian leaders. For instance, Grudem (2005) considers God to be "the highest source of information about himself" (p. 21). He continues, noting that "if there was a higher source of information about God, then God wouldn't be God" (p. 21). The field of Christian apologetics has provided a similar definition of God, drawing from Saint Anselm of Canterbury's ontological proposition that God is "a being than which no greater being can be conceived" ("Ontological Arguments," 2019, para. 2). In other words, God is seen to be the greatest being imaginable and the creator and preserver of all things.

God in Post-Evangelical Christianity. Although the participants of the present study are likely to have been influenced by this evangelical understanding of God, it is also important to note that some proponents of this tradition have shifted towards reimagining their understanding of God in a way that departs from the traditional conceptions found in many evangelical circles. Authors such as Peter Enns (2016), Rob Bell (2013), Richard Rohr (2019), Brad Jersak (2006), Peter Rollins (2011), and others have written about how their respective faith journeys have involved deconstructing previous beliefs in the service of finding a more congruent and expansive worldview. For instance, Bell (2013) has discussed how his emerging spiritual journey has led him to consider God as "the ground of our being, the electricity that lights up the whole house, the transcendent presence in our tastes, sights, and sensations of the depth and dimension and fullness of life, from joy to agony to everything else" (p. 15). This understanding of God moves away from the evangelical conception of God as the ultimate being and towards God as a life-pulse and source of energy within us. Rohr (2019) similarly considers the God of the evangelical container to be too small. He speaks of God as a divine flow, an infinite mystery, and "anything that draws you out of yourself in a positive way" (p. 52). Rollins (2011) offers a

radical take on the idea of God through his rejection of the God that people use as an idol to fill the gap in their lives. He considers a new understanding of God to emerge "where people are gathered together in love," and "where the sick are healed, the starving fed, and where those who dwell in death are raised to life" (p. 108). Many other authors have provided similar and differing re-imaginings of who God is and what God is like. The common thread between many of them is an openness to a God that transcends the container of the evangelical tradition and who may be something other than the greatest conceivable being.

This trend has attracted an increasing number of individuals who were raised adhering to an evangelical faith. In citing survey research conducted across the United States, Gushee (2020) notes that there has been a sharp decline in proponents of evangelicalism, with millennials—those born between 1981 and 1996—being at the forefront of the shift to a post-evangelical belief system or complete religious disaffiliation. He goes on to say that there have been many reported reasons for this change. For example, some ex-evangelicals have left their previous beliefs due to "what they believe to be specific offenses against them personally . . . like clergy sexual abuse, sexist exclusion and mistreatment, and every kind of indignity against gay, lesbian, and trans people" (p. 2). He claims that others have left because of what they consider to be intellectual problems within evangelicalism (e.g., biblical inerrancy, evolution), or because they consider the ethical posture of evangelicalism to be unethical.

In light of this decline in evangelicalism, many individuals have been left searching for a spiritual home that is more congruent with their values and have gravitated to communities that centre around faith deconstruction and post-evangelical thinking. However, due to the fact that evangelical Christianity is still a popular subculture in the geographical region that the research investigation takes place in, it is likely that when the word God shows up in the data of the

present study it is rooted in an understanding that has been influenced by the evangelical tradition. In other words, the participants of the present study are likely to have ideas of God that align with the evangelical tradition previously discussed.

Searching for God

If God is the all-powerful, all-loving being that the evangelical tradition purports, or the energy that animates life, as the post-evangelicals seem to suggest, then what does it mean to search for God? The short answer is that *searching for God* does not have a set definition. From my experience, I know that it includes a feeling of disconnection from God and alienation from community. However, in designing this study I did not want to limit my understanding of this phenomenon by defining it solely according to these things. In other words, I resisted coming to an exclusive definition of searching for God so that my pre-understandings would not interfere with the emergence of the phenomenon in the participants I was to interview.

If there is no set definition of searching for God, it is reasonable to ask why these words were selected to describe the phenomenon at the heart of the present study. In short, the research team decided on this language because it offered a good starting point from which to launch an investigation. The word *searching* seemed to capture the dynamic, ongoing nature of the experience of questioning, doubting, and longing, while the inclusion of *for God* broadly indicated what I perceived to be the focus of the search. Therefore, when I reviewed the extant literature, I was looking for how searching for God was understood by others. Was my experience as an adolescent already a well-documented phenomenon? Was there already research that provided better language for this experience? I was hoping to find studies that articulated the experience of questioning, doubting, longing, and feeling disconnected from God and others. And although I came across a plethora of blogs and pastoral writers who have

documented their struggles with faith and spirituality (e.g., Starr, 2015; Rolheiser, 2018), I only encountered a few constructs that seemed similar to the phenomenon, the closest being *quest*. I will discuss these constructs later in this chapter. First, however, I will walk you through the ways that other related terms—*religion* and *spirituality*—have been understood in the psychological literature.

Religion and Spirituality

In psychological research, religion and spirituality have had a multiplicity of definitions over recent years (Pargament et al., 2013). Presently, there is no uniform definition of either construct on which all scholars agree. Pargament and his colleagues (2013) note that this diversity is perhaps warranted, as it may reflect the richness and complexity of spiritual and religious life. Their tentative definitions have been widely used by scholars in recent years. They define spirituality as "the search for the sacred" (Pargament, 1999, p. 12), with sacred referring to aspects of life that are perceived to be manifestations of the divine, and search indicating the ongoing journey of spirituality (Pargament et al., 2013). They define religiosity as "the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality" (Pargament et al., 2013, p. 15). With these definitions, one can see how religion and spirituality overlap; here, spirituality resides at the core of religion.

These definitions are prevalent in the literature; however, they are far from being the only accepted ways of understanding these words. In a review of the varying definitions of these terms, Harris and his colleagues (2018) compared definitions for spirituality, religiousness, faith, and the sacred. Some of the definitions of religiousness they reviewed were: "the systematization or codification of spirituality" (Bolletino, 2001, p. 93), a "system of beliefs in a divine or superhuman power, and practices of worship or other rituals directed towards such a power"

(Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975, p. 1), and "commitments of beliefs and practices characteristic of a particular tradition" (Peteet, 1994, p. 237). Definitions for spirituality they reviewed included, "the experience of and integration of meaning and purpose in life through connectedness with self, others, art, music, literature, nature, or a power greater than oneself" (Burkhart & Solari-Twadell, 2001, p. 49), "the presence of a relationship with a Higher Power that affects the way in which one operates in the world" (Armstrong, 1995, p. 3), and "the way one lives out one's faith in daily life, the way a person relates to the ultimate conditions of existence" (Hart, 1994, p. 23). Clearly various authors have similar, yet distinct, ideas of what these two terms represent. As I considered these definitions, I was left with the impression that religiousness involves a systematic and ritualistic approach to the transcendent, while spirituality involves a connectedness or relationship with the transcendent.

After Harris and his colleagues (2018) reviewed the many divergent, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of spirituality, religiousness, faith, and the sacred, they offered new definitions with the hope of providing useful heuristics "to guide further exploration of spirituality, religiousness, faith, and the sacred" (p. 15). Their new definition of spirituality is, "a faith concept referring to a search for the sacred involving a relationship with an ultimate concern that is in some way meaningful" (p. 14). Similarly, they defined religiousness (including religion, religious, and religiosity) as "a faith concept referring to ritual, institutional, or codified spirituality which is culturally sanctioned" (p. 14). They deemed faith to be synonymous with spirituality and religiousness, while sacred was defined as "a faith concept referring to manifestations of the divine, existential meaningfulness, or an ultimate concern as perceived by an individual" (p. 14).

As I read these definitions, I appreciated their conciseness. I particularly found the definition of religiousness to be helpful, as it seemed to synthesize numerous important aspects of religion without becoming convoluted and wordy. However, I could not help but notice that the definition of spirituality was quite abstracted and disembodied. It seemed as though this definition reduced spirituality to the pursuit of a relationship with something beyond the self. The authors were claiming that spirituality was external—something that can be practiced or pursued that it is nothing more than a meaningful search for the transcendent. This did not seem right to me. Although I do think it is possible for such a quest to be manifestation of one's spirituality, I do not think that spirituality can be reduced to a cognitive endeavour. Does spirituality not involve mystery, emotion, bodily sensations, connection to other people, connection to life itself? Is it not wired into the very pulse our being? Does it not reveal itself in moments of creativity, when I sense in my core that I am becoming myself, that I am doing something good for the earth, that I am embodying the divine flow within me? In my review of the definitions offered in the extant literature, there seemed to be less of an emphasis on understanding spirituality in a way that could include these dimensions. As such, I turned elsewhere for a definition of spirituality that could be used for this study.

An Existential-Analytical Definition of Spirituality

Alfried Längle has been influential in the development of the phenomenological and person-centred therapy known as Existential Analysis (EA; Längle, 2012). His definition of spirituality resembles the deeply person-affirming values of EA. From this perspective, spirituality is the basis of existence; it is a person's ability to enter a circumstance—to be touched by life—in order to understand it. Spirituality, according to Längle (2016) is:

> an experiential, spiritual openness towards a greatness that exceeds the human being . . . it is an essential layer which humans can experience as the origin of their personhood, indeed, of existence itself, where they can experience the ultimate being kept. (p. 47)

In this definition, spirituality is not only our experience of who we are at the core, but also of something that transcends ourselves. It is an ability to connect with the deepest, truest parts of who we are through our engagement and openness to the world around us. This understanding of spirituality aligns with the definition posed by Ronald Rolheiser. Rolheiser (2014) believes that spirituality is far more primal and ingrained than its common representation in modern society. He considers spirituality to be what we do with the unrest of our souls. It is where our passions lie; what we do with the dis-ease we find within ourselves. In this way, Rolheiser and Längle both agree that spirituality is built into the core of our being. It is our response to the fire within us, our openness to experiencing that which is beyond us but also within us. This existential and mystical framework of spirituality expands on the cognitive definitions previously discussed by connecting spirituality to the core of our personhood. As such, this definition of spirituality will be used to illuminate this study and support the personal-phenomenological nature of its design.

Constructs Related to Searching for God

I have indicated how my journey through the psychological literature left me without a clear understanding of the experience of searching for God. Despite this absence, I did come across certain constructs that appeared to be related to this experience. These constructs include quest, religious and spiritual struggles, and religious doubt. Furthermore, I came across a model that highlighted how these constructs might fit into the broader context of one's spiritual journey. In this section, I will first offer an overview of this model to provide a framework for the

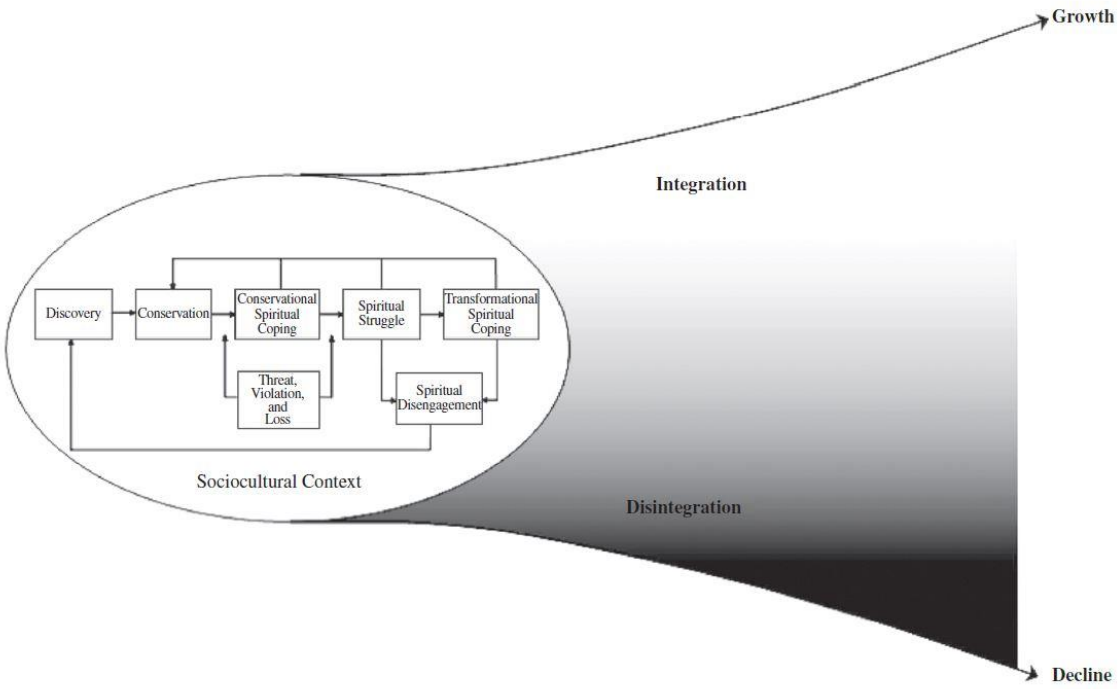
constructs, which I will discuss next. Overall, this section will highlight the current situation of psychological research that resembles the experience of searching for God.

Pargament's Nonreductive Theory of Spirituality

The field of the psychology of religion and spirituality is vast. It has seen much proliferation over the past decades, providing us with important information about the effects religion and spirituality have on well-being. For instance, religion and spirituality have been found to help people cope (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013) while providing a sense of hope (Soenke et al., 2013) and meaning (Park, 2005). Pargament (2013) has been a particularly influential contributor to this field, providing extensive research and commentary on the way humans engage with and are impacted by religion and spirituality. One of his most well-known areas of study has been religious coping (e.g., Pargament, 2001); however, his influence has included work on spiritually integrated psychotherapy (e.g., Pargament, 2007) and other aspects relating to the human search for the divine. Although I previously indicated that many of the conceptualizations of spirituality in psychological literature are largely cognitivist and insufficient in addressing spirituality holistically, Pargament's (2013) model of spirituality (see Figure 1) is compelling in its elucidation of spirituality as "a search for the sacred" (p. 260). This model represents Pargament's attempt to convey an understanding of spirituality that resists reducing religion and spirituality to purely psychological, physical, and social processes. It highlights the ever-changing movement of spirituality, noting the presence of discovery (learning of something perceived to be sacred), conservation (efforts to hold on to the sacred), and transformation (changes in the approach to the sacred) in spiritual development.

Figure 1.

Pargament's (2013) model of the search for the sacred.



This model demonstrates how the presence of religious and spiritual struggles fit into the bigger context of the search for the sacred. Namely, it considers spiritual struggles to be a prerequisite for either disengagement from the search for the sacred, or profound changes to one's understanding or approach to the search. Highlighting the non-static nature of spirituality, Pargament (2013) notes that once a transformation takes place, the individual typically will return to a state conservation, "to sustain a relationship with the newly transformed understanding of the sacred" (p. 266).

Regardless of what specifically causes someone to experience a spiritual transformation—and what happens to them as a result—this model is of import to the present study because it considers spiritual struggles to be a catalyst for this type of change. And, as I

will discuss below, the constructs in the literature that include spiritual-related issues loosely align with the experience of searching for God that is the focal point of this project.

I will now discuss these constructs, first focusing on quest, as it appears to be most closely connected to searching for God out of all the notions presented in the psychological literature.

Quest

Batson's (1976) quest orientation is a dimension of religion that emerged as a response to Allport's work on religious motivations. Allport and Ross (1967) had considered people to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated by religion. In their view, "the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion" (p. 434). In other words, the extrinsically motivated person would use their religion as a means to an end. They might attend religious gatherings and claim certain ideologies simply to maintain or establish social relationships. In contrast to this, the intrinsically motivated person believes in their religion and might attempt to live their life accordingly. They see their religion as an end, as opposed to a means to an end, and may consider it to be the most important aspect of their life, following its teachings as closely as possible.

Batson, however, found that Allport's framework was incomplete. He suggested that in addition to extrinsic and intrinsic religious motivations, a third dimension should be added. He devised the concept of quest to respond accordingly (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b). According to Batson and his colleagues (1993), a quest orientation to religion is one that avoids oversimplification and trite answers. It is a stance that embraces the complexity and ambiguity of life and may or may not include an affirmation of a transcendent

reality. Rather than considering religion as a means or an end, quest is about the search for truth. Batson and Ventis (1982) state that:

> An individual who approaches religion in this way recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters. Still the questions are deemed important, and however tentative and subject to changes, answers are sought. (p. 149)

The addition of this third religious orientation was met with mixed responses from the academic community. While some embraced it, as noted by Batson and Schoenrade (1991a), others doubted its legitimacy (e.g., Hood and Morris, 1985). For instance, Donahue (1985) wondered if a quest orientation was more about agnosticism or anti-orthodoxy rather than anything to do with religion. In response to these critiques, Batson devised a scale, hoping to assess the degree to which individuals honestly face existential questions while resisting clear-cut, pat answers (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b). This scale has been used in multiple follow-up studies that have since expanded the influence and applicability of the quest construct. For instance, Klaassen and McDonald (2002) explored the connections between quest and identity development, with results supporting the notion that quest and identity development occur independent of one another. Arrowood and his colleagues (2018) found that individuals high in quest orientation reported lower levels of well-being following reminders of their eventual death. Furthermore, Beck and Jessup (2004) found that quest was a multidimensional construct and created a revised quest scale to enhance its validity.

Work on the quest approach to religion has offered the psychology of religion and spirituality a way to measure an individual's openness and receptiveness to the complexity and messiness of faith. This has been an important development in the field, as it has given an

identity to those with questions or doubts about their religious convictions. However, while the quest construct is useful in determining an individual's level of openness to wrestling with their worldview, it does not explicitly give voice to such individuals. Although one previous study conducted by Graham and his colleagues (2008) sought to bridge this gap by analyzing quester voices phenomenologically—revealing themes such as the questers' desire for profound spiritual connection and the connection between quest and identity shaping—the overall qualitative understanding of quest in the literature is still relatively limited. This is perhaps due to the fact that Batson is a social psychologist and is therefore primarily concerned with explaining and categorizing human interactions. The quest construct reflects this; it provides certain individuals with a label, giving us a way to determine who is a quester and who is not. Its relevance to the present study—which comes from the field of counselling psychology, not social psychology—might be increased if it were to prioritize what it is like to be a quester. However, this was never the intention of the quest construct. It was not designed with the goal of understanding the lived experience of wrestling with one's faith. Therefore, though it has been an important development in the psychological literature, it remains largely detached from the human experience of searching and is consequently limited in its relevance to the present study.

Religious and Spiritual Struggle

Another construct in the psychological literature that resembles the experience of searching for God is *religious and spiritual struggle*. This broad sub-field of the psychology of religion and spirituality deals with general distress related to an individual's current religious beliefs, practices, or experiences (Exline, 2013). As such, it is, at the surface, connected to the phenomenon of the present study; searching for God certainly can include religion-related distress. A deeper inspection, however, reveals that the construct of religious and spiritual

struggle is far broader and more disconnected from human experience than the embodied, emotional, relational phenomenon of searching for God. The construct of religious and spiritual struggle does not prioritize the qualitative voices of the sufferers or tell us what it is like to search for God. Rather, it highlights the associations between religious and spiritual struggle and well-being.

Nonetheless, this field has seen growth in recent years because of research supporting an association between these types of struggles and physical and mental health problems (Exline, 2013). The grouping of the words "religious" and "spiritual" into one construct (sometimes abbreviated to r/s) occurred due to the perceived overlap of the terms, though some struggles are clearly spiritual in nature with a focus on the transcendent realm, while others are notably religious and centre on the practices of an organized religious group. Specific definitions for this construct vary. Exline (2013) defines it as "a form of distress or conflict in the religious or spiritual realm" (p. 460) while Krause and his colleagues (2018) note that spiritual struggles include difficulties with faith, difficulties with other people over religious matters, attributing negative events to demonic sources, and having difficulty finding meaning in life. Pargament and his colleagues (2005) offer their take on it by claiming that religious and spiritual struggles are "efforts to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed" (p. 247). Regardless of the specific words used to describe this construct, religious and spiritual struggle is broadly considered to be a term that relates to difficulties regarding sacred matters within the self, with others, and with the divine (Exline, 2013). Intrapersonal struggles have an inward focus and include facing moral imperfection and spiritual questions and doubts. Interpersonal struggles focus specifically on disagreements about religious issues and offenses made by

members of religious groups. Divine struggles include anger towards God and concern about divine punishment (Exline, 2013).

Key studies in this field include those that have highlighted the relationship between religious and spiritual struggles and mental and physical health. For instance, Dew and her colleagues (2010) found a link between depression and religious and spiritual struggles. Others have focused on how struggle is connected to poorer adaptation to stressors such as divorce (e.g., Krumrei et al., 2009), childhood sexual abuse (e.g., Gall, 2006), and bereavement (e.g., Exline et al., 2011). Other researchers have displayed the relationship between struggles and poor physical health (e.g., Pargament et al., 2001). In sum, many researchers have found that religious and spiritual struggle is linked with emotional and physical distress. However, Exline (2013) notes that some studies have suggested possible benefits from struggle. She notes how it is reasonable to believe that when faith is tested, "it could become stronger—at least if a person turns to faith-building responses when faced with spiritual choice points" (p. 464). But which conditions lend themselves to growth versus decline? Exline (2013) admits that this area has been understudied; we do not know why struggles sometimes lead to positive outcomes and other times do not. Furthermore, she notes how this field has had a narrow focus on health outcomes, and could benefit from work that gives more attention to the nuances of specific types of struggles.

Overall, the construct of religious and spiritual struggle has produced fruitful research that has advanced the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality. However, as noted above, limitations to this body of research are related to its narrow scope. For instance, the body of research on religious and spiritual struggle is lacking qualitative depth. In my review of the literature, I came across only one phenomenological study that highlighted the lived experience of individuals with religious and spiritual struggles (i.e., Rockenbach et al., 2012) and only a few

other qualitative studies that were peripherally related to the topic (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2020; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Maunu & Stein, 2010). How can a field grow without a proper foundation in the human experience of the construct? This body of research has been too abstracted from lived experience through various theorizing and development. Furthermore, the delineation between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and divine struggles represents a view of spirituality that could be seen as narrow or reductive. Is there not room within this field for a spirituality that transcends these barriers and melds together all three of these domains? The present categorization, though helpful in organizing the literature, ultimately suffers from its attempt to operationalize something that perhaps cannot be contained as such. In sum, my study of the body of research on religious and spiritual struggles left me with a greater awareness of the correlation between religious and spiritual struggles and well-being, but without a framework from which to understand the lived experience of searching for God.

Religious Doubt

Religious doubt is another construct found in psychological research that I came across in my search for a language by which to understand the experience of searching for God. This construct caught my attention because doubting was a considerable part of my experience as an adolescent. I questioned the tenets of Christianity: God, the Bible, the church. I doubted the validity of the claims made in my faith community. Did God really care about me? Was Jesus really the son of God? Indeed, doubt was part of my search; however, it was not all of my search. As such, the literature on religious doubt is useful in addressing the intellectual domain of searching for God, but has little to say about the felt experience. Nonetheless, the construct has been given attention in recent years and has provided considerable contributions to the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality. Here I will briefly review these contributions, while

also noting the construct's limited usefulness in addressing the phenomenon of searching for God.

As a psychological construct, religious doubt emerged in the literature as part of the surge of research, beginning in the 1960s, that sought to explore psychological phenomena in a way that spoke directly to human life (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Allport (1967) was the first to offer a formal definition of religious doubt and to provide commentary on its role and purpose. He considered doubt to be an "unstable or hesitant reaction, produced by the collision of evidence with prior belief, or of one belief with another" (p. 100). Other definitions of religious doubt have also emerged in the past few decades. For instance, Hunsberger and his colleagues (1993) described religious doubt as "a feeling of uncertainty toward, or questioning of, religious teachings and beliefs" (p. 28), while Kooistra and Pargament (1999) defined it as "uncertainty and/or questioning regarding the verity of ideas that are considered central to a person's religious faith" (p. 33). These definitions capture the intellectual dimension of religious doubt but have little to offer regarding the felt experience of doubting one's faith. Nonetheless, research on religious doubt has proliferated in recent years.

Contributing Factors to Religious Doubt. Various researchers have discovered differing reasons for the emergence of religious doubt. Broadly speaking, there is not one main precipitant for religious doubt; many factors contribute to the emergence of doubts. Hood and his colleagues (2018) noted that religious questions often emerge in adolescence (e.g., "Does God really exist?") and while some of these questions are resolved, the ones that are not may result in doubts about religious beliefs. Smith (2011) found that religious doubt may formulate if individuals perceive their previously upheld religious beliefs to be less accurate than secular explanations. In a sample of university students, Hunsberger and his colleagues (1996) found

that doubts arose after negative life events or exposure to other information such as other religions. Similarly, others have found that stressful life events, such as death or divorce, are associated with religious doubt (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). In a longitudinal study with older adult participants, Krause and Ellison (2009) found that doubting may occur when one perceives a divide between their experience and the teachings of their religious tradition or from one's own efforts to strengthen their faith. They also found that people who experience negative interactions with church congregants report more religious doubt. Hunsberger and his colleagues (2002) found that, for high school students, doubts appear to emerge when individuals perceive their religions to fail at making people "better" and that doubt typically relates to concerns regarding the infallibility of the scriptures and the pressuring of young people to adopt certain beliefs.

Certain personality traits have also been found to predict religious doubt. Puffer (2013), in an attempt to expand the knowledge of the relationship between religious doubt and social phenomena, found that empathy, androgynous social sensitivity, and a disregard for making a good impression may lead to increased doubt. Wilt and his colleagues (2017) were curious about the relationship between doubt and anxiety and found that anxiety predicts increases in religious doubt over time. Exposure to trauma has also been associated with greater religious doubt (Krause & Hayward, 2012); however, the results of a different study suggested that traumatic experiences could lead a person toward or away from God (Pasquale, 2010).

Negative Impacts of Religious Doubt. In addition to the varied and diverse precipitants and causes of religious doubt that the literature has found, studies have also provided support for the negative impacts that religious doubt might have. For instance, religious individuals who have doubts about their faith report having less purpose in life than confident believers and nonbelievers (Cranney, 2013). Other studies have demonstrated that religious doubt is linked to

poorer mental health (Galek et al., 2007), psychological distress (Ellison & Lee, 2010; Krause et al., 1999), anger and confusion (Gall & Grant, 2005), poorer sleep quality (Ellison et al., 2011), and diminished psychological well-being (Krause, 2006). Religious doubt may also influence one's coping, as indicated by one study that found that a strong, doubtless religious or atheist belief system may contribute to the efficacy of coping (Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010). Findings from another study indicate that those with weak religious beliefs are less happy than those who do not espouse any religion whatsoever (Mochon et al., 2011). Galen and Kloet (2011) also found that those with higher belief certainty have greater well-being compared to those with low belief certainty, while Krause (2012) found that religious doubt exacerbates the effects of financial strain on depressive symptoms in a sample of Mexican Americans. Less religious doubt is also associated with spiritual growth in bereavement, as indicated by a study involving adults bereaved of a grandparent (Patrick & Henrie, 2015).

In sum, the many studies on religious doubt have given us an empirical foundation for understanding the precipitants and impacts of religious doubt. They have helped us understand the way that religious doubts affect personal adjustment, highlighting the positive correlations between doubts and distress, depression, and other stressors (Hood et al., 2018). These studies can help scholars and clinicians predict the effects that religious doubt might have on an individual or community. Though this research is helpful for the advancement of our knowledge of religious doubt, it ultimately remains detached from the lived experience of the doubter. What is it like to have religious doubts? What are the emotions that a doubter feels? What is the meaning of religious doubt for questioning adolescents? In the same way that research on the construct of religious and spiritual struggles has narrowly focused on correlates and health outcomes (Exline, 2013), the construct of religious doubt has not set itself up to answer these

questions. A more holistic approach to the construct could help readers better understand the nuances and experiences of religious doubt.

Summary and Limitations

In this section I have referenced Pargament's (2013) model of spirituality that can be used to describe how constructs related to spiritual issues fit within the one's spiritual development. This model provided context for the three constructs that I described next. These constructs—quest, religious and spiritual struggles, and religious doubt—have all made significant contributions to our understanding of the various ways that humans grapple with issues related to spirituality and religion. For instance, the quest construct has provided us with an orientation to religion that addresses the human search for meaning and purpose, while the literature on religious and spiritual struggle has given us numerous associations between such struggles and physical and mental health (Exline, 2013). Similarly, work on religious doubt has revealed the correlations between doubt and different facets of the human experience (Fisher, 2017).

Despite these contributions, this literature is limited in its description of the lived experiences of religious and spiritual issues. My experience of searching for God has revealed it to be a multifaceted, complex, confusing, and disorienting experience. And while the present psychological literature has done well in its commitment to examining the various precipitants and health outcomes of searching, it has become too far abstracted from the experience itself. It emphasizes the cognitive and functionalist aspects of searching for God, but unfortunately has little to say about the emotional and relational dimensions. Humans are more than simply a sum of their thoughts and beliefs; they are interconnected, emotional, intricate beings. This has been elucidated by the handful of qualitative studies that have delved into the experience of spiritual

concerns (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2008; Lee & Gubi, 2019). Furthermore, we can look to how spirituality is experienced by ourselves and those around us to give evidence to its multidimensionality. For example, do we not use the word spiritual to describe moments of reverence in churches, but also great awe and beauty while in nature? Or perhaps we find ourselves describing a deep connection with a friend to be a spiritual experience. The vastness of how humans understand and experience spirituality means that challenges related to spirituality are likely to be just as multi-faceted. Therefore, to understand the experience of the pursuit of the divine properly, research on the topic must come from multiple angles, casting a wide net so as to do justice to such an intrinsically vast phenomenon. In other words, psychological research on religious and spiritual concerns would benefit from a return to first-person accounts of searching for God to give the body of literature the foundation that it needs, but was never built upon.

Searching for God in Pastoral and Religious Writing

After struggling to find adequate language for the experience of searching for God in the psychological literature, I turned to documents written from within the world of Christianity. I wanted to see if pastoral and religious writing would address the gap that the psychological world did not. Of course, written experiences of searching for God also exist outside the container of Christianity. However, due to my experience with Christianity, my desire to understand those with similar backgrounds, and the inability to survey the experience of the human quest for the divine across all worldviews, I decided to stay within this framework for the purposes of this review. And unlike the psychological literature, in this exploration I found numerous notions that provided a rich language for the first-person experience of feeling disconnected from God. In this section, I will briefly outline some of these notions, including the dark night of the soul (May, 2004) and spiritual desolations. Furthermore, I will discuss the ways

in which these experiences have been recorded throughout history by using examples from the Bible as well as people such as Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, and others. I will conclude this section by articulating how the present study exists to bridge the gap between the psychological literature and pastoral/religious literature by bringing some of the experiential language of the Christian tradition over to the realm of counselling psychology. My review of this body of literature is not exhaustive, as a comprehensive look at the theological writings related to spiritual struggles would be beyond the scope of this project. However, the sources I do reference should be enough provide a broad representation of how such issues have been discussed theologically.

Dark Night of the Soul

A descriptor of searching for God that is well known in religious circles is called the *dark night of the soul* (May, 2004). Sixteenth-century Carmelite priest St. John of the Cross coined the phrase as he and Teresa of Ávila began consolidating their respective experiences of spiritual turmoil. He described it as the path the soul travels on to reach genuine love (St. John of the Cross, trans. 1991). The expression is commonly used today to describe the experience of desolation that is associated with struggles related to religion or spirituality. It is what happens when the lights of faith have gone out: when God feels distant, when our beliefs fail us, when we feel like giving up on the religious life (Stone, 1998). Despite the common understanding of the dark night as a time of agony and despair, it should not be cast as purely negative. Many authors, in referencing St. John, admit that though it can be immensely painful and disorienting, it is also a catalyst for spiritual maturation and refinement. May (2004) holds that it is a deeply transformational process that involves liberation from attachments and "movement toward indescribable freedom and joy" (p. 4). He expands on this by describing the distinction that St.

John made between the dark night of the senses and of the spirit. The dark night of the senses involves the liberation from attachments to sensory gratifications: physical comfort, a feeling of God's presence, or other sensory indulgences. The dark night of the spirit is more about the freedom from our rigid beliefs and ways of thinking. Both of these elements of the dark night reveal how the loss of our previous desires and understandings ultimately leads to spiritual growth. Rolheiser (2018) similarly writes about the dark night as a purifying experience:

> And while that darkness can be confusing, it can also be maturing: it can help move us from being arrogant, judgmental, religious neophytes to being humble, empathic men and women, living inside a cloud of unknowing, understanding more by not understanding than by understanding, helpfully lost in a darkness we cannot manipulate or control, so as to finally be pushed into genuine faith, hope, and charity. (p. 112)

In our inability to induce any feeling about God's existence, we actually encounter the true God. The images that we have constructed about the divine shed away and our certainty similarly vanishes. It feels like "the foundations of faith are being shaken" (May, 2004, p. 92) and that we have been utterly abandoned by God. But in this pruning of our beliefs about God, God actually comes into our lives "in such a way that we cannot manipulate the experience through ego, narcissism, self-advantage, self-glorification, and self-mirroring" (Rolheiser, 2018, p. 114).

In sum, my review of the dark night of the soul has revealed to me that it has parallels to the experience of searching for God that I encountered in my adolescence. It provides language for the felt sense of disconnection from God and acknowledges the experience of loneliness, confusion, and emptiness that searchers are so familiar with. The experiential content of the dark night literature resonated with me; certainly, my experience as a teen could be described as a type of dark night. Perhaps the most salient difference between the dark night and searching for

God is the language that writers use when describing the function of the dark night. The dark night has been found to be a prerequisite for spiritual refinement and growth; it is ultimately about empowering believers "to live and love more freely" (May, 2004, p. 4-5). Searching for God may result in similar transformation; however, it does not, at this point, have the same agenda as the dark night. Searching for God is simply an experience that *is*. It is not a means to attaining deeper union with God or spiritual enlightenment. Even more, the dark night of the soul is a phrase that has been used for centuries and therefore comes with its own unique set of associations and pre-understandings. It is also a phrase that many adolescents may not be familiar with. For these reasons, I resist solely using the notion of the dark night to describe the phenomenon of the present study.

Spiritual Desolation

Another term that I came across in my survey of religious texts was *spiritual desolation*. This term was described by Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th century founder of the Jesuits, as interior movement away from God (Stone, 1998). Ignatius discusses this concept in in his work *Spiritual Exercises*, which he wrote to edify seekers on their journey of faith. Central to these exercises is a spiritual retreat that guides Christians through four weeks of meditations. One of these meditations centres around self-knowledge. And it is in discussing this practice that Ignatius warns of the emergence of spiritual desolation. He describes the experience as:

> Darkness of the soul, turmoil within it, and impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and lead one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord. (Ignatius of Loyola, trans. 1992, p. 122)

Described in this way, spiritual desolation appears similar to depression. Stone (1998) notes that the difference is that spiritual desolation is an experience born in faith and "ultimately endured for faith" (p. 390), while depression does not necessarily have this theological distinction.

In my review of this concept, it occurred to me that spiritual desolation was quite similar to the dark night of the soul. Both involve a feeling of separation or lack of connectedness to God, and both may leave the searcher feeling utterly hopeless. Furthermore, both experiences appear to be central to the path of spiritual growth and development. But could these concepts be used to describe my experiences as a questioning teenager? Did they provide an adequate description of what it is like to search for God? Had I found what I was looking for at the outset of this review? To make sure I had answers to these questions, I sought out additional examples of people throughout history who wrote about such experiences. I wanted to be able to properly situate my experiences alongside others who claimed to feel similarly. As such, the following sections include examples of people who have searched for God, beginning with stories from the Bible.

Searching for God in the Bible

It did not surprise me to find that the experience of searching for God is recorded in the biblical text. I knew, from my evangelical Christian background, that the Bible was a type of anthology, with writings from various authors over a vast time period who recorded a variety of stories and experiences. To me, it is a very honest text; accounts of the human search for answers about the divine are not excluded.

Perhaps the most famous example of the human search for God is the story of Job. This story exemplifies the experience of facing tremendous suffering in the absence of a divine explanation. Job is a "blameless and upright" man who "feared God and turned away from evil"

(Job 1:1 English Standard Version). He finds himself as the subject of a divine wager when God allows the satan to test his faith by inflicting him with physical ailments and the loss of all his family and possessions. In other words, Job loses everything he has for no apparent reason. As a result, he mourns. He looks to God and says, "I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me" (Job 30:20). He laments God's apparent absence through curses and pleas for help. He feels abandoned, destitute, and hopeless. Everything he had has been taken from him; God seems distant; nothing seems fair. In sum, Job's experience of searching for God is inextricably linked to the absence of divine comfort or explanation amidst tremendous suffering.

The Psalms are also rich with accounts of individuals and communities wrestling with doubt and questioning. Broadly speaking, they are a collection of Hebrew prayers and hymns that were composed for use in worship by the ancient Israelites (Fee, 2003). They have been roughly grouped into different categories, based on their function and content. The largest group of Psalms, with more than 60, are known as laments (Fee, 2003). These Psalms contain accounts of people and communities expressing their suffering and disappointment to Yahweh. For example, in Psalm 13 the author feels sorrow in his heart and cries out, "how long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1-2). Psalm 88 is another example of a heartfelt call to God in the midst of agony. The author cries out:

> But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. (Ps. 88:14-15)

Elsewhere in the psalter the experience of questioning, doubting, and longing for God is linked with distress, agony, anguish, and discomfort (e.g., Ps. 4, 6, 22, 77).

In the New Testament, one could argue that Jesus himself had an experience of disconnection from God. While on the cross, prior to breathing his last breath, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). This is likely a reflection of his deeply felt sense of abandonment from God (Wessel & Lane, 2011). Rolheiser (2018) agrees, noting that it is likely that Jesus acutely sensed "that God is absent, that God is dead, that there isn't any God" (p. 114) in the moments before his death on the cross. How are we to understand this? Wasn't Jesus God-incarnate? How could he possibly feel disconnected from God? Regardless of how we answer these questions, when we read the text, we cannot ignore Jesus' plea for God to show up amidst his suffering. It is an honest cry; a heartfelt lament. What a beautiful irony it is that the experience of searching for God can be traced back to Jesus himself.

Other Accounts of Searching for God

Of course, the Bible is not the only place where we find accounts of searching for God. Numerous other writers have since portrayed their respective experiences as well. Here I will summarize a few of these stories to further deepen my review various accounts of searching for God.

Martin Luther. Martin Luther, the man who is now known as the father of Protestantism, experienced multiple bouts of depression and hopelessness in his life. He called these experiences *Anfechtungen*, which in English loosely refers to temptations, including the battle with one's thoughts and with the devil (Metaxas, 2017). For Luther, meditating on his deep-rooted sinfulness and the subsequent fear of it separating him from God was the context for *Anfechtungen*. And this experience plunged Luther into a deep despair. He wrote, "for more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was

wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy of God" (as cited in Delaney, 2016, p. 34). Metaxas (2017) describes Luther's experience as "a widening hole of sheerest hopelessness, an increasing cacophony of devils' voices accusing him of a thousand things, and all of them true or true enough—and no way out of it" (p. 28).

Mother Teresa. The experience of searching for God is also captured through the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa was a Roman Catholic nun and missionary who devoted her life to the service of the poor. She wrote to various people, and her writings included quotes that revealed her ongoing struggle with doubting God and the emptiness that she felt in her heart. To her spiritual guide Father Picachy in 1959, she wrote:

> Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love—and now become as the most hated one—the one You have thrown away as unwanted—unloved. I call, I cling, I want—and there is no One to answer—no One on Whom I can cling—no, No One—Alone. The darkness is so dark—and I am alone—Unwanted, forsaken —The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable—Where is my faith?—even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. (as cited in Kolodiejchuk, 2007, p. 186-187)

Elsewhere she describes her religious life using words such as, "torturous," "dry," and "devoid of all feeling" (Kolodiejchuk, 2007). How can this be? Mother Teresa is a woman who we now regard as a paradigm of faith. How is it possible that she felt a repeated sense of loneliness and separation from God? Rolheiser (2018) notes that Mother Teresa experienced a dark night of the soul. He claims that it is only because of her inability to imagine or feel God's existence that a God can show up that transcends feeling and imagination.

Paula D'Arcy. Countless other accounts of the human search for the divine are recorded in journals, books, movies, and other media in both classical and contemporary Christianity. One current story that I have been particularly drawn to is that of Paula D'Arcy. In her short autobiography, *Gift of the Red Bird*, D'Arcy (1996) recounts her experiences of spiritual transformation after losing her husband and daughter in a car accident. She notes how her immense grief includes a desperate plea for God to show up and provide answers for her pain:

> I scream, *why?* For months I have screamed, *why?* Why did this happen to me? Wasn't I good enough? Am I being punished? Could you have controlled this, God, but didn't? *Why?* Do you hate me? I only stop asking why when I sleep. (p. 34)

She then describes how she senses God's presence amidst the pain, and subsequently decides to resist becoming bitter or resentful towards life. The path this choice takes her down ultimately guides her toward a more expansive view of God and an encounter with the divine through the natural world. She claims how God has become far more paradoxical, mysterious, and personal than the restrictive version of God that she believed in as a child.

Overall, the examples of searching for God provided in this section reveal that the experience is one that includes immense pain and suffering, but ultimately can be transformative. Martin Luther's work drastically changed the trajectory of the Christian church through the birth of Protestantism; Mother Teresa became internationally regarded for her selfless service and identification with marginalized and impoverished communities; Paula D'Arcy has become an influential author and speaker, sharing her story of suffering and spiritual transformation.

Summary

In sum, the examples of how searching for God has shown up in the Christian tradition have revealed that experiential language for this phenomenon exists and various individuals

throughout history have come in contact with it. This discovery was important in my task of situating the present study within the extant literature. Where the psychological world was lacking in the emotional, relational dimension of spiritual struggles, the pastoral/religious world was not. These texts highlighted the agony, despondence, and aloneness that can accompany a crisis of faith. Furthermore, many of them considered such an experience to have a deeper meaning. For instance, I learned that many spiritual leaders in the Christian tradition have considered the loss of one's felt sense of connection with God to be an active and purifying experience. I also learned that some consider God to be present within the darkness, refining the searcher through the pain and confusion.

Consequently, I was left wondering how the psychological research could benefit from the language provided by notions such as the dark night of the soul and spiritual desolations. What if counselling psychologists had reason to believe that religious questioning may be a symptom of a deeper process of one's unfolding spiritual journey? What if clinicians had a language by which to understand their clients' experiences of the dark night of the soul that was not laced with theological associations and assumptions? I was beginning to see why it was important for a phenomenological study on searching for God to bring ideas explored in the Christian tradition over to the psychological literature. First, however, I wanted to take a deeper look into the population that I was planning to focus on. As such, the following section will provide an overview of adolescence and two frameworks that suggest that religious and spiritual questioning and longing is experienced by many adolescents who have grown up in a faith community.

Spirituality in Adolescence

Adolescence is a dynamic stage of the life cycle that is defined as the period of transition from childhood to adulthood (Santrock, 2011). It has historically been characterized by storm and stress and identity crises (Erikson, 1968/1994; Hall, 1931), though scholars now emphasize that it is predominantly defined by interactions between adolescents and their respective contexts (Benson et al., 2006). Despite the continual emergence of new ways to conceptualize this time of life, it has always been clear that adolescence is a time of emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual transformation (Lerner et al., 2008; Lochman et al., 2016). King and her colleagues (2013) specifically emphasize that adolescents have an increased capacity for wrestling with abstract ideologies and therefore can connect meaningfully with something beyond themselves, such as God or a belief system. In other words, adolescents go through many changes that enable them to search for the transcendent in new ways. In some cases, these changes include experiences of wrestling with previously held religious beliefs. Various authors have found that such experiences are likely to show up during this stage of life, focusing on how they impact young people's health and development (e.g., Cotton et al., 2013; Nipkow and Schweitzer, 1991; Rockenbach et al., 2012; Tamminen, 1994). For instance, Oemig Dworsky and her colleagues (2013) write that "many college students encounter spiritual struggles, [and] these struggles have significant implications for students' health and well-being" (p. 310).

Although this research has focused primarily on religious and spiritual struggles and their correlates, two frameworks demonstrate that these struggles actually include a more embodied, felt sense of disconnection from God and others. Marcia's (1966) identity statuses and Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development demonstrate that some adolescents are not just experiencing

religious and spiritual struggles, but are searching for God. In this section I will briefly outline these two models, noting how they highlight the prevalence of searching for God in adolescence.

Marcia's Identity Statuses

Marcia (1966) built on the work of Erikson's psychosocial stages by devising a model that included two additional dimensions to identity development: exploration and commitment. While Erikson (1968/1994) hypothesized that identity or identity diffusion is the result of the crises occurring in adolescence, Marcia conceptualized adolescent identity development as a movement through four stages: *diffusion* (low exploration, low commitment), *foreclosure* (low exploration, high commitment), *moratorium,* (high exploration, low commitment), and *achievement* (high exploration, high commitment). In other words, in developing an identity, adolescents are likely to move from being highly committed to certain worldview beliefs to experiencing the upheaval of that worldview in service of exploring other options. And according to Marcia, it is not until this happens that an individual can reach the identity achievement phase and have their identity "constructed" (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 34).

Identity development often includes concerns related to religion and spirituality (King et al., 2013). Therefore, Marcia's model is, in effect, claiming that searching for religious or spiritual grounding is not only a common experience amongst religious adolescents, but also a necessary and important task in their overall development. In other words, for adolescents that have a previous religious disposition, the most likely course of development for them will include a time of disorientation and wrestling. They may wonder who God is, what religious beliefs they should espouse, and which spiritual practices they should pursue. Simply put, according to Marcia's model, adolescents from religious backgrounds are likely to find themselves searching for God at some point during this time of life.

Fowler's Stages of Faith Development

Fowler (1981) similarly suggested that adolescence involves unrest and turbulence regarding religious and spiritual matters. He developed a model of faith development that parallels Piaget's (1936) stages of cognitive development and Kohlberg's (1975) model of moral development. And while Fowler's model is not the only model of faith development that has emerged in the past few decades (e.g., Peck, 1993; Stephens, 1996; Westerhoff, 1980), his framework has become the most influential. His model includes six distinct stages that an individual might pass through as their faith develops and expands. The first stage, *intuitive-projective* faith, occurs when an individual is three to seven years old. This stage is characterized by learning through experiences and stories and includes the adoption of one's most basic ideas about God. The second stage is *mythic-literal* faith and occurs in school-age children. In this stage, stories and metaphors are often taken literally and children begin to understand faith in more logical ways. In the third stage, *synthetic-conventional* faith, an individual typically adopts an all-encompassing belief system in an attempt to make sense of their changing environment. This usually occurs in early adolescence. The fourth stage, *individuative-reflective* faith, occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood and is characterized by a critical examination of one's beliefs. This stage is accompanied by questioning, angst, and struggle. *Conjunctive* faith is the fifth stage, occurring in mid-life, and is characterized by an acceptance of paradox and a growing awareness of the mystical self in relation to the social conventions that were previously taken for granted. The final stage, *universalizing* faith, is characterized by a life of full service to others that is guided by the principles of love and justice (Fowler, 1981).

The stage that is most relevant to the present study is the individuative-reflective stage, as it most often occurs during adolescence or young adulthood. In greater detail, this stage involves

a movement away from the previous assumption that one's belief system is a reflection of the way things really are. A distance emerges between the self and the previous set of beliefs; the individual critically evaluates their previous worldview and develops an openness to other worldviews they come in contact with. They also may realize that instead of relying upon an external authority to dictate their lives, they are actually responsible for making their own decisions about what to believe and who to follow. Fowler (1981) writes that while this transition is necessary for faith development, it also brings "a sense of loss, dislocation, grief, and even guilt" (p. 180). In other words, Fowler suggests that adolescents are likely to find themselves searching for God.

Summary

Although many authors have indicated that adolescence may be a time of spiritual unrest and discontent, here I have focused on the frameworks provided by Marcia and Fowler. Though these models are subject to the inherent limitation that comes with reducing the vast process of human development to discreet stages, they both have helpfully suggested that the transition from childhood to adulthood involves a process of deconstructing previous religious beliefs and wrestling with the questions and doubts that may accompany this task. These models have also highlighted how this process is often paired with a feeling of confusion, dislocation, or disorientation. As teenagers confront their previous belief systems and begin to expose themselves to other worldviews, they may suffer. They might feel lost, upended, directionless; they may even grieve the simplicity of the way things used to be.

After reviewing these models, I could see similarities between what seemed to be a normative process for many adolescents and my experiences during that time of life. The literature was saying that a disruption of one's belief system was a common component of one's

faith and identity development, and that this process came with a certain degree of suffering. Therefore, it seemed that according to the literature on faith development in adolescence, a study on the experience of searching for God in adolescence would appropriately target a phenomenon that is prevalent during this time. If many adolescents are facing challenges related to the deconstruction of their belief systems, would it not be important for us to gain a deeper understanding of their perspective so we can support them in more effective ways? I wonder how many teenagers enter a counselling session feeling spiritually lost and disoriented, only to be treated with interventions that solely target their depression-like symptoms. I also wonder what interventions have been used in the past to address experiences like searching for God. In response to these musings, I conducted a brief review of how spiritual issues have been treated previously in psychotherapy. The following section will highlight what came of this review.

Spirituality in Psychotherapy

As I have noted earlier in this chapter, spirituality pervades the lives of many, if not all, people (Exline, 2013). It is knit into the fabric of our being; alongside our physical, emotional, and cognitive capacities, we are also deeply spiritual creatures. We search for meaning in the face of pain and loss; we feel connected to something greater through beauty and expressions of creativity; we pray; we call on a higher power to provide us with answers to our suffering and relief from our hurt. In light of our inherent spiritual-ness, it would make sense if psychotherapy would address these concerns in the same way that a therapist might inquire about a person's thoughts, emotions, or behaviours. However, in citing studies conducted across North America (e.g., Brawer et al., 2002), Pargament (2007) notes that many counsellors do not receive adequate training in issues related to religion and spirituality. He reports:

> Most young professionals leave graduate school unprepared to address the spiritual and religious issues that they will face in their work. This state of affairs is a reflection of the deeply seated assumption within the mental health field that spirituality is, at most, a side issue in psychotherapy, one that can be either sidestepped or resolved through an education to reality. (p. 9)

Despite the underemphasis of training students receive related to spiritual issues in psychotherapy, multiple approaches and interventions have been devised over the years to address faith-oriented problems that clients might be facing. In this section I will discuss examples of some of these approaches. I will first highlight a recent approach, called *Winding Road*, that has been created to address spiritual struggles in a group-based setting (Gear et al., 2008). I will then discuss the various ways that spiritual issues have been addressed from within a Christian counselling framework. Although I recognize that spiritual issues have been approached in therapy from a wide array of religious contexts, here I will solely draw from the Christian tradition because of its relevance to the population of the present study. Overall, this discussion pertains to the present study because of its innate concern with psychotherapeutic praxis. The context from which the present study emerges is counselling psychology; therefore, it is inherently interested in practical application. Furthermore, as a researcher from within this context I am curious about the ways that searching for God has been dealt with in clinical practice and how the present study might influence clinicians in their work with adolescents.

Winding Road

As noted previously, studies have found that many college students encounter spiritual struggles (e.g., Astin et al., 2007; Oemig Dworsky et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a growing awareness of the need for empirically-grounded treatment protocols related to spiritual struggles

(Pargament & Saunders, 2007). In responding to these two realities, Gear and her colleagues (2008) developed a nine-session, group-based intervention as an attempt to address spiritual struggles in college students. Based on Pargament's (2007) model of spirituality, outlined previously in this chapter, Winding Road assumes that spiritual struggles are a natural part of development. As such, it exists to help participants "articulate and normalize their spiritual struggles, develop their personal spiritual identity, expand their concepts of God and the sacred, broaden their coping responses, engage in psycho-spiritual self-care, and move towards acceptance and forgiveness of themselves and others" (pp. 2-3).

The nine sessions of Winding Road include activities such as sharing one's spiritual autobiography, creating a spiritual genogram, sharing spiritual struggles, and participating in other meditations and rituals designed to move participants towards meeting their spiritual goals. Take-home exercises also help participants engage with the materials throughout the week, helping them prepare for upcoming topics. Although this intervention is still relatively novel, it has been found to be effective in improving psychological and spiritual outcomes for college students (Oemig Dworsky et al., 2013) and adults with mental illnesses (Reist Gibbel et al., 2019).

Christian Counselling

In addition to Winding Road, there have been many other ways that clinicians have addressed spiritual issues in psychotherapy. From a Christian perspective, interventions from various psychotherapeutic schools have been tailored to address concerns related to God, faith, or other religious matters. Tan (2011) notes an important distinction that can broadly categorize this adaptation, highlighting the continuum of implicit to explicit Christian integration in psychotherapy. He notes that implicit integration refers to "a more covert approach that does not

initiate the discussion of religious or spiritual issues and does not openly, directly or systematically use spiritual resources" (p. 340), while explicit integration refers to "a more overt approach that directly and systematically deals with spiritual or religious issues in therapy" (p. 340). Here I will discuss the explicit ways that two psychotherapies—cognitive behavioural therapy and psychodynamic/process-experiential therapy—have been adapted for use within Christian counselling settings for work with spiritual-related issues.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Jennings and his colleagues (2013) write about Christian-accommodative cognitive therapy as an effective tool for restructuring one's thoughts about God that may result in depressive symptoms. They note the importance of using scripture as an authoritative basis for changing one's thoughts as well as the inclusion of prayer to help clients replace unhelpful core beliefs. From the perspective of Christian-accommodative trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT), Walker and his colleagues (2013) report that survivors of abuse may experience spiritual struggles related to "anger toward God and questioning how God could allow their abuse to occur" (p. 105) as well as difficulty believing that God still loves them. They note that therapists should normalize these experiences, while guiding clients through simultaneous prayer and relaxation exercises. They also discuss how the other modules of TF-CBT can be adapted in a Christian accommodative approach. For example, in helping clients see how their thoughts connect to their feelings and behaviours, therapists might also help clients realize how their thoughts help them draw nearer to God or farther away. Therapists also may be particularly interested in the spiritual struggles that occurred after the trauma, asking clients questions related to where God was during the trauma, or how they think God could have let the trauma happen.

Psychodynamic and Process-Experiential Therapy. Edwards and Davis (2013) note that the philosophy underlying psychodynamic and process-experiential (PE) psychotherapies may be inherently contradictory to a traditional Christian worldview, as they typically highlight self-determination and personal fulfilment as opposed to the Christian notion of depending on God and being led by the Holy Spirit. They admit, however, that despite such differences, strategies used within these forms of therapy can be just as effective when employed within a Christian therapy context. For instance, harnessing the emphasis on client experience, PE therapy can help clients explore their emotional relationship with God, rather than their thoughts about God. This can help bypass clients' cognitive defenses, helping them experience and express suppressed emotions related to God. For example, asking a client to reflect on their feelings towards God might invite them to access a deep-seated anger they hold that emerged when God was seemingly absent during a particular loss or trauma. This can help clients integrate and regulate their affect, expanding their window of tolerance. Furthermore, empty-chair techniques that are typically used to facilitate the exploration of a client's negative feelings towards a parent could be adapted for work with spiritual issues. For instance, one could imagine God or Jesus in the empty chair, expressing their feelings and needs to the imagined other.

Summary

In sum, although counsellor training programs may not always adequately prepare clinicians for work with spiritual issues, there have been a variety of ways that spiritual issues have been addressed in psychotherapy. Whether the counselling is deemed to be explicitly Christian or not, various interventions have been devised and adapted to help clients navigate difficulties related to religious and spiritual matters. And while these interventions have been useful in helping clients navigate their respective spiritual concerns, the present study's addition

of descriptions of searching for God could invite clinicians to tailor them to serve the adolescent population as they see fit. Furthermore, clinicians with an understanding of the phenomenology of searching for God may be better equipped for developing a therapeutic alliance with their questioning clients. Empathy is a core component in the development of a therapeutic relationship, which is a common factor in research on therapeutic change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2014). Understanding the experience of searching for God at a deeper level would undoubtedly aid clinicians in their use of empathy with their questioning clients.

Rationale and Research Question

I began this review wondering what the psychological literature had to say about the experience of searching for God in adolescence. I discovered that constructs that are similar to the phenomenon exist—namely, quest, religious and spiritual struggle, and religious doubt—but that this research is quite narrow in its cognitivist and functionalist approach to the human condition. I then turned to the Christian tradition and found that multiple notions exist that describe the experience more holistically. I discovered phrases such as dark night of the soul and spiritual desolations and looked at examples of how these things have been written about throughout history. I then reviewed some of the research on faith development and discovered that this experience is likely to show up in adolescence and that various models suggest that adolescence is a challenging time because of the upending of certain worldview beliefs and assumptions. I also looked at how this experience might be approached from the lens of various spiritually-informed counselling interventions.

In light of what I have reviewed, where does the present study fit? How does it address some of the limitations I have discussed previously in this chapter? In this section I will answer these questions, first noting how the present study responds to the gaps left in the psychological

literature. I will then note how this study provides somewhat of a bridge between the psychological world and the religious/pastoral world. I will conclude this section with a discussion about how my personal experience with the phenomenon prepares me for conducting a phenomenological investigation, followed by the research question that this study seeks to answer.

The Absence of Research on Searching for God

As discussed, the present state of psychological research on religious and spiritual struggles is lacking qualitative depth. The few qualitative studies that do relate to this topic—such as Rockenbach and her colleagues' (2012) study on spiritual struggles in college students and Lee and Gubi's (2019) phenomenological exploration of deconversion—have yielded fruitful results; however, the voices of spiritual searchers still remain largely unrepresented in the psychological literature. For instance, Rockenbach and her colleagues (2012) found that contrast was central to their participants' reports of spiritual struggle, but admitted that their research was limited in the gender and geographical diversity of its participants. Lee and Gubi (2019) similarly found that cognitive dissonance lay at the heart of transitioning from evangelical Christianity to atheism; however, their research did not prioritize those who are still in the midst of spiritual searching. In other words, the emergence of qualitative studies related to searching for God has been beneficial thus far but still needs further development.

In her review of the field, Exline (2013) notes that a useful next step for research on religious and spiritual struggle would be to "focus more attention on specific types of struggles: what they entail, how they develop, and how they can be resolved" (p. 469). In a later study, Exline and her colleagues (2020) similarly purport that "qualitative research could complement [quantitative] work by allowing people to reflect in an open-ended way on the types of r/s

struggle that preceded, followed, or accompanied their decisions to disengage from religion" (p. 10). In essence, she exhorts researchers to begin narrowing their focus to gain a deeper understanding of specific types of struggles. The present study directly responds to this call by prioritizing the experience of searching for God in adolescence. It offers the literature a closer look at the context of spiritual-related concerns (how they develop) as well as the lived experience of going through them (what they entail) from an adolescent's perspective.

Furthermore, in their discussion of the psychology of religion requiring a meaning-based approach, Paloutzian and Park (2005) note that future work regarding religious and spiritual matters holds promise because of the possibility for the integration of various phenomena. They suggest that researchers should "view their topics of study through a phenomenological lens" and that they should "start with the interior experience and understanding of the perspective of the individual" (p. 556). Phenomenology allows researchers to assume this bottom-up, nonreductive posture; therefore, the present phenomenological investigation also aptly responds to this call.

Overall, the psychology of religion and spirituality benefits from diverse methodological approaches. Hood (2013) reports that "religion and spirituality are best illuminated by a variety of methods, each of which contributes something to our understanding" (p. 79). Pargament (2013) agrees, specifically noting that psychologists have "largely ignored the interpretive phenomenology of spiritual people" (p. 266) due to their skepticism about the reality of divine forces and the inability to measure such things directly. He responds to this by admonishing future researchers to resist a reductive approach to studying religious and spiritual phenomena and to be cautious about efforts to "explain religion away." In designing and conducting the present study, I have listened to these concerns and employed a methodologically innovative,

phenomenological structure to put forth a study that will begin to enrich and texturize the research on religious and spiritual issues.

The Relationship Between Psychological Research and the Christian Tradition

The second part of the rationale for the present study relates to the convergence of the world of psychological research with pastoral/religious writings. I have discussed how the Christian tradition has numerous notions that describe the experience of searching for God. I have also sought to demonstrate that the psychological literature does so only in a very limited sense. So why is a bridge needed to connect these two disciplines? In other words, why should counselling psychologists need a language to describe searching for God if the religious world has already provided us with one? Why not simply direct those in the psychological world to the Christian tradition? The answer lies in the agenda of the discipline. The experiences written about in religious texts often were documented to serve the purpose of furthering spiritual growth, achieving theological correctness, or reconnecting with God. In other words, texts written from a religious framework have a religious agenda. And while this agenda has produced a certain richness and depth to the body of writings, it has remained confined to this particular tradition. Approaching the experience of searching for God from the perspective of counselling psychology—as the present study does—would offer a fuller understanding of the experience that could augment the religious/spiritual descriptions that already exist. Counselling psychology is concerned with "using psychological principles to enhance and promote the positive growth, well-being and mental health of individuals, families, groups, and the broader community" (Counselling Psychology Definition, Canadian Psychological Association, 2009, para. 1). This is achieved through psychotherapy, which invariably involves meeting people where they are at in their respective contexts, helping to modify behaviours, cognitions, emotions, or other aspects of

their lives that they desire to change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2014). The primary agenda of the discipline of counselling psychology is not about furthering one's relationship with God or achieving a better theology. Therefore, it is not enough to simply direct counselling psychologists to the pastoral/religious texts outlined in this review for a description of searching for God. Rather, a description of the experience of searching for God that is written from within the world of counselling psychology would be more helpful for therapists' quest to understand and treat their spiritually desolate clients.

Personal Experience

The final dimension of the rationale for the present study is my personal connection to the topic. van Manen (2014) writes that "personal experience is often a good starting point for phenomenological inquiry" (p. 313). Therefore, a researcher with a personal connection to a specific phenomenon may be better suited to study that phenomenon than someone without such a connection. My experience of searching for God, outlined in greater detail later in this thesis (see Chapter 6), orients me toward the phenomenon and fuels my passion for understanding fellow searchers. It also serves as one additional voice that claims that searching for God is prevalent amongst adolescents who grew up in Christian contexts.

Research Question

This brings us to the research question of the present study. In sum, this study exists as a response to the lack of experiential language describing searching for God in psychological research, the absence of a bridge to connect this literature to the Christian tradition, and my personal connection to the topic. I sought to address these elements by answering the question, *what is the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities?*

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Hermeneutic phenomenology was the methodology used in this study to answer the research question provided above. In its most basic form, phenomenology is "the study of the primal, lived, prereflective, prepredicative meaning of an experience" (van Manen, 2017, p. 776) and the aim of phenomenological research is "to describe the lived world of everyday experience" (Finlay, 2011, p. 10). Though there are varying forms of phenomenology with distinct underlying assumptions and presuppositions, phenomenological researchers generally agree that they seek a return to experiential, embodied meanings of the world directly experienced and concretely lived (Finlay, 2012). Husserl (1911/1980) famously stated that there is a need to return "to the things themselves" (p. 116), indicating the importance of studying phenomena in the absence of prevailing theory. As such, I am not looking to devise a theory or explanation for one's experience of searching for God through this study. Rather, I am interested in understanding the experience of searching for God as it is lived out in the participants in this study.

In this chapter, I will discuss the paradigmatic underpinnings of phenomenology as well as the origin of phenomenology and its translation into a research methodology. I will then outline the methodological procedures that were utilised for data collection and analysis, including brief descriptions of each of the five participants who were recruited. I will end this chapter with a discussion about issues related to rigour and trustworthiness in this study.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm provides context for a study by outlining various ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that guide the process and by situating the researcher and research project among the existing epistemological and methodological strands

(Ponterotto, 2005). Research paradigms typically seek to answer questions related to the assumptions inherent in the research project. Ontological questions are concerned with the nature of reality and being, including questions such as, “does an external reality exist?” and “what is the nature of reality?” Epistemological questions relate to the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the researcher and the research participant. Axiology is concerned with the role of researcher values in the research process, whereas methodological questions relate to the specific processes and procedures of acquiring the desired knowledge (Mertens, 2010). There are several research paradigms that researchers can choose to adopt (Ponterotto, 2005). In an attempt to offer a simpler classification, some authors have categorized research paradigms into three main categories: positivism/post-positivism, interpretivism-constructivism, and critical-ideological (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Descriptive phenomenology generally aligns with the positivist framework, while hermeneutic and interpretive phenomenology mostly align with the constructivist, postmodern paradigm (Laverty, 2003). These two schools of phenomenology will be expanded on later in this chapter.

Although some (e.g., Mertens, 2010) consider hermeneutic phenomenology to fall under the broad umbrella of the constructivist paradigm, the present hermeneutic phenomenological methodology drew primarily from Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology. Heidegger’s phenomenology departs from the Husserlian epistemological emphasis on knowing objects through the intentionality of our consciousness, taking an ontological turn towards asking how being itself, and in particular the being of human beings, is revealed in everyday activities (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger considered Husserl’s idea of the phenomenological reduction to be impossible, as interpretation not only cannot be fully suspended but is embedded in how phenomena are encountered or known. He believed that “the meaning of

phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation" (1927/1962, p. 37). In other words, we cannot come to know or understand a phenomenon without interpreting it through our unique, subjective lens. And we should not try to rid ourselves of this subjectivity, as it is the channel through which phenomena can be revealed.

For the present study, this framework provided me with a foundation for how I expected knowledge to be gained. I was not looking for one underlying essence of the experience of searching for God that could be uncovered through the removal of my pre-understandings and biases. Rather, the phenomenon of searching for God revealed itself to me through my careful attunement to the lifeworld of the participants while I simultaneously allowed myself to be moved by what was being shared. Bracketing my own presuppositions, theoretical knowledge, and affective reactions helped create openness and attunement to the lived experience; however, my understandings of the experience also shaped my view and interpretation of the phenomenon (Kwee & Längle, 2013).

Phenomenology

Now that the paradigmatic foundation for the study has been established, here I will discuss phenomenology as it transitioned from a philosophical movement to a research method. I will also discuss the inclusion of personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019) as an augmentation to the described hermeneutic phenomenological method.

Origins of Phenomenology

Phenomenology originated in Germany as a philosophical movement in the early 20th century. The movement was pioneered by Edmund Husserl, a Jewish mathematician who became fascinated with philosophy upon haphazardly attending lectures in Vienna on psychology and philosophy (Jennings, 2000; van Manen, 2014). Husserl eventually directed his

attention from mathematics to the study of lived experiences through structures of consciousness. He suggested that the world could only be understood through consciousness and that both minds and objects occur within the context of experience (Laverty, 2003). For Husserl, *phenomena*, or the 'lifeworld' refers to what we experience pre-reflectively, without categorization or conceptualization (Husserl, 1936/1970). He posited that through a process of bracketing, or *epoché*, one can capture these experiences in their purest form, without interpretations or theorizations getting in the way (Husserl, 1936/1970). Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, questioned whether phenomena can, in fact, be known apart from interpretation. Heidegger introduced the concept *Dasein*, which refers to the mode of being of human beings, a mode of being which is characterized by an irreducible being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). He considered consciousness to be a product of the context from which it arises and thus focused on studying the meaning of phenomena as it is revealed to the knower (van Manen, 2014). Things, therefore, are not studied through intentional bracketing, but rather looking into their contextual relations.

Phenomenology as a Research Methodology

Although phenomenology's roots lie in the philosophical movement described above, it has now been adapted for use in psychological research. This translation has not occurred without considerable confusion and debate (Finlay, 2008). How can such a complex and varied philosophy be turned into an empirical, scientific method? And how can this method be applied for use in human research? These questions have been answered differently by various scholars, resulting in multiple methods of phenomenological inquiry. Here I will highlight the two main streams of phenomenological research methods: descriptive and hermeneutic.

Descriptive Phenomenology. Amedeo Giorgi, an American psychologist, played a prominent role in translating phenomenological philosophy into a scientific method. His preferred method, descriptive phenomenology, is thoroughly rooted in Husserl's thinking and therefore seeks to reveal the essence of a phenomenon without the influence of a prevailing theory or interpretation (Giorgi, 1970). This process happens through a process that has been called phenomenological psychological reduction (Giorgi, 1989). This task guides the researcher into revealing essential meaning structures of a phenomenon while bracketing pre-understandings and assumptions. This method has been known for its commitment to methodological and scientific rigour; however, it has also been criticized as an attempt to minimize subjectivity (Finlay, 2011).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology. The hermeneutic, or interpretive, stream of phenomenology emerged from the work of philosophers such as Heidegger (1927/1962), Gadamer (1977), and Ricoeur (1981). In contrast to the Husserl-inspired descriptive phenomenologists, these philosophers argued for the embeddedness of phenomena in the world of language and social relationships. In other words, interpretation cannot be suspended; it is a basic structure of our being-in-the-world. In practice, this means that in addition to listening for the participants' experience of a phenomenon, researchers also tune into the context from which the phenomenon emerges. Furthermore, researchers do not seek to fully remove themselves from the research process; they make sense of the data by drawing on their own understandings, including their past experiences and cultural and historical contexts (Finlay, 2011).

Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected for the present study for the precise reason cited above: it allows researchers to tune into phenomena that are embedded in language, culture, and ways of being (van Manen, 2014). I do not think that the phenomenon of searching for God

can be divorced from its context; it emerges from the developmental and personal situations of its hosts. Removing the context from the phenomenon would not only be impossible, but would also do violence to its connectedness to our being-in-the-world.

Central to this method is the belief that interpretations "arise out of the research context which involves a meeting of persons in a particular, situated, shared space" (Finlay, 2011, p. 113). In other words, the starting point for hermeneutic phenomenological research is semi-structured interviews. I will describe the specifics of these interviews later in this chapter. Broadly speaking, however, these interviews were designed to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself in its embeddedness and through the dialogue between researcher and research participants. They invite the researcher to join with their participants at an intersubjective level with a "phenomenological attitude" (Finlay, 2011, p. 73). This attitude is characterized by openness and curiosity; it is a posture of invitation towards whatever it is that might emerge. However, it can be difficult to adopt because of the tension the researcher faces between "striving for reductive focus and being reflexively self-aware" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). In other words, the researcher's main challenge is that they are constantly seeking to listen openly for the emerging phenomenon while at the same time noting how they are being impacted by what is being shared. Finlay (2008) calls this process a "dialectical dance" (p. 18) because it is not simply as straightforward as solely bracketing one's previous experiences or solely bringing them into the interviews. Both must occur in tandem with each other. In the present study, this meant that it was important for me to lean into my own experience of searching for God in my adolescence, as it impacted, and was impacted by, the experiences of my participants. Yet, I was also intentional about bracketing my opinions so that the experiences of my participants were not clouded by my own narrative.

This ultimately allowed me to approach my participants with fresh eyes and ears while also showing up as a fellow searcher with similar stories of searching for God.

Personal Phenomenology

In addition to hermeneutic phenomenology, the present study benefitted from the influence of personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019). Personal phenomenology is an approach to research that highlights how human phenomena that are explored in psychological research reveal our personal relationship with ourselves, others, and the world (Yannaras, 2007). It draws on the existential-analytical model of the person (Längle, 2013), which portrays the person as "an endless, dynamic flow, springing from a well of unfathomable depth" (Launeanu et al., 2019, p. 71). Its influence comes from the existential phenomenological tradition (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) and philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1977; Ricoeur, 1981). Personal phenomenology was used as a supplemental method in the present study because it provided a framework from which to access a deeply personal phenomenon: searching for God. As searchers, our personhood is implicated by our experiences. Searching for God is married to our humanness; it cannot be separated and analyzed discretely. It was therefore important to have a method that respected the innate oneness of persons and personal phenomena.

As I sought to integrate this method into my study, I followed a model that has been historically used for psychotherapy. This model, Personal Existential Analysis (PEA; Längle, 2003), is an adaptation of phenomenology to psychotherapeutic praxis. Although it emerged from its utility in Existential Analysis (EA; Kwee & Langle, 2013), work on adapting it for phenomenological research interviews and analysis has begun (Klaassen et al., 2017; Launeanu et al., 2018). It has already been used in other phenomenological investigations as a novel way of

incorporating personal phenomenological principles into hermeneutic phenomenological research (Konieczny, 2020; Schutt, 2020). Because PEA was developed for use in psychotherapy, I will provide a brief overview of how it is applied in EA as context for its presence in the current study. This will provide a background for the data collection and analysis procedures outlined later in this chapter.

PEA in Existential Analysis. As a phenomenological and person-oriented psychotherapy, EA guides a person towards making free and authentic decisions while giving inner consent for one's actions (Längle, 2012). It centres around four fundamental pre-requisites that are central to a fulfilled existence. These are: (1) Being-in-the-world; I am here in the world with its conditions and limitations. Can I be here? Do I have sufficient space, protection, and support to sustain my being? (2) Being alive and in relationship; I am alive and feel myself with my vitality and relationships. Do I like to live? Do I feel my emotions and experience my life as valuable? (3) Being myself; I am myself in my uniqueness and individuality. May I be myself? Am I free to be me? (4) Contributing to a meaningful future; what am I here for? What gives my life meaning? These four pre-requisites are the ingredients for an existence that is full and meaningful (Kwee & Längle, 2013).

EA posits that people are in a constant dialogical exchange between themselves and the world around them (Buber, 1923/1970). The PEA framework supports this inner and outer dialogue and practically assists individuals in becoming more authentically present in specific situations. Developed by Alfried Längle (2003), PEA follows four nonlinear steps that facilitate reconnection with reality, connection with primary understandings and feelings, inner dialogue and inner positioning, and coming to an acceptable and responsible action. The following descriptions of the four phases are adapted from the work of Kwee and Längle (2013).

PEA-0: Description. This step exists to answer the question, "what really happened?" This typically involves descriptions of when, how, and with whom the problematic situation occurred. In determining the facts of a situation, clients are able to reconnect with the reality of what happened in their lives that caused them pain. Opinions and explanations are minimized as factual information arises. It is only until this occurs that a client will be able to effectively deal with their life circumstances, as "connection with reality is a prerequisite for existential-analytical dialogue" (Kwee & Längle, 2013, p. 7).

PEA-1: Impression. The second phase asks the question, "how is it for you and for your life?" Now that the facts are established, the client is able to explore their feelings, impulses, and reactions. This allows for the cultivation of self-acceptance. Specifically, the client is invited to explore how the situation impressed upon them and what emotions spontaneously emerged. Furthermore, the client may comment on their impulse—what they were drawn to do in that moment—and the phenomenological content of their experience. This may enhance the client's self-understanding and uncover content that is captured emotionally but not fully understood.

PEA-2: Position. In this stage of psychotherapy, the client is asked, "what do you make of this experience?" Clients are invited to connect to their former experiences and seek to understand the present situation. Furthermore, they may evaluate the situation according to their moral conscience and choose to take a stand towards, or away from, the situation. They may respond to questions such as, "was it right that this experience occurred?" or "what is your position towards this experience?"

PEA-3: Expression. In this final stage of the PEA framework the client is invited to respond through action. Now that the situation and corresponding feelings have been explored, the understanding and meaning of the experience has been elucidated, and the positioning in

relation to the situation has been established, the client is free to give their inner consent to making intentional action in concordance with the inner self.

In sum, PEA is a person-centred and phenomenological therapeutic method that aims to bring individuals closer to their experiences so that they may live a fulfilled existence. Its core principles have been translated into a method for data collection and analysis and were used in the present study because of its effectiveness in highlighting the personal nature of phenomena.

Rationale for Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The rationale for using hermeneutic phenomenology in the present study is twofold. First, in designing the study I was looking for a methodology that could help me access lived experience. My intention was to seek an understanding of what is it like to search for God as an adolescent in a Christian community. I was not looking for an overview of factors that cause teens to abandon their faith, or the effects of searching for God on well-being. Rather, I was hoping to dive deep into the experience of searching for God as it is lived out in its unique contexts. Thus, phenomenology, in its prioritization of lived experience, was a good fit. Second, I knew that I was coming into this project with my own experiences of searching for God. I was not going to be a distant, objective researcher with no personal involvement in the topic. Therefore, a methodology with an appreciation of the researcher's impact on the research process was important to find. Hermeneutic phenomenology was consequently the stream of phenomenology that I decided to pursue.

Recruitment

In this section I will transition into a discussion about the details that undergirded the process of recruiting individuals to participate in this study. I will first discuss the pilot interview that was completed prior to the recruitment of the research participants. I will then discuss the

inclusion and exclusion criteria that were used to ensure the data collected would help answer the research question. Finally, I will highlight the specific methods used to communicate the details of the study to the individuals interested in participating.

Pilot Interview

At the time of recruiting participants for this study, I was not aware of any previous study that used a phenomenological method for research with the adolescent population. As such, I had a few questions about the suitability of the interview questions for the participants. Would adolescents be able to sufficiently describe their experiences of searching for God using experientially-rich language? Would they have the reflective capacity for engaging with my inward-focused questions? I was hopeful that such questions would not pose a barrier to data collection; however, the research team collectively decided that it would be best to conduct a pilot interview simply to be sure. The individual that was selected for this interview was recruited via word of mouth. Aside from discussing that the interview was, in fact, a pilot interview and that the data would not be included in the study, all other procedures mimicked the actual research interviews. For instance, the interview was conducted in a private room at Trinity Western University; the participant met the inclusion criteria outlined below; and the interview questions described below were used. Furthermore, the participant was asked about the suitability of the interview questions to their experiences after it was complete. Upon listening to the interview, transcribing it, and considering the feedback given by the participant, it was decided that the interview guide was, in fact, suitable for adolescents and that no direct changes needed to be made. Throughout the entire process, I developed an eagerness for the process of data collection. I felt more prepared for the future interviews and was more confident as an interviewer. I also learned how to navigate the dance between asking questions on the interview

guide and going off-script to help the participant deepen their responses. Overall, the pilot interview served multiple purposes in setting the stage for study's data collection process.

Inclusion Criteria

As I was designing this study, I set up various parameters to ensure that my participants' experiences would help to answer my research question. Specifically, I noted that my participants were to be individuals in late adolescence (specifically, 15 to 20 years old) who are actively searching for God. The selected age range was chosen because I anticipated that due to their developmental level, younger participants may have trouble using sufficient experiential language to answer open-ended questions related to spiritual struggle. Furthermore, late adolescents are most likely to be in Fowler's (1981) individuative-reflective stage of faith development, which is a time characterized by religious questioning and uncertainty.

How was I to know that my participants were "searching for God?" And what does it actually mean to search for God? Such questions are important to ask. However, to honour the hermeneutic phenomenological design of the study, I did not ask my participants if their experiences matched a specific pre-set definition of searching for God because I did not want a preestablished theory to influence their experience or interpretation of the phenomenon. Rather, participants were free to define "searching for God" in any way that fit for them. That being said, the prompts on my recruitment advertisement indicated that I was generally looking for individuals that were experiencing a certain level of suffering related to their search. I was looking for people that were feeling spiritually lost, desolate, or otherwise disconnected from God.

It was also important for participants to have a previous Christian influence. If they did not presently identify as being part of a church community, they were to have a recent history of

consistently attending a Christian church or other Christian-affiliated program. For this study, "Christian church" was defined as any church belonging to either an evangelical denomination (e.g., Baptist, Mennonite Brethren, non-denominational, etc.) or other Protestant denomination (e.g., mainline, fundamentalist, charismatic, etc.). Uniformity in theological background was not important for this study. Rather, general church involvement and overall Christian influence was what was needed to answer the study's research question.

Exclusion Criteria

I determined that respondents would not be selected to participate in the study if they were deemed to be experiencing intense psychological distress that impaired their functioning, such as a psychotic episode or active suicidality (see Appendix A). Furthermore, I decided that respondents would likely not be selected for the study, at the discretion of the researcher, if they had difficulty communicating their experiences in English. No participants that responded to the posted advertisements were excluded from participation in this study.

Recruitment Methods

Participants were recruited via homogenous purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). Homogenous sampling is a technique that ensures that all participants in a study share a specific characteristic (commonly age, gender, occupation, etc.). For the present study, the characteristics that all my participants shared were: (a) an experience of searching for God and (b) belonging—present or recent past—to a Christian community. This method of sampling also allowed me to select participants who were most likely to provide rich descriptions of their experiences. Because qualitative research is not driven by the etic and nomothetic principles that inform quantitative measures, I did not require a large-scale sample with hopes of generalizing my results to a specific population. Rather, I was looking to understand and describe the experiences

of my participants. Therefore, participants were selected based on their ability to adequately answer the study's research question: What is the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities? To obtain a sufficient level of richness and depth to the data, I anticipated recruiting four to six participants (Morrow, 2005). The final number of participants recruited was five.

Recruitment involved advertisements on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram) (see Appendix B) and posters placed on bulletin boards and e-newsletters at universities and community counselling centres (see Appendix C). These locations were selected because they are high-traffic locations for adolescents.

Data Collection Procedures

This section will cover the various procedures employed to collect the data for the present study. I will first discuss the process of screening for eligibility that respondents went through. Then, I will outline the details of the research interviews that followed.

Screening Interview

After individuals responded to the recruitment efforts, I invited them to partake in an in-person screening interview to ensure their eligibility for participation in the study. This interview was designed to acquire demographic and contextual information about the participants, including their age, prior involvement in a Christian community, and experience of searching for God. Furthermore, this interview informed me of each respondent's capacity for self-reflection and whether they would be able to provide sufficient phenomenological data for the study. During this interview, participants were also screened for psychological issues that might interfere with their participation in the study. Resources were available for participants deemed ineligible due to psychological distress (see Appendix A); however, no respondents fell into this

category. Once participants were deemed eligible to participate, a time was arranged for the semi-structured interviews to take place.

Research Interview

Four of the research interviews took place at private locations at the researcher's school, Trinity Western University (i.e., library study rooms and conference rooms). One interview was held in a private meeting room at a church that the participant was loosely affiliated with. Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the details of the study as outlined in the informed consent form (see Appendix D). They then signed this form and received the renumeration for their participation. At this time, I began the audio recording via a voice recording app on my cell phone. The data remained on my password-protected cell phone until it was transferred to my computer, at which time it was deleted from my phone. My computer also requires a password; therefore, at no point was the data accessible to anyone other than myself and the individuals I chose to share it with (i.e., my research lab and supervisor). The individuals that I shared the data with first signed a confidentiality agreement form (see Appendix E).

I began each interview with a greeting. I wanted to create a comfortable and open tone for each interview, so I also took time to orient each participant to the physical space around us. Furthermore, I spent some time engaging in casual conversation with them to set a foundation for emotional safety and openness. Once we had settled into the physical and conversational space, I began the audio recording and commenced the interview. Each interview was shaped by a semi-structured interview guide that followed the general PEA structure (Appendix F). This interview guide was supplemented by an additional guide that contained more descriptive and explanatory questions (Appendix G). Both of these guides followed a similar format and were therefore used concurrently.

Each interview began with a warm-up question to invite participants to settle into the conversation: “what drew you to this study?” This question was not intended to produce phenomenological data; rather, it helped to alleviate any pre-interview anxiety that might be present in the room. Next, I asked participants to think of a specific time and place where they experienced searching for God. In alignment with PEA-0, this question invited participants to travel back to a concrete moment and describe it in detail. To help anchor their descriptions in the facts of what happened, I asked, “if someone was watching this moment unfold on a TV screen, what would they see?” This allowed for the lifeworld of the participant to be accessed and illuminated. Furthermore, it set the stage for the transition to questions pertaining to PEA-1. These questions related to how the experience of searching for God impacted each participant. They included question related to emotion (i.e., how did you feel as this was happening?), somatic experience (i.e., what did you feel in your body?), and impulse (i.e., is there something that you spontaneously wanted to do as this was happening?). For some participants, these questions were challenging to answer; it is typically easier to remain in one’s thoughts and avoid emotions, particularly if the emotions are painful. As such, I would occasionally gently guide participants back into their emotional and somatic experiences if I noticed them returning to their thoughts. The semi-structured format of the interviews granted me the freedom to do this, ensuring that I gave each participant ample space to drop below the surface of their thoughts and into a more embodied description of the phenomenon.

Next, participants were invited to talk about the phenomenal meaning of their experience of searching for God. Specifically, I asked them to tune into their experience and listen for a message that it might have for them. This helped participants distance themselves from the phenomenon, adopting a posture reflective of PEA-2. Furthermore, I inquired about their

understanding of the phenomenon. Did it make sense to them? Did it confuse them? Did they like the experience? Again, this helped participants see the phenomenon from a distance and take a position towards it.

At this time in the interview, the context of the experience of searching for God had been described, as well as the way in which the experience had impressed upon each participant. Additionally, a certain distance from the experience had been achieved, and participants had entered a more reflective posture towards what was happening inside of them. To deepen this reflection, I invited participants to take a few deep breaths and imagine themselves holding their experience at the bottom of their heart. I asked if they could let their experience reach their innermost self, and if they could receive it at the core of their being. I wanted each participant to resonate with their experiences, and then speak about its essence from that place of connection. After a slight pause, I invited participants to share with me what was coming up for them. What was at the heart of the experience of searching for God? How did they understand the experience at a core-level? What is the experience of searching for God really about?

The final question I had for the participants was related to PEA-3. It was about the next steps. What did the experience of searching for God invite them to do? This question allowed for the participants to reflect on the action tendency of the phenomenon. It guided their attention towards the movement inherent in the experience. Were they going to write a book about their experiences? Would they reach out to others with similar experiences? Were they simply going to wait?

Following each interview, I thanked the participant for their involvement in the study and debriefed their experience with them (see Appendix H). After giving them time to ask any

other questions they had for me, we parted ways. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes to complete.

Participant Descriptions

As indicated, five participants were recruited for this study. All of the participants were living in the Fraser Valley region of Metro Vancouver at the time of their interview. They each reported unique experiences of searching for God; however, a common thread could be found amidst them all. They all fit within the age criteria that I had selected (15-20 years) and had some previous experience with the Christian faith. Many of them grew up attending church services with their parents; others were exposed to Christianity through peers and other Christian-affiliated organizations. After each interview, the participants selected a pseudonym to be included in the study instead of their real name, to ensure participant confidentiality. In this section, I will provide brief descriptions of each of these participants, including demographic and contextual information as well as their reported reasons for joining the study.

Celestia

The first participant that I interviewed for this study was Celestia. Celestia is a bright, thoughtful 15-year-old who identified herself as an agnostic. She mentioned that she grew up in a family with a "confusing" spiritual orientation, and that although her father claimed belief in God and her mother sometimes went to church for social reasons, faith was not a large part of her childhood. Celestia explained that her main exposure to Christianity was through a theatre club hosted by an evangelical Christian youth organization. It was through her participation in this program that Celestia began to give more attention to the questions she has about faith.

Celestia found out about the present study via a mutual friend we shared. This person was a youth leader at a church that Celestia was loosely affiliated with. She brought the study to

Celestia's awareness because of her knowledge of Celestia's many questions about Christianity—especially related to the person of God and the Bible's position on sexual ethics. When I met with her to conduct the interview, Celestia seemed eager to share her experiences and talk about the things that she has been struggling with.

Rachael

The next participant that I interviewed was Rachael. Rachael is a 19-year-old university student. She was born in China and moved to Canada with her parents at age six. Right away I could sense that Rachael was a forthright, almost-sassy young woman with a strong will and a straightforward approach to life. She mentioned that her parents are "hardcore Christians" and that she has been attending an evangelical church regularly since she was nine. She said that most weekends she goes to church with her family, but that sometimes she attends a different church closer to her school with other university students. In our screening interview, when I asked Rachael about her search for God, she replied by telling me that she is "searching for everything" and that she "doesn't know [her]self at all." She told me that she has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, and has struggled with anorexia and depression in recent years as well.

Rachael told me that the advertisement I had posted in her school's e-newsletter caught her eye because she had been feeling as if God had been absent from her life lately. She mentioned that she had never talked about the feeling before, because in her world, "everyone assumes that everyone's good, you know?"

Rae

Rae is the third participant that I interviewed. She is a 20-year-old university student from California. Rae grew up attending a non-denominational church and mentioned that she

considered much of what she learned at church to be true. She told me that her parents identify as Christians and that in her family church attendance was not necessary, but that "it was a bad thing if you didn't go." Rae also mentioned that her mother wanted to make sure that her children had a relationship with God because Rae's father was rarely present.

Rae mentioned that she began to have doubts about her faith when she came to Canada for university. Specifically, she found her evangelical Christian worldview to be challenged by her biblical studies classes and conversations with her roommate. Amidst the disorienting experience of questioning and doubting, Rae also told me that she feels quite alone in her struggles. She stated that she does not have anyone to talk to about her questions and does not fit in with the upbeat, happy culture of her Christian university. She decided to participate in the present study to find a space to process some of her questions and hopefully learn about others who have similar questions and doubts.

Jae

Jae is the fourth participant that I interviewed for this study. Jae is a 20-year-old student, studying kinesiology at a Christian university. As the child of missionary parents, he moved around frequently as a young child. He told me that he was born in Malaysia, but soon moved to Australia, the Philippines, and eventually Indonesia, where he spent the entirety of his grade school years. Jae's parents and sister still live in Indonesia, but he came to Canada two years ago for university. Jae mentioned that he has always identified as a Christian and that his close proximity to missionaries kept his faith afloat throughout his upbringing. He also mentioned that he would see "little miracles" regularly and that, as a result, his spiritual life felt vibrant and real. When he came to Canada, he found the culture at his evangelical Christian university to be quite different from what he was used to back home. He told me that the spiritual realm that was so

present and palpable in his Indonesian village was largely absent. He mentioned that he longs to feel close to God again, but does not feel motivated, as he does not see any "spiritual stuff" around him. He mentioned that he still attends church with his girlfriend most weekends and still believes that God is present; however, his felt sense of the spiritual world has vanished and he longs for a reconnection.

Jae became interested in the present study because he found himself resonating with the questions listed on the poster (specifically, "do you feel spiritually lost or disconnected?"). He used the analogy of his spiritual life as an electronic device that can be plugged into a wall outlet to recharge. While he had adequate places to 'plug in' back home, here he experiences a draining, empty feeling instead.

Gerard

The final participant that I interviewed for this study was Gerard. Gerard is a 19-year-old university student who moved to BC from Alberta with his family 13 years ago. Gerard discovered the present study through an advertisement posted at a counselling centre in his community. He resonated with the questions posed on the poster, and reached out to me in response. When I first met Gerard in our screening interview, I could right away feel the sort of innocent energy that he carried with him. He was a very engaging conversationalist, speaking clearly and assuredly. I could tell that he was a thinker; it did not take much time at all for Gerard to begin talking about the things he was thinking about and struggling with.

Gerard grew up believing the Bible to be true; he attended an evangelical church regularly and was raised by parents who identify as Christians. However, Gerard began questioning some of what he believed in grade 10. Here he learned that he loved to ask questions, but that many of his questions did not seem to have satisfactory answers. He told me that many of his questions were

related to the Bible's seemingly mixed messages about homosexuality. He mentioned that it does not make sense to him that the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin, while also claiming that God's love and grace extends to all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

Data Analysis

After all of the interviews were complete, I began the process of data analysis. This was a multifaceted process that began with the transcription of the interviews and ended with phenomenological writing. I will describe this process in this section.

Transcription

My first task after collecting the data was to convert the audio files into written format. Although some researchers opt to employ research assistants or professional transcribers to aid with this process, I decided that it was important for me to do all of the transcribing myself. This allowed me to become immersed in the data right away; I became quite familiar with each of the interviews throughout the process of carefully listening to each interview and converting them into text. Furthermore, as I transcribed the interviews, I started to hear how the phenomenon of searching for God was already emerging. I consequently kept a journal to document what I was hearing, as well as my initial response and reaction to the data.

Phenomenological Analysis

The phenomenological analysis of the data included immersion in the data, writing out phenomenological descriptions of each participant (see Appendix I), consulting with my research team, and phenomenological writing. These steps were non-linear; many happened simultaneously. For instance, as I was immersing myself in the data I would often write descriptions of what I was listening to. Or, after consultation with my research team, I would re-immerse myself in the data to revitalize my writing. It is also important to note that the

phenomenological analysis of this study was based on a workshop conducted by Klaassen and his colleagues (2017). This analytic protocol resembles other phenomenological methods of analysis (e.g., van Manen, 1990), and also draws upon insights from personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019).

Immersion. In phenomenological research, analysis begins with dwelling with the data. Finlay (2014) describes dwelling as "the process by which phenomenology makes room for the phenomenon to reveal itself and speak its story into our understanding" (p. 125). It is a process of slowing down and becoming absorbed in the data, assuming a posture of receptiveness to the phenomenon as it is revealed. As a researcher dwells with the data, they eventually find themselves to be immersed in it. They begin to see the phenomenon and can discern parts of it that were previously hidden. von Eckartsberg (1998) describes this process aptly:

> One embeds oneself in the process of getting involved in the text, one begins to discern configurations of meaning, of parts and wholes and their interrelationships, one receives certain messages and glimpses of an unfolding development that beckons to be articulated and related to the total fabric of meaning. (p. 50)

For the present study, I became immersed in the data first through transcribing the research interviews into written text. I then re-read each transcript and re-listened to each interview several times. I listened for both verbal and non-verbal elements of the recordings; I even envisioned the participant's body posture when they were talking. This allowed me to begin to see the phenomenon as a whole. It allowed me to start answering the question, "what is the experience of searching for God for this participant?"

Phenomenological Descriptions. The next task I engaged in was writing about the experience of searching for God for each participant individually. Once I felt sufficiently

immersed in the data, I attempted to translate the experience into writing. To do this, I once again used the PEA structure as my guide. I selected a participant whose data I felt particularly immersed in, and began to write a description of the phenomenon as it appeared in the interview (PEA-0). Because hermeneutic phenomenology posits that an experience cannot be divorced from its context, I also described the participant's situation and background during this step. Searching for God did not appear in a vacuum; it arose from each individual's unique context. Therefore, it was important that I not only described the phenomenon as it appeared, but also the details of the stories surrounding the phenomenon. I then wrote about the feelings, bodily sensations, impulses, and phenomenal meanings that appeared in the participant (PEA-1) as well as the way in which the participant understood the phenomenon (PEA-2). I also described the action that the participant was invited into in response to their experience of searching for God (PEA-3). Once these descriptions were written, I took a step back and considered what the participant's experience of searching for God was as a whole. I had written about the discreet elements of the phenomenon; now my task was to listen for what was at the heart it all. I asked, "what is the experience of searching for God really about for this participant?" and "what is essential about searching for God for this participant?" To answer these questions, I created a list of key features of searching for God that I included below the participant's description. I completed this process separately for all five of my participants. See Appendix I for an abbreviated example of what the result of this step looked like.

Consultation with Research Team. Allowing a research team to come alongside me in the process of data analysis deepened my immersion in the data and allowed for the phenomenon to reveal itself in new ways to fresh ears. My research team consisted of my supervisor, second reader, and research lab. The research lab I was a part of included other students engaged in

research projects or that were otherwise interested in counselling psychology research. After collecting confidentiality forms from the lab members (see Appendix E), I would share a segment of one of the interviews, via recording or transcript, and invite the listeners to allow the data to impress upon them. I was curious about their reactions to the data. How were they moved by it? What emotions came up for them as they listened to the interview? Did they resonate with anything that was shared? These reflections were sometimes similar to my own responses; other times, they were not. This allowed me a greater understanding of the phenomenon; it opened me up to seeing it from a perspective that was not my own. Often, lab members would share how they were moved by a participant's courage in sharing a painful experience. Other times people would talk about their resonance with the shared experience. Many would say, "I've felt that way too" or "that happened to me as well." This told me that the data was, in fact, phenomenological. It was not simply a dry or abstracted collection of words. It was living and moving, and it spoke to its listeners in a way that similarly moved something in them.

Phenomenological Writing. The process of phenomenological writing was perhaps the most important and most challenging part of the analysis process. It was in this writing that I was to express, in language, what I had encountered in the data. However, language has its limitations at the best of times; how was I to capture something so embodied and experiential using words and paper? The guidelines offered by my supervisory team and other contributors to phenomenological research methods supported me in this task. For instance, Finlay (2014) encourages researchers to write in a way that allows the phenomenon to come to life. Similarly, van Manen (2014) exhorts researchers to present their findings in a way that evokes a sense of awe and wonder in their readers. As such, I came up with images and metaphors to integrate into my writing. For instance, I wrote about searching for God being like a river that searchers

haphazardly find themselves travelling down. Furthermore, I used direct quotations from my participants in my writing to elucidate their lifeworld and bring readers more fully into their experiences. Prior to beginning this writing process, I created a separate document that brought together all of the key features of the individual interviews. I had previously determined what each separate interview revealed about the phenomenon of searching for God; now it was time to synthesize the data and find overlap between the interviews. I discovered that many of the key features of searching for God were shared by all five participants while others showed up in only three or four of the interviews. This process eventually left me with a document that contained the main themes of searching for God as a synthesized whole, as well as direct quotations from my participants that related to each theme. Using this document as an outline, I then proceeded to write out my findings, integrating the various metaphors and quotations as I saw fit. I acknowledged that there will always be better ways of crafting sentences and more evocative ways to describe my findings; therefore, I used the feedback of my peers and supervisors as an indication of the suitability of the writing. Specifically, I was looking for resonance with the writing and the readers' felt sense of entering the experience of searching for God.

Methodological Rigour

Rigour relates to the quality of research and is therefore imperative to address in any scientific study. In qualitative research, quality is demonstrated through a set of standards that differs from the conventional criteria of quantitative projects. Broadly speaking, good qualitative research can be described using terms such as "trustworthiness," "goodness," and "credibility" and can be assessed on the basis of the paradigmatic underpinnings of the study (Morrow, 2005). For instance, the criteria for "goodness" for a project rooted in a postpositivist framework will differ from a constructivist-based study. Regardless of the underlying paradigm, however, all

qualitative researchers must deal with questions such as, “how good is this study?” and “are the findings legitimate and of value to the reader?” This section will highlight the ways in which the present study addressed these questions.

Rigour in Phenomenology

Finlay (2011) acknowledges that “good phenomenological research evokes the lived world” (p. 261). In other words, phenomenological research should invite readers into a space where the phenomenon can touch their being and evoke a response. Reading a body of phenomenological text should move something in you; it should resonate in your core and invite you to connect with your own experiences of the phenomenon. It should leave you feeling connected to the text and more in touch with the part of yourself that it enlivened. As such, it ultimately should leave you with a deeper understanding of an experience. It can be difficult to ensure that this occurs, however. Therefore, various authors have proposed specific criteria to evaluate phenomenological research (e.g., Smith et al., 2009; de Witt and Ploeg, 2006; van Manen, 2014). For the present study, Finlay’s (2011) criteria were followed.

Finlay’s Criteria for Rigour

Finlay’s (2011) criteria for evaluating phenomenological research emerged from her collaboration with Evans (see Finlay & Evans, 2009). She describes it as ‘the 4 R’s as it outlines issues related to: (a) rigour, (b) relevance, (c) resonance, and (d) reflexivity. I will describe these categories below, including ways in which they were addressed in the present study.

Rigour. Finlay (2011) describes rigour as the way in which the research has been managed and worked through. She notes that rigorous phenomenological research is coherent, well described, and expressed clearly in its report. Furthermore, she argues that the knowledge that emerged from the study should be validated and argued with others, such as colleagues and

supervisors. In the present study, I was careful of ensuring that all of the procedural steps I took in designing and implementing the study were well documented and explained. For instance, the process of data collection and analysis is described earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, multiple discussions with my supervisor and fellow lab members gave me reason to believe that the phenomenon of searching for God was described appropriately, given the parameters of the study and research question guiding the project.

Relevance. Finlay (2011) describes relevance as "the value of the research in terms of its applicability and contribution" (p. 265). In other words, it addresses questions related to the addition that the research makes to the existing body of knowledge. Phenomenological research should enrich our understanding of the human condition and seek to empower or enliven both its readers and participants. The relevance of the present study is addressed in the discussion of the gaps in the literature it sought to fill (see Chapter 2) as well as its clinical and theoretical implications (see Chapter 5). In sum, this study expands the current body of research by adding an experiential, in-depth description of a prevalent, yet largely undocumented phenomenon to an otherwise mainly quantitative collection of studies. Additionally, it is relevant for practitioners working with adolescents by giving them a first-person perspective of what might be happening in their clients. This could give them a deeper sense of connection and curiosity with their clients, therefore enhancing their work.

Another way I ensured the relevance of the study was through directly discussing with my participants the impact that the research interviews had on them. All five individuals noted that our conversation was helpful for them. Some indicated that they felt unburdened, having told someone about their previously hidden experiences; others noted that they gained a specific insight about their experiences through our discussion. In this way, I am certain that the study

was relevant for the participants and potentially for any readers that can relate to the experiences they described.

Resonance. Phenomenological research is resonant when it taps into the reader's "emotional, artistic, and/or spiritual dimensions" (Finlay, 2011, p. 265). This category seeks to ensure that the writing is vivid, powerful, and moving. Readers should be touched by the findings; their emotions and somatic sensations should be impacted by what is written. This is a way of determining whether an adequate level of depth is achieved for the understanding of the phenomenon to be deepened. For the present study, a number of strategies were employed to determine resonance. First, I added imagery to the descriptions of the findings. The use of metaphors (e.g., a river) helped illuminate my descriptions by likening the findings to an image that readers can hold in their mind's eye. Furthermore, various other comparisons and experiential language helped to enhance the resonance of the findings. Second, I made sure to include direct quotations in my writing. These quotations were taken from the transcripts of the interviews and brought forth the participants' experiences in a direct and powerful way. They invite readers to say, "me too," or "I've felt that way also." Third, I shared my writing with my supervisor and colleagues to ensure that my descriptions resonated with them. I prompted them by asking for their reactions to the text, hoping to discover how the writing impacted someone other than me. The responses I received ensured me that the text was, in fact, resonant. Some commented on how they felt moved by specific sections and were able to connect with their own experiences of searching for God. Others noted that they did not share the experience of searching for God, but could understand it more deeply after reading it.

Reflexivity. Finlay's (2011) final criterion for ensuring the rigour of a phenomenological study is reflexivity. Broadly speaking, reflexivity refers to "the researcher's self-awareness and

openness about the research process" (2011, p. 265). It addresses the ways in which a researcher has navigated how their own subjectivity impacts the research process. This is an important topic for all researchers, as every person has their own set of values and experiences that they bring forth, whether they have an awareness of them or not. For the present study, it was particularly important for me to address how my experiences of searching for God intersected with the design and implementation of the project. Although my years of searching as an adolescent gave me a foundation for connecting with my participants, it also meant that I needed to be careful about bracketing my assumptions so that I could be open to hearing their stories. Because this task was so important, I decided to write a separate chapter about my reflexivity journey (see Chapter 6). In summary, this chapter outlines my experiences of searching for God as an adolescent and how those experiences have translated into my present-day quest for the divine. Furthermore, it explains in detail the reflexive practices I utilised, including a pilot interview and ongoing journaling throughout the entirety of the project.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological groundwork of the present study. I first described my underlying paradigmatic position and how that served as a foundation for using hermeneutic phenomenology. Then, I provided a brief outline of how phenomenology transitioned from a philosophical movement to a contemporary research method. I then discussed the steps I took to recruit my participants and collect the data. After providing brief descriptions of these five individuals, I outlined the process of analyzing the data and converting it into writing. The chapter concluded with a discussion about how I ensured that the present study met the standards for methodological rigour and trustworthiness. At this time, I invite you to make a

transition with me from the left-brained, analytical tone of the present chapter to a more embodied, receptive posture as we enter into an exploration of the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In exploring the lived experience of searching for God in adolescence, I have opened myself to being moved, impacted, and challenged by the experiences my participants shared with me. As a fellow searcher, I experienced resonance with many of the stories that were shared. I was struck by the imagery that was used; their descriptions connected me to my participants at a core-level, as if I understood a deep, central part of them that had previously been imprisoned or invalidated. It is my hope that I can now share these experiences with you, the reader, in a way that captures the pulse of these stories. I invite you to open your heart to these experiences and to let the words wash over you and enter your being.[3]

Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I will present to you the findings of the study. I will first discuss the metaphor that I use throughout this chapter to illuminate the experience of searching for God. This metaphor is that of an ever-flowing river, as the phenomenon did not appear as static or motionless but rather as a dynamic, moving *process*. This will provide the groundwork for the phenomenological writing that will follow. This writing will include the six key features that emerged as central to the process of searching: (a) suffering, (b) questioning and doubting, (c) longing for authenticity, (d) saying "yes" to the process of searching, (e) unburdening, and (f) striving to help others.

[3] As you read this chapter, you will notice that I use the first-person plural (i.e., we) in my descriptions of the experiences. I decided to write in this way to highlight my connectedness to my participants in their respective journeys. I am, after all, a fellow searcher alongside them. The use of the first-person plural is consistent with the method of the study. As noted in a previous footnote, a central tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology is that the researcher impacts and is impacted by the research process. A more detailed explanation of my personal engagement with the study can be found in chapter six.

Metaphor of River

I am hesitant to say that any metaphor can fully capture the true experience of searching for God. How can such a multifaceted, deeply personal yet inherently relational experience be described using mere words? As I searched for imagery to aid in this task, I struggled. Yet as I slowed down and considered the felt experience that my participants revealed to me—the confusion, the pain, the endless thinking, the occasional relief—it occurred to me that something that could capture the moving, undulating, seemingly unceasing nature of this process would be crucial. So I looked to the world around me. What did I see that had a constant flow, an incessant movement, a unique pulse? I eventually was brought to the moments I have spent beside moving waters. I could spend hours simply staring at the travelling wetness, enraptured by its mysterious cadence, puzzling over the self-powered current while resisting any technical explanations for its endless flow. I would switch my attention from one specific rock to the overall force of its whole, and then back again to a different spot. And as I thought of these things it became clear to me that these images could be useful in elucidating the experience at the heart of my participants.

A river begins with a source, such as a spring or marsh, and follows a course that usually ends at an ocean, lake, or another river. The current of a river is persistent; it may continue to flow even through the driest seasons. I imagine that those of us searching for God have left the stillness at the source of the river. Perhaps we were comfortable in the calm body of water, on a raft or a small boat. But something happened and now we find ourselves being moved by the current of a connected river. We are uprooted, taken from our safety and certainty, and left with a longing to return to what once was. Perhaps we begin to grieve the loss of an in-tact worldview or a solid set of beliefs, or satisfactory assumptions about God and life. But it seems like the river

cannot grant us these things. Instead, it is foreign, unpredictable, and unable to promise to keep us safe on our journey.

Although the initial movement in the river leaves us disoriented, confused, and unsettled, we also know that turning around and fighting its flow is a near-impossible task. So we reluctantly proceed. We grasp for debris in the water, something solid to hang onto to prevent us from being taken further by the terrifying current into who-knows-where. Perhaps this looks like a certain belief about God, or a theological explanation for our suffering. But even as we latch ourselves onto certain solidities, we often find that uncertainty still lies ahead. We cannot see the mouth of the river; we do not know its destination. But then something happens. Slowly, amidst our resistances and attempts to cling to what we know, we start to realize that the river is actually something we can trust. Usually we realize this when we look around and see that someone else is with us in the terrifying current. Perhaps this person takes our hand and assures us that we are OK because they have spent more time in the river than we have and know that it will not harm us. And we slowly come to believe that our existence in the flowing river is important and valid, that we can begin to trust it and be carried by its strength into unknowingness. And as this happens, we become more acquainted with the river. We feel an unburdening. The river becomes less scary, but never safe. Its current sometimes abates; other times it quickens. It bends, meanders, yet never stops.

In other words, searching for God emerged in this study as an insistent process of moving away from a belief system that no longer works. We distance ourselves from the God we were raised believing in to make space for something new—perhaps something bigger, more spacious, more true. Does this process ever complete itself? Does the river ever reach its destination? Does the searcher ever exhale in relief, saying, “I have arrived?” I am not so sure. I wonder if there are

moments when the river-traveller reaches a lake momentarily, only to be swept up in a new river the following day. Or perhaps they reach a destination, become familiarized with its surroundings, but then find themselves craving more movement, more dynamism, and choose to enter into the flow of a new river. It is like a searcher coming to an understanding of God, only to eventually realize that such an understanding is inadequate and must be cast away. Or a traveller who comes to understand glimpses of their true self only to realize that this is a never-ending task; that the task of becoming is lifelong.

The metaphor of a river has previously been used to describe the experience of grief. Wilson's (1992) image of an unsuspecting oarsman travelling down a river into a sudden waterfall captures a similar process of upheaval and disorientation in the face of life's unexpected events. In this image—which Wilson called the whirlpool of grief—the oarsman finds himself caught in a vortex of water following the initial drop down the waterfall. It is only until the waves settle that he may once again become settled and accept his place in the unpredictable waters. Perhaps the overlap between grief and searching for God is warranted, as the path the soul finds itself on in the midst of religious questioning and doubting may not be too dissimilar from that of a bereaved individual in the midst of grief.

Phenomenological Writing

Below is the phenomenological text of the experience of searching for God[4] for adolescents in evangelical Christian communities. It is organized into key features that appear to be central to the process. I imagine these features as stopping points along the path of searching.

[4] It is worth noting here that in our discussion about the words we selected to label this phenomenon—searching for God—we (the research team) wondered whether it was appropriate to keep this language after hearing the interviews. As noted in this section, it originally did not seem that the participants were searching for God at all. They rarely even brought up the God that is often found in evangelical churches. In fact, as discussed, it seemed like many of them were moving away from this God. We ultimately decided to keep this language because although they were not searching for the church-God, per se, the participants were undoubtedly still searching for God: a God that was less contained, more mystical, and more personal.

They are not discreet categories or themes; rather, they should be seen as descriptors of common experiences that searchers pass through. They depict searching for God as a process that involves: (a) suffering, (b) questioning and doubting, (c) longing for authenticity, (d) saying "yes" to the process of searching, (d) unburdening, and (e) striving to help others. These features are non-linear; they are not stages that one predictably passes through from start to finish. Therefore, they should not be read as if the second feature always shows up in someone's life after the first, and so on. Someone may experience suffering, for example, throughout their entire journey, rather than simply at its inception, as it is presented here. The ordering of the features below is simply due to what seemed most congruent with the descriptions provided in the research interviews.

The river metaphor will be used throughout to help illuminate the experience described. Despite this device, the challenge of translating experience into language remains. We are hopelessly limited in our ability to translate experiential material into something that can be read from a paper or screen. As such, I have included direct quotations from the participants to draw you, the reader, into the lives of these individuals. I have italicized these quotations and indicated in superscript which participant they link to according to the following notation: (a) Celestia, (b) Rachael, (c) Rae, (d) Jae, and (e) Gerard. I invite you to adopt a stance of wonder, awe, and openness to entering such experiences. Perhaps the movement of the search for God described below will speak to you and guide you towards the stirrings of the river flowing within you as well.

Searching for God as Suffering

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of searching for God is the suffering that we so often experience. We feel burdened, stuck, confused, angry. And we feel things that we cannot even

put into words. We carry our suffering with us, as if we are dragging a sled of bricks behind us in each moment. Sometimes the pain seems to show up out of nowhere, like we were simply dealt a poor hand and have to live with the consequences. But other times it is contextually situated and it arises from our circumstances.

Context for Suffering. There is not one answer to the question of where our suffering comes from, as our situations are all unique. However, for many of us our suffering is the result of an internal voice that wants to become external, but is forced to remain inside. For instance, we may have a reaction to something we hear—perhaps a sermon or teaching—that doesn't quite seem right to us. We might hear someone say, "this is true, because it says so in the Bible" or "God wants everyone to be like *this*." And we tilt our heads in confusion. We take a look inside and think to ourselves, "that doesn't make sense." Our experiences don't align with what we have just heard. And when these teachings repeat themselves, or we hear the same message from different sources, an unrest begins to develop in our bodies. We want to say something, to take a stand and exclaim, "that's not right!" But who are we to question the people who claim to know all the answers? What gives us the right to disagree with our pastors and teachers? So we remain silent, and our dissatisfaction grows.

Other times our suffering emerges from a shift in our physical contexts. We may have felt God's presence at a previous time in a different location. Maybe we were certain that God was real because we had an enlivening emotional experience at a summer camp or worship conference or youth retreat. Yet, now we have graduated from our youth group or moved away from our hometown to attend a new school. Our new environment does not feel as spiritually rich as our previous context, and we begin to wonder if any of what we experienced in the past was actually real. We don't feel the joy that we once felt; it seems like a feeling of emptiness or

longing has shown up in its place. And to make things worse, we sometimes feel alienated in our new communities because others cannot seem to understand what it is like to grieve the loss of a felt experience of God in a different location.

And other times the precipitant of our suffering is hard to distill; it seems to simply show up without notice. We might one day find ourselves feeling confused, disoriented, and helpless without any traceable reason. Perhaps we spontaneously realize that our worldview is not big enough to account for the pain we observe around us. Or it may just occur to us that our experience of God doesn't match the things we were taught in our childhood. We look for the source of our pain, but cannot find it. We might read theological texts, listen to sermons, speak to pastors for spiritual guidance, but our confusion lingers. We feel more and more stuck, and our powerlessness to change our felt experience eats away at us.

Amidst our varying contexts, there are many ways that we, the searchers, suffer. Sometimes our suffering includes anger, loneliness, confusion, and hopelessness all at once; other times, only one type of pain takes centre stage and we dwell there for long periods of time. The faces of suffering that I have identified below are far from exhaustive. Your experience of searching may include a suffering that is not included in the section below. Either way, these expressions of suffering appeared to be prominent for the participants of this study: (a) confusion and emptiness; (b) helplessness and desperation; (c) sadness and depression; (d) loneliness; (e) shame; and (f) anxiety, anger, and fear.

Confusion and Emptiness. Up until this point, we have learned to live within our worldview. We have accepted that the world operates according to the script we were handed in childhood and have not needed to radically adjust or deconstruct our beliefs. There has been no need to create distance between the self and the belief-system. We exist comfortably within our

water-source; movement has been minimal; we feel safe in the stillness. Therefore, when we begin to sense an unrest within our core, it is confusing and disorienting. Sometimes it happens when we learn something new about God that doesn't quite match our beliefs. Other times it's after we listen to a sermon that makes us wonder if the desires that we once thought were good and natural are actually sinful and wrong.

> *I was at church; it was just after a Sunday service and I was sitting in the pews. I had people around me, but I wasn't really thinking about them. I was just kind of in my own head. I was very confused, but I feel like it was more than confused; I think there was something else happening.*[e]

"Why do I feel dissatisfied?" we ask. "Why do I feel like something isn't right within me?" We look around to find the source of our discomfort, but to no avail. It is a discontentedness felt in our being, in the deepest part of our body.

> *There is a void in my chest. When I touch my chest, I feel like I'm not actually reaching it. It's deeper.*[e]

> *It's like a longing; I feel empty. Like there's an empty space in my chest. Like I've taken in a big breath of air but I can't release it.*[e]

The safety of our previously-held belief system has been replaced with confusion, longing, emptiness, vacancy. It's as if our experience of incongruency has left us with a big, black hole at the centre of us; one that cannot be filled with religious platitudes or answers to theological questions. It is a hole that extends deep into our hearts, demanding our attention. It tells us that we no longer belong in our current situation, that our context doesn't match whatever is happening within us. And the black hole eventually takes up so much space that we barely remember that things used to make sense, that certain beliefs used to satisfy our curiosities. Our feelings of confusion and emptiness are the new here-and-now.

Helplessness and Desperation. And as we turn our attention toward this vacancy, we become aware of our powerlessness to change it.

> *I was lost; I didn't know what to do next.*[c]
>
> *I felt fear of not being in control, like I didn't have agency or choice.*[c]

We long for direction, for a map to guide us through the journey that we have haphazardly found ourselves on. We wish we had something or someone to tell us how to proceed, who to talk to, what steps to take to restore our sense of control. We wish we could figure out all the answers to our questions about God, the Bible, Christianity. We wish that things could make sense, like they used to. We long for a return to the days of Sunday school; the days when Jesus felt like a friend, a mentor, a guide. But instead we get nothing.

> *I don't understand how to reconnect with God. No one ever gives you any specifics on how to do it.*[b]
>
> *Everywhere I went to find an answer, there was another question to be asked. I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere.*[e]

We realize that we don't have the power to pull ourselves out of the emptiness and confusion. So we grasp for something solid amidst the ever-increasing current of the river. We try to cling to an outstretched log or boulder; we try to dig our feet into the rocky ground. Perhaps someone directs us towards a Bible passage or tells us God is greater than our questions. And we try our hardest to believe this, to cling to the words of the scriptures, or to imagine a divine being above our problems. We wish we could believe; and sometimes we even convince ourselves that we can. We might tell people that even though we can't feel God, we know God is still there. But these wistful claims are not sustainable; they satisfy our peers, but we know that they are not true. When we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are over-powered by the current of the river. And we eventually run out of energy to continue pretending. We can't fake-it-till-we-make-it forever. So we end up feeling helpless and desperate.

> *I'm never gonna find the answers to my questions. I'm probably gonna be left wondering "what is going on?" until the day I die.*[a]

I was disappointed and lost. I didn't get anything from counselling. What do I do next?[e]

We even feel helpless to tell others about our struggles. We feel caught in a paradox: we want to talk to others, but simultaneously want to avoid them. We long for their support, but cannot bear the possibility of burdening them with our pain. We see how important their faith is to them. We might want to say, "hey, this thing you believe, I don't know if it's actually true" or "I'm struggling right now, can you help?" But we can't. We are tongue-tied, stuck, silent. It's as if a wall has been erected between us and them. We have created this wall to protect them from having to feel the weight of our questions and struggles. But instead, the wall actually keeps us more silent, more isolated, and more alone.

> *Everyone's always saying, "oh yeah, ask me anything." But its like, this is your faith, this is what you believe in, this is what you care about. For some of these people it's their entire identity. I don't wanna lead them astray, I don't wanna drag them down the path to hell.*[a]

And if it doesn't feel cruel to burden others with our struggles, it could feel dangerous. For some of us, the thing that we struggle so deeply with is tightly knit into the fabric of our communities. Christianity has been built into the very identity of our families and peer groups. If we all-of-a-sudden come out and say what we feel—that we are doubting, questioning, feeling distant from the church, unsure about who God is and what to believe—then we could risk losing the people we love so much. Or if they don't disown us, they could simply dismiss our problems and pretend they don't exist. And that could feel just as painful. It would be like saying, "this is me; this is the truest form of me; this is what's happening in my heart," and having the response be, "okay, anything else new in your life?" We want to protect ourselves from being invalidated or ostracized.

> *Faith is the pinnacle of my family's foundation. If that's the thing that I'm struggling with… that's kind of a big deal. I don't understand what that could mean for me.*[c]

So, we are left silent and helpless, trapped between showing our true self and maintaining our close relationships. Our relationships are so important to us; we want to do everything we can to make sure they are intact and conflict-free. But we also sense that what's happening inside of us is equally as important—our questions, doubt, confusion and longing. And this part of us doesn't want to stay under the surface. So we are caught in the tension, being pulled at from all sides, and we don't know what to do. And it seems like we will never truly know what to do, like our existence in the tension is never-ending.

> *Will this void ever go away? Will I always have this need to look for an answer? Will I ever get to a point where I can just relax and not have to keep thinking about things?*[e]

Our helplessness and desperation persist. Sometimes it fades in and out as the circumstances around us change. Maybe we'll hear a hopeful song and feel our spirits lift as the music enters our being. Or perhaps we'll talk with an encouraging friend and experience a momentary freedom from the stuckness and tension. These experiences are like gifts, spontaneously given to us. But they are gifts that we must return. Because when the dust settles and we return to our dark rooms at the end of each day, we often come back to the worn-out words: "I just don't know what to do."

Sadness and Depression. The vacancy, the confusion, the helplessness sometimes plunges us into a pit of depression. It is a sinking feeling, as if our bodies respond to the helplessness by numbing out the world. Our ability to experience joy goes offline, and a bitter sadness descends upon us.

> *I don't feel like talking to God because I'm so consumed in my own sadness.*[b]

Where does our sadness come from? Does it simply show up unannounced? Sometimes it feels random and unfounded, but when we trace it back, we can often distill the context of our

depressiveness. And most often, it emerges out of our realization that our communities are indifferent to our search for God. We have been on this journey of wondering about our faith, wrestling with what to believe, trying to find God amidst it all; and no one seems to care. Or if they do care, they don't know how to express it. We just want people to be curious about what we're going through, to express interest, to ask, "how've you been feeling lately?" But instead we hear the superficial conversations around us. We hear people talk about work and school and the weather. And we are left feeling alone, different, despondent. We try to numb out the sadness, to pretend that we're unaffected by it. But when our armour cracks and our defenses fail, the tears flow. But rarely are they tears of catharsis or release; they are often tears of pain, of longing to feel joy again, to feel anything other than depression.

> *It felt like everything was dulled. Like a big major thing could happen in the distance, like an explosion or something, and I'd be like, "yeah, cool."*[b]

We feel so trapped in our sadness because we know that there is no quick-fix. We feel the weight of the journey ahead of us, as if we have no other option but to proceed into the pain, to carry the burdens of questioning, searching, longing for answers. The process ahead of us feels daunting, long, and distant. But it seems inevitable.

> *As soon as I started questioning, I became sad because I knew there was a really long process ahead of me.*[c]

We sometimes avoid the process altogether to distract ourselves from the journey ahead of us. We play video games, watch movies, sleep. We do anything we can to numb the pain inside, to avoid the scary journey ahead of us. We discover that coping techniques are effective; that even though it's not permanent, the short-lived relief that avoidance brings us is better than no relief at all.

> *I would sleep. Because then I would be unconscious and wouldn't have to process things. Or play games on my phone.*[b]

Some of us even try counselling or speak with a mentor or pastor. Or we try writing out our struggles in a journal or blog. And although these strategies sometimes offer us a new perspective or invite us into new ways of thinking about our struggles, rarely do they access the deep-rooted pain of our souls. We were hoping that such techniques would possess the magical cure for our sadness, but nothing seems to remediate our suffering.

So we are left with ourselves and our inescapable pain. Our motivation to complete our life-tasks drops; we lose energy; we struggle to get through each day. It seems like our sadness is here to stay.

> *I don't have the energy or motivation to do anything.*[b]

Loneliness. And the pain of the sadness is compounded when we realize that we are suffering alone.

> *It just felt really lonely. Who do I even talk to about this? It seemed like I was the only one struggling.*[c]

Somewhere in the depths of our being we know that we need to talk to someone with whom to share our suffering. We know that the embers of the fire within us want to burst into flame, to ignite, grow, expand, and illuminate. But we also know that such embers have no oxygen. We know we need a Firestarter, but doubt that such a person exists.

> *Right now it's really lonely. I just don't know who to talk to, where to go to. I can't express this to my family, and don't have a mentor or pastor who I could go to.*[c]

> *I really want to talk to my friends, but they're strangers now for some reason. And they don't know how to talk to me.*[c]

We think we are doing others a favour by shielding them from our pain. After all, who could we burden with our suffering? Who would want to carry our pain? It would be too much to let

someone in, to let someone know the depths of our struggle. Too much for us, and for them. So the fire inside of us remains idle, and our search remains veiled.

> *I just wanted to put on my hood and hide.*[a]

We shield ourselves. We put on a mask and pretend that everything is OK. We hide behind a guise of confidence, stability, and put-together-ness. We know that if we admit to feeling sad, lost, or desolate, we wouldn't even end up getting what we truly need. We've learned that people don't want to hear about our struggles, that our curiosities about God and the world are not welcomed.

> *No one wants to acknowledge that you're sad or accept it. Or say to you that it's valid.*[b]

> *I've never really talked about it before, 'cause everyone just assumes everyone's good, you know?*[b]

But sometimes we try; sometimes we decide that we can put away the mask and show up as authentically as we can.

> *I'm trying to be more open with my struggles, so I told my mom I was doing this research study. And immediately she was like, "oh that's good, what else have you been up to?" Her response didn't surprise me, but I wish she would've been more curious with me.*[c]

Each time our questions are dismissed and our experiences invalidated, we return to the state of loneliness from whence we came. And eventually this loneliness begins to eat away at our core. It's as if it turns into a thick, dark fog that engulfs us, forcing us deeper into isolation. We retreat into ourselves, to our best coping mechanisms, our most effective survival tools. We sleep, we consume media, we think suicidal thoughts, we write, we think more. We do anything in our power to fight off the loneliness, to escape the fog. But it remains. And it gets thicker every time it gets ignored, dismissed, or pushed away. Every time it hears, "snap out of it" or "just pray more" it intensifies. It protects us from being seen, from being truly exposed.

Shame. As the fog lingers, we begin to wonder if we are the problem. We so deeply hope that this is not the case, that there are others who are suffering with us. We look around, but don't see anyone.

> *I was confused. I was like, "why isn't this weird for them?" And then, "why is this weird for me?" I didn't know what to do.*[c]

We go to church and see our peers raise their hands in worship; we hear our family members praying earnestly at the dinner table; we witness the joy that others seem to experience when they read the Bible. But we cannot relate to them anymore. We are soon convinced that we don't belong in the world that we were born into. We ask, "is it me? Is something wrong with me? Why am I different?"

> *All these other people can find God so easily and are like, "yeah he came to me in my time of need." And I'm just sitting here thinking all the wrong things.*[a]

We think that the only reasonable explanation for all of this is that it's our own doing. After all, God can't be the problem, we think. It must be something we are doing, or not doing.

> *I was probably doing something wrong.*[a]

Our minds try to find ways to fix the problem, to get back on track so that we can once again feel connected to God and our communities. We take responsibility for our suffering and think that if we can just do more we will begin to feel better. We think we should pray more, read our Bible more, listen to more worship songs. When we are convinced that we are the source of our pain, it only makes sense for us to think about ways we can change our behaviours to get back on track with God.

> *I should be doing more, I should be talking to God.*[d]

Sometimes we even try doing these things. We open our Bibles; we sit through church services, we pray our hardest. But when we lie awake night and take an honest look inside, we find that

the familiar, lingering feeling of being flawed and broken is still there. And now it has even more power, more ammunition: we can't even pray correctly or read enough scripture. We can't seem to help ourselves—just more evidence of how flawed we are. Surely, we are a lost cause; there is no other explanation. We've caused our pain and are powerless to be free from it.

Anxiety, Anger, and Fear. Amidst our melancholic experiences of suffering, sometimes we also find a more active and dynamic type of pain inside of us. In these moments, our suffering can feel agitated, pressurized, or jittery, like something inside of us wants to escape and show itself to the world.

> *There was a pressure in my chest.*[a]

> *I feel like someone has taken a massive syringe and injected fluid into my body. I can feel it in the heart and near the lungs. And it's causing a lot of pressure in the upper part of my chest, like my heart's working overtime.*[e]

We feel the pressure when we drop out of our thoughts and into our bodies. When we take a step back from our endless questioning, we realize that there are physical sensations that our bodies have been dealing with for who-knows-how-long. Sometimes these sensations are there because we fear we will never find answers to our questions; other times it seems like the sensations are there simply to alert us that something isn't right in the world. Maybe our values have been compromised or our worldview has been challenged. Our bodies try to tell us to make things right; but it's hard to trust our bodies. We would far rather avoid the pressure by jumping back up to our thoughts. When we do risk staying with the physical sensations, we sometimes discover that our bodies long for a release of something. It's like we really need to exhale, but don't have the air in our lungs. We can feel the internal pressure, the stirring inside of us, but yet again feel powerless to express ourselves. Our hands are tied behind our back; we cannot make the pressure we feel disappear.

As a reaction to our powerlessness, sometimes we find ourselves feeling angry. We are angry that we can't just tell everyone how we feel. We are angry that our struggles would fall on deaf ears, and angry at ourselves for choosing to remain hidden and silent. Sometimes the anger takes the form of a conviction within ourselves about the way things ought to be. And it propels us to want to stand up and give a speech about it. It could be about the right way to interpret the Bible, or the correct way to treat the homosexuals or other minority populations. It's like a passion bubbling up inside of us, waiting to explode. It's like our bodies are telling us to fight for our voice, to fight against injustice.

> *I felt angry that the Bible could cause so much pain. It wasn't a burning hot rage; it was more of a shaky anger.*[a]

> *It's like a mini frustration tantrum going on in my head.*[e]

Yet we often resist the messages our bodies send us. We know that our anger is dangerous; we are yet again caught in the perennial tension between expressing ourselves and protecting our relationships. And so we choose the latter; we can't lose our families, our friends. It would be too painful, too harmful. We would rather absorb the pain ourselves. So that's exactly what we do. We fear that expressing our true selves would result in the loss of our closest relationships. We fear the loss of the safety and stability of our old way of living. And most of all, we fear losing God. We fear that we will get to the other side and realize that God was never there all along; that God was never more than just a figment of our imaginations, a construction of our psyche to help us cope with the pain of the world.

> *It's like I'm playing peek-a-boo with God. Right now I'm closing my eyes, like, "You're not there God, I know you're not." But then I'm really hoping that when I open my eyes he still is. But I'm afraid he won't be.*[c]

Losing God could mean losing our identity, our source of meaning, our hope in an afterlife. It's hard for us to even imagine what it would be like to experience such a loss.

> *It's scary to think that I might open my eyes and God's not there. It's unsettling. I feel like I'm on my own.*[c]

Searching for God as Questioning and Doubting

Amidst our experiences of suffering, we also find ourselves asking critical questions about the things that matter to us. We hold our beliefs under a microscope and inspect them with all of the intellectual energy we have left. We want to know about the values beneath the worldview we once blindly espoused. Can we be sure that our previous belief-system aligns with our emerging sense of what is right and true? Do the core doctrines of Christianity hold up in our present culture? Are there any parts of our childhood faith that are worth holding onto? We long to find answers to our questions because it seems like our identities rest on them. Although some of our questions are asked simply because we have discovered that we like asking questions—and we certainly have many of these—the majority of our questions come from a deeper part of ourselves. This part is concerned with discovering who we really are. It asks, "What do I value? What do I believe? What makes me human? What makes me me?" And so, we take our questions seriously. We restlessly pursue answers; we lose sleep over finding the correct things to believe in; we doubt; we criticize; we remain skeptical. Sometimes we think that the answers to our questions will tame the unrest of our souls; that once we figure out the right things to believe or the right ways to behave, we will be satisfied. But other times we admit that answers seem to simply birth more questions and that we are caught in an unending spiral. But whether it is fruitful or not, our questioning persists. And although they are many, they often fall under broad categories. These categories include: (a) questions about morality and sexuality; (b) questions about the Bible and God; (c) questions about Satan, hell, and salvation; and (d) questions about existence.

Questions about Morality and Sexuality. Our questions are often about morality and sexuality. We have heard sermons about the Bible's messages about homosexuality and in many cases our communities have reinforced these perspectives. Sometimes we wish that we could simply accept their conclusions. But instead we struggle with them. Our experiences don't seem to match what we hear.

> *If Jesus loves me for who I am and he is meeting me where I am and loves me no matter what, then how can me being bisexual bar me from heaven?*[e]

It doesn't seem to add up. We look at the world around us and see a spectrum of Christians with varying sexual orientations, preferences, and identities. We have heard that Jesus loves all humans unconditionally, but we have also heard that homosexuality is a sin.

> *How can there be gay Christians that believe they are saved if in the Bible there's a verse where Paul says homosexuality is a sin?*[e]

Rarely do we know how to resolve this tension. We have homosexual friends; homosexual desires. Are we really "living in sin?" Are we truly expected to cut out this part of ourselves because the Bible claims that such desires are not God's design? This seems wrong and oppressive, offensive even. So we push back.

> *It's not right that God's word is causing my bisexual friend so much pain. I can't see how consensual love between two people could really be sinful. The Bible's supposed to bring joy!*[a]

We want to relieve the suffering that these messages have inflicted, but we don't know how. We don't have the answers to the pain; we don't know why the Bible says what it does. So we keep questioning. We keep pushing back against the messages we hear that clash with our experiences. Sometimes we even try to accept the answers that we get. But they never satisfy us.

> *When I find an answer I get really happy. I get super excited, euphoric even. And then it instantly fades away and I realize that it's not the answer I was looking for. It's not filling the void inside of me. It doesn't help me at all; it does nothing for me.*[e]

It is as if the answers themselves tell us that our search is not for answers. It's like they say, "you think you need me, but you don't. I will never satisfy you." So we momentarily admit defeat.

> *It's not gonna be explained to me because "God works in mysterious ways" and I don't understand it. I'm human.*[a]

The lofty platitudes that we hear in response to our questions anger us; we feel so dismissed and invalidated. We don't want to hear that "it's all part of God's plan" or that "God is bigger than your questions" or that we should "love the sinner but hate the sin." We have friends that are suffering because of some of these messages; *we* are suffering because of these messages. But we have little else to cling to; no one else is giving us satisfactory answers. So we continue our pursuit amidst our frustration; the stirring inside of us cannot be silenced with trite responses and dismissive clichés.

Questions about the Bible and God. Other times we question the entirety of the Bible. We look around and see the way our communities revere it; we hear people talk about what the Bible says and how that dictates their lives. But sometimes we don't agree with these imperatives. Sometimes we find that the Bible's so-called rules for living are actually oppressive or hurtful. So instead of placating and submitting to its alleged authority, we question it.

> *My friends said that homosexuality is a sin. I just don't understand why. They said it said so in the Bible. But what does that mean? Why is the Bible true? Why should I believe it's true?*[a]

Other times it's not a certain moral imperative that makes us question the Bible. Sometimes it's a series of lectures we hear from a respected professor in a religious studies class that leaves us with doubts about the Bible's legitimacy and value.

> *After I took this class, I started to doubt certain parts of the Bible. And I began to doubt the validity of the Bible.*[c]

And now that we have started to question the relevance of the Bible for our lives, we cannot go back. We remember what it was like to think of the scriptures as the definitive foundation for our lives; how we used to read it, study it, listen to sermons about it.

> *I grew up thinking you have to believe in everything the Bible says in order to have a certain relationship with God. So I did.*[c]

But now our experience has changed. We can no longer blindly accept its teachings because we don't even know if it's a trustworthy source of truth. We want to believe it; that would be far simpler. But we cannot. We can't deny the part of ourselves that harbours these questions; we can't cut out a part of ourselves that is real and authentic.

Sometimes our questions about the Bible turn into questions about God. We think about the God we were raised believing in. We were told that this God is a father, that he is male. And we were told that 'he' is loving, powerful, good, all-present, all-knowing, outside of time yet infinitely present with us, in us. We learned about a God that responds to our prayers, that cares for the poor and powerless. We also learned that this God sent a child, Jesus, to earth to pay the penalty for the sins we have committed. So we learned that the God of the Bible also demands justice, holiness, perfection. But just as we become skeptical about the Bible, we also start to wonder about these bold claims about the divine. We may want to believe that this God is still present, loving, and powerful, but we simply don't know.

> *I always thought that God was always watching me. Like he's just there. And he's in my head and has a little room in my head and he's just there all the time. But now I'm not so sure.*[c]

> *How does God have unconditional love?*[e]

Sometimes we are not even sure why we still have any beliefs about God at all. We recognize that our perspective is just that—a perspective. We wonder about why it is the way it is, and why other perspectives exist alongside ours.

> *Why do I even believe in God? Why do so many people have different perspectives, and why is mine the way it is?*[c]

The idea of God becomes mysterious and confusing, and our beliefs about a divine being get analyzed, questioned, criticized, dropped.

Questions about Satan, Hell, and Salvation. When we begin to question God, we also begin to wonder about our fate. We used to be so certain that our ticket to heaven lay in our belief and commitment to our Christian faith. We were told that our path to eternal life was carved out through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. And we believed this wholeheartedly. We had something to look forward to, something to relieve the sting of our awareness of our inevitable demise. When we feared death, we were told that Jesus conquered death. When we feared the cessation of our existence, we were told that after we die we will go to heaven—or heaven will eventually come down to us—and that we will spend an eternity worshipping God without suffering and pain. This held us together; it allowed us to cope in the bleak, dark world around us.

But yet again, things have changed. Questioning is our new norm, and questions about hell, Satan, and salvation are no exception.

> *How did hell get here?*[a]

> *How is it fair that some people die and go to hell? What about the people that don't get the chance to experience God, or they tried and it just isn't working for them?*[a]

> *Can Satan be saved? What makes us more worthy of being saved than the fallen angels?*[a]

We no longer understand what determines salvation; we no longer have confidence in an eternity with God; we barely even believe if the dichotomy of heaven and hell is real.

> *I no longer know if there's a heaven or a hell, and I definitely don't know the exact logistics of how they work, if they are real.*[a]

Without the certainty of a painless afterlife we are left with our pervasive unknowingness. Our anxiety about death and nonbeing rears its head; it tries to surface. But who can face the mystery of death head-on? How can anyone survive a true encounter with nonbeing? We feel confused, trapped, and afraid.

Questions about Existence. As our minds try to make sense of the dizzying array of all these questions, we start to wonder about the meaning of it all. We wonder why things are so confusing, why our beliefs are changing, why we have so many questions. We fear that our quest for answers, our pursuit of the resolution of our unrest, is nothing more than a hollow expedition through a meaningless world. We question the meaning of our existence on this earth.

> *If no one's willing to explain this to me, not even the creator of the universe, then why am I here? Do I matter right now?*[a]
>
> *What am I actually doing here?*[d]
>
> *I don't care about being happy. I just wanna find meaning for my life.*[c]

After all, the thing that seemingly held together our worldview—our Christian faith—no longer works. Our foundation has been ripped away from underneath us; we are suspended in mid-air, left to our own devices. And without that structure, we don't know how to proceed.

> *I'm not sure where I am or what I'm supposed to be doing.*[d]

We are trapped. We cannot go back to our old beliefs; they seem naïve, trite, and insufficient. Yet, movement forward feels scary, uncertain, and dark.

Searching for God as Longing for Authenticity

Throughout our entire process of searching, longing, questioning, doubting, and suffering, we deeply desire authenticity. We long for realness, for a genuine encounter with another human being—one that isn't shrouded in religious platitudes and clichés. We crave the real like an artist craves beauty, like a performer craves the stage. It is as if our souls long to

meet other souls; like the deepest part of us wants to connect with the depth and richness of another. We have been honest with our search; we have turned our attention inwards and acknowledged our suffering, our pain. Now we simply long for another to see this pain with us, to acknowledge it, make space for it, validate it.

> *I've been trying to be more authentic and transparent about my struggle. I have a hard time opening up about anything, so I'm at a point now where I'm forcing myself to do it.*[c]

It's hard for us to take the first step and talk about our struggles because we sense that it's not safe to let others in. Maybe we've tried in the past and it's been dismissed or ignored; perhaps we have shared our doubts with a friend, only to have them tell us that we don't have enough faith. Or maybe we talked with a pastor and heard them say that our theology is off, that we should be focusing on the sovereignty and glory of God instead of the things that don't make sense. Or maybe people we've heard people tell us that we are simply being too negative and should try to be happier in life.

> *I want to be able to talk to other people about this without feeling like a downer.*[c]

It seems like every time we try to talk about our struggles we are left feeling hurt, confused, unseen, and unsafe. So we resolve that the next time we have the opportunity to be vulnerable, we won't risk it. We protect ourselves by remaining on the surface and partaking in the artificial, church-lobby conversations around us. We talk about work, school, media. We even know how to talk about things related to God and Christianity. But we know that such conversations contain no realness or substance; it's just an act to prevent ourselves from being hurt again. We hate that we do this and we hate that other people do it too.

> *I'm not actually happy. And I know everyone isn't happy, but they always seem to give off the impression that they're happy. I hate seeing happy people.*[b]

As we continue to dance around the surface, we become more and more certain that our suffering is not welcome. We even begin to build narratives about our peers, claiming to know their true desires and intentions. We convince ourselves that they want nothing to do with our questions and doubts, that they don't want to hear about how lonely we've been lately.

> *When people ask you how you're doing, they're not really asking how you're doing. They don't really wanna know.*[b]
>
> *It sounds so cheesy, but it feels like people can't accept the real you.*[b]

We know the extent of our suffering, and we imagine what it would be like to share the weight of our burdens with another. It would be too much for them; it would destabilize them, weaken them. And we would hate to do that to them. So we don't. We protect them by pretending that we are OK. We say, "I'm fine, how are you?" and try to keep conversations as trivial as possible. Every time we do this, we get better at it. We become experts at steering conversations away from ourselves, away from our pain. We hide ourselves from them, and they hide themselves from us. And we exist in this skittish two-way dialogue involving words and sentences, but no humanness, no personhood, no realness. It's amazing how many empty sentences we can come up with to protect ourselves and avoid our pain.

In order for our habits to be broken, we need someone to persistently create a space for our true selves to appear. We need to know that it is safe to reveal ourselves, that we are cared-for and valued. We need to know that people aren't simply being polite or courteous when they ask us how we're doing. And we need people to be vulnerable with us, so we can see enough of them to know that we are safe being seen ourselves. But rarely do we experience these things. Rarely do we find a community that invites our whole self to the table, including the parts of us that are scary, reprehensible, or shameful. We wish that this community existed in our worlds, but it seems like a fantasy, a too-good-to-be-true fairy tale.

Despite our acknowledgement of the lack of real, good, safe community in our lives, sometimes we push through anyways. Sometimes we take it upon ourselves to create such a community and test the waters with our peers. We feel determined to be real with our trusted friends. We cautiously hope that our pain will be met with curiosity, compassion and spaciousness. We might share that we are having a hard time, or that we've been feeling down. We might say, "you know, I've actually been struggling a bit lately." And we fearfully await the response. We feel exposed and naked, like we have just given out a part of ourselves that we have not shared with anyone else. And most often, we end up feeling discouraged.

> *As soon as you talk about anything personal that's not school or work related, people just don't want to hear it.*[b]

We might see a look of surprise come back at us, as if that we disrupted the tempo of their happy life. Or they might feign interest, offering empty sympathy or a story of how they got through a difficult time in their life. Or they might simply give us advice on how to be happy again. "Look on the bright side," they might say. "You have so much to be thankful for." But we already know this; we know how happy and grateful we should be. We sloop our heads in defeat. Another attempt to be seen, to be less lonely, has failed. We regret ever saying anything in the first place; it would have been better to have never tried. That way we wouldn't have to feel the disappointment of failure. We are left with the same longing for authenticity that we started with.

So what do we do? How do we respond? Do we silence the inner voice that craves authenticity? Do we conform to the social world around us and return to pretending that everything is OK? Do we permanently turn off this part of ourselves so that we can maintain the relationships that are important to us?

Searching for God as Saying "Yes" to the Process

Amidst our suffering, questioning and doubting, and longing for realness and authenticity, we choose to keep struggling. We could simply re-adopt our former belief system and return to our old, uncomplicated worldview. But we don't. We don't go back to believing all the things about God that we were told to believe; we don't return to the cookie-cutter faith of our childhood. It is as if something inside of us knows that such a return would cost us a part of ourselves. This part of us tells us that the journey we are on is good and important. We cannot quite identify this voice; at times it seems foreign or distant. It is still, calm, and almost-silent at first. But it is there. It tells us to keep questioning, to keep doubting, to keep struggling for a voice, for a glimpse of light amidst the darkness around us. It tells us that even though we fear losing everything that once held us together, we are OK. *We are OK*. This voice is often heard most clearly in the presence of an open, spacious other. When we are joined with someone who has listened to the prompting of their inner voice, we can also begin to pay attention to ours. It is as if the person we trust with our struggles can give us permission to simply be in the flow of the river we are travelling down. When we feel safe in the presence of a fellow searcher, we can let go of the debris that we cling to and trust the movement of the water. And as we learn to trust the current, we find ourselves accepting our struggles and committing to the journey ahead of us.

Acceptance of the Process. We have learned through experience that our strategies to avoid, suppress, or change the inner turmoil inside of us are not sustainable. We've learned that pretending to fit in with the world around us is not worth it, that being inauthentic gets us nowhere. We cannot continue to sit in the pews and pretend to agree with the pastor. We cannot continue to pretend that we're unaffected by our peers' interpretations of certain Bible passages. We cannot be silent anymore. So instead we say, "I will struggle with this; I will exist in this

tension, I will not give up." These words come to us when our search is validated by someone we trust, when someone sees the goodness of our emerging story and invites us to do the same. We come to accept that our struggle is here, moving inside of us, a part of us. We accept that we have questions and doubts, and that our concerns about faith and spirituality are real. We accept that we no longer have the answers about who God is or what we should believe. And as this happens, we find that we are also learning to accept the deepest parts of ourselves. When our posture towards our struggles shifts from denial and avoidance to acceptance, our posture towards ourselves follow suit. We embark on the journey of undoing our shaming tactics and simply let ourselves *be.* We begin to believe that we are good, that our questions and doubts should not be hidden, that all parts of us are OK. We know that the journey ahead of us will likely be difficult, but this does not faze us. We have learned to loosen our grasp on the idea of having a life without confusion or pain because we know that it's not worth it to lose ourselves by avoiding pain.

> *I've just kind of accepted it. This is me. I question things. And if someone doesn't like it, they can answer my questions.*[a]

> *This experience is another stage of life. For the time being this is where I'm at. I might as well make the most of it.*[d]

We recognize that we can't escape this phase of life; it is here to stay. So we enter into it. We let go of our need for answers and trust the current of the river.

Commitment to the Journey. When we accept ourselves, we also find ourselves committing to whatever it is that lies ahead of us. We don't know where the river will take us; we cannot see what's around the bend. But we willingly say "yes" to moving forward. We travel into the unknown, committed to always learning, always growing.

> *I don't want to stop at a certain point, but rather constantly learn. I don't know everything and neither does anyone else in the world, but we're doing the best that we can.*[c]

As we commit to this journey, we find ourselves writing about our pain, thinking about our struggles, pushing back against the things that don't make sense, talking to people about our experiences and concerns. We keep questioning the doctrines that seem harmful and try to navigate our way through the communities that alienate us. We keep doing these things because we know that it's the most authentic thing we can do.

And as we commit ourselves to authenticity, it becomes clearer to us that this process is one that we cannot control, but rather must *allow*. It's like we slowly realize that the river we are in will move us freely and persistently, as long as we stop resisting it. We cannot control the pace of the current; it might churn and chop; or it might become slow and even. But either way, our attempts to contain it don't work. It needs us to be patient, to let it flow at its own pace.

> *For now, all I can do is wait and let what happens happen.*[b]

> *I understand that this is a lifelong thing. I realize that I can't understand everything.*[c]

So we give our consent to being on this journey; we commit ourselves to the unfolding of the process inside of us. We don't know where the journey is taking us, but we trust it anyways.

> *It's OK to not know why this is happening right now, or where it's taking me. I just need to trust.*[d]

We trust the path unfolding ahead of us; we trust the quiet voice in our soul that that says, "keep going." And we trust that even though more suffering likely awaits us, our journey is wholly good. So we let the process guide itself into the lands ahead, regardless of whatever murky waters or unforeseen dangers lay there. We find a courage within ourselves to proceed on this quest. But it is not a courage of honour or strength; rather, it is a courage to let go of the old way of being, to invite the distance to show up between our selves and our worldviews. It is a courage

to let go of the need to have the answers, or to know the right things to believe, or to be sure of the best way to get into heaven.

As our commitment to searching continues, we start to notice the greater significance of our journey inwards. We have discovered within us a newfound trust, a courage to radically be ourselves, an acceptance of everything that simply *is.* And it has begun to feel right and true. So we wonder about this. It is possible that this entire process of accepting and allowing our struggles might be part of the unfolding of some divine narrative in our lives?

Here's a thought: maybe God actually wants me to pursue my questions.[e]

Could it be that God wants us to express our questions and doubts? Could it be that God wants us to let go of our beliefs about the divine, to renounce the version of faith that blocked the movement inside of us? Could it be that God *is* this movement inside of us?

Searching for God as Unburdening

As we find ourselves accepting the position we are in and committing to the journey ahead of us, we begin to feel a release, as if we have finally been given permission to simply *be*. We can exhale, we can stop resisting our struggle. We realize that the movement of the river, though unpredictable and mysterious, is what we were actually longing for. It is as if the people we trust, that can see us and hold our suffering, have invited us to let down our burdens and trust the movement of our souls. This experience sometimes resonates in us persistently; other times we receive it in flashes. And it usually shows itself in the form of relief, insight, or excitement.

Relief. The relief we feel usually shows up after we have told someone about our struggles. It's when we have let our guard down in the presence of a caring, safe other that we can finally feel at ease. We feel less crazy, less broken, less different. When we hear someone say, "I understand, I've been there too, tell me more," the walls can begin to come down. We

cautiously continue, wanting to share more but also fearful that more vulnerability will result in more hurt. So our movement is slow, but it is steady. We learn to trust the other; and in time, relief washes over us. It is such a welcome experience; it has been so long since we have felt able to relax into our being. We can finally be at peace; the unrest of our souls has been momentarily quieted.

> *I feel peace.*[d]
>
> *My breathing feels really still. Like a good kind of still. My heart isn't pounding, I don't feel any pain. It's nice.*[b]
>
> *At first I was very nervous, my hands were shaking, I was anxious. But now I'm at peace. I don't feel the longing.*[e]

It is a beautiful irony that our submission to the movement in our hearts results in an unprecedented stillness. It feels far different than the instant-high that our coping mechanisms provide us with. It feels deep. We could not have conjured up this peace, this settling of our anxieties; but we can receive it. We can soak it up, feel it in our bodies. We can be thankful for it when it comes, but also let it go when it departs. After all, we have learned not to cling; we have learned to trust, to open our hearts to the inner movement that is always present.

And the thankfulness we feel towards our relief can extend to the people we have trusted along the way. We recognize their role in our lives; we acknowledge that they have granted us the permission to release our pain into the world, to give voice to our suffering.

> *I feel like a door in my brain that has been closed is now slightly opened, because I told someone all of this.*[a]
>
> *My brain is being like, "OK your burdens are slightly lifted because you told someone."*[a]
>
> *I feel really great, you've really helped me out!*[e]
>
> *It's nice to finally put it into words. I don't think I've ever talked about it before.*[b]

Insight. Our unburdening can also take the form of insight as we piece together things that didn't make sense to us before. Perhaps it is the mere act of talking to another about our struggles that helps us make sense of our dizzying internal worlds. It's as if hearing our own perspective, and having it reflected back to us, grants us with a new lens to see the world through. This lens is often clearer, less muddy and foggy.

> *This interview was really good. Like I eventually probably would have figured this out but it would have taken a lot longer than like one hour.*[d]

And although many of our questions are not answered and our doubts and longings often remain, we have reached certain conclusions that feel novel and fresh.

> *I just thought of something. What if I take my experiences and put them inside the void I feel? If I took my questions and put them in my place of longing… Maybe that'd fill it up and then I wouldn't be searching for things.*[e]

> *It's like your parents are ordering something for you at a restaurant, and they always order you grilled cheese. And then you get to a certain point where they're like, "here's your menu" and it's like, "Woah there's way more than grilled cheese. Other things look really good, but do I order the grilled cheese still? What do my parents order? What does my Catholic friend order? And what's the guy ordering over there, because it smells really good." Can I ever go back to just eating grilled cheese?*[c]

We feel invigorated, refreshed, restored, and for the moment, unstuck. We're not sure whether our insights will last, or if they will soon be replaced by more struggles. But we welcome them anyways.

> *Most of the void that I talked about earlier is gone. I feel like I've come to an amazing conclusion. I feel great!*[e]

Our insights help us clarify our position in our struggle; they help us see ourselves from an outsider's perspective. Truly, our sight has returned. We have been gifted clarity.

> *I can* see *the experience more clearly.*[d]

It's as if we are given a broader perspective from which we can view our pain; it seems to fit within something bigger than ourselves. We still experience the difficulty of our search, but it no

longer overwhelms us. We paradoxically can sense the unraveling of the bigger picture, yet still find the future to be mysterious and uncertain. It's as if our venture into the future now has a purpose. The details of that purpose are not clear to us; we don't know where we are going or what will become of us. But we sense that this is our current task, that travelling into the unknown is what life is asking of us right now.

> *I've realized that God's watching me go through this, I'm certain of that. But it kind of feels like I'm a fish in a fishbowl. I'm kind of aware that he's there, but at the same time I'm just in my fishbowl, I'm not really seeing anything.*[b]

And when our insights do not refresh us or inspire us, they challenge us. They bring us closer to our true experiences and reveal things to us that we were previously blind to. They open our eyes to what's really happening under the surface of our thoughts; they help us focus our attention from our minds to our hearts.

> *I realize that there's actually a deep void in my chest that I can't quite access.*[e]

> *I wish I had more experiences like this interview. These conversations aren't happening as much as they should be. It's sad.*[c]

We have been given permission to enter into our bodies, to exit the cycle of our bewildering vortex of thinking. It is as if our thoughts have been the frantic waves on the surface of a deep ocean of pain. And although our recognition of this pain may be frightening to first encounter, it is ultimately a welcome shift away from the frenetic questioning that we are so used to.

Excitement. The unburdening we sense also takes the form of excitement. Occasionally, throughout our journey of searching we experience momentary flashes of energy and anticipation. It is as if our bodies realize that a disruption in the cycle of aloneness and confusion is possible. It's like the feeling someone might get after deciding to risk a career-change after years of being tethered to the grind up the corporate ladder. We can start a new life that aligns

with our passions and desires. Like we actually have agency in the things we pursue, the beliefs we espouse, the values we hold.

> *It was exciting and hopeful to realize that I wasn't tied to the beliefs I was raised with. It's almost like I got to start over from the beginning to build my faith for myself.*[c]

This agency feels like a freedom that we were owed, but never given. Like something that we always knew we deserved, but couldn't ask for. It's welcome when it comes, but is often counterbalanced with apprehension about the vast landscape of options in front of us.

> *It was also daunting… like "where do I start? Who do I talk to? Who shouldn't I talk to?" I want to be cautious of the people that claim to know all the answers.*[c]

We feel a mix of excitement and fear, paralysis, and liveliness, as we realize that the world ahead of us is ours to explore, to inspect and observe, to digest and make our own.

We also occasionally find ourselves excited to seek reconnection with those we love. We have been so estranged and alienated from our communities; yet, sometimes we simply feel a desire for restoration. In these moments, it's as if we have forgotten all of the pain and shame that these people have inflicted; we are simply excited to see them.

> *Lately out of nowhere I've had this feeling of excitement to go to church, because I want to talk to the people there.*[b]

Even though this excitement sometimes loses its pulse as rapidly as it appears, it is a good feeling. It reminds us that we do value our relationships, even though they are confusing and damaging at times. We long for a deep, authentic connection with our peers; but we also sometimes just long for their company. We miss the breezy chatter about nothingness, the conversations that feel easy and unforced.

Searching for God as Striving to Help Others

When we allow the fire to spark inside of us and grant it freedom to burn and glow, it expands. It begins in us, but soon moves outwards. When we say, "I trust you; I trust this

process; I trust my inner voice," we find ourselves longing to meet others in their suffering. We know what it feels like to have our questions and doubts met with genuine curiosity and nonjudgment and we long to provide a similar space for others.

> *I just want to be with my friends and make sure they're safe. And if they need a shoulder to cry on or have worries or doubts, I won't be able to say, "here are your answers," but I will be like, "I understand."*[a]

We know that our unburdening did not come from the answers to our many theological questions. In fact, we admit that we will continue to have questions until we die. Rather, we sense that our relief emerged from a deep connectedness *within* our suffering. We had someone come alongside us and say, "tell me your worries, your fears, your questions. It's OK. I was there. I *am* there. And we can be there together." And we know that this act of companioning granted us with a relief that no trite answer to a moral dilemma could ever provide. We were not lifted out of our suffering; we were met at the heart of it, invited deeper into it. And in travelling to the heart of our pain, we discovered in ourselves a desire to use our experiences to help those around us.

> *This experience is already a tool. It will help me relate to others who are struggling with the same thing.*[b]

Sometimes we think that our motivation to help others depends on us coming to a place of peace within ourselves. We think, "once I get my experiences sorted, I can start to help others deal with their problems."

> *I wanna help people. I wanna figure things out so that I can help others. Most of my life has been pretty unstable, so I want to find a good rhythm.*[d]

> *I want to be OK so that I can help other people. I want to figure things out, but not so I can say, "sucks that you guys don't know what's going on, let me tell you so that you can be where I'm at." I don't want to do that. It's more like, "wow, I'm glad I struggled through that, and I'm still struggling with it. Tell me how you feel about it and maybe we can just talk to each other about it."*[c]

But do we ever "figure it out?" Do we ever reach a point in our lives when we understand the secrets of faith, the mysteries of the divine? If we're honest with ourselves, we simply don't know. But we do know that we have the here-and-now, and we have a stirring inside us to join with other sufferers, to share our pain, to tell our stories and empower the voiceless searchers around us.

> *No matter what's in heaven, no matter what's waiting for me in hell, the here-and-now is what I value. All I can do is focus on what I can do on earth. Whatever consequences await me, they will happen later on. So I wanna focus more on trying to help my friends.*[a]
>
> *I don't want people to feel alone because I know how hard it is to feel alone.*[a]

We know what the pain feels like, what the questions feel like, what the aloneness feels like. And we know that it's our task to undo the aloneness in others. The fire that has been burning inside of us now longs to transcend us; it can't be kept within us, it wants to spread its flames to others. It is a wild, uncontrollable, yet purifying. And now that we've allowed it to blaze, we cannot help but let it travel through us and into the world.

How will we facilitate the spreading of this flame? We will start by listening to others. We will ask about the questions they have and refrain from providing quick answers. And we will hear their pain, we will listen to their suffering, we will simply be with them in it all. Perhaps we will write about it; maybe we will let it resonate through our creative pursuits. We will do everything we can to keep the fire spreading, because we know, in the deepest well of our being, that the spreading of this fire is actually the spreading of an invitation to *become*. It is a plea to return to our humanness, our personhood. We spread the fire to be reminded of the flowing self within our bodies that longs to emerge and encounter and love the people around us. We cannot help ourselves from feeling this movement; it becomes central to our core, our identity. We feel fake when we deny it, and most fully ourselves when we embrace it. We love

the moments that we can say, “tell me your story, and let me tell you mine.” Because in these moments we feel most in touch with our true selves, most united with the people around us, and most connected to the divine.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This thesis illuminated the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents who grew up in Christian communities. I recruited and interviewed five participants who shared intimate details of their experiences of their search for the divine. I found parts of myself in their stories, suffering with them in coming to an understanding of what this phenomenon is and what it is like to experience it. I described their experiences with the help of various imagery, such as metaphors and direct quotations, to move you, the reader, into an experiential understanding of what it is like to search for God. This chapter provides a response to these findings. Here I will summarize and discuss what I found, including ways in which the results interact with the extant empirical literature. I will also discuss the theoretical, clinical, and pastoral implications of this work, paying specific attention to how this research might impact counsellors and church leaders who work with adolescents and young adults. I will conclude this chapter with some comments on the strengths and limitations of this project as well as areas of future research that that could expand and develop further what was completed in this thesis.

Summary of Findings

The individuals that participated in this study consisted of: (a) Celestia, a bright and thoughtful 15-year-old who was exposed to Christianity through a faith-based theatre club; (b) Rachael, a 19-year-old university student with an unceasing desire to be seen and accepted by her community; (c) Rae, a 20-year-old university student who is searching for a basis for her worldview while navigating conflicting new information in her Bible classes; (d) Jae, a 20-year-old university student who is grappling with the many changes that came with his recent move from Indonesia to Canada; and (e) Gerard, an inquisitive 19-year-old university student with a

flurry of questions about the Bible's stance on homosexuality atop a deep desire to be accepted for who he is.

In the research interviews, these individuals answered questions related to their respective experiences of searching for God. They revealed details such as their thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, impulses, and positioning towards their experiences. In effect, they showed me what it was like to see the world through their perspective. And as I listened to their stories and later immersed myself deeper into the data, the phenomenon of searching for God as experienced by these study participants became clearer. It revealed itself as a relational, paradoxical, process of becoming oneself. In other words, I did not find that searchers were engaging in a mere task or procedure to find a God that exists outside of the self. Instead, it appeared that searchers were really asking, "who am I?" and "is it OK for me to be fully me?" And as they asked these questions, many of them found that they were being prompted to move away from their previous assumptions and to make space for a new, unknown path ahead of them. The features I identified that were central to this process showed up as stopping points amidst the larger context of their search. They illuminated searching for God as an experience of: (a) suffering, (b) questioning and doubting, (c) longing for authenticity, (d) saying "yes" to the process, (e) unburdening, and (f) striving to help others.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I will highlight how the findings of the present study interact with the extant literature reviewed in chapter two. I will first consider the findings that appear to be consistent with previous research; then, I will highlight the novel contributions that this study brings to the field of psychological research.

Findings Consistent with Previous Research

The findings of the present study align partially with various ideas discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis. The first consistency is the fact that any sort of religious questioning or doubting often contains a certain degree of suffering. The second similarity is that honestly facing questions—a key feature of the quest construct—may be an important task in spiritual development.

Suffering. The findings of the present study indicate that suffering is a common experience amongst adolescents that are searching for God. And although, to my knowledge, searching for God was not directly researched prior to this study, certain aspects of the phenomenon have been studied previously and were also found to be associated with considerable suffering. For instance, religious doubts were a feature of searching for God—many participants indicated that their experiences included doubting certain aspects of the worldview they grew up adhering to. In the literature, religious doubt is a construct that has been the focus of multiple studies in recent years. And, according to these studies, doubting one's religion is linked to various forms of distress. For example, Galek and her colleagues (2007) found that suffering in the form of anger is an experience that is linked to religious doubt. They also found religious doubts to be associated with anxiety and depression. The findings of the present study similarly revealed that searching for God may involve experiences of anger, anxiety, and depression. Many participants described moments when they felt particularly despondent and hopeless, as if their will to live had run dry. Others noted how their struggle with faith included feelings of anxiety and agitation, particularly in the form of physical sensations of a pressure in the chest or a fidgety energy running through the body.

The present study's findings also somewhat align with features of the literature's broader construct of religious and spiritual struggles. For instance, Ellison and Lee (2010) found that psychological distress linked with all facets of religious and spiritual struggle. The present study similarly found that suffering in the form of psychological distress was prevalent for those searching for God—all participants reported some degree of uneasiness, whether it was low mood, frustration, loneliness, or something else. Dew and her colleagues (2010) focused specifically on the association between adolescent psychiatric patients' depressive symptoms with negative religious and spiritual factors, finding an association between these two domains. Again, as indicated in the findings of this study, depression was a common experience that participants disclosed in relation to their search for God.

An additional parallel to this study's findings relates to the experience of suffering described in a previous phenomenological study conducted by Lee and Gubi (2019) that explored the experience of deconversion from Christianity to Atheism. In their study, Lee and Gubi found that deconversion came with difficult emotions, such as embarrassment, shame, and anger. For instance, their results indicated that certain participants were angry about the way that their previous religious convictions had impacted their thinking and development and that in some cases they struggled to relate to their families, who raised them to be a certain way. Lee and Gubi also found that deconversion sometimes included suffering in the form of loss of worldview and identity. They reported that some participants felt like their world was being "turned upside down" (p. 178) amidst the process of transitioning from Christianity to Atheism. Although the present study did not specifically target the experience of deconversion, per se, searching for God appeared to have similar qualitative characteristics. For example, Celestia reported experiencing considerable anger upon realizing that certain Christian messages were

harming her homosexual friends. Further, Rae expressed how disorienting it was to have her worldview upended and to not know what to believe anymore, similar to how deconversion was linked with a loss of worldview and identity in Lee and Gubi's research.

Overall, these parallels suggest that concerns relating to religion and spirituality—whether described in qualitative depth or through quantitative analysis—often include a significant degree of suffering. The nature of this suffering may vary according to each individual's unique context; however, it appears clear that some kind of suffering lies at the heart of the search for God.

Quest and Spiritual Development. As noted in the literature review of this thesis, quest is a construct developed by Batson (1976) who sought to augment Allport's work on intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivations. This third dimension, the quest orientation, represents a posture toward religion that avoids oversimplification and trite answers while instead embracing the complexity and ambiguity of life. Batson suggested that this stance is typically adopted by people who value wrestling with life's existential questions and uncertainties; he measured it using the corresponding quest scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a; Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b).

This construct aligns with the findings of the present study in its acknowledgement that for many individuals, questioning and doubting religious principles is central to the search for truth. For instance, many of the participants interviewed in the present study would likely score high on the quest scale. Rae indicated that throughout her ongoing search for God she wanted to resist those who gave her trite, dismissive answers to her many questions. Celestia also mentioned how the questions she had seemed to be important in and of themselves; she considered her emerging task to be more about honestly asking her questions instead of

searching for clear-cut answers to them. This very posture of openness and authenticity is central to quest (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991b).

Furthermore, work on the quest orientation has found that one's efforts to openly face their religious questions and concerns is a central ingredient of spiritual development. Graham and his colleagues (2008), in discussing the findings of their phenomenological analysis of questers, noted that "questioning and doubt can sometimes nurture spiritual growth" (p. 155). They found that although questioning and doubting can sometimes result in feeling alienated from one's religious community, it is often an important part of personal and spiritual development. These researchers also found that the normalization of religion-as-Quest left participants with a sense of ease and courage to face the spiritual path ahead of them. In other words, allowing the expression of religious questions and doubts appeared to be an important and enlivening developmental task. This corresponds to the sense of unburdening that was highlighted in the findings of the present study. Upon expressing their experiences of searching for God, many of the participants felt a sense of renewal and excitement, as if they were more in touch with who they were and how they were going to proceed on their spiritual journey.

The normalization of religious questioning also corresponds with the developmental models outlined earlier in this study. Previously, I discussed how Marcia (1966) and Fowler's (1981) models of identity and faith development propose that adolescence may be a time of wrestling with one's worldview beliefs and assumptions. I discussed how these models not only indicate that such an experience is likely to be common amongst adolescents, but that it is also an important experience for overall growth and development. The findings of the present study are consistent with these models, supporting the notion that one's freedom to struggle with their faith questions allows them to progress forward in their developmental journeys. For instance, Fowler

might consider some of the participants to have moved closer to the conjunctive stage of faith development upon completing the research interviews. This stage is characterized by a renewed awareness of the mystical self and an acceptance of paradox. And while the participants are likely to continue wrestling with their respective questions and doubts, the experience of unburdening they reported indicates that perhaps they were able to move through a part the individuative-reflective stage during their interviews. Marcia's model would likely provide different language for the same experience, highlighting the fact that the participants are presently in the moratorium stage of identity development but that the research interviews helped them move closer to identity achievement.

In sum, the findings of the present study align with previous ideas discussed in the literature that hold that honestly facing one's questions and doubts about religious matters is an important and valid process that many people experience as a prerequisite to faith and identity development.

Novel Contributions

Despite these similarities, much of what we found in this study was novel and somewhat surprising. The findings depicted a deeply personal process that was a dynamic, relational, and paradoxical movement away from old understandings of God into newer, unknown territory. In this section, I will expand on these contributions, providing an additional note on the methodological contribution that this study adds to the literature.

Searching as a Dynamic, Paradoxical Process. The first contribution that this study adds to the literature is the idea of searching for God being an active, moving process. Although the five participants that I interviewed each told different stories, their experiences followed a similar flow. It appeared as a process of allowing the self to become. Searching for God did not

reveal itself as a static task that one engages in or a sole quest to find an external, out-there God to come down and comfort the desolate questioner. Rather, it showed up as an internal journey towards the heart of the self. It was not a search for the all-powerful, all-loving God that one might extract from the biblical text. Instead, it was a search for belonging, for connection, for validation of one's deepest fears and pains. For example, Celestia had a flurry of questions about who God is and what Christianity is really about, but underneath these concerns was a deep desire for someone to hold space for her questions, undo her loneliness, and have her doubts and concerns welcomed and validated. Her experience is representative of many of the participants in the study. It is as if searchers initially ask, "where is God; why has God left me?" but end up really asking, "who am I, and is it OK for me to really be me?" The personal phenomenological understanding of the person, which draws on the existential-analytical tradition, is helpful in further understanding this experience. From this perspective, the person is understood to be an endless flow that emerges from a deep well from within. It represents someone's "unique, free essence that is captured by the I/ego, similar to how the mouth of a well captures the water of the spring" (Launeanu et al., 2018, p. 71). Thus, in realizing that their task was more about themselves than about an external God, the participants of the present study learned to allow the flow within them to move and shift, thereby coming closer to themselves and what they truly value.

This highlights how searching for God is also paradoxical. It is simultaneously the search for the transcendent and the immanent, for the out-there God and the in-here person. Searchers long for the God of the Bible that exists in the heavens, far above humanity. They may initially think that this God is able to rescue them from their dizzying questions and ever-increasing doubts. They may have heard that this God cares for humanity, that Jesus was God-incarnate and

that he provides them with all the answers they need. Yet, the findings indicated that their quest is not solely for this transcendent being to bring them comfort or relief. In fact, it is more a search for permission to ask questions, to have doubts validated, and to follow the path of the heart. As they allowed themselves to be honest about their experiences—especially as evidenced in the research interviews—the participants slowly began to realize that their inner state was trustworthy and that it did not need to be denied or suppressed.

Another paradox that showed up in the findings is that one chooses to embark on the journey of searching for God, yet they cannot choose the path it will take. I see parallels between searching for God and an artist who learns to see and capture the gift of ever-present beauty or a songwriter who trains the ear to receive and translate the lyrics that the world gifts. This posture must be chosen; it does not occur independent of choice. But it is a choosing to let go of control, of the very ability to choose. Searchers choose to allow and invite the process to unfold itself on its own terms, and in doing so admit that they do not have control over what will happen. The safety net of an intact worldview has been left behind; uncertainty lies ahead. Making this choice requires a posture of responsiveness and humility, and is often accompanied by complexity and frustration, suffering and doubt. It is no wonder that so many resist this openheartedness, for it is far safer to close off oneself and remain in the world of certitude. Searching for God means being honest with oneself, being open to the natural flow of growth, development, spiritual maturation that it always there, but rarely made visible. And this is no easy task.

Searching as a Relational Process. Another novel contribution to the literature is that searching for God is a relational process. Although, as searchers, we embark on our search individually in our own unique contexts, it is by no means an individual process. We are constantly in dialogue with our surroundings. Sometimes we look to our peers for validation and

support or we look to family members for answers to our questions. Other times we seek help from our respective communities or call upon our mentors for guidance. Or, we move away from the relationships that harm us; we distance ourselves from the people that cannot hold the space for our questions and struggles. We learn the boundaries of what we can share when people respond to our pain with dismissal or engagement. And we sense the gaze of the other as we build narratives around their internal worlds. In this way we are always in dialogue. And as much as we interact with the world around us, this dialogue is not just with our communities. We also dialogue with ourselves. We learn to stand behind our choices; we take positions concerning our experiences; we engage in thoughtful decision-making as we navigate our internal landscapes. The way that we engage with our surroundings and with ourselves is persistent; we cannot escape it.

Every participant in the study discussed ways in which their search for God involved the relationships in their lives. Many reported feeling neglected by their communities; others told me how they reached out to pastors and counsellors to aid them in their search. And they also let me in on the inner dialogue that they had with themselves. For example, in seeing the watered-down evangelical Christian world around him, Jae mentioned that he began to ask himself, “am I any different?” He shifted from merely looking out into the world around him into a more introspective dialogue with himself.

The relational nature of searching for God was also illuminated throughout the here-and-now of the research interviews. As we invited the phenomenon to reveal itself, providing the open space for participants to discuss their experiences, it shifted. It took shape and moved. It transitioned from a state of stuck-ness to a fluidity, from rigid questioning to an embodied unburdening. It was as if our openness to seeing the experience allowed it to blossom and

change. Gerard even mentioned how the anxiety he felt at the beginning of the interview had transformed into a quiet peace, devoid of longing and pain. Others used the metaphor of a burden lifting from the shoulders or a locked door being opened for the first time ever.

Searching for God as Moving Away from God. An additional novel contribution that the findings revealed was that, for some, searching for God is a process of moving away from God. This was perhaps the most surprising novel finding. As I set out to understand the experience of searching for God, I expected to come across just that: a quest for the God that is presented in many evangelical churches. This God is often portrayed as an eternal, all-knowing, all-loving, father-like being. "He" is also considered to be the epitome of holiness, righteousness, and justice, hating sin and opposing evil (Grudem, 2005). According to this tradition, God is accessible through belief in Jesus, God's incarnate son, who atoned for the sins of humanity so that they could be cleansed of their wrongdoings and spend eternity in union with their creator. But were the participants truly searching for this God? Perhaps initially they may have thought this to be so. They did, after all, respond to an advertisement that had questions like, "are you searching for God?" and, "do you have questions or doubts about your faith?" However, as they shared their stories in the research interviews it became clear that many of these individuals were actually moving away from the evangelical God in exchange for a God that can hold their experiences, validate their struggles, and allow them to search. It was as if the cry for the God in the sky—for the supernatural peace that they were promised from the pulpit—transformed into a silent respect for the God of the here-and-now, the God that shows up in moments of vulnerability and trust.

Tillich (1952/2014) wrote about the experience of losing God in an effort to find a God that is more fluid and mystical and self-affirming. He refers to this as the "God above God" (p.

171)—the God who shows up when the God of doubt and anxiety has disappeared. He notes that this God is the source of all courage, which he defines as the ability to affirm life in spite of its ambiguities and frustrations. May (2004), in his description of the dark night of the soul, agrees. He suggests that the loss of the sense of God's presence is a process of liberation from old idols and images of God. It is a pruning process of shedding prior understandings that seem obsolete so that we actually come to know the true God. For many of the participants, the old conception of God simply no longer worked; they sensed a growing distance between themselves and what they were taught in church. For example, upon learning that there were different ways to interpret what the Bible said about God, Rae began to inspect the beliefs she was raised with to make space for new understandings and conceptions of the divine. Additionally, Gerard found himself pushing against what his church claimed about homosexuality, committing himself to finding a new understanding that better fit with what he sensed inside of him.

It is important to note that the participants' effort in making this change was not simply a cognitive task of replacing old beliefs with new ones. Rather, it was a task of the heart—a process of moving away from a worldview centred around cognitive assent and towards a life more embodied and attuned to the inner promptings of the self. And in the unfolding of this process they realized that certain things are not worth losing the self for. In other words, it was not worth denying the self of its movement towards wholeness just to hang onto an in-tact worldview and satisfactory assumptions about God and life. For instance, Celestia was not willing to shut down her deep desire to care for her friends just because she heard that the God of the Bible finds homosexuality to be sinful. Palmer (2000) considers the ability to listen to the self as calling or *vocation*; our task is not to conform to the people or values around us, but rather to "accept the treasure of true self I already possess" (p. 10). He goes on to say that vocation does

not come from an external voice, but rather from a voice inside that invites us to be the person we were made to be. With this in mind, it could be said that my participants had begun to perceive their vocation; they were beginning to understand who they really were and what they were doing on this earth.

In sum, searching for God emerged in this study as a movement away from a previous understanding of God and towards a more embodied, mystical, felt sense of God that invites us to become ourselves even amidst the fear and uncertainty. Words such as "vocation," the "God above God," or "the movement of the inner self" can aid in our understanding of this process, but ultimately it is something so curious and mysterious that I doubt it could ever be fully captured using words on paper.

Methodological Contribution. In addition to the contributions that the findings of the study added to the literature, the method of investigation also offered an important contribution to the field. As indicated previously, phenomenology is an underused method when it comes to exploring spiritual and religious concerns. Thus, this study helped to diversify the angle from which these issues can be understood, providing a description of searching for God from the ground up, rather than through theoretical constructs such as religious doubt or quest. The addition of phenomenological descriptions to this field responds to a commentary of the literature that Hood (2013) has offered: "religion and spirituality are best illuminated by a variety of methods, each of which contributes something to our understanding" (p. 79). In other words, the complexity and richness of the concepts of religion and spirituality deserve a multi-faceted approach when studied empirically.

In addition to the broad inclusion of phenomenology as a contribution to the literature, the specific use of personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019), such as PEA-inspired

interviews and analysis, also add a new dimension to research on religious and spiritual concerns. Launeanu and her colleagues (2019) describe personal phenomenology as an approach to research that finds its core in "the personal encounter between researcher and research participants throughout the research process as well as the inner encounter of the researcher with one's self" (Launeanu et al., 2019, p. 73). In other words, the emphasis on personal encounter (Buber, 1923/1970) is what distinguishes personal phenomenology from other approaches. The use of personal phenomenology in psychological research is a new development in the field; to my knowledge, only two previous studies have used it (Konieczny, 2020; Schutt, 2020). Therefore, in the present study's use of personal phenomenology, it not only presents an innovative methodology as a valid means of doing research on religious and spiritual issues, but also responds to the call to reclaim the person in psychological research (Launeanu et al., 2019).

Theoretical Implications

In addition to the ways this study contributes something new to the field, it also interacts with some of the constructs discussed in the literature review of this thesis. In this section, I will highlight these empirical implications, beginning with a discussion about religious and spiritual struggles and concluding by revisiting Pargament's (2013) model of spirituality.

Religious and Spiritual Struggles

Religious and spiritual struggles is a broad field within the psychology of religion and spirituality that deals with experiences of distress or conflict within the religious and spiritual domain (Exline et al., 2020). This field has previously organized such struggles into three categories: divine struggles, intrapersonal struggles, and interpersonal struggles (Exline, 2013). Recent work has expanded this typology to instead include six domains: divine struggles, demonic struggles, interpersonal religious struggles, moral struggles, ultimate meaning struggles,

and doubt-related struggles (Exline et al., 2020). The findings of the present study have offered somewhat of a supplement to this list, suggesting that religious and spiritual concerns can also be elucidated through a more process-oriented approach, resisting the oversimplification that can accompany typological categorization. In other words, the present study has offered this field the idea that various types of struggles may be more blended together than separate, and that organizing such struggles into discreet categories might take away some of the fullness of the experience. Searching for God was the language that the present study used to describe this process; future research on the construct of religious and spiritual struggles might do well to consider searching for God as the movement between various categories of struggles, acknowledging the complexity and fluidity of the human search for the divine.

Pargament's Model of Spirituality

The present study also interacts with Pargament's (2013) model of the search for the sacred discussed earlier in this thesis. In this model, Pargament helpfully proposes that spirituality is not a static task, but rather a dynamic process that individuals are constantly moving through. He understands this process as a non-linear progression that involves: (a) discovering something sacred, (b) conserving one's relationship with the sacred, and (c) eventually transforming one's understanding of the sacred. He posits that one often experiences spiritual struggles as a precursor to the transformation stage, highlighting how spiritual transformation has often been associated with reports of uncertainty, turmoil, and negative emotions such as sadness and worry. The findings of the present study mostly align with this part of Pargament's model. For instance, the process of searching for God outlined in the present study supports the notion that suffering and turmoil might precede an experience of unburdening

and relief. Furthermore, both Pargament's model and the findings of the present study emphasize that movement and change reside at the core of spirituality.

The addition that the present study makes to this model is twofold. First, it enriches Pargament's model by approaching spirituality through a phenomenological lens, thereby responding to his critique that psychologists have "largely ignored the interpretive phenomenology of spiritual people" (p. 266). More specifically, the findings of the present study have elucidated searching for God as a dynamic process that involves a movement between experiences of suffering, questioning and doubting, longing for authenticity, saying "yes" to the process, unburdening, and striving to help others. This somewhat expands Pargament's model, proposing that the boxes that Pargament has delineated as predictable stages of spirituality might be less defined than once thought. For instance, although spiritual struggles may often occur before transformation, as the model suggests, the findings of the present study allow for such struggles to appear during any part of one's overall spiritual development. In other words, the present study might adjust Pargament's model by perforating the lines around each box, thereby acknowledging the unpredictability of the movement of spirituality.

Second, the present study interacts with Pargament's model through the personal phenomenological perspective that it highlights. Drawing on the work of Frankl (1970) and others in the personological tradition, personal phenomenology considers the person to be an "endless, dynamic flow, springing from a well of unfathomable depth" (Launeanu et al., 2019, p. 71). This flow was exemplified in the findings of the present study, as evidenced by the non-static nature of each participant's search for God. There was an underlying movement inherent to the phenomenon as it appeared; it broadly shifted from a state of stuckness and rigidity to a willful acceptance of the experience. And this movement was only revealed when the

participants allowed it to take shape in the interviews, thereby suggesting that it was not something external to the person, but rather at the very core of the person. The understanding of this unique, flowing, personal movement could augment the process of spirituality that Pargament highlights in his nonreductive model. Pargament articulates that spirituality is a distinctive, irreducible human motivation that evolves and changes over the course of one's life. The personal phenomenological understanding of the person expands on this understanding, claiming that spirituality is not only a dynamic process, but also a deeply personal one. It is a process that shifts and changes, inviting the person to allow its unfolding and respond to its call on our lives. In this way, the person is not simply a passive recipient of the movement of spirituality, but an active being that can take a position on its situatedness within the movement of spirituality. This understanding could deepen and expand Pargament's model of spirituality, adding a distinctly personal element that allows for the mystery and vastness of the person to enrich what has been referred to as the search for the sacred.

Clinical and Pastoral Implications

In addition to the ways in which this study adds to the body of empirical research that addresses religious and spiritual concerns and challenges, there are also numerous ways that the present study's findings might inform clinical and pastoral praxis. As a counsellor-in-training with extensive prior experience in the evangelical church, I consider practical implications to be particularly important. As such, in this section I will discuss how these findings could help those working with adolescents in clinical and church-based settings.

Clinical Implications

One of the most important messages that this study has to offer to counsellors is the necessity of allowing space for the experience of searching for God to show up. Throughout the

research interviews it became clear that many of the participants had felt invalidated or alienated by their communities, whether it was at home, church, or school. Many disclosed that they did not feel safe enough to explore their questions or express how confused and disoriented they were feeling. Thus, when they encountered the open, non-pathologizing nature of the phenomenological interviews, things shifted within them. Many of them slowly began to realize that they were not alone in their experiences of searching for God and that talking about their questions and doubts would not result in a dismissal of their experiences, but rather an invitation to share more. As a result, a burden was lifted from their shoulders. They could begin allow the process of becoming to unfold inside of them; they no longer felt the need to maintain a semblance of 'togetherness' to uphold a certain reputation or status. The therapeutic effect that these interviews had on participants reveals just how important it is for clinicians to validate, allow, and encourage the expression of religious and spiritual questions and doubts in their work with adolescents. In other words, counsellors would do well to intentionally be with adolescents in their processing of these things. "Being with" in this sense does not mean passive disengagement; rather, it means adopting a stance of curiosity, openness, and kindness. It is similar to what Gubi (2015) has called Spiritual Accompaniment:

> The art of appropriately being alongside another in their spiritual journeying or quest. It is a way of insightfully hearing the process of spiritual journeying, a way of being for meeting another on a spiritual level, and a way of being for facilitating their journeying – however idiosyncratic and existential that journey may be. (pp. 30-31)

It requires clinicians to actively set aside their own assumptions to fully allow the client and their experiences to come to the forefront. This might require a counsellor to reflect on their own prior experiences and opinions of searching for God. Are questions about religion and spirituality

considered to be irrelevant, or are they a normal part of being a human? Does doubting one's previous worldview lead to an inevitable collapse of identity? Is searching for God something that should be treated or fixed, or is it a process that can simply exist alongside other formative processes? By asking these questions, clinicians can come to better understand their underlying assumptions and opinions about searching for God.

Why is it important for clinicians to do this work and join with their clients in this way? One answer is that this welcoming, phenomenological posture would support clients in what might be a key stage of their faith and identity development. As noted previously, various developmental models have suggested that adolescence is a time of worldview deconstruction and upheaval. Marcia (1966) called this moratorium while Fowler (1981) called it the individuative-reflective stage. Both of these authors recognized the significance of a time of searching as it relates to the overall construction of identity and faith. I also referenced Pargament's (2013) model of the search for the sacred—he similarly finds spiritual struggles to lie at the heart of a larger process of growth and change. In other words, the findings of this study align with pre-existing models that consider faith-related searching and questioning to be essential for development. Therefore, clinicians would benefit from approaching their clients with a phenomenological, non-pathologizing attitude that seeks to normalize and validate the experience of searching for God to prevent the inhibition of a key developmental process that many adolescents go through.

This phenomenological posture could also prevent possible misdiagnosis. If a counsellor is aware of the experience of searching for God, as indicated in this study, they may be less likely to reduce it to a mental health concern and apply a misguided treatment protocol. For example, a counsellor may notice the suffering of a searching adolescent, seeing the parallels to

major depressive disorder. Without prior knowledge of the dynamic, multifaceted experience of searching for God, they may be inclined to treat the client as they would any other depressed client, perhaps creating a safety plan, teaching cognitive restructuring, behavioural activation, mindfulness, etc. Although such skills are valuable in the right contexts, in this case they might initially stifle an important existential process that is unfolding at the heart of the client, doing a disservice to the client's overall growth and well-being.

I will also note here that the model that I referenced in the literature review of this thesis, Winding Road (Gear et al., 2008), takes many of these considerations into account. It is a group-based intervention that seeks to help participants normalize and articulate their experiences of faith-related struggles, assuming that such struggles are an integral part of faith development. The open, nonjudgmental posture that this intervention assumes is in alignment with what was found to be helpful for the participants interviewed in the present study. Further, the tasks completed in this group, such as creating a spiritual autobiography and genogram, could aid in the process of understanding one's spiritual situation. However, I also wonder if this task-based intervention might inhibit participants' ability to share freely and openly about their experiences. Could the instruction to participate in certain exercises interfere with a client's longing to simply have their experiences heard and validated? Perhaps phenomenologically-inspired individual therapy, such as existential analysis or person-centred therapy, in addition to this group could fill this gap and better serve clients that are searching for God.

Pastoral Implications

The findings of this study are also relevant for individuals working with youth in churches or faith-based organizations. My experiences at church, along with some of the experiences described by the participants of this study, has revealed that some Western

evangelical churches consider doubt to be the antithesis of faith. Therefore, in these communities, questioning the core tenets of Christianity could be seen as a personal weakness or spiritual attack. This mentality may lead youth pastors and others to advise young people to "stay firm" in their beliefs and resist the doubt or spiritual uneasiness that they sense at their core. An example of this is how church leaders might urge doubters to redirect their attention to how God has blessed them in the past in order to minimize the power of their doubts or questions. As a result of this dismissal, questioning adolescents might learn to suppress their growing discomfort or pretend it does not exist. They may even begin to think that they are somehow flawed or inadequate for having such questions in the first place. My hope is that church leaders can observe this study's findings and come to value open, honest discussions with teenagers that are searching for God, even if it means temporarily suspending what is thought to be right and true. Perhaps, in reading the findings, pastors and church leaders might be less inclined to see doubt as a threat to faith and more willing to accept this experience as a natural and important part of faith and identity development. Perhaps they will invite young people to talk about their inner experiences instead of minimizing them for the sake of maintaining an air-tight theology. In other words, this study is a call for church leaders to focus their attention on understanding and validating the experiences of searchers instead of trying to keep them from wavering in their beliefs.

An additional note I will add here is that I have heard certain church leaders claim that "it's OK to doubt," referencing biblical examples such as Jesus' disciple, Thomas. However, I have often sensed that underlying this claim there is an unspoken qualification: it's OK to doubt as long as you don't stay there for too long, or it's OK to doubt as long as it doesn't lead you to abandon your faith. The call of this study urges church leaders to adopt a more radical stance that

embraces doubt and questioning not because it is part of the agenda of strengthening one's faith, but rather because it is an outpouring of the self's internal, inherently-good movement that lies at the heart of one's being.

Strengths and Limitations

In a number of ways, the present study represented good, rigorous research. However, it also had various constraints that impacted its contribution to the literature. In this section, I will discuss these strengths and limitations.

Strengths

The research question guiding this project highlighted how it aimed to reveal the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities. The first strength of this study is the method that was employed to address this question. To understand lived experience, it is important to adopt a stance of openness and receptiveness, seeking to listen and attune to what is emerging while reflexively bracketing and utilising prior experiences accordingly (Finlay, 2012). Hermeneutic phenomenology, the method employed in the present study, provides researchers with the tools to do just this. Specifically, this method prioritizes lived experience by inviting researchers to adopt a stance of curiosity and wonder, so that they might see the world with "fresh eyes" (Finlay, 2012, p. 175). Furthermore, the use of this method was a strength of the study because it recognizes the inherent historical and cultural embeddedness of the phenomenon in its contexts. Searching for God occurs contextually; perhaps it shows up when hearing a new interpretation of the Bible or upon feeling alienated from a church community. These contexts are not ignored in hermeneutic phenomenological research; rather, they are considered to be inseparable from the phenomenon. This allows for a

more holistic understanding of the phenomenon to be revealed, preventing the possible reduction of a phenomenon to its mere parts.

Another strength of this study is the reflexive practices that I, the researcher, used throughout the design and implementation of the project. Because I had prior experience with the phenomenon, I was positioned well to begin an investigation on it. However, I was also at risk of projecting my experiences onto my participants, effectively limiting my ability to understand their perspectives. I consequently made sure to journal about my experiences throughout the entire project, coming closer to what my experiences of searching for God were so that I could bracket them sufficiently when speaking with my participants. Reflexive practices are central to rigorous research (Finlay, 2011); the extent of engagement with these practices are what makes this a notable strength of the study. See chapter six for other ways that I practiced reflexivity in this study.

Additionally, this study benefitted from a culturally diverse sample. The participants that were recruited had unique ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Rae reported growing up in California and coming to Canada for university. Rachael mentioned that she was born in China and came to Canada with her parents at six years old. Jae also grew up overseas, spending most of his childhood years in Indonesia before coming to Canada for post-secondary school. Gerard and Celestia indicated that they grew up in Western Canada and attended local schools in their neighbourhoods. This diversity strengthens the study because it broadens the range of experiences that were shared and helps us understand searching for God cross-culturally. A study consisting of 5 Caucasian participants, for example, would be much more limited in its ability to speak to broader cultural contexts.

Limitations

Despite these strengths, the study also was limited in a number of ways. First, although the sample was culturally diverse, there was minimal age diversity. Four of the five participants were either 19 or 20 years old. A wider range of ages could have enriched the data by highlighting how the search for God changes throughout different stages of adolescence. Furthermore, having more participants in the mid-to-late-teenage years could have yielded findings that more accurately depict the time of life that is typically considered to be adolescence.

A second limitation relates to the selected method's dependence on participants that can describe their experiences in detail. Although the participants were able to provide sufficient experiential content, it is possible that the depth of their descriptions was limited due to their developmental stage. As noted previously in this thesis, an adolescent's capacity to reflect on abstract ideas and internal states is in construction during this time of life. As such, I feared that my participants might not be able to fully access and describe their experience of searching for God. I was pleased with the level of depth that the interviews ultimately yielded; however, I still wonder how the data was affected by their developmental level. To my knowledge, hermeneutic phenomenology has not previously been used for research with the adolescent population. And although this methodological risk offered an innovative and refreshing take on the topic, it also may have limited the level of depth that was achieved in the interviews.

Areas for Future Research

There are numerous avenues for researchers to discover in response to the present study. First, there is still an overall paucity of qualitative research targeting faith-related issues in comparison to the many cross-sectional and correlational studies that exist in the field.

Therefore, more research that prioritizes the lived experience of those facing these concerns would enrich the literature and add texture to this mainly-quantitative body of research. Specifically, it would be important to expand on the groundwork laid in this study by conducting research on searching for God with a demographic other than adolescents. How do adults experience the search for God? What is it like to search for God as an older adult? This research could give us an understanding of how searching for God differs according to a person's stage of development, which would be useful for clinicians who seek to join their clients in navigating times of spiritual unrest.

Another avenue that could be explored as a useful follow-up to the present study is a retroactive take on searching for God. Researchers could invite participants to reflect on what it was like to search for God at a previous time in their lives. For instance, they could seek to understand what the participants found to be helpful and unhelpful in their navigation of such an experience. This research would also be useful for counsellors and others who hope to gain a deeper understanding of searching for God in an effort to support those around them.

A final area of future research that I will mention here relates to the language that was selected for the phenomenon of the present study. Though this language, searching for God, is adequate—considering, as previously discussed, that the God the participants seemed to actually be searching for was a much more mystical and personal God than the often-preached God of the evangelical church—it would benefit from further development. For example, future research could expand on the discovery that searching for God was as much about searching for the self as it was for an external, divine entity or being. It could narrow in on a phenomenon such as *becoming oneself* or *searching for myself* to bring further clarity to what exactly it is that we are searching for. What does it mean to become myself? How do I know when I have become

myself? Though these questions have been wrestled with outside of the academic world, they have been given little attention from within it. This research could also contribute to the recent trend towards using personal phenomenology (Launeanu et al., 2019) in research as an access point to understanding the person (see Konieczny, 2020; Schutt, 2020). Because the use of personal phenomenology is still a relatively novel development in phenomenological inquiry, this research would not only serve as a development of the present study's findings, but also a contribution to this recent methodological innovation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study yielded some results that aligned with previous notions in the literature, and others that added something new to what we already knew about faith-related concerns. The most notable contributions were that searching for God is a dynamic, moving process that occurs relationally and is laden with paradox. Furthermore, searching for God appears as a process of letting go of prior understandings of God while trusting that whatever lies ahead is good, however uncertain and mysterious it may be. These findings are important for clinicians and church leaders who work with adolescents and young adults, urging them to adopt a phenomenological, affirming, non-pathologizing posture in their work with young people. Future research would benefit from continuing what this study started, addressing this phenomenon from the lens of a different demographic.

CHAPTER SIX: REFLEXIVITY

Regardless of the chosen method, it is important for any researcher to be aware of the way that their personal experiences impact the research process. For many projects, researchers seek to eliminate their bias so they can observe their participants' experiences as objectively as possible. The method used in the current study, hermeneutic phenomenology, approaches the topic of researcher bias in a different way. Because the aim of this method is to understand the lived experience of a phenomenon, rather than explain or predict outcomes, the researcher's experience with the phenomenon is actually an important and necessary condition. It provides the researcher with an ability to sense the movement of the phenomenon as it emerges; it allows the researcher to listen for the phenomenon and make contact with it. van Manen (2014) states that "personal experience is often a good starting point for phenomenological inquiry" (p. 313). I would add that personal experience is not only a good starting point, but an essential part of rigorous phenomenological research. A researcher with no prior experience of a phenomenon would be severely disadvantaged in their attempts to explicate and vividly describe the details of a phenomenon.

The process of reflecting critically on prior and evolving understandings of a phenomenon has been referred to as reflexivity (Finlay, 2011). However, the process of reflexivity is more than simply self-reflection. It is a complex and dynamic practice of simultaneously bracketing and exploiting prior knowledge and experiences. Finlay (2008) calls it a type of dance where "the researcher slides between striving for reductive focus and reflexive self-awareness; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight" (p. 1). For the present study, this meant that it was important for me to connect with my own experiences of searching for God so that I could bracket them, but also use them to join with

my participants in listening for the emerging phenomenon in their experiences. As such, in this chapter I will describe my experiences of searching for God and how they became the foundation for this study's design. Furthermore, I will discuss the reflexive practices that I engaged in throughout the development and implementation of the study.

My Experience of Searching for God as an Adolescent

According to my journals, my process of searching began when I was 13 years old. I may have had questions or doubts before then, but June 1, 2008 is the first documented account of wonderings I had about the God I was raised believing in. I was a fairly sheltered child; I did not experience any major traumas while growing up and had loving parents that did all they could to provide my sister and I with a stable and supportive home life. Faith was simple: believe the things that Mom and Dad tell you to believe and all will be well. Christianity was built into the social world I was a part of. I had friends at church and sought out Christian peers at my school because I felt safe with them and my parents approved of them. I don't recall having any specific supernatural or mystical experiences as a child; however, I knew that I wanted God to show up and relieve some of the pressure I was experiencing at school.

> *I'm under a ton of pressure right now. . . I feel the devil is working with me. I just need some way for God to show me that he is real so that I won't fall into all the temptations put before me right now. – June 1, 2008*

At this time, God was simply a magician who I thought should wave a wand and free me from the stress of grade 8 final exams. Naturally, this did not happen. But my plea for the divine and my experience of its absence developed and deepened over the following months. On November 8, 2009, I wrote:

> *As far as my Christianity, I'm not sure where I'm at. I believe in God and all, but sometimes I have trouble believing he's actually there. I can never really feel him, and it seems as though I'm praying and praying to nothing but thin air. I'd really like him to*

> *prove to me in some way that he's real, out there, and that he loves me. I want to believe it, a lot! But it's hard, when you can't really feel him there. Sigh…*

I had heard from the pulpit about a certain experience that Christians were promised when they truly put their faith in God. It was something along the lines of, "if you genuinely believe in the Gospel and dedicate your life to Jesus, your problems will fade and joy will fill your heart." This made sense to me on a purely intellectual level. The theology of grace and forgiveness seemed believable, and at that time the theory of substitutionary atonement somewhat satisfied any questions I had about why Jesus' death and resurrection mattered for my life. However, beneath my cognitive assent of this worldview was an emotional experience that didn't line up with what I was told should be there. I didn't know exactly what I was supposed to feel, but what I was feeling certainly wasn't joy. It was confusion, emptiness, growing dissatisfaction. I was trying to navigate my social relationships at high school and was feeling the pressure of finding a place to belong amongst my friends. And I was exhausted from trying to maintain a reputation as a youth leader who was supposed to know answers to the questions about faith and spirituality. I started to wonder if I was the problem when I realized that amidst my life-challenges I was missing the feeling of God's presence or love—whatever that meant. I could not put words to this vacancy; it was simply a gut-sense that something was increasingly lacking. Why wasn't I able to feel God's love for me? Was it because I wasn't believing enough? I just wanted God to show up and makes things clear for me.

> *I need help. I've tried to turn to God for his forgiveness but still find it hard to believe that he's really up there. The way I see it, if God wants me to believe in him and live my whole life for him, he's gonna hafta prove to me that he's really there. "Oh he has, just look around and see how blessed you are Ryan." That's not cutting it for me. I've tried 'surrendering' and 'throwing it all down at the cross' so he can forgive my sins, but I FEEL NO DIFFERENT AFTERWARDS. I don't know what to do now. If there is no God, is life really worth living? – July 25, 2010*

As time went by, I began to feel desperate. I longed for proof of God's existence so that I could be assured that my entire worldview wasn't built on a nice-sounding myth. I could feel myself being thrust down the river of searching; the things I used to believe did not hold up anymore. I could feel the hollowness of a faith built solely on beliefs, and it wasn't good enough anymore. However, I had no alternative. I did not have anyone to tell me that the growing dissatisfaction in my soul was actually an important, confusing, beautiful invitation to become more fully human, to become more authentically Ryan. All I had was my journal and a community that I was convinced could not understand me.

My problem-solver brain thought that I would be able to feel God's presence in the natural beauty of the world. But a trip to Hawaii soon revealed that even a tropical vacation couldn't undo the unrest of my heart.

> *Guess what? I'm in Hawaii for a family vacation! It's a fricken paradise let me tell you: massive waves, warm air, palm trees, sandy beaches, hot tubs. Like does it get any better than this? But ya know what just kills me? I thought that when we'd get here with all the beautiful scenery, I'd really be able to feel the presence of God. But I can't. Gahh I'm on the best place on the planet and somehow God still can't get into my thick skull. Maybe I just need to have an 'open heart,' however I'd do that. – December 19, 2010*

If a Hawaiian paradise couldn't make me feel God, then what hope did I have? My shame deepened. Surely, I was doing something wrong, I thought. I had no context for the inner journey that was wanting to unfold from inside my soul; no permission to trust my feeling of dissatisfaction; no reason to believe that it was good. So I kept it hidden. I pushed it down and didn't tell anyone about it. As my internal dissatisfaction moved and evolved, I worked hard to make sure that nothing on the outside changed. I tried to maintain my reputation as a good Christian leader at youth group and a hardworking student at school. But I could not do this forever. The questioning, the shame, the felt sense of emptiness inside of me continued to grow. And my journal became so much more important to me as it was the only place that I could be

real with my feelings and honest about what was going on inside of me. I felt a little bit of relief every time I would write about my internal experiences. I knew that my journal wouldn't judge me; I didn't have to fear the consequences of opening up like I did with my friends and family. It was just text. I could be as honest as I pleased. However, one can only write so much before realizing that loneliness cannot be remedied by ink on paper. So the growing, moving, felt emptiness inside of me remained. It could not be permanently suppressed. It slowly emerged as the famous symptoms of depression: hopelessness, suicidality, loss of energy, social isolation, self-criticism. I began to self-harm via cutting to take my mind off of the growing agony I was experiencing inside. My journal entries quickly became darker and more intense.

> *I can't freaking do this. I can't do anything right. I'm a frickin fail. I just wish I had someone that I could just pour out my life to, but I don't. Not without God. Why the heck am I here anyways? Nobody knows. Besides, what difference would it make if I died now, or if I died when I'm 100? Minor differences. Nothing in the bigger picture. – January 20, 2011.*

> *Obviously I've been struggling a lot with my faith and my life, just sort of living it day by day, waiting for the next thing coming that will bring me temporary joy or happiness. It seems as though the only reason I'm waking up in the morning is to get through the day, because nothing will truly satisfy me. It's not worth it to rely on something invisible that won't show up when you need it. – June 24, 2011*

I knew that I needed a different outlet; my journal could only get me so far. I longed for someone to talk to, but didn't know who I could trust. I had people to talk to at church and school, but could I really tell them everything going on inside of me? Could I be sure that they wouldn't judge me or think of me as weak and broken? I didn't think so. And I certainly didn't want to burden others with my struggles. I began to doubt that anyone even cared about me.

> *I need a better escape. I need someone, something to ease my loneliness, my anger. But I think I've exhausted the friends I'd be willing to talk to. They only pretend to care. They don't want to be stuck with helping their depressed, high maintenance "friend." – June 29, 2011*

I also directed my anger towards God. After all, God was the reason that I was suffering, wasn't it? Wasn't God's absence the cause of my pain?

> *It's all coming back, the anger, the cutting, the depression, the thoughts about death. I wish it was just over. All the hope that I found is gone again. This time maybe it's gone for good. Why? Who the hell knows? I'm just sick of always having these unanswered questions that spit in my face. Seriously God? I thought you were up there. The pain. IT HURTS. – March 7, 2011*

I hated my questions, yet I knew that I needed them. Questioning was a strategy I could use to shield me from loneliness. When I asked questions, I was safe in my head and out of my emotions. They gave me control in during a time of immense uncertainty. If I could ask more questions and complain about the lack of answers readily present to me, then I wouldn't have to turn inside and take responsibility for my unrest. If the problem was out there, it meant that I didn't have to sit with my pain and feel the weight of it.

As I'm just sitting here, I wonder why it has to be like this. Why do I have billions of questions that I know I will never find the answer to? In case you're wondering what some of my questions are…

- *Is there a God?*
- *Why am I here?*
- *Why is anger a big part of my life?*
- *Why is our society so attracted to drama?*
- *Why is it so much easier to focus on negative things?*
- *Why doesn't God prove his existence?*
- *Why am I not madly in love with this "God?"*
- *Will I ever fully understand God? (Probably not)*
- *Then why bother?*
- *How is it fair that a little ~80 year period determines an eternity of either pain or happiness?*
- *Why is sinning "funner?"*
- *How do I truly believe in/trust/depend on someone I can't even see?*
- *Why do I have to try so hard to hear God's voice, when people say we should communicate with him like an everyday friend?*
- *What really determines whether I go to heaven or hell?*
- *How do I "believe in God?"*
- *How come obeying him is so hard and boring?*
- *Is the Bible really "God's word?"*
- *Why do I never feel any different during/after I read the Bible?*
- *Why do I still have doubts about God after seeing the beauty of this world?*

- *Is "God" really just a figment of our imagination?*
- *How do I truly love God?*
- *Why do I not want to obey God?*
- *Why am I so upset when I have an essentially externally perfect life?*
- *If this God really loves me… why?*
- *When we ask for his forgiveness, but know we will sin again, why do we even ask in the first place?*
- *What's wrong with swearing?*
- *If my parents and church and media had not told me about Christianity and God, would it be easier for me to trust and obey him?*
- *What would happen if I died right now?*
- *Why is the main reason I pursue Jesus Christ because of my fear of hell?*
- *Does God really give a rip about me?*
- *Why am I so driven by my feelings and emotions?*
- *Why did God create me to think so much?*
- *Why do I have so many questions?*

And I could go on and on… – March 27, 2011

My experience of pain and confusion underneath my many questions stayed with me throughout high school. Although I was given momentary glimpses of relief from the people around me that noticed the shift in my behaviour, it never fully vanished. I learned to exist in the suffering and proceeded to live my life at a sub-optimal level. I began to accept that I was different and that I lived in a mainly Christian world but did not feel totally at home there. I could sense I had an emerging passion for helping others with spiritual struggles and faith crises, but I didn't know what to do with that. I was still dealing with my own felt sense of isolation and pain; how was I supposed to help others when I could not seem to help myself?

After high school, I spent a year of studying in England at Capernwray Bible School. The change in location brought with it a sense of relief. I was hoping to press reset on my worldview and figure things out between me and God. And to a certain extent, this happened. I made new friends and learned how to live in a new part of the world. By moving away from my hometown, I found that I also distanced myself from the suffering of my adolescence. It felt good. Upon my return home, I started my undergraduate degree at a local Bible college. I was motivated to

eventually complete my Master's, so my career pursuits fueled the next four years of my life. For the most part, I maintained the distance between my present self and teenage self, focusing solely on my academic goals. However, there were moments when I would take an honest look inside and remember the suffering of my youth. I would think about the hours spent in tears, begging God to show up and take my burdens from me. And in these moments, I knew that I was still the questioning, doubting, scared, lonely teenager that I once was. I was still unsatisfied, unsettled, confused, lonely. Yet, now I was now receiving a formal education in theology and biblical study; I was learning how to read and interpret the Bible, and how to defend my faith. If anything could remediate a crisis of faith, it was these things, right? Unsurprisingly, the void inside of me was not satiated by my newfound ability to argue for God's existence or preach a sound theology. I was always left with an emptiness that, if I let it, would bring me right back to my dark room in my parents' basement years ago.

My Experience of Searching for God Throughout This Project

After undergrad, I immediately began my Master's degree. And when I was presented with the opportunity to write a thesis, I knew that I wanted to study a topic related to spiritual struggles. I sensed that this was my opportunity to use my experiences to provide a space for others to air their questions and doubts. As the project took form, I initially decided that I would study religious doubt. I found plenty of research on doubt—mostly correlational studies about the effects religious doubt has on well-being. These quantitative studies left a gap that I thought I could fill; a phenomenological study about the experience of doubting could nicely accompany the extant research on its correlates. However, upon receiving feedback from some of my instructors and being the interviewee in a pilot interview, I decided to take the project in a different direction. My struggle in adolescence was not solely about my intellectual doubts. It

was a far more embodied experience; alongside my questioning and doubting, I was experiencing loneliness, shame, confusion, and anger. To reduce such an experience to a mere construct would do violence to the dynamic, moving phenomenon that I encountered in my teenage years. As such, I shifted the focus of the topic from religious doubt to searching for God.

Spending so much time developing this project and travelling back to my time as a questioning teenager, I eventually found myself reflecting on my present experience of searching for God. Have things changed since those angsty, confusing teenage years? Have I reached any sort of ground, any foundation for my worldview? Do I have any semblance of certainty about the things that I thought I needed to be certain about in the past? The answer seems trite, almost cliché at this point: I have not arrived and I doubt I ever will. But I have learned to trust the process, to invite the questions, doubts, fears and whatever else there might be, and to follow the movement of the river flowing from inside of me. So far, this river has taken me away from organized religion and into communities that centre around mysticism, deconstructionism, and contemplative practices. I have found solace in the writings of authors such as Peter Rollins (2011), Richard Rohr (2019), and Peter Enns (2016). And I have become increasingly aware of the importance of leaning into our questions together, rather than providing quick and easy answers. I believe that we all need to learn to trust our souls' desire to become, and we need to notice and support each other in this journey. I think the greatest barrier to this kind of connection is our tendency to preach certainty. We love to be safe, to know our fate, to think that we've got the correct beliefs. But can we really know if we are right and everyone else is wrong? Are we not assuming a position of superiority the second we say, "I've got it, this is how things really are?" I would much rather adopt a stance of curiosity and humility, and learn how to turn

towards the unknowns of life rather than cover them up with religious platitudes and empty doctrines.

As I reflect on this, Rilke's (1934/2004) famous quote comes to mind. The poet urged his protégé to learn to adopt a stance of patience and acceptance towards the unresolved stirrings of the heart:

> Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. (p. 43)

Live the questions now. This is Rilke's message. What would happen if we were to embody this message, to lean into that which is unresolved, instead of hurriedly seeking resolution to our crises?

As I write this, I am painfully aware of an irony within my words. I resist coming to a final position about the way things are in the world, yet seem to be proclaiming a final position as I do so. Namely, I am saying that the position to arrive at should be a posture that resists arriving too quickly at any position. And, as such, I am left with an admission of my own limitation as my journey proceeds. I do not know if my current desire to resist answers will persist, or if I will one day come to a place of stillness within the river and find a system of beliefs that I can authentically give my inner consent to. However, I do know that this process is an important one. I can sense that the fire inside of me is good. It is not controllable; nor is it safe. But it is a process of becoming human. And although it is a process of becoming oneself, it

also seems to be greater than the self. In a mysterious way, it seems like as I encounter the movement of my heart and give it the space it needs to evolve, I am encountering something divine. Could it be that instead of being an external entity, God is actually the movement in the deepest parts of ourselves? Is God closer than we ever could have expected, inviting us to embark on a journey of trust? If this is the case, "trusting God" takes a vastly different shape. It is not trusting that a father-like God will come down and relieve me of my suffering. Rather, it is an invitation to enter *into* the suffering, the unknowingness, the void, trusting that it is good, and that God is present there.

The line between me and God has consequently become quite blurry. I am not so sure if I am as distinct, as separate from the divine as I once thought. Do I carry the characteristics of the God-of-the-sky that we hear about in churches? No. But when I take an honest look inside and connect with the part of me that longs to see others liberated from their shame and loneliness, it cannot be described as anything but divine. It is something that is far beyond me, yet at the same time as close to me as possible. And when this transcendent yet immanent passion emerges from within me, it is a miracle. A miracle of becoming, of living fully into myself, and inviting others to do the same.

Searching for God, therefore, is something that I now consider to be far more important than simply finding a worldview that works for a certain time of life. I am not even sure if we can say that this process is best described by the words "searching for God" anymore. We are searching, yes, but more central to our process is our willingness to allow and invite what is already there to be fuller, more present, more alive.

Reflexive Practices

My ongoing engagement with my journey of searching throughout writing this thesis was supported by various reflexivity practices. Because, as described, the topic is something so close to my own story, I was careful to be sensitive of my own ongoing personal discoveries so that I could also continue to see my participants' experience through a lens of openness and newness. These various practices include a pilot interview in which I was the participant and ongoing journaling throughout the entire process of designing and implementing this project.

Pilot Interview

In the design phase of this project, I had an opportunity to be interviewed by one of my professors using the semi-structured, phenomenological format that I used in this study. This interview occurred back when I thought the study would be about religious doubt. I wanted to know what it was like to be interviewed about the topic so that I could be better prepared for interviewing my future participants. Unsurprisingly, this interview was very powerful for me. Although I was being asked about my experience of religious doubt, the interview quickly shifted to the broader experience of isolation, disconnection, shame, anger, loneliness, and confusion that characterized much of my time as an adolescent. A number of insights emerged from this interview that directly impacted the present study. First, I realized that the construct of religious doubt was far too narrow and impersonal to be the focal point of my research. I realized that although I had plenty of doubt, my experience was far more embodied and dynamic than simply doubting or questioning certain doctrines or teachings. Second, I realized that my continuous engagement with my confusing experience through my journals was actually a way of giving voice to my pain and standing up for what I knew to be true inside of me. My interviewer pointed out that she had an image of a path come to mind as I shared my

experiences. She said that she imagined that my commitment to wrestling with my struggles could be likened to a path that I was unwilling to exit. This was a profound revelation for me. It meant that my consistent, unwavering decision to write about my experiences in my journals was not simply a coping mechanism. It was a reflection of a decision I made—perhaps unconsciously—to find a space to let my authentic self show up. This space wasn't with my family or peers; it was with my journals. Third, I learned what it was like to talk about experiences of searching for God. I discovered how easy it is to remain on the surface and talk about the questions, avoiding the underlying pain and emotion. And I learned that my experience as a teenager, although very multifaceted, was ultimately an experience of disconnection. Disconnection from God, but more so from my community. I wanted people to come alongside me and remediate my loneliness; but this did not happen.

This interview ultimately gave me a deeper understanding of what my experience was like as an adolescent, which consequently allowed me to approach my participants with an awareness of what I was bringing into the space between us. This allowed me to remain open and curious about their stories without assuming that they were going through exactly what I went through.

Journaling About Interviews and Participants

I kept an active journal throughout the process of completing this project. Journaling provided me with a way to dig into my subjective response to the data that I was gathering. It liberated me from imposing my experience onto my participants and allowed me to engage with the phenomenon as it was emerging throughout each step of the project. I wrote in my journals before and after each of the research interviews, while transcribing the interviews, and after I had written descriptions of each participant. In my attempt to stay true to the phenomenological

nature of the study, my journal entries primarily included comments about the way I was being impacted and moved by the data. The following examples are snippets taken from the journal I kept while transcribing the interviews.

> *I am moved by the word 'isolation.' I can connect to this feeling.*
>
> *I am sad and a bit angry that she concludes that she simply has to do her spirituality apart from her parents. Why can't family members be more open and accepting of questions and doubts?*
>
> *The core of her experience? Longing! For security, safety in relationships. WOW. I am moved by this.*
>
> *I experience him as being authentic to his experience; I'm a bit intrigued and drawn in to his approach to faith, culturally.*
>
> *I resonate with the critique of Christian culture at church. I have had the same questions and can feel the inauthenticity of it all. I get a light-ish feeling in my gut when listening to this part of the recording.*
>
> *I am exhausted listening to his quest for answers. I long for him to drop into his experience instead of asking more questions.*

These quotes provide an example of the way in which I wrote about my personal experience throughout the process of transcription. A more detailed journal was kept as I began to analyze the data and immerse myself more fully into each participant's story. This journal allowed for me to write in more depth about the various emotions, thoughts, opinions, impulses, desires, and anything else that I experienced in response to the data. A few examples taken from this journal are included below.

> *I am drawn to [this participant's] experience of searching for God. She feels somewhat 'othered' in her thoughts and questions, as if no one else experiences the world in the same way that she does. This resonates deeply with me; I recall feeling alienated because of my questions, afraid to express them for fear of being ostracized from the community that I valued so much. She sees others "finding God" and wonders why she doesn't have a similar experience. She has consequently wondered what she is doing wrong, why she is different. This makes me extremely sad; I frequently wondered what was wrong with me when I would come in contact with people who "experienced God" in times of need. I absorbed the pain and let the shame spread in me like a cancer. For this reason, I am*

moved at her response to her questions. Though it appears as though she wonders why she experiences life differently than her Christian community, she has not lapsed into self-deprecation. She lives fervently despite feeling othered – something that I am finding to be increasingly important in my own life.

I struggled to 'enter in' to [this participant's] experience during this interview. During analysis, I found my mind wandering often; I had to reign it in to focus on what was being discussed. I initially did not feel connected to her; it did not feel like an 'encounter.' I found it hard to get close to her; hard to get close to her experience. She talked about it, but she did not appear to embody it. It felt as if she was guarding herself from me. Eventually, however, I found that I developed empathy for her. I began to see her Self through her forthright and unfiltered commentary about the social world around her. I, too, crave connection with my community. It was as if I could catch a glimpse of who she is, yet not fully, as her defenses still kept most of me out.

I wish that [participant's name] could feel her emotions with me in the interview. She talked about them from an outsider's perspective. Her words, however, impacted me. They saddened me. They reminded me that real life is not like a 90-minute research interview about searching for God. Real life is less safe, for so many. What happens in real life is why many people need to construct defenses against their most vulnerable places. Perhaps that's why I felt that her guard was up, that it didn't feel safe for her to go there – perhaps she didn't know how. The deepest part of me wanted to see the deepest part of her. And it couldn't. It liked that honest admission of loneliness and sadness, but it did not feel the pain that it wanted to feel. It's as if my essence, my Self, had some important things to say:

> "I get it. I get you. I want to see you. It's OK, it's safe. You're safe here, with me. Show me where it hurts, where the suffering is the most painful. I'll feel it with you, and we'll both be OK. I promise that it won't be too much for me, that I won't judge you or think less of you. I know that it's hard, I've been there. I am there. Let's go there together."

Of course, there's a striking resemblance between what I needed someone to tell me in my pain and what my heart longed to communicate to her in her pain. The way that experiences shape our passions and desires is quite a beautiful thing.

I was quite impacted by the findings that were showing up in front of me. As such, I am grateful that these journals provided me with space to write freely about my active involvement and engagement with what I was discovering. They effectively invited my humanness to show up in its entirety; all that I was experiencing in my body, thoughts, and emotions were invited to the forefront through my journaling.

My Ongoing Journey of Searching for God

As I reflect on this thesis and consider the growth that I have witnessed in my participants and in myself, I am deeply moved yet simultaneously frustrated. I am moved at the bravery of my participants in telling their stories and engaging with their pain. And I feel the sacredness of our joint exploration into the dark, disorienting pit of deconstruction. Yet while this journey feels wholly good, it is also vastly unfinished. If what I'm looking for is satisfaction or fulfillment, I have not found it. I experience the movement of the flowing river inside of me; but like my participants, I too resist the current sometimes. Some days it feels tumultuous, and I long for the ease of having a belief system that shields me from the pain of the present. Sometimes the teenage part of me re-emerges and wishes for the God in the sky to come down and take my burden from me. Sometimes I find it hard to trust the river flowing within me; I want to avoid my internal world and simply cope.

It is in these moments that I am invited to have courage. Not courage to "stay strong" and resist exhaustion; rather, courage to affirm life in spite of exhaustion. Tillich (1952/2014) calls this the courage to be. It is a courage to say "yes" to life amidst its ambiguity or meaninglessness. It is a courage that allows us to be ourselves, to remain in the river, despite the felt pain of the world around us or inside of us. According to Tillich, the source of this courage is the "God above God" (p. 171). This God transcends the God of our theologies; it goes beyond our mere beliefs and attitudes about God. It is a God "who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt" (p. 175). Being grasped by this God above God, a process that Tillich calls absolute faith, is not something that can be reduced to word or concepts. It is a mysterious movement that is within being itself. Because it transcends the God of theism, it is outside of the

subject-object dichotomy that so often God is placed within. God is not a being; God is being-itself.

I believe that even in the moments of frustration and despondency, this is the God that I have touched. Or perhaps this God has touched me. In my admission to let myself search, doubt, and trust I have allowed that which is beyond all conceptions of God to emerge. I have not been relieved of my burdens; however, I have resisted them less and come to a place of acceptance of the unrest in my heart. And as this journey continues, I can only hope that the hidden-yet-present God of mystery will invite my soul into deeper awareness and acceptance of this process.

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APPENDIX A:

Screening Interview

Name of prospective participant: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on searching for God. I have designed this study because I am interested in understanding the lived experience of the search for God in adolescents from Christian communities. The purpose of this conversation is for me to get a sense of who you are and whether you would be a good fit for this study. It will also give you an opportunity to evaluate for yourself whether this study is a good fit for you. I will ask you some questions which you are free to answer in as much detail as you wish. You may choose not to answer the questions or end our conversation at any time. It should not take longer than 30 minutes. I recognize that the nature of what we discuss can be sensitive for some people; for example, some people find it difficult to talk about some of their struggles with faith or spirituality. Thus, all your answers to these questions will be kept confidential.

Do you consent to me asking these questions? Yes/No

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic Screening:

15-20 years old? Yes/No Age: ____

Gender:_____

Member of a Christian community?
Yes/No Current/Past

Community: _____

Date left (if applicable):

1. Do you find yourself searching for God often? What does this look like for you?

2. Do you suffer because of your search for God? How so?

Sometimes people searching for God also experience emotional problems. I will now ask you a few questions about some of these problems to make sure that this study does not make some of these problems worse. You have the right not to answer them or participate further if you wish.

Is it OK with you for me to ask these questions?

1. Do you sometimes experience prolonged feelings of sadness or low mood?
   If yes:
   - When was the last time this has happened?
   - How do you cope with this? What supports do you have to help you with this?
   - Sometimes when people feel this way, they have thoughts about harming themselves (such as cutting, excessive scratching, or burning yourself) or committing suicide. Have you ever had these thoughts? When was the last time you had these thoughts?

   If yes:
   - What thoughts did you have? How did you act on these thoughts? Have you ever attempted suicide in the past? Has anyone in your family ever attempted suicide?
   - Are you afraid of seriously hurting yourself or dying?
   - Do you regularly take any drugs or drink alcohol?
   - What other things in your life prevent you from acting on these thoughts? (for example, family, friendships, romantic partner, hobbies)

If the participant is deemed to be at risk for suicide based on their answers to the previous questions, they will be directed to the resources at the end of this document.

2. Do you sometimes, past or present, see or hear things that other people don't see or hear? (For example, hearing voices when no one is there speaking to you or saying bad things about you; or having visions, when you are completely awake, that is seeing something or someone that no one else could see?)
   If yes:
   - What do you see/hear? How do you know others don't see/hear these things?
   - How often does this occur? Once or twice a week? More/less?
   - How does this affect your life? (For example, does it interfere with school or your relationships?)
   - What supports do you have in place to help you with this? (such as doctor, medication, counsellor)

If the participant is deemed to be experiencing psychotic symptoms currently or has previously experienced psychosis-related symptoms and is not being treated, they will be directed to the following resources:

Local Emergency Number:	911
Professional or Agency:	Fraser Health Crisis Line: 1-877-820-7444
Suicide Hotline:	1-800 SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
Mental Health Support:	310-6789 (no need to dial area code)

Fraser River Counselling
7600 Glover Rd, Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1
(604) 513-2113
www.fraserrivercounselling.ca

Brookswood Counselling
#107 20103 40th Ave Langley, BC V3A 2W3
778-278-3411
www.brookswoodcounselling.com

If they are eligible to participate:

It sounds like you would be a good fit for the study. The next step is for us to find a time to meet for the interview. The interview will either take place on campus at Trinity Western University or somewhere else that is private. It will take up to 90 minutes and will be recorded using a password-protected audio recording device. Is there a particular date and location that works well for you?

If they are not eligible to participate:

Unfortunately, you are not eligible to participate in the study at this time. Thank you for your time and willingness to speak with me! There may be other studies at a later time that you may be eligible to participate in. Is this something you would be interested in?

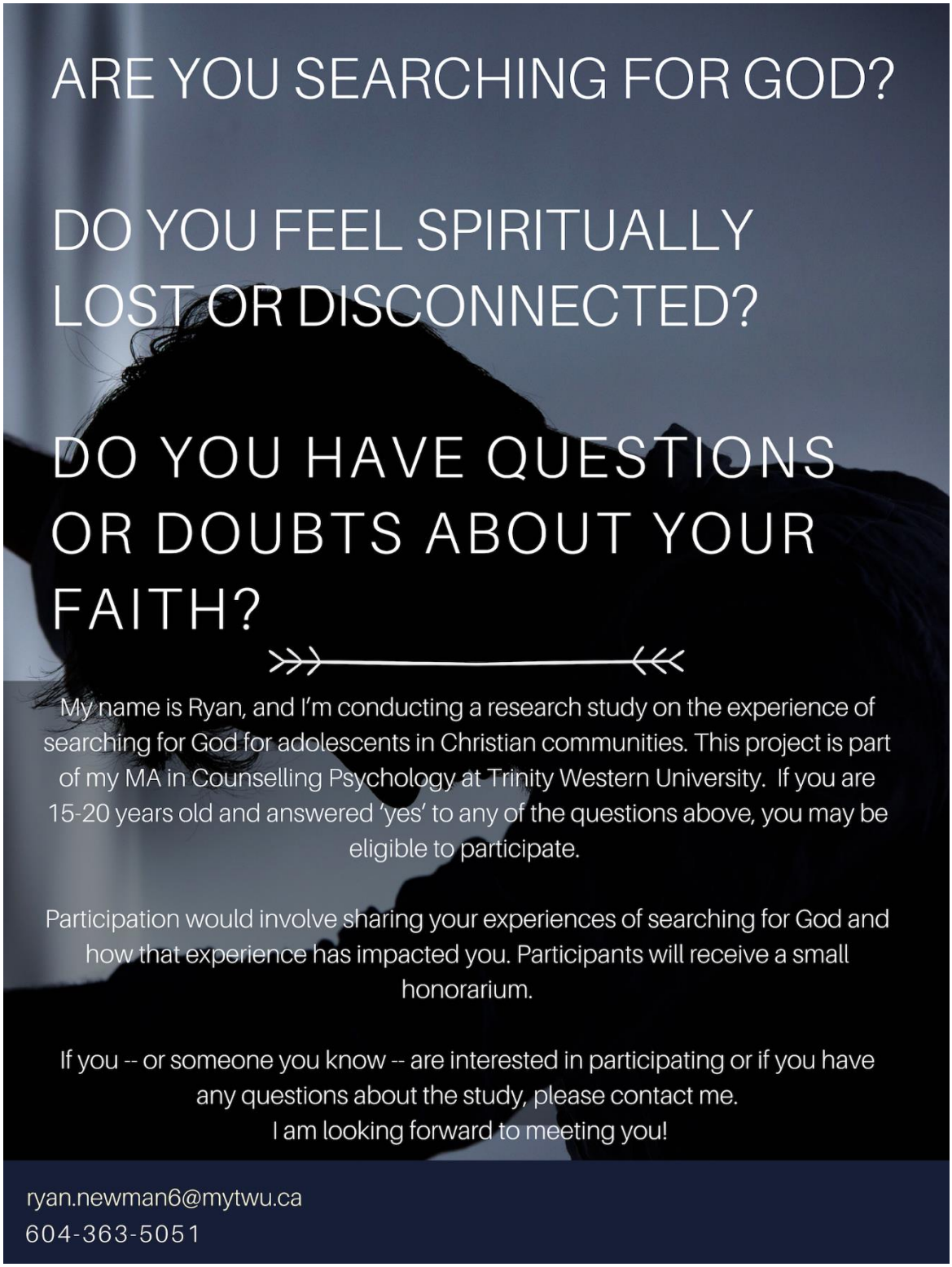
APPENDIX B:

Social Media Advertisement

Hello! I am presently conducting a research study on the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities. I am looking for participants who would currently consider themselves searching for God (i.e., experiencing spiritual longing or doubt, feeling abandoned by God, feeling spiritually disconnected or numb) and are (or recently were) part of a Christian community. Participants must be 15-20 years old. If you are interested in participating, know of someone who may be eligible to participate, or simply would like more information about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at rj.newman@hotmail.com. Thank you!

APPENDIX C:

Recruitment Poster



APPENDIX D:

Informed Consent Form

WHEN GOD FEELS ABSENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF SEARCHING FOR GOD IN ADOLESCENCE

Principal Investigator: Ryan J. Newman, B.A., M.A. Student in Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University. Contact number: 604-363-5051. Contact email address: rj.newman@hotmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Derrick Klaassen, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University. Contact email address: derrick.klaassen@twu.ca

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities.

Procedures: The method selected to conduct this research values the unique input of each participant and the way they experience the search for God. For this study, you will participate in a semi-structured interview where the interviewer will ask you questions about your experience of searching for God and the way that it impacts your life. The interview will take place at Trinity Western University or another private location and will take approximately 1.5 hours to complete. This interview will be audio-taped for transcription at a later time. When the study is completed, the results will be made available to you if you would like. The data will be stored in a locked location in the Counselling Psychology department at TWU upon the completion of the study. No identifying information will be retained.

Potential Risks: Participating in this study may be challenging for you. You may experience discomfort while sharing some details of searching for God that may be sensitive or difficult to talk about. The researcher will provide a safe space for you to share your experience, as he has training in counselling psychology (although he will not provide counselling, specifically). The researcher will also provide you with a referral to a clinical counsellor should any emotional distress arise.

Potential Benefits: Participating in this study will assist the researcher in understanding the lived experience of searching for God in adolescents and what these experiences mean. This will deepen the knowledge of the experience of the search for God in the academic community and provide clinicians with valuable information that could be useful for treatment strategies for adolescents with spiritual struggles. You may also find this experience to be personally empowering, given the opportunity to share a potentially challenging experience in great detail.

Confidentiality: *Any information that is obtained throughout this study will remain confidential.* This means that the researcher will keep everything that you say private. Data will be stored in password-protected documents on the researcher's computer. The researcher's supervisor and research lab may need access to anonymized data to provide guidance and supervision when necessary. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study (A fake name will be used. Do you want to pick this fake name?). Confidentiality of information shared

through participation in this research will be maintained under every circumstance, with exception only in the following situations:

- When there is a clear risk of substantial harm to yourself or threat of harm towards another person (e.g., you tell me you are going to hurt yourself or someone you know).
- When there is reason to believe that a child or a vulnerable adult is as risk of harm, including physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or exploitation (e.g., you tell me that a child you know is being abused).
- When a court-of-law requires the release of personal information (e.g., a judge requires information about the study for legal purposes).

Remuneration/Compensation: You will receive a $15 Starbucks card prior to beginning the research interview. This will not be revoked if you decide to withdraw from the study.

Contact for information about the study: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Ryan Newman at rj.newman@hotmail.com.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact Elizabeth Kreiter in the Office of Research, Trinity Western University at 604-513-2167 or researchethicsboard@twu.ca. You may also contact the researcher's supervisor, Derrick Klaassen, at derrick.klaassen@twu.ca.

Consent: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time (in person, via email or telephone). Your withdrawal from this study is not possible after the researcher has written the final project based on the data that you provide. If you decide to withdraw before the completion of this study, your data will be destroyed (e.g., audio recordings will be deleted, transcripts will be shredded).

Signatures: Your signature below indicates that you have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that your responses may be put in anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study.

Research Participant Signature Date

Research Participant printed name

Principal Investigator Signature Date

APPENDIX E:

Confidentiality Agreement Form

I, _____, research assistant, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all documentation received from Ryan Newman. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Ryan Newman;

3. To store all study related materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all study related documents (e.g., transcribed interviews and research journal) to Ryan Newman in a complete and timely manner;

5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any back up devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the files to which I will have access.

Research Assistant's name (printed): _____

Research Assistant's signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX F:

Interview Guide

Preamble:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and to share your experience of searching for God with me. By sharing with me today, you are contributing to important research that I think will benefit lots of people. Specifically, I hope that the results of this study will help us understand the nature of searching for God and the impact that it has for adolescents. All of the information that you share in this interview will remain confidential and you have a right to withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized in any way. Please do not hesitate to ask questions.

1. What drew you to this study? *(warm-up question)*
2. Please think of a specific time and place where you really knew that you were searching for God and describe it as fully as you can.
    a. Please start with the facts: if someone was watching this moment unfold on a TV screen, what would they see? Where were you? Who was with you? What did you see? (PEA-0)
    b. How did you feel as this was happening? (PEA-1)
    c. What did you feel in your body? (PEA-1)
    d. Is there something that you spontaneously wanted to do as this was happening? (PEA-1)
3. What is this experience of searching for God telling you? Does it have a message for you? How do you understand it? What confuses you about it? (PEA-2)
4. What's at the heart of this experience for you? (PEA-2)
5. What does this experience invite you to do now? Where are you going with this? (PEA-3)

APPENDIX G:

Supplemental Interview Guide

Tell me about a situation or an event where you felt deeply moved by this phenomenon. Take your time and allow yourself to go to the situation that was the most moving, perhaps the most memorable for you in this experience. There may be more than one experience that will come to your mind. We can explore each of these situations in our dialogue. For now, choose a situation or event that seems the most relevant to you in terms of the experience of… and when ready tell me about that.

Since it is easy for all of us to lose touch with our actual experiences once they become memories, let's try to make this memory more alive and durable by anchoring it in time, space and your own body. Can you tell me where did this happen, when, with whom were you, what did you notice in your body, what did you see, hear, smell in that situation, how old were you or how long ago did it happen. Imagine yourself traveling back to that time and place while taking me with you and showing me around: where did this happen, when, how long ago, who was there, what happened, what did you see/hear/smell, and how did you feel in your body (*Accessing the existentials/lifeworld/facticity*)

As you remember all these details that make your experience rich and vivid, notice what came/comes up in you as you immerse yourself again in that experience: What is going on in your body? What sensations are you aware of? How are you moved by all this? Do you notice any reactions emerging? Let's take time to stay with all this, to notice what comes up in you, and to describe your experience from the inside as if you are immersing yourself in it. Feel free to use images or metaphors to describe how it was like for you to experience that (*Phenomenological description*)

As you immerse yourself further in this experience and are now aware of what is going on in your body and of any reactions or moods that you may have, I wonder if you notice any particular feelings becoming clearer or more distinct. Or maybe one feeling begins to take centre stage in your experience. Take some time to notice if this is happening for you. Are there any particular feelings that you become aware of? (*Feelings*)

How are you moved by this experience? Are you drawn towards or repulsed by this experience? Are there any impulses that come up for you as you experience these feelings? Is there anything that you would like to do spontaneously? (*Impulses*)

Allow this experience to reach you fully, receive it, allow it within yourself. Invite whatever is coming up in you. Let it be. This experience may carry a message for you as if it tries to speak to you to tell you something. Take a moment to listen to whatever this experience may tell you/communicate to you. Imagine this experience as giving you something, speaking to you, addressing you. What is it that you receive/get from it? (*Phenomenal meaning*)
How do you understand your experience? Is there something that you don't understand? Something missing? (*Understanding*)

As you allow this experience to reach your innermost self, the core of your being as you let it reverberate in you through your feelings, impulses and how you begin to understand it, pause and hold this experience at the bottom of your heart, in a moment of stillness. This is your experience fully received by you and you are holding it at the core of your being. Rest in that space for a moment. (*Resonance*)

PAUSE

Notice what starts to move in you/speak in you from that place of stillness and silence. (*Standing*)

Follow-up questions (if needed)
What is at the heart of this experience for you personally? How do you understand this experience from the bottom of your heart/in your heart of hearts?
How do you find yourself in it?
Where/how do you stand with this?

Earlier you invited this experience to speak to you and you listened. Now it is your turn to listen to the response carried in your heart and to speak it up. Give your response to this experience (Standing/rising)

Perhaps this experience carries not only a message but also an invitation for you as it inspires/invites you to do something. What are you invited to do given your experience? Our experiences call us forward or inspire us to do something. What is this calling for you? What do you sense that you are called to do after having had this experience? What will you bring into your life/existence as a result of this experience? How do you return to life, to your existence after this? (Responding)

APPENDIX H:

Debriefing Script

Thank you very much for your participation in this study!

What was this experience like for you?

Was there a part of the study that was difficult?

Do you have any questions or comments about what it was like participating in the study?

Just a reminder, if you would like me send you the results of this study, I can send you the completed project. Please feel free to contact me at rj.newman@hotmail.com.

Thank you again for your participation in this study. I am grateful for your time and contribution to this research.

APPENDIX I:

Audit Trail

The following is an example taken from the part of the analytical process that involved writing phenomenological descriptions for each participant individually. The example has been abbreviated; further, names and some identifying information have been removed to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Initial Data Analysis: [participant's name]

Phenomenological Description

How did the participant/phenomenon *appear* to me?

What is the lived experience of searching for God for adolescents in Christian communities?

[Participant] is a university student. She grew up attending a non-denominational church and considered many of the teachings of her church to be true. She would consistently attend services on Sunday mornings and youth group on Wednesday nights. She mentioned that in her family church attendance wasn't mandatory, but that "it was a bad thing if you didn't go."

Over the past few years [Participant] has had experiences that have surprised and confused her. She's learned that the things she used to swear by—particularly related to her Christian faith—may not be as straightforward as she once thought. The worldview that she once blindly accepted had been challenged, especially through encountering different beliefs at university. As I spoke with [Participant], I heard her talk about how she's struggled to reconstruct her beliefs after being exposed to new information about God and the Bible. However, I also sensed that there was more to her story than simply wanting to find the right things to believe in.

I sensed that she wanted to know that she was not alone in her questioning. She longed for others to understand her and validate her concerns. It was as if she needed reassurance that she wasn't crazy for having questions about what she was learning in her Bible classes. But [Participant] had no one. And so it felt lonely:

> "And it felt lonely for a few reasons. One, actually being there, not finding that person that you're like, 'what is this guy [the professor] talking about and why is he teaching it this way?' But then also in the sense of 'who do I even talk to about this?'"

"Lonely" wasn't the only word that [Participant] used to describe her experience. She also used words such as "nervous" and "anxious" and "alert" when she talked about being exposed to things in class that challenged her worldview:

> "I was physically aware, you know? Like my body, I was taking notes but I wasn't slouched down taking notes or just passively listening. I was alert and I felt like I was hanging onto every word he was saying . . . it made me more anxious."

[Participant]'s entire being—her body, mind, and emotions—was hypervigilant. Because it wasn't just about finding the correct beliefs; it was about her entire identity being uprooted. For so long she had felt safe in what she believed in; perhaps her beliefs shielded her from some of the anxieties or pains of life. But now it felt like her wall of protection was being attacked. If the foundation she once stood upon wasn't as strong as she thought it was, then what would she stand on instead? [Participant]'s worldview, belief system, and very identity was at stake. And she couldn't understand why it didn't seem like a big deal to anyone else around her:

> "I was confused. I was like, 'why isn't this weird for them?' and then, 'why *is* this weird for me?'"

As our interview continued, [Participant] told me about what she wanted to do when she had these experiences. She mentioned that she vacillates between movement towards and away from the source of her frustration:

> "Initially it was curiosity towards the beginning of the class. And then once I understood how the rest of the class was gonna go or the theme of how he was gonna teach it was almost rejection. Because I didn't know what to do."

In other words, [Participant]'s curiosity turned into withdrawal as she realized that it was safer to shield herself from new information . . .

Possible Key Features

What is central to the experience of searching for God for [Participant]?

- Loneliness, longing for a community that validates and understands
- Longing for security, safety
- Longing for a restored worldview, to know what she believes
- Longing to let the process unfold as it will; to not rush her search or manufacture its completion
- Finding meaning in life (through suffering)
- Movement; a revealing and deepening of emotion (anger, fear, etc.)

Reflexivity

As I interviewed [Participant], I found myself wishing that she could trust her questions and ignore the perceived judgment of others. I longed for her community to reach out to her and give her space to process her experiences and hold her in her uncertainty. This longing was likely a countertransference reaction, because I think that's what I needed when I began questioning my worldview . . .

So I felt her loneliness. I felt the immense longing that screams, "does anyone else feel this way? Is it just me? Am I OK?" It's such a hard feeling – I can feel it in my core. And I hate it; I hate that people feel lonely and I hate that our culture seems to perpetuate loneliness and alienation by promoting values such as worldview-certainty, instantaneous gratification, and put-together-ness. Hate is a strong word, but I am passionate about people admitting that they're not OK, and that being an OK thing!

But as much as I longed for her to have a supportive and validating community around her, I also trusted that she will listen to her inner voice, the small prompting that says, "truth is worth struggling for – keep searching." I had a sense that she will be OK; that her commitment to her

Self was strong. And I capitalize “Self” because it feels divine. Something about [Participant]’s acknowledgement of her inner position, her desire to stay with the uncomfortable feelings, and her resistance to quick answers seems transcendent to me. Like these things are not just problems that she is going through, that this is not just a stage of life that she will one day come out of. This feels as if she is coming into herself, that she is being led into discovering who she actually is and what she truly values. Could it be that God is guiding her in this? That’s what *I* want to believe; but I don’t think that [Participant] senses God’s guidance through it right now.