

## Article

# The Experience and Correlates of God's Silence among Christians

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**Abstract:** The aim of the study was to find out if Christians experience God's silence and if so, what are its correlates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second purpose of the study was to identify the connections between the experience of God's silence and depressive mood disorders and the impact of God's silence on other spiritual experiences. The study was conducted online on a group of 771 people, mostly Christians. The experience of God's silence was declared by 82.1% of the respondents. This experience does not depend on the sex of the respondents, but correlates with their age. The experience of God's silence is commensurate with the joy that comes from having a relationship with God through daily spiritual experiences. Additionally, the conducted research shows that experience of God's silence resembles a state rather than a permanent feature with a visible ending, which is associated with a change in the image of God. The consequences of experiencing God's silence need not to be negative. The conducted research shows that the most frequently mentioned effect of this experience is the strengthening and consolidation of faith.

**Keywords:** God's silence; religiosity; spirituality; DSES; divine struggles; depression; psychology of religion



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## 1. Introduction

What people look for in religion is a way to establish contact with the invisible other, and thanks to this relationship they want to feel differently in their life (Luhmann 2020). This sense of closeness and relationship with the invisible other understood as God or as the divine or holy is investigated in many ways in the psychology of religion and spirituality—also through the presence of religious or spiritual experiences (Underwood 2013). The aim in this kind of research is to measure intrapsychic experiences, not beliefs or behaviors themselves, regardless of subjects' self-declared religiosity or spirituality (Hood et al. 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected many domains of human life, including the religion and spirituality of Christians (Dein et al. 2020). Research conducted among this population before the pandemic (see Exline et al. 2015) showed that God was more often experienced as loving (caring and forgiving) than as cruel (rejecting/hostile) or as remote (distant/inaccessible). Although a positive image of God has always predominated over negative images both among university students and among adults, subjects in both of these groups more often perceived God as remote than as cruel. It can therefore be said that a sense of God's absence or inaccessibility is not a rare phenomenon and that it is linked with doubts concerning His existence or His nature (i.e., attributes). A survey study on the effect of faith and spirituality on coping with the consequences of coronavirus among Polish Christians (Kowalczyk et al. 2020) revealed that for most respondents they were a positive strategy of coping with distress, but not always a sufficient one in the face of the threat experienced (Boguszewski et al. 2020; Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020). The aim of the present study was to check the prevalence of the experience of God's silence among Christians during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experience of God's silence was understood as the sense of God's absence or inaccessibility despite attempts to establish

contact with Him. The effect of the pandemic on religion and spirituality is investigated in various ways, and so are religious and spiritual struggles (cf. Zarzycka 2017). In most cases, however, previous studies on the sense of God's silence among Christians were conducted on small and homogeneous samples and involved the application of qualitative procedures (cf. Durà-Vilà 2017; Girrell 2018; Luhrmann 2012; Mandt-Anfindsen 2016). The amount of qualitative research on the issues of divine struggles in the psychology of religion is still relatively modest, and there is a clear disproportion between research on the sense of divine presence in various types of experiences of self-transcendence (Yaden et al. 2017) and research on the experience of God's silence in religious people (Wilt et al. 2020). What is explored in studies on divine struggles is, above all, the sense of guilt and anger experienced when God is perceived as rejecting/punishing and the doubts experienced when He is perceived as inaccessible (Exline et al. 2015; Zarzycka 2017) rather than God's silence as a normative religious or spiritual crisis. In view of the adopted research strategy, the problem outlined above can be presented in the form of the following exploratory questions: (1) Do Christians experience God's silence, and if so, in what form? (2) As a result of negative events and affective states (suffering and death), such as those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, do respondents experience divine struggle in the form of a sense of God's silence? The problem can also be presented in the form of research questions: (3) Does the experience of depression correlate with the experience of God's silence? (4) Does the experience of God's silence change with age? (5) Does the sex variable differentiate the experience of God's silence? (6) Do daily spiritual experiences correlate with the experience of God's silence? The research questions were made more specific in the form of the following hypotheses:

**Hypotheses 1 (H1).** *There is a positive covariance between depression and the experience of God's silence.*

**Hypotheses 2 (H2).** *There is a statistically significant difference between women and men in the experience of God's silence.*

**Hypotheses 3 (H3).** *There is a negative correlation between the experience of God's silence and age.*

**Hypotheses 4 (H4).** *There is a negative correlation between DSES scores and the experience of God's silence.*

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Instruments

To determine the experience of God's silence and the presence of other spiritual experiences, we used a questionnaire of our own design. Its first part was a survey concerning sociodemographic data and consisting of questions about respondents' sex, age, education, marital status, religion, and religious commitment. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about the experience of God's silence (its triggers, frequency, and duration), religious and spiritual strategies of coping with the distress associated with this experience, the effect of this experience on personal faith or spirituality and the image of God, the signs of the end of this experience, the feeling of inner joy derived from relationship with God, and the history of depression in respondents' life (current or past treatment for depressive mood disorder or a depressive episode). Items for this part of the questionnaire were inspired by qualitative studies on the experience of God's silence among Christians (cf. Durà-Vilà 2017; Girrell 2018; Luhrmann 2012; Mandt-Anfindsen 2016). The survey consisted of 18 items. Some of them were measured using yes/no answers, others were multiple choice questions (identifying the triggers of God's silence, religious and spiritual coping strategies, and the signs by which respondents recognized the end of the experience), still others were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (assessing the level of respondents' religiosity or faith, the effect of God's presence or absence on their image of God, and the feeling of inner joy derived from relationship

with God). To assess other kinds of religious and spiritual experience, we used the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES; Underwood 2013). The measure consists of 16 questions. Respondents indicate their answers on a 6-point scale, from 1 = never or almost never to 6 = many times a day; the higher the score, the higher the level of spirituality. The DSES has acceptable psychometric properties. Depending on the population, its reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) ranges from 0.86 to 0.95 (Loustalot et al. 2006). There are also data showing that the scale strongly correlates with positive religious coping in difficult situations, private religious and spiritual practices, spiritual or religious commitment, and spiritual values and beliefs (Idler et al. 2003; Neff et al. 2007). The authors of the DSES claim that certain feelings (emotions) measured using this scale, such as inner peace or harmony, lead to a decrease in psychological distress, which means they moderate the relations of stressors to signs of health and well-being. Moreover, research has shown that the spiritual experiences included in this scale may reduce tension associated with anxiety and depression and increase psychological resilience, thus improving mood and globally influencing the individual's well-being (Underwood 2013).

## 2.2. Procedure

The study was conducted between 17 November 2020, and 2 February 2021, which was during the developing COVID-19 epidemic in Poland. For this reason, we used a sampling method based on volunteers recruited from the general population using the Google survey system via popular social media and religious social networking sites.

## 2.3. Participants

The participants in the study were 591 women (77%) and 180 men (23%), adding up to a total of 771 respondents. Mean age in the sample was approximately 40 years (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Age in the Sample of Polish Respondents (N = 771).

|     | M    | SD   | Me | Min. | Max. |
|-----|------|------|----|------|------|
| Age | 39.2 | 13.8 | 40 | 16   | 81   |

A large majority of the participants (558, 72.4%) had higher education. The next largest group (202, 26.2%) was individuals with secondary education. The smallest group (11, 1.4%) was respondents with elementary education. Respondents education levels are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Respondents' Education (N = 771).

| Education Level | n   | %     | Cumulative Frequency |
|-----------------|-----|-------|----------------------|
| Elementary      | 11  | 1.4%  | 1.4%                 |
| Secondary       | 202 | 26.2% | 27.6%                |
| Higher          | 558 | 72.4% | 100.0%               |

As regards marital status (Table 3), the largest group was married people (43.1%), followed by single participants (41.1%), people in relationships (10.9%), and clergy and consecrated persons: nuns (2.6%), priests (1.1%), and clerical students (0.8%).

As far as participants' religion and faith (denomination) were concerned (Table 4), the vast majority of respondents were Christians (96.6%). The remaining participants identified themselves as belonging to the categories of non-Christian religions (0.3%), non-denominational spirituality (1.2%), or none (0.3%). Among Christians, the largest group were Catholics (94.2%), followed by Protestants (1.7%) and believers of other Christian denominations (0.8%).

**Table 3.** Respondents' Marital Status (N = 771).

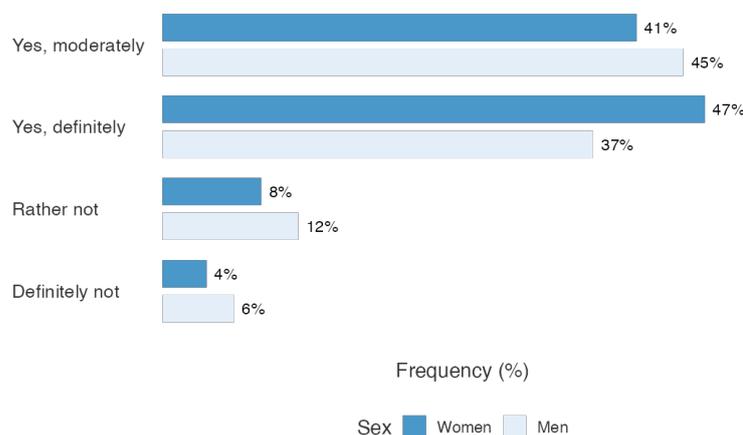
| Civil Status      | n   | %     | Cumulative Frequency |
|-------------------|-----|-------|----------------------|
| Secular institute | 3   | 0.4%  | 0.0%                 |
| Clerical students | 6   | 0.8%  | 1.2%                 |
| Priests           | 9   | 1.1%  | 2.3%                 |
| Nuns              | 20  | 2.6%  | 4.9%                 |
| Single            | 317 | 41.1% | 46.0%                |
| Married           | 332 | 43.1% | 89.1%                |
| In a relationship | 84  | 10.9% | 100.0%               |

**Table 4.** Respondents' Declared Religion/Denomination (N = 771).

| Religion/Denomination           | n   | %     | Cumulative Frequency |
|---------------------------------|-----|-------|----------------------|
| Baptism                         | 1   | 0.1%  | 0.1%                 |
| Buddhism                        | 1   | 0.1%  | 0.3%                 |
| Non-denominational spirituality | 9   | 1.2%  | 1.4%                 |
| Other Christian denominations   | 6   | 0.8%  | 2.2%                 |
| Catholicism                     | 726 | 94.2% | 96.4%                |
| Orthodox Christianity           | 2   | 0.3%  | 96.6%                |
| Protestantism                   | 13  | 1.7%  | 98.3%                |
| Non-Christian religions         | 2   | 0.3%  | 98.6%                |
| Atheism                         | 11  | 1.4%  | 100.0%               |

A clear majority of the respondents (87%) considered themselves highly religious people or strong believers; this was the case both among women (41%—Yes, moderately, 47%—Yes, definitely) and among men (45%—Yes, moderately, 37%—Yes, definitely). As shown by this comparison (Figure 1), women considered themselves strong believers more often than men.

Do you consider yourself a very religious person?

**Figure 1.** Strength of Religious Faith (N = 771).

#### 2.4. Statistical Analysis

In the statistical analysis of results we used the Jamovi software ([The Jamovi Project 2019](#)) and the R engine, particularly with the psych library.

#### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

All the research procedures applied concerned humans and were consistent with the ethical standards of the Research Ethics Board at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow and the Declaration of Helsinki. The survey was anonymous and conducted electronically. Respondents were not required to provide any personal data.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. The Experience of God's Silence

Past or present experience of God's silence was reported by 633 respondents (Table 5), who accounted for 82.1% of the total sample (N = 771); 138 respondents (17.9%) had not experienced God's silence. The experience of God's silence affected 486 women and 147 men either in the present or in the past.

**Table 5.** Present or Past Experience of God's Silence (N = 771).

| Experience of God's Silence | n   | %     | Cumulative Frequency |
|-----------------------------|-----|-------|----------------------|
| Yes                         | 633 | 82.1% | 82.1%                |
| No                          | 138 | 17.9% | 100.0%               |

No statistically significant differences were observed in the experience of God's silence depending on respondents' sex ( $t = 0.173$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). We found, however, that the experience of God's absence/inaccessibility correlated negatively with age (Table 6).

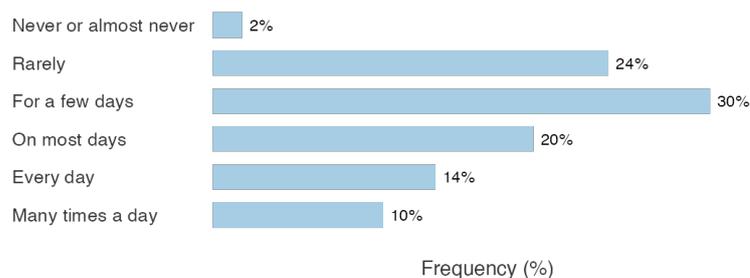
**Table 6.** Matrix of Correlations of the Experience of God's Silence With Age and Religiosity Level (N = 771).

|                      | Experience of God's Silence |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Age                  | −0.105 **                   |
| Level of religiosity | −0.042                      |

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

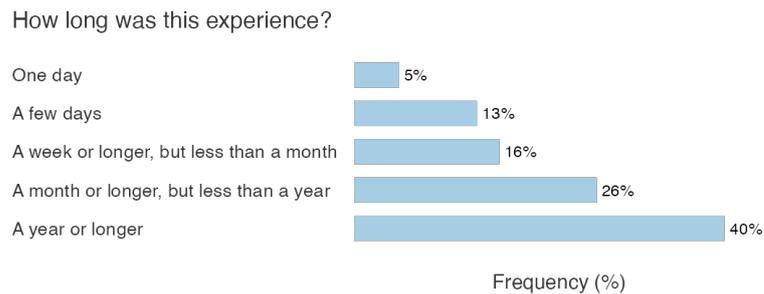
In the group of Christians (N = 500), the experience of God's silence occurred often: every day (14%), on most days (20%), for a few days (30%), occasionally (24%), or almost never (2%). The frequency of the experience of God's silence is presented in Figure 2.

How often has this happened?



**Figure 2.** Frequency of the experience of God's Silence in the Group of Polish Christians (N = 500, NA = 133).

Moreover, God's silence tended to be a long-term experience (Figure 3); 40% of respondents indicated that they had had it for a year or longer, and 26% reported that the experience had lasted longer than a month but less than a year.



**Figure 3.** Duration of the experience of God's Silence in the Group of Polish Christians (N = 626, NA = 7).

### 3.2. Triggers of the Experience of God's Silence

The study showed that the external circumstances that the respondents reported most often were their own or other people's suffering in reaction to a painful loss, illness, or tragedy (50.8%) and the COVID-19 pandemic (6.1%). The most often reported spiritual causes were: dryness in prayer (40.1%), lukewarmness in the practice of faith (39%), faith crisis (38.2%), the crisis of the Church as an institution (33.1%), the fruitlessness of religious/spiritual practices to date (31.7%), being scandalized by the conduct of other religious people (26.5%), questioning God's love (20%), anger with God (17.6%), a test of my faith by God (16.1%), the influence of evil spirit (15.7%), tensions in the religious community or prayer group (13.2%), reaching a higher stage of relationship with God (12%), questioning God's power (10.4%), the loss of a spiritual director, regular confessor, or spiritual teacher (9.4%), God's intentional action associated with His plans about me (8.8%), punishment for not surrendering myself to God (5.3%), and the experience of God's transcendence (4.2%). Among dispositional factors the most often reported triggers were: personal emotional problems (50.7%), moral imperfections or character flaws (40.6%), and a sense of being on the brink of a psychological breakdown (35.8%). The triggers are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Types and Frequency of Triggers of the experience of God's Silence in the Group of Polish Christians Who Have Experienced God's Absence (N = 633).

| Type of Trigger   | Frequency of Response |
|---|-----------------------|
| My own or someone else's suffering as a result of a painful event | >300                  |
| Personal emotional problems                                       | >300                  |
| My moral imperfections or character flaws                         | >200                  |
| Dryness in prayer   | >200                  |
| Lukewarmness in the practice of faith                             | >200                  |
| Faith crisis  | >200                  |
| Sense of being on the brink of a psychological breakdown          | >200                  |
| Crisis of the Church as an institution                            | >200                  |
| Ineffectiveness of religious and spiritual practices              | >200                  |
| Being scandalized by the conduct of other religious people        | >100                  |
| Questioning God's love  | >100                  |
| Anger with God  | >100                  |
| A test of my faith by God   | >100                  |
| Influence of evil spirit  | 100                   |
| Tensions in the religious community                               | >100                  |
| Reaching a higher stage of relationship with God                  | <100                  |
| Questioning God's power   | <100                  |
| Loss or lack of a spiritual director/teacher                      | <100                  |
| God's intentional action associated with His plans about me       | <100                  |
| COVID-19 pandemic   | <50                   |
| Divine punishment   | <50                   |
| God's transcendence   | <50                   |

In the light of the analyzed research, the most frequent trigger of a sense of God's silence is the experience of a painful loss, illness, or tragedy—in other words, the person's own or someone else's suffering, regardless of the respondent's sex. An equally frequent source of a sense of God's silence or inaccessibility is being on the brink of a psychological breakdown, which may but does not have to be related to such events.

### 3.3. Religious and Spiritual Strategies of Coping With the Experience of God's Silence

The religious and spiritual strategies of coping with the experience of God's silence that respondents most often mentioned are presented in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Religious and Spiritual Strategies of Coping With the experience of God's Silence in the Group of Polish Christians (N = 594, NA = 39).

| Religious and Spiritual Coping              | Frequency       |
|---|-----------------|
| Continuing to pray                          | 56.7% (n = 337) |
| Mass and other services                     | 45.9% (n = 273) |
| Faith in Providence                         | 44.2% (n = 263) |
| Reading the Bible                           | 35.5% (n = 211) |
| Support from a prayer group or other people | 33.5% (n = 199) |
| Attending a retreat                         | 31.4% (n = 187) |
| Meditation                                  | 27.4% (n = 163) |
| Spiritual direction                         | 19.5% (n = 116) |
| Religious rituals                           | 9.7% (n = 58)   |

### 3.4. Signals of Overcoming God's Silence

Answering the question about the signs (indications) of overcoming God's silence (Figure 4), 19.9% of respondents were unable to name them clearly, 16% reported that they had regained a sense of divine presence, 11.7% felt things were different in their life than before, 11.2% felt zest for life, 7.8% found that they had ceased to experience problems with themselves, 7.3% felt touched by God's love, 6.2% had experienced conversion, 5.2% reported that their prayers had been answered, 2% reported that God had spoken to them.

What was the sign of the end of this experience?



**Figure 4.** Signs (Indications) of Overcoming (or the End of) the experience of God's Silence Among Polish Christians (N = 547, NA = 86).

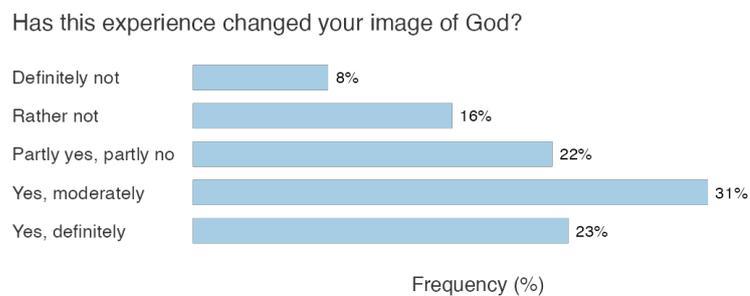
### 3.5. Consequences of the Experience of God's Silence

Among Polish Christians, 45.2% of respondents reported that, when all was said and done, the experience of God's silence had strengthened their faith/spirituality, 17% reported that their faith had become weaker as a result of this experience and required additional care, 14.7% indicated that their faith/spirituality had not changed as a result of God's silence, 12.5% stated that the experience had no negative effects on their faith/spirituality, and 10.4% were not sure if they were still believers after what they had experienced. The effects of the experience of God's silence are presented in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Effect of the experience of God’s Silence on the Faith/Spirituality of Polish Christians (N = 623, NA = 10).

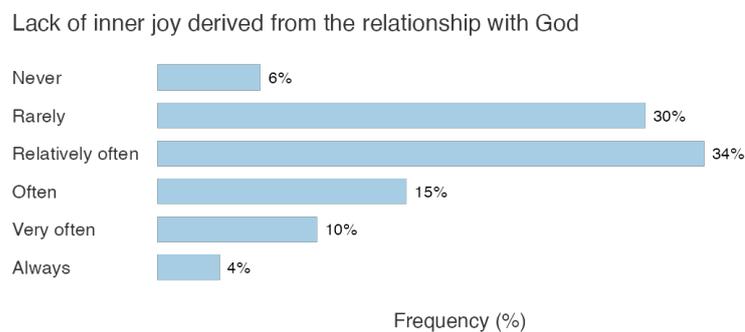
| Effect of God’s Silence on the Faith/Spirituality of Polish Christians                                   | Frequency       |
|--|-----------------|
| When all is said and done, my faith/spirituality became stronger/deeper                                  | 45.2% (n = 282) |
| My faith/spirituality became weaker as a result of this experience and I have to take greater care of it | 17% (n = 106)   |
| I think this experience did not affect my faith/spirituality negatively                                  | 12.5% (n = 78)  |
| My faith/spirituality did not change   | 14.7% (n = 92)  |
| I have always been sure God was there in this experience   | 10.4% (n = 65)  |
| I don’t know if I am still a believer after what I have experienced                                      |                 |

When asked about the effect of the experience of God’s silence on their image of God (Figure 5), 31.3% of respondents answered affirmatively and 22.8% definitely saw such an effect; 21.8% saw it only in some aspects, 15.7% did not think they saw it, and 8.1% were sure they did not see any effect of this kind.



**Figure 5.** Effect of the experience of God’s Silence on His Image Among Polish Christians (N = 622, NA = 11).

More than half of the respondents (64%) reported that they felt a lack of joy derived from relationship with God (n = 626); for 4% of respondents this was a permanent state (“always”), for 10% it was very frequent, 15% experienced this state often, 34% experienced it relatively often, 30% rarely felt this way, and 6% never experienced this kind of lack of joy (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Frequency of Perceived Lack of Inner Joy Derived From the Relationship With God (N = 626).

**3.6. God’s Silence and Depression**

As shown in Table 10, in the whole sample (N = 771), 24% of respondents answered affirmatively to the question about treatment for depression; 48% of them had undergone depression treatment in the past (25% of women and 22% of men) and 51.9% were treated for depression at the time of the study (13% of women and 14% of men).

**Table 10.** Sex and Depression (N = 183).

| Sex   | Depression in the Past (n = 88) | Depression in the Present (n = 95) |
|-------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Women | 25%                             | 13%                                |
| Men   | 22%                             | 14%                                |

The correlational analysis of results (Table 11) showed that there was a statistically significant though weak positive covariance between the experience of God's silence and depression treatment in the past ( $r = 0.110$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 11.** Matrix of Correlations Between the Experience of God's Silence and Depression Treatment (N = 771).

|                                     | Experience of God's Silence |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Depression treatment in the past    | 0.110 **                    |
| Depression treatment in the present | 0.045                       |

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

We also observed a negative covariance between the experience of God's silence and the frequency of joy derived from relationship with God ( $r = -0.154$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a positive correlation between the experience of God's silence and the lack of joy derived from relationship with God ( $r = 0.196$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result (Table 12) indicates that, in the context of respondents' faith, God's silence is an unpleasant experience. Unlike for the experience of God's closeness, in the case of His silence we observed no statistically significant differences associated with respondents' sex.

**Table 12.** Matrix of Correlations Between the Experience of God's Silence and Inner Joy Derived From Relationship With God (N = 771).

|  | Experience of God's Silence |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Frequency of experiencing inner joy derived from relationship with God           | -0.154 ***                  |
| Frequency of experiencing a lack of inner joy derived from relationship with God | 0.196 ***                   |

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.7. The Experience of God's Silence Against the Background of Other Spiritual Experiences

Respondents' sense of God's silence/inaccessibility correlated negatively with other spiritual experiences measured using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Table 13). We removed the outliers from the sample (N = 771) using the interquartile range ( $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ ); as a result, further analyses are based on 696 observations. The factor analysis of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) showed that it was possible to distinguish three factors: Experience of God, Relationship With God, and Coping. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients indicate acceptable internal consistency of the whole measure ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) and its individual factors: Experience of God ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ), Relationship With God ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ), and Coping ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ). The matrix of correlations between the items of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale suggests the existence of negative covariances between most of the items presented and the experience of God's silence in the sample (N = 696). Only in the case of three items was there no such relationship (i.e., 5. I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine; 7. I feel God's love for me through others (I feel divine love for me through others); 9. I accept others even when they have done things I think are wrong).

A similar negative covariance between DSES scores and the experience of God's silence was observed in the matrix of correlations between raw factor scores and the experience of God's silence (Table 14). All the relationships investigated proved to be statistically significant. The strongest negative correlations were observed for the sum of raw scores on Relationship With God ( $r = -0.270$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and for the DSES total score ( $r = -0.231$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 13.** Matrix of Correlations Between the Experience of God’s Silence and Items of the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (N = 696).

| DSES  | Experience of God’s Silence |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Have you been spiritually touched by the beauty of creation?<br>“Experience of God”  | −0.104 **                   |
| 2. Have you felt God’s presence, or the presence of the divine or holy?<br>“Relationship With God”  | −0.259 ***                  |
| 3. Have you experienced a connection to all of life?<br>“Experience of God”   | −0.122 **                   |
| 4. Have you felt close to God, or to the divine or transcendent as expressed in other words?<br>“Relationship With God”                                 | −0.164 ***                  |
| 5. Have you desired to be closer to God or in union with the divine?<br>“Coping”  | −0.054                      |
| 6. Have you felt God’s love or divine love for you directly?<br>“Relationship With God”   | −0.264 ***                  |
| 7. Have you felt God’s love (divine love) for you through others?<br>“Relationship With God”  | −0.149 ***                  |
| 8. Have you felt a selfless caring for others?<br>“Experience of God”   | −0.052                      |
| 9. Have you accepted others even when they have done things you think are wrong?<br>“Experience of God”   | 0.037                       |
| 10. Have you found strength in your spirituality or religion?<br>“Coping”   | −0.155 ***                  |
| 11. Have you found comfort in your spirituality or religion?<br>“Coping”  | −0.186 ***                  |
| 12. Have you felt guided by God in the midst of daily activities?<br>“Relationship With God”  | −0.279 ***                  |
| 13. Have you asked for God’s help in the midst of daily activities?<br>“Coping”   | −0.124 ***                  |
| 14. During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, have you felt joy that lifts you out of your daily concerns?<br>“Relationship With God” | −0.190 ***                  |
| 15. Have you felt thankful for your blessings?<br>“Relationship With God”   | 0.196 ***                   |
| 16. Have you felt deep inner peace or harmony?<br>“Relationship With God”   | −0.199 ***                  |

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 14.** Matrix of Correlations of the Experience of God’s Silence With DSES Factor Scores and Total Score (N = 696).

|                       | Experience of God’s Silence |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total score           | −0.231 ***                  |
| Experience of God     | −0.90 *                     |
| Coping                | −0.168 ***                  |
| Relationship With God | −0.270 ***                  |

\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to determine the significance of the experience of God’s silence for Christians during the pandemic. We also sought to determine the links between a sense of God’s silence and depressive mood disorder or depressive episode and

to establish the effect of God's silence on other spiritual experiences. Divine struggles, which include the experience of God's silence, are relatively frequent among Christians (cf. [Wilt et al. 2020](#)), and 67% of respondents in a representative Polish sample admitted that they experienced tensions in their relationship with God ([Zarzycka 2017](#)). The COVID-19 pandemic situation also influenced the amount of religious and spiritual struggles experienced by Christians ([Dein et al. 2020](#)); this was the case in Poland too ([Boguszewski et al. 2020](#); [Kowalczyk et al. 2020](#); [Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020](#)). Conducted on a sample of 771 subjects, mostly Christians with a moderate or high level of religiosity, our research addressed the significant role of the experience of God's silence in the human spiritual and mental spheres. The fact of experiencing or having experienced God's silence was reported by 82.1% of the participants. This result invites the interpretation of the experience of God's silence as one of the crucial and common attributes of contemporary spirituality regardless of the effect of COVID-19 on Christians' religiosity or faith. This is because the results showed that, when asked about the external circumstances they perceived as sources (triggers) of the experience of God's silence, respondents most often mentioned their own or someone else's suffering resulting from a painful loss, illness, or tragedy (50.8%) rather than the COVID-19 pandemic itself (6.1%). In the light of our results, the experience of God's silence involved several categories of religious and spiritual struggles simultaneously. This means that it should not be understood exclusively in terms of divine struggle, which is consistent with the findings of qualitative studies (cf. [Wilt et al. 2020](#)). According to the respondents, the experience of God's silence is a long-term (lasting from a month to a year or longer) state (occurring occasionally, every few days), co-occurring with the lack of inner joy derived from relationship with God. This finding is supported by earlier studies on the outcomes of religious and spiritual struggles, as these struggles are a significant predictor of high emotional distress; they are positively related to depressive symptoms, anxiety, state anger, and loneliness and negatively related to life satisfaction and meaning in life in both clinical and nonclinical samples ([Exline et al. 2015](#); [Zarzycka 2017](#); [Zarzycka et al. 2020](#); [Wilt et al. 2020](#)). Struggles affect mental health in two ways: (1) they intensify dysfunctional processes—in individuals who experience problems in psychological functioning they constitute an additional problem and aggravate the initial state; (2) they weaken the positive functions of religiosity associated with well-being, as it is more difficult for individuals experiencing such struggles to derive support from faith and from relationship with God. The present study suggests that a valuable direction to pursue when looking for the sources and predictors of the experience of God's silence is to explore subjects' own and other people's suffering as a result of painful experiences and emotional problems and to investigate the mechanisms involved in making such experiences meaningful. This is also supported by the positive correlation between the experience of God's silence and depression treatment in the past. This relationship is consistent with the results of previous studies, which showed that an increase in the level of depressive symptoms increased the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions towards God, but the expression of these emotions considerably decreased the attribution of meaning to one's illness ([Zarzycka 2017](#)). The experience of God's silence is independent of respondents' sex, but it is negatively related to their age. This means that, with age, the experience of God's silence becomes less frequent. These are important observations, because sex plays an important moderating role in the relationship between personality and religiosity and because the level of religiosity and the strength of beliefs associated with this domain correlate with age ([Bengston 2015](#)). The functioning of women and men in interpersonal relations and in the domain of religiosity differs. Research shows that, compared to men, women more intensively seek the existential meaning and purpose of life in religious contents, show a higher level of openness to the experience of transcendence, and attach greater importance to individual and communal forms of religious activity (e.g., prayer and participation in religious services; cf. [Śliwak et al. 2020](#)). With regard to God's silence, sex was not this kind of moderator between religiosity and divine struggle. What our study did reveal is women's tendency to develop stronger identification with their

own religion/faith—a finding supported in other studies, too (cf. Saroglou 2021). God’s silence is experienced as a disagreeable state, and correlates negatively with the presence of other religious experiences. Nevertheless, it may be a positive experience regarding its transformative consequences for individuals. A clear majority of the respondents report that it is a faith-enhancing and faith-reinforcing experience, whose end is noticeable and associated, among other things, with regaining a sense of divine presence, with the result that, ultimately, it modifies the image of God. This is a valuable guideline for researchers and practitioners in the field of the psychology of religion, suggesting that the construct of God’s silence should be analyzed and explored in research studies and approached in therapeutic interventions as a multidimensional compound of experiences. The results of our study suggest, after all, that God’s silence may also be seen by people as a predictor of growth—a positive change in the process of religious and spiritual struggle. Against this background, our research adds to the as yet small number of studies on spiritual and religious struggles in the context of their positive effect on the perceived processes of development and growth (cf. Zarzycka 2017). The present study has a few limitations that should be noted. Although it involved various groups of Christians in Poland, where the level of declared faith in society is above 98%, the vast majority of our respondents were Catholics, which reflects the fact that they are the largest religious group in this country. As far as the results are concerned, although the present study broadens the knowledge about the experience of God’s silence as one of the signs of religious and spiritual struggle, all data analyzed in it are cross-sectional, which makes it impossible to draw cause-and-effect conclusions. Most of the information about the experience of God’s silence is self-report data, and the relationship or bond with God, and spiritual growth can be investigated by means of methods and instruments other than those relating it to the frequency of spiritual experiences measured using one scale. Further research into the experience of God’s silence, particularly research looking for answers to the question of how this kind of experience can predict spiritual and emotional growth, should focus more broadly on the intensity of religious and spiritual struggles, the context of religious commitment, and the ability to cope with difficult situations, taking into account dispositional factors.

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