

# **THE IMAGES OF GOD OF MIDDLE SECONDARY SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS**

Submitted by

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**STATEMENT OF SOURCES**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees.

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to identify the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents (14-17 years) and the influences shaping these images. It intends to

compare and contrast the images of God of the participants, with those of Catholic theology; to explore the extent to which the findings about adolescents' images of God contained in this study, support or challenge those of a range of literature in the field of adolescent spirituality; to report on some of the formative factors that shape middle adolescents' images of God; and to propose implications for religious education arising from the findings and recommendations.

This thesis contributes to the field of research in the area of adolescent spirituality. As there is little existing literature on the spirituality of middle adolescents, the findings of the study provide valuable data about this age-group, in an area of central significance to Christian belief. The thesis represents the most extensive Australian research in this area. Its methodology is quantitative in that its chief research instrument is a questionnaire used with 1000 middle adolescents in seven Catholic Secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The analysis of the data from the questionnaire is through the use of a statistical analysis program.

Chapter One introduces the study. It defines the terms used in the study and outlines its structure. Chapter Two explores literature related to a range of religious and spiritual issues associated with adolescent spirituality. It includes literature on the stages of human development, on religion and spirituality in Australia, and on religious education theory and practice. Chapter Three considers the scriptural and theological images of God that influenced the development of the research instrument. This chapter provides the background to this study, as images of God have their roots in Scripture and theology. The scriptural exploration focuses on the images of God in the Old and New Testament, in particular, on the images taught by Jesus Christ in the parables. The theological focus is on the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ, in Scripture and in experiences of life. Chapter Four describes and justifies the

quantitative methodology adopted in the thesis. Chapter Five presents the data findings, which are then analysed in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven presents conclusions and recommendations.

The major conclusions of the study are summarised under the headings of the images and qualities of God, and the factors leading participants to think about God, and shaping their images of God. The participants' key images of God were those of "Jesus Christ" and those drawn from "nature". There was also evidence of widespread belief in the image of God as "Trinity". The positive nature of the participants' images of God was evident in the frequent references to images such as "forgiver", "redeemer" and "listener", and participants rejected the image of a demanding, punishing God. There were more anthropomorphic than abstract images of God in the participants' responses. The anthropomorphic images were male, and masculine language about God was used throughout the study. The key qualities associated with God were "loving", "powerful", "good", "religious" and "active" and participants thought of God as both present and transcendent.

They indicated that reflection on death was the major factor leading them to think about God. Other factors were good people and good experiences. Peaceful situations and experiences of nature were also frequently reported. Religious Education classes and liturgies were the key factors at school that led participants to think about God. For some, belonging to a parish community, participating in Church services/ Mass and reflecting on the Bible also led them to think about God. Some of the influences that the participants reported as shaping their images of God were their parents and the Church. Other influences on the participants were secularisation, their belief in the privatisation of faith and the importance of freedom and individual choice.

These findings lead to a number of practical recommendations for educators in spirituality and religious educators, which are outlined in Chapter Seven.

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## TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| ACBPRP | Australian Catholic Bishops Pastoral Research Projects |
|--------|--|

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| ACS               | <i>Australian Community Survey (1998)</i>  |
| CCC               | <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994)</i>   |
| CCLS              | <i>Catholic Church Life Survey (1996)</i>  |
| CEOM              | Catholic Education Office, Melbourne   |
| <i>Guidelines</i> | <i>Guidelines for Religious Education of Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne (1995)</i> |
| Vatican 11        | The Second Vatican Council of the Bishops of the Catholic Church (1962-1965).                |

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Background and Significance of the Study

Rapid cultural change in western society has contributed to changes in the spirituality of young people. One of the important ways in which this differs from that of earlier generations, is that it is no longer always associated with a religion, hence it is often considered to be a secular spirituality. For example, Kay and Francis (1994), reporting on adolescents within a general Christian tradition, found that over a twenty-year period, decline in Church involvement had increased "among pupils aged fourteen to sixteen years" (p. 43). The question can therefore be asked as to whether young people's understanding and experience of the spiritual dimension of life today is different from that of the past. Further questions arise as to whether or not these young people have different views of "transcendence" and different images of God from the traditional images of God in Christianity, in particular, in Catholicism.

An understanding of youth spirituality is a central concern for religious educators particularly in terms of curriculum theory, curriculum development and teaching approaches. For instance, as a result of his research, Shelton (1992), in studies of Christian adolescents in the United States, found that friendship was of central importance to adolescents. Hence he suggested that an emphasis on Jesus Christ as a friend would be helpful to their prayer lives. Such an emphasis could be included in the religious education curriculum.

Research on young people's spirituality is particularly important for informing religious education, and Church schooling, so that what is done in religious education and Church schooling, as well as in other areas of service to youth (homes, youth ministry, etc.) are "relevant". In other words, it is important that there be an awareness

of adolescents' spiritual starting points and of their needs for personal, spiritual and moral development. This implies knowledge of the young people's life experience. For example, Schwab (2000) in his research into young Germans' personal values, considered that personal experience was central to the formulation of young people's spirituality: "Ready-made traditional patterns must be regarded as minor if compared to their own experience" (p. 5).

### Main Categories of Research into Young People's Spirituality

The following list describes some of the main types of research on young people's spirituality:

1. investigations of young people's experience of the spiritual through the use of quantitative methods such as Flynn's (1993);
2. the use of sociological surveys of beliefs, attitudes and values such as the *Catholic Church Life Survey* (1996);
3. speculations about the nature and function of young people's spirituality as in Crawford & Rossiter (1991);
4. research into adolescents' images of God such as Nowotny's (1978);
5. the influence of developmental stages on adolescent spirituality as in Leavey, Hetherington, Britt & O'Neill (1992).

This study is located within the fourth category since it seeks to report new Australian data on middle adolescents' images of God from a population of young people in Catholic secondary schools in Victoria. Although the young people are mainly Catholics, in Catholic schools, and the study will draw on a Catholic theological perspective, nevertheless the data provided by the study will form part of the wider

findings about the images of God of young people in different religious traditions. The study extends the work of researchers who have provided insights into the spirituality of young people, in particular, their attitude to religion and to Church affiliation and practice. In extending this work it specifically focuses on the images of God of middle adolescents, within an Australian context.

The term "middle adolescents", is used in this study, to refer to young people aged fourteen to sixteen years, who are in Years 9 and 10 in Catholic schools in Australia. The study was conducted with 1000 adolescents, using a 112-question survey, and it reports on adolescents' images of God, and the factors that shape these young people's attitudes to faith, religion, spirituality, Church affiliation and practice. The study seeks to generate data on young people's images of God that will contribute to a more informed understanding of adolescent spirituality. Hence it both draws on and extends earlier research on adolescent spirituality.

#### Aims of the Study

The research reported in this study aimed to: -

1. identify the need for additional data on the images of God of Australian Catholic youth;
2. identify where the images of God of the middle adolescents are located within a comprehensive spectrum of images of God in Catholic theology;
3. explore the extent to which the data on middle adolescents' images of God harmonise with or call into question findings from existing research on images of God;

4. report on some of the formative factors that may have influenced the development of middle adolescents' images of God;
5. consider implications for youth spirituality and religious education.

### Definition of Terms

#### *Images and Qualities of God*

The terms "image" and "quality" as used in this study, are based on the Oxford Dictionary definitions, in which "image" includes "conception, thought, idea or similitude"<sup>1</sup>. Using this definition, an "image of God" is a word that conveys a conception, thought, idea or similitude about God. It creates a visible representation (e.g., shepherd) of an invisible entity (God). A "quality" of God is a word or sentence that describes an image. In this framework of definitions, a "shepherd" is an image of God and "protective" is a quality of God.

---

Table 1.1

*Framework of definitions*

---

|                  |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| Images of God    | Shepherd; Judge; Mother  |
| Qualities of God | Protective; wise; loving |

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The definition of "image of God" here is similar to that of Ralph (1989):

An image is most simply defined as a mental representation of anything not actually present to the senses. God is not actually present to the senses, so whenever we think and talk about God we must resort to using imagery (Ralph, 1989, pp. 1-2).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (1991). (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press. P. 816.

Heller (1986) used similar language about images or concepts of God:

Essentially I am interested in children's conceptions of God. These "conceptions" refer to the imagery, thoughts and feelings which crystallize to make up the characteristics of the child's inner world (Heller, 1986, p. 2).

Another important aspect of the conceptual framework of this thesis is the assumption that human experience and understanding of God are inextricably linked, and that religious language emerges from the human experience of God, hence images of God arise from reflection on the experience of life. In the *Human Experience of God*, Edwards (1983) explored the claim that humanity can experience God, and in the introduction to this book, Dulles outlined the difficulty of such an exploration.

God transcends ... every human knower, and thus the self-experience of the knowing subject is not the same as an experience of God. Since God is neither the subject nor the object of human experience, it is no easy matter to explain how (God) can be experienced (Dulles cited in Edwards, 1983, p. ix).

However, Dulles added:

And yet an increasing number of theologians, with whom Denis Edwards aligns himself, assert that in some sense we do experience God. God is present all the time, acting upon us as conscious beings. Can we not say, then, that our vital and immediate contact with God can, at least in faith, be called an experience of God? (Dulles cited in Edwards, 1983, p. ix).

The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, a document from the Second Vatican Council, reinforces the teaching of the Catholic Church that "knowledge of the human condition" is one of the means of Revelation:

"God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason" (cf., Rom. 1:20); but the Synod teaches that it is through His revelation "that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error, even in the present state of the human race" (Abbott, 1966, p. 114).

The relationship between Revelation and Scripture, and the role of Revelation in human life is explored in Chapter Three of this study.

*Analogy and Metaphor*

"Images of God " can be considered to be analogies or metaphors for God.

Tracy (1981) defined an analogy as:

A language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference. The order among the relationships is constituted by the distinct but similar relationships of each analogue to some primary focal meaning, some prime analogue (Tracy, 1981, p. 408).

Ricoeur (1977) defined metaphor as "talking about one thing in terms of another" (1977, p. 83) and considered that "metaphor holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of this meaning" (p. 80). Both Tracy (1981) and Ricoeur (1977) saw the limitations of the use of analogies and metaphors, as well as their value:

The presence of the negations continues in the real similarities articulated as similarities-in-difference. For these reasons, the major explicitly analogical traditions in theology have correctly insisted that in the theological use of analogies, the dissimilarities between God and the world are as great as the similarities; the *via eminentiae* is possible only on condition of its constant fidelity to the *via negationis*. (Tracy, 1981, p. 409)

Over time, the distinction between what is similar and dissimilar can collapse and an identification of one with the other can take place, as the metaphorical understanding is replaced by the literal. In this way, the use of the image of "father" for God can result in people identifying God with this image and praying to an old man with a white beard.

This exploration of the value and limitations of the use of analogical language for God helped in the interpretation of the participants' responses to the questionnaire in this study. It is a reminder of the difficulty of responding to a written questionnaire about God, and explains the inclusion of the request for participants to explain the reasons for some of their responses.

## Structure of the Study

### *Chapter 2: The Literature Review*

The literature review places this study in the context of existing research in the field of adolescent spirituality. It includes general literature about adolescent spirituality and more specific literature concerning images of God, and also considers the relationship between religion and spirituality. Psychological and developmental theories are included for their relevance to the developing spirituality of adolescents. This comprehensive review of the literature provides a context against which to examine and interpret the findings of the study.

### *Chapter 3: Images of God in Scripture and Theology Within the Catholic Tradition*

The foundations of images of God in Scripture and Catholic theology are explored in the third chapter in order to provide an interpretative background for the Christian images of God that emerge from the participants' responses. Christian images form part of the religious education curriculum of the students' schools, and so may shape the participants' images of God. Hence, this chapter reviews the key religious education curriculum framework directed for use in the schools attended by the participants. The theology of Revelation is then outlined, and Revelation in human life today is considered, as this study asks students to reflect on the experience of Revelation in their own lives. The scriptural and theological explorations provide a background against which to compare and contrast the Christian spirituality that will emerge from the participants' responses.

### *Chapter 4: The Research Design*

The methodology adopted in the study is described and justified in Chapter Four. The study is centred on a written questionnaire of 112 questions (Appendix 7),

administered to 1000 middle adolescents in Years 9 and 10, in seven Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The first section seeks some background information about the participants. This is followed by Section A asking participants to complete seventeen sentences, to indicate their thoughts in response to questions about God. Section B also focuses on the way in which participants think about God, asking them to identify their images of God through the use of a Likert scale. Section C gives participants single words or brief descriptors of God and asks them to circle the number that best matches their descriptions of God. Single words or brief descriptors of factors leading students to think about God are given in Section D. Participants were asked to circle the number that they believed best matched the descriptors, and an open-ended question asked them to state the factor leading them to think about God. Section E provides participants with fifteen statements about Jesus Christ, asking them to circle the number that best matched their own image. Section F provides participants with five statements about God, asking them to circle the number that best matched the description given. An open-ended question asked them to state the image of God they mostly have when they pray.

*Chapters: 5-8*

Chapter Five presents the findings of the questionnaire, and in Chapters Six and Seven, these findings are analysed against the background of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. In Chapter Eight, conclusions resulting from the study are listed and recommendations are made. Drawing on the conclusions, the significance and limitations of the study are considered and suggestions for further research are given.

The following chapter therefore, will provide a review of key literature in the area of adolescent spirituality.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

#### *Aims of the Chapter*

This chapter provides a critical review of literature relevant to the present study. Since this study is situated in the field of spirituality, issues related to the nature of spirituality and its relationship with religion are explored, and provide a context for a more particular study of the spirituality of adolescents. Similarly, psychological and spiritual developmental theories are examined for their relevance to the developing spirituality of the adolescent. Statistics on Church attendance and religious attitudes of young people are presented, and this data differentiates between the attitude of adolescents to spirituality and towards religion. Both Australian and international research on young people's spirituality are reviewed, providing a context for the study and positing the issues which inform it.

#### *Definition of "Spirituality"*

There are different ways of defining "spirituality", but it is not within the scope of this study to provide a detailed range of definitions, nor to evaluate them. This study begins with the definition given by Harris, M. and Moran, G. (1998), as it assumes an apprehension of the sacred or the transcendent, and this is a basic assumption in Christian theology, as will be illustrated in the following chapter. Harris, M. and Moran, G. (1998) considered that spirituality was "Our way of being in the world...in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe" (p. 109). Their use of the word "mystery" sums up the several ways in which religions and systems of spirituality speak of the sacred.

#### *Differences between "Spirituality" and "Religion"*

Although defining the differences between religion and spirituality is a matter of debate, it is generally agreed that a connection exists between the two. Religion refers to organised, ritualised systems within which spirituality is expressed and Harris, M. & Moran, G. (1998) in particular, refer to a close connection between the two. It is possible, however, to be spiritual without belonging to a particular religion. It is also possible to be spiritual without belief in a divine being, and without practising particular rites or observances, hence religion can be considered as simply one of the ways in which spirituality is expressed. The growth of secularisation has contributed to an increased privatisation of belief and helped to create the spectrum of belief ranging from those who see spirituality and religion as synonymous, to those who do not. It is therefore necessary to keep this range of views in mind when interpreting the participants' images of God. This chapter illustrates that spirituality can and does exist both in relationship to religion, and independent of it, as Fowler (1981) observed:

Prior to our being religious or irreligious. ... Whether we become nonbelievers, agnostics or atheists, we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honour and respect that has the power to sustain our being (Fowler, 1981, p. 5).

## Literature on Stages of Human Development

### *Developmental Theorists*

Harris, M. & Moran, G. (1998) claimed that the age of the individual was a significant component of spirituality and that the spiritual life developed throughout the life cycle in response to developmental tasks and life experiences. Therefore, the stage of adolescence in the work of the developmental theorists Piaget (1969), Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981) is examined, for the understanding it gives of the spirituality of the

adolescent. These theorists claimed that the capacity for abstract thought developed during adolescence: This claim was tested in the present study.

### *Piaget*

Piaget's (1969) general hypothesis was that:

Cognitive development is a coherent process of successive qualitative changes of cognitive structures (schemata), each structure and its concomitant change deriving logically and inevitably from the preceding one. New schemata do not replace prior ones; they incorporate them, resulting in a qualitative change (Piaget, 1969, pp. 25-26).

He identified four stages of childhood development: the sensorimotor, the preoperational, the concrete operational and the formal operational. He claimed that in the sensorimotor stage (age 0-2), children begin to use imitation, memory and thought and to recognise that objects continued to exist when they are hidden. In the preoperational stage (age 2-7), children's language and the ability to think in symbolic form develops, and in the concrete operational stage (age 7-11), children are able to apply logical thought to concrete problems.

Piaget (1969) considered that during the formal operational stage (age 11-15), the developmental stage of the majority of the participants (69%), young people's cognitive structures have developed sufficiently to enable them to solve abstract problems in a logical fashion. He claimed that the development of the personality is linked to the development of autonomy:

Personality formation begins in middle to late childhood (eight to twelve years) with the autonomous organisation of rules and values, and the affirmation of will with respect to the regulation and hierarchical organisation of moral tendencies (Piaget, 1969, p. 65).

Some of the questions in this research asked whether differences exist between the participants' images of God and those of external authorities such as the Church, school,

teachers and parents. Questions also investigated the extent to which participants are influenced by authorities, especially in terms of the formation of their images of God. The study may therefore provide further evidence in support of developmental theories such as Piaget's.

Piaget (1969) claimed that moral reasoning develops during adolescence, as young people begin to see the purpose behind society's rules and no longer regard them as impositions by external authorities. He believed that they also see the necessity of telling the truth and of working towards justice in society. These claims will be tested and reported in this study, which seeks to identify the participants' attitude to issues of morality and social justice.

Piaget's developmental theory provides insights into the relationship between age and spiritual development, hence it is of relevance to the present study. Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981) were influenced by Piaget's concepts, and their developmental theories, particularly regarding adolescence, are briefly outlined here.

### *Erikson*

Erikson (1968) identified eight developmental stages during which a potential 'crisis' emerged. He defined "crisis" as follows: "Crisis is used here in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a developmental task to be negotiated, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (Erikson, 1968, p. 96).

Table 2.1

*Erikson's human developmental stages*

| Developmental stage                                   | Developmental crisis             | Identity gain                       |
|---|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Infancy and the mutuality of Recognition (0-1yrs)     | Trust vs. mistrust               | I am what hope I have and give.     |
| Early childhood and the will to be oneself. (1-3 yrs) | Autonomy vs. shame, doubt        | I am what I can will freely.        |
| Childhood and the anticipation of roles. (3-5 yrs)    | Initiative vs. guilt             | I am what I can imagine I will be.  |
| School age and task identification (5-12 yrs)         | Industry vs. inferiority         | I am what I can learn to make work. |
| Adolescence (12-18 yrs)                               | Identity vs. identity diffusion  |                                     |
| Young Adulthood. Beyond identity (18-40 yrs)          | Intimacy vs. isolation           | We are what we love.                |
| Adulthood (40-65)                                     | Generativity vs. self-absorption |                                     |
| Mature adulthood (65+)                                | Integrity vs. disgust, despair   | I am what survives of me.           |

*Note:* Table from Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 1968, pp. 107-141.

The first of Erikson's (1968) stages involves a sense of basic trustfulness of others and of self, founded on a loving maternal relationship. Erikson claimed that it is at this stage that "basic trust or mistrust" developed:

It is against the combination of these impressions of having been deprived, of having being divided, and of having been abandoned, all of which leave a residue of basic mistrust, that basic trust must establish and maintain itself (Erikson, 1968, pp. 101-102).

During the second stage, the child either develops a sense of autonomy or a propensity for doubt and shame caused by "an unavoidable sense of loss of self-control and of parental overcontrol" (Erikson, 1968, p. 109). Erikson (1968) claimed that the task of the third stage is to discover the kind of person the child might become, and that this process could either develop initiative or a sense of guilt. In the fourth stage, a sense of industry or inferiority may develop.

Erikson's fifth stage, adolescence, is of greatest relevance to this study as it includes the age group of the participants. Like Piaget, Erikson claimed that during adolescence, young people look for people and ideas in whom and in which to have faith. This claim will be considered through this research, which asked participants to describe the ways in which they thought about God. The images they report may reflect the qualities that they admire in people. Other responses may indicate their personal ideals and the causes in which they believe.

Erikson (1968) commented that "the adolescent fears a foolish, all too trusting commitment, and will, paradoxically, express his need for faith in loud and cynical mistrust" (Erikson, 1968, p. 129). This comment supports the inclusion of questions in the present study, inviting participants to give reasons for their answers, as they will help to clarify their responses. The questionnaire also elicits participants' attitudes to

commitment to a specific religion. The responses can then be compared with Erikson's claim.

Erikson (1968) believed that the estrangement of the young is due to identity confusion and that most young people are disturbed by "the inability to settle on occupational identity" (p. 132). He considered that to develop a sense of identity, young people need to feel a sense of continuity between who they were as children and who they promised to become, (Erikson, 1968, p. 87). In his view, interaction with peers and leaders outside the family fosters growth in personal identity:

The search for a new and yet reliable identity can perhaps best be seen in the persistent adolescent endeavour to define, overdefine, and redefine themselves and each other in often ruthless comparison, while a search for reliable realignments can be recognised in the restless testing of the newest in possibilities and the oldest in values (Erikson, 1968, p. 87).

Erikson (1968) also highlighted the influence on adolescents of people outside the family.

This research also asks participants to name the people who were the greatest influences on their images of God. It invites them to prioritise these influences and to indicate the person who best represented an image of God for them. The research also considers the principles and values to which the participants were committed. Erikson (1968) stated that the tasks of adulthood, the sixth, seventh and eighth stages, were to grow in intimacy and integrity. He defined adulthood as the stage in which "the fruits of the seven stages gradually ripen" (Erikson, 1968, p. 139).

Maier (1965) is amongst the scholars to have compared the theories of Erikson and Piaget. He claimed that for Piaget, personality integration occurs during adolescence, but for Erikson, adolescence is a time when a new crisis is experienced.

For Piaget ... a growing person reaches adulthood the moment he surrenders his childish thinking and actions. For Erikson, adulthood ... depends upon continued development of one's self-awareness and understanding (Maier, 1965, p. 210).

Maier (1965) considered that Piaget and Erikson were similar in that Piaget's view of the adolescent's attempt to understand his/her environment reflected Erikson's concept of the adolescent's struggle for identity. He summarised his views in stating that:

Each theory has an inner consistency in terms of its development of a concept of personality growth, both have some developmental phases in common and they differ in that they focus on different aspects of personality functioning (Maier, 1965, p. 212).

The theorists' emphasis on adolescence as a time of searching for personal identity, led to the inclusion of questions in the research reported in this thesis, investigating the extent to which this is true of the participants in this study. The findings may support the theorists' claim.

Phillips (1992) considered both the work of Erikson and images of God. He considered that:

Human life is a God-ordained pilgrimage by which persons travel toward ever-expanding images of God that emerge from the universal pattern of developmental crises. ... By accurately tracing a person's images of God back to their potentially unresolved developmental crises, the pastoral caregiver can reopen opportunities for further and healthier resolution of the crises (Phillips, 1992, p. 167).

He claimed that empirical data could not be found to support the underlying assumption of Erikson's developmental theory, that epigenesis mirrored the psychosocial development of human life, and suggested, instead, that the underlying assumption is religious in nature: "Empiricism has been left behind in favour of a *belief* about the order of human life.... Humanity is thus on a quest *toward* something"<sup>2</sup> (p. 170). He stated that religion is one of the institutions that significantly influence this quest, and

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis given by Phillips

that theological language could be used for Erikson's concept. He suggested that such language could explain human "drivenness", that because they were created in the image of God, people were therefore "driven" to seek to know God:

Thus, the epigenetic principle may be recast as a religious concept that describes the Creator's plan for human development through psychosocial experience (Phillips, 1992, p. 170).

Phillips (1992) considered that religious life and human development was not separate processes and that the purpose of the life cycle is to grow into the image of God: "Ordered by God, the life-cycle unfolds deeper and fuller images of the divine to the end that persons experience the glory of the Creator" (Phillips, 1992, p. 172). Phillips (1992) considered that where the crisis of each stage of the life cycle is not resolved well, an unhealthy image of God might emerge. Table 2.2 shows the relationship Phillips (1992) saw between the various stages of the life cycle and the images of God, virtues and sins that may be formed at each stage.

Table 2.2

*Images of God and the Life- Cycle*

| Stage                   | Virtue     | Sin        | Image of God      |
|-------------------------|------------|------------|-------------------|
| Infancy (0-1)           | Hope       | Gluttony   | God of hope       |
| Early childhood (1-3)   | Will       | Anger      | God of will       |
| Play age (3-5)          | Purpose    | Greed      | God of purpose    |
| School age (5-12)       | Competence | Envy       | God of competence |
| Adolescence (12-18)     | Fidelity   | Pride      | God of fidelity   |
| Young Adulthood (18-40) | Love       | Lust       | God of love       |
| Adulthood               | Care       | Apathy     | God of care       |
| Mature adulthood        | Wisdom     | Melancholy | God of wisdom     |

*Note:* Table from Phillips, 1992, p. 171.

Phillips (1992) expressed the link between the virtues and images of God in the following terms: "Images of God are formed when these virtues and sins are invested with religious significance. The acquired human virtues are writ large as divine characteristics" (p. 171). He claimed that:

Rather than being imposed or given from outside of our human frame of reference, the images grow out of our developmental experience, which has been ordered by the Creator: divine images become human dispositions (Phillips, 1992, p. 174).

From this standpoint, he stated that it was possible for pastoral caregivers to come to know the person's developmental stage through exploring the person's images of God, as unhealthy images of God might point to unresolved crises. He considered that such crises are the cause of the sins which shape false images of God.

Phillips' (1992) interpretation of Erikson was centred on the relationship he saw between the purpose of life and images of God that were formed at various stages of life. His interpretation supports the direction of the research reported in this thesis, which seeks to identify the images of God, which are formed during adolescence. It may be that secularisation, not religion, has had a greater influence on participants. This study confirms his claim that religious development and human development are integrated processes. It will investigate whether "fidelity", "pride" and belief in "the God of fidelity" are evident in the participants' responses.

#### *Fowler*

Fowler's (1981) work is linked to Piaget and Erikson. His theory was centred on "faith", hence its relevance to the present study with its focus on images of God. Fowler associated faith with relationship, but did not always equate it with religious faith:

Faith is a *verb*; it is an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life...faith is always *relational*; there is always *another* in faith (Fowler, 1981, p. 16).

The extent to which participants believed that faith involves action, is considered in this study, through questions such as those asking them whether they believed that faith should be expressed through commitment to a religion, through Mass/Church attendance and through service of others. It also asked them to identify the key relationships that led them to think about God. The research also asked questions about the connection between spirituality and religion.

Fowler (1981) considered that the human process of faith is synonymous with human growth and moved through seven developmental stages. This reflected Phillips' (1992) view, stated earlier, that the two processes are integrated. However theorists

such as Moran (1998) have challenged Fowler's "stage" theory, as they considered the process of spiritual growth to be spasmodic and irregular rather than linear, and that more diversified metaphors for "growth" and "development" are required to interpret the complex nature of human development.

If one imagines development as a straight line up or forward, then ground gained is an individual and permanent conquest. It seems to me that Christianity and every major religion oppose this assumption. One's life as a whole is at issue throughout all of one's life (Moran, 1992, p. 161).

Nevertheless, Fowler's stage theory can help to shed some light on particular characteristics that may be associated with the participants in this research. Fowler's stages of faith are listed in the following table (Table 2.3).

---

Table 2.3

*Stages of Faith*

---

| Stages of Faith                                       | Age                            |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1. Primal faith                                       | Infancy                        |
| 2. Intuitive projective faith (Experienced faith)     | Early childhood (Age 4-6)      |
| 3. Mythic literal faith. (Affiliative faith)          | Childhood and beyond (age 6-8) |
| 4. Synthetic conventional faith. (Conventional faith) | Adolescence and beyond         |
| 5. Individuative reflective faith. (Personal faith)   | Young adulthood and beyond     |
| 6. Conjunctive faith. (Community faith)               | Early mid-life and beyond      |
| 7. Universalising faith. (Universal faith)            |                                |

---

Fowler (1981) claimed that the preparatory stage of "primal faith" established a basic orientation of trust and faith through life, and is followed by the stage of "intuitive

projective faith" characterised by the lack of a distinction between reality, imagination and magic. He considered that the stage of "affiliative faith" emerges with the development of abstract thinking.

This study will identify whether the participants' images of God provide evidence of this development. According to Fowler's stages of faith, "synthetic conventional faith", is the developmental stage of fourteen to fifteen year olds, who are the age of most of the participants in this study. Fowler (1981) claimed that adolescents develop a new and deeper awareness of self and others, that interpersonal relationships are central to their lives, and that conformity with the group is critical to them. He believes that the adolescent's world expands beyond the family to include school, work, peers, leisure, Church and the wider society. Fowler's claims led to certain questions about the factors shaping participants' images of God being included in the research reported in this study. Fowler (1981) also considered that a personal meaning system is not fully acquired during adolescence, and that young people rely on the meanings and values of significant others. Questions concerning participants' personal meaning system were also included in the research.

#### *Implications of Developmental Theories for the Study*

The developmental theories of Piaget (1969), Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981) raise issues that are pertinent to this study - in particular, their claim that adolescence is the stage in which the capacity for abstract thought develops. Hence, this research includes questions exploring whether participants held abstract images of God. The theorists also considered that the young person's world expands from the family to school, Church, friends and peers during adolescence. This study identifies the extent to which each of these factors seems to have influenced the formation of the participants' images of God. The theorists contended that adolescence is a time for

seeking meaning in life. Hence the survey seeks to discover if this is true of the participants in this research. Finally, Fowler identified faith with action, and this survey investigated whether this definition of faith is shared by the participants.

## Literature on Young People and Organised Religion

### *Relationship Between Spirituality and Religion*

This section explores general data about religious affiliation and practice in Australia today, particularly among adolescents, in order to identify possible links with adolescent spirituality. Researchers such as Crawford and Rossiter (1991) claimed that factors other than religion affect the spirituality of young people (Crawford & Rossiter, 1991, pp. 7-8) and the *Australian Community Survey (ACS)*, cited in Kaldor et al., (1999b) found that for most Australians, belief in God does not lead to church attendance. These findings led to the inclusion of questions in this study, asking participants whether they, too, believed that it was possible to have faith, but not be committed to a religion and its practices.

### *Australian Community Survey (1998)*

Some of the findings of the *ACS* (1998) are relevant to the present study, including the finding that:

Most Australians believe in God. A large number accept conventional Christian beliefs such as...the divinity of Jesus. ... While most Australians believe in God, only a minority believe in a personal God (*ACS*, cited in Kaldor, Dixon, & Powell, 1999b, p. 15).

The present study asked participants whether they believe in a personal God. These findings can then be compared with that of the *ACS*. The *ACS* also found that for most Australians, particularly young people, belief in God does not lead to Church attendance: "Those under 40 years are under-represented in Catholic Church life.

Further, younger Catholic Mass attenders are less likely to attend as regularly as those who are older" (Kaldor et al., 1999b, p. 37). The frequency of Church attendance, and reasons for non-attendance, are also investigated in the present study.

The *ACS* found that despite falling Church attendance, 71% of the Australian population had been to a special religious service in the past twelve months and that many had contacted religious social services or other Church activities. This indicates a degree of positive involvement with Churches. However, Kaldor et al. (1999b) commented that "(despite) latent Christian belief and goodwill towards the churches ... Australians are not turning to the churches to understand or develop their spirituality" (p. 27). This study explored some of the sources of the spirituality of young Australians in Catholic schools, and the extent to which participants have a positive attitude towards the Church. This will enable comparisons to be made between the two studies.

*The Catholic Church Life Survey*<sup>3</sup> (Board of Management of the Australian Catholic Bishops Pastoral Research Projects, ACBPRP, 1996)

In 1996, a study of Catholic parish life, the *Catholic Church Life Survey (1996)* (*CCLS*, ACBPRP, 1996) was conducted under the auspices of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. It included a sample from every Australian diocese, was statistically representative of parishes, and included Catholic Church attenders aged fifteen years or more. This is the age group of participants in this study. As the data from the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) was divided into age groups, the findings about questions related to images of God can therefore be identified, and comparisons with the present study can be made. Some of the differences between the two surveys are

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished material used with permission of the ACBPRP.

that the participants in the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) were all Catholics, were Mass attenders and represented a variety of age groups, whereas those in the present study were not exclusively Catholic, or regular Mass attenders, and were middle adolescents only. There were also more than four times as many middle adolescent participants in the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) than in the present study.

*Images of God in the CCLS (ACBPRP, 1996)*

Questions 14 and 15 of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) explored the participants' images of God. Almost all responded that they believed in God (99%) and half of them indicated that they had a Trinitarian image of God (Table 2.4). This finding led to the inclusion of a similar question in the present study.

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Table 2.4

*Ideas about God (CCLS, ACBPRP, 1996)*

| Response                    | Percentage % |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| Don't know or not available | 4.5          |
| Doesn't exist               | 1.0          |
| Can't know if exists        | 5.4          |
| Only in persons             | 8.3          |
| We and the universe are God | 14.8         |
| Not a person but a name     | 14.6         |
| A person not the Trinity    | 1.2          |
| One God – Trinity           | 50.2         |

Another question in the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) asked participants to prioritise between contrasting images (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5

*Images of God (CCLS, ACBPRP, 1996)*

| Image  | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5   | 6    | 7    | Image  |
|--------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|------|--------|
| Father | 28.5 | 13.1 | 7.2  | 38.5 | 3.2 | 4.5  | 5.0  | Mother |
| Master | 17.2 | 17.7 | 15.3 | 33.5 | 7.7 | 6.7  | 1.9  | Spouse |
| Judge  | 15.3 | 6.5  | 11.2 | 41.0 | 8.8 | 8.4  | 8.8  | Lover  |
| King   | 9.1  | 3.7  | 6.9  | 30.1 | 8.2 | 12.3 | 29.7 | Friend |

Table 2.6 indicates that the participants' preferred the images of "master", "father" and "judge" to those of "spouse" and "mother". These findings led to the inclusion of similar pairs of images in the survey used for the research reported in this thesis, hence enabling a comparison to be drawn between the two studies. However, unlike the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), the present study involved middle adolescents only.

*Factors Affecting the Participants' Faith and  
Their Images of God (CCLS, ACBPRP, 1996)*

Other questions in the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) related to the present study, concerned factors affecting the participants' faith and their images of God. The responses to these questions are listed in Tables 2.6-2.8.

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Table 2.6

*Most Significant People for Faith*

| Response            | Percentage % |
|---------------------|--------------|
| Mother              | 75.7         |
| Father              | 58.0         |
| Work mates          | 5.9          |
| Mission priests     | 3.5          |
| Teachers            | 20.9         |
| RE teachers         | 24.9         |
| A priest            | 18.2         |
| Other parish people | 2.4          |
| Other               | 8.6          |

---

Parents were "the most significant person" in terms of their children's faith. Mothers were the most significant people for over three-quarters of the participants, and fathers for 58% of the participants. Teachers and priests were also influential. These responses led to the inclusion of questions in the survey used for the present research, concerning the influence of parents and other adults on the spirituality of the participants. Another question (Survey A: question 22) asked participants to indicate the ordinary events that had special meaning for them as they strengthened their awareness of God. The responses to this question led to the inclusion of a similar question in the survey used for this study.

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Table 2.7

*Effect of ordinary events on awareness of God (Set 1)*

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| Response           | Percentage % |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Birth of a child   | 15.7         |
| Wedding            | 6.6          |
| Nature             | 30.3         |
| Creative work      | 6.6          |
| Sacred place       | 13.2         |
| Mass/prayer group  | 9.2          |
| Quiet reflection   | 10.5         |
| Listening to music | 6.6          |
| Reading the Bible  | 1.3          |
| Hearing sermons    | 0            |

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Table 2.8

*Effect of ordinary events on awareness of God (Set 2)*

| Response                    | Percentage % |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| Don't know or not available | 0            |
| Personal suffering          | 10.2         |
| Family death                | 46.2         |
| Fear in danger              | 7.7          |
| Unable to cope with evil    | 10.3         |
| Life meaningless            | 5.1          |
| Guilt/conscience            | 0            |
| Desperate search            | 7.7          |
| Relationship crisis         | 5.1          |
| Desolation/despair          | 7.7          |

"Nature" was the prominent factor in the first set of responses and was mentioned twice as often as the next most frequent response "the birth of a child". The most frequently occurring factor in the second set of responses was a "family death" (46%), which received the highest rate of responses across both sets of factors.

*Readiness of the Participants To Discuss Faith (CCLS 1996)*

Another set of findings related to the present study, was concerned with the readiness of participants to discuss their faith (Table 2.9).

Table 2.9

*Readiness to talk to others about faith (Survey A: Q 20)*

| Response                        | Percentage % |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Question not applicable         | 3.5          |
| Life/actions sufficient         | 18.4         |
| Hard to express                 | 26.8         |
| Mostly at ease with             | 46.5         |
| Look for opportunities to do so | 4.8          |

The findings indicated that slightly more than half the participants in the *CCLS* (1996) felt at ease in talking about their faith (52%). Some reasons for not doing so were that they believed that their actions were enough, or they found it hard to express faith in ordinary language. These findings led to the inclusion of questions about the articulation of faith, in the survey used for this study. Therefore the *CCLS* (1996) raised issues for consideration in this study and helped to shape the research instrument.

## Empirical Research on Young People and Spirituality

### *Introduction*

The focus in this section is on literature containing images of God. It includes the work of the Australian researchers Nowotny (1978), Leavey, Hetherington, Britt and O'Neill (1992) and Flynn (1993); the American researchers, Heller (1986), Coles (1992) and Johnson (1994); and the work of the British researchers Hyde (1990) and Kay and Francis (1996).

#### *Australian Researchers: Nowotny (1978); Leavey et al. (1992) and Flynn (1993)*

##### *Nowotny*

Nowotny's (1978) research dealt with similar questions to those of the present study, including questions about God, religion and the meaning of life. However, unlike the present study, her work was with senior students aged seventeen to nineteen years, in their final year of school, and from all Australian States. Like the present study, her methodology involved the use of a questionnaire from which her conclusions were drawn. She found that the participants' ideas about God could be placed along a five-point continuum: (i) nonbelief; (ii) belief in God as a Supreme being or force; (iii) belief in God in a personal way while searching through questions of God's existence or relevance; (iv)

belief in God through the experience of nature, the universe and people; (v) belief in a personal God who is helper, guide and loving friend. This continuum helped to shape the areas to be included in the survey used for the research reported in this thesis.

Nowotny's (1978) emphasis on the need "to take students where they are now" (p. 41) reflected the importance placed on age by the developmental theorists Piaget (1969), Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981). It also supported the emphasis on life experience in the questions included in this survey. Nowotny highlighted the need to realise that the students' images of God came from a variety of influences and life experiences. This claim led to the inclusion of questions in the survey, concerning the influence of everyday life experience on the formation of the participants' images of God.

*Leavey, Hetherington, Britt and O'Neill*

The methodology involved in this research, like the present study, involved the use of a questionnaire. However it involved a smaller number of students in fewer schools than the present study, namely, 266 Year 11 students in three schools. It also involved girls only and included a school that was not Catholic, two additional points of difference from the present study.

Although their research did not seek to discover the images of God of the students, their work did find a link between Fowler's (1981) stages of faith and images of God. Using Fowler's work as a basis for their own, they found, for example, that in Stage Two, young people might see God in terms of size, power and external signs; in Stage Three as a friend and supporter of their needs; and in Stage Four, God might be identified with people and nature: "They can see God involved in world affairs and the Kingdom of God as concerned with striving for justice in this world" (Leavey et al., 1992, p. 221).

Leavey et al. (1992) claimed that adolescents would be open to the image of God as "a friend and supporter of their needs" (Stage 3). As this is the age of the

participants in the research reported in this thesis, the questionnaire sought to identify whether the participants thought of God in this way. Leavey et al. (1992) also found that the participants in their survey identified Jesus with God, and this finding is explored in the present research. Another of their findings was that mothers had a greater influence on their children than fathers, but that overall, the influence of parents was not as strong as could have been expected:

For 20% of students, parents are chosen as the only mentor; for a further 28% peers as well as parents are chosen. This means that a modest 48% are choosing parents. Similarly, only 26% of the students considered their fathers of great importance to them as a religious influence, while 39% accorded this influence to their mothers (Leavey et al., 1992, p. 226)

This finding supports the inclusion of questions about the religious influence of parents on their children in the present survey used for the research reported in this study.

### *Flynn*

The research by Flynn (1993) has several factors in common with this study, as its focus was on students in Catholic secondary schools in one Australian State. However the numbers involved were larger, as he surveyed 5155 Year Twelve students compared with the 1000 middle adolescents in this study. Flynn (1993) found that 80% of the participants believed in God, and that their main image of God was that of a personal, loving Father:

About three-quarters of students see God as a *Loving Father* who loves them very much, who always forgives them and is ready to assist them in need. Students generally hold a *very positive, warm image of God as a loving Father*. For about 60% of students, God is close to them, means a lot to them and assists them in their daily lives (Flynn, 1993, p. 308).

The research reported in this study explores the extent to which participants thought of God as a "loving Father", "personal friend", "helper" and "shepherd" as these are key images of God in Flynn's (1993) findings. The findings of the two studies can then be compared. Flynn (1993) found that the participants had a positive attitude to Jesus Christ:

About two-thirds of students acknowledge that they 'want to love Jesus' and over 40% believe that Jesus is very close to them. For the large group of students (42%) who acknowledge that *Christ is a real person to me in my daily life*, there is evidence of a personal relationship with him (Flynn, 1993, p. 309).

The research reported in this study also asked participants about their attitude to Jesus Christ, and Chapters Six and Seven compares these findings with Flynn's (1993).

Another of Flynn's findings, which is of relevance to this study, was that parents had the greatest influence on their children's religious development: "The influence of the example and lives of parents remained the *single most significant influence on students' religious development*" (p. 412). Teachers were also significant adults for students. However, Flynn (1993) found that their influence had halved over the past two decades, and that only 14% of respondents saw teachers as sponsors of their religious development. The reported level of influence of the peer group had doubled in the same period. Students saw the school as an important influence on their religious development through such things as retreats, religious education, liturgies and Masses, and 19% regarded the parish as an important religious influence on their lives (Flynn, 1993, p. 413). Flynn's findings enable a comparison to be made with those of the research reported in this study, as similar questions have been included in the survey.

*American Researchers: Heller (1986); Coles (1992); Johnson (1994)*

*Heller*

Heller (1986) examined children's images of God and the formative influences shaping belief. He noted that these images changed in three stages as children grew older: from four to six, seven to nine, and ten to twelve years of age. He described these stages

as demonstrating increased cognitive ability, curiosity about God and knowledge of God. He also found gender differences in the children's responses, for instance, while all thought of God as "Father", boys emphasised the rational qualities of God and girls the aesthetic qualities. Heller's (1986) claims reflected those of the developmental theorists, Piaget (1969), Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981), which were discussed earlier in this chapter. This study will examine these claims, in particular, Heller's view that children's images of God changed with age, because the present research seeks to identify whether the participants' images of God are affected by their developmental stage. Although the participants in his study were not in the same age group as those in the present study, nevertheless, his work is relevant, as it is focused on the developmental stage immediately preceding that of the students in the present study (14 - 16 years) and may therefore offer insights into the findings of the current research.

### *Coles*

In his far-ranging research, Coles (1992) worked with children from a range of countries, including North and South America, Europe and the Middle East, and from a variety of religious backgrounds, including Christian, Islamic and Jewish. He also included children more interested in "spiritual ruminations" than in religion. Most of the children were eight to twelve years old, a few six years, and others were thirteen years, hence some were close in age to the participants in the present study. In his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Coles (1992) asked: "How does one learn from children what they think about God?" (p. 22). Coles (1992) used both verbal and non-verbal techniques, interviews and discussions, drawing, and storytelling; with individuals and groups, at schools and in homes.

One of Coles' (1992) key findings was that God was very important to most children, even if they found it difficult to form an image of God. They had many questions

about God's relationship with them, their families, the Church and the world. The survey used in this research also asked participants to list the questions they would like to ask God.

Their responses can then be compared with Coles' findings. Like Leavey, Coles (1992) also found that Christian students often identified Jesus with God. This important finding will also be explored in the present study. Another finding was that children's images of God were strongly influenced by family members, significant adults and their religious and cultural background. The survey used in this research also asked participants to indicate the influences shaping their images of God.

### *Johnson*

Johnson's research (1994), although small in scope, focused on images of God, hence its relevance to this study. Johnson's methodology involved the use of a set of questions based on Heller's book: *The Children's God*, and the non-verbal techniques were adopted from the work of Heller (1986) and Coles (1992). Johnson's research (1994) is an additional example of international research in the area of images of God, as Johnson worked with five inner city youth living in the Bronx, New York. The stated aim of her research, '*God in the Inner City*', was to identify the participants' "image of, belief in, and feelings toward a deity they firmly believe in" (p. 512). The research reported in this study also sought to identify the participants' images of God and their feelings towards God. Johnson (1994) found a sense of hope in her participants, despite their harsh environment:

For these five, strong belief in a mighty God enables them to survive in an environment where only the fittest do. God provides security in an unsafe setting, peace amidst the noise and confusion, and hope of a better day (Johnson, 1994, p. 512).

The survey for this study asked participants how they felt when they thought about God and the extent to which belief in God affected their lives.

*British Researchers: Hyde (1990); Kay and Francis (1996)*

*Hyde*

Hyde's (1990) *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence. A Comprehensive Review of the Research*, contained several references to research on the spirituality of middle adolescents, including that of Barnes (as cited in Hyde, 1990), who claimed that anthropomorphism in images of God ended after the age of fourteen: "by fifteen, abstract ideas were expressed" (p. 66). Bradbury (as cited in Hyde, 1990) also found that material conceptions of God tended to disappear about the age of fourteen (p. 76). Such findings led to the inclusion of questions in the present study, exploring this claim. Hyde (1990) referred to MacMahon's (as cited in Hyde 1990) study in which he found a widespread absence of a Christ-centred religious conviction among the participants (p. 262). He also found that parents' religious beliefs, and increased cognitive ability were among the strongest formative influences on their children's religious development. These findings are explored in this study. Hyde did not refer to any Australian research in the chapter entitled "Children's ideas of God" and this may imply that there is a gap in Australian-based research in this area, which the present study will help to fill.

*Kay and Francis*

Kay and Francis' (1996) research was conducted in the United Kingdom, hence its findings may suggest trends that are relevant for the western secularised culture of Australia. Their overall finding was that over a twenty year period, decline in Church involvement had increased: "among pupils aged fourteen to sixteen years. This is where the drift from the churches is most apparent" (p. 43). They added that:

Negative attitudes are creeping down the school, so that the sort of attitudes which were found only among those who were about to leave school in 1974 are by 1994 common in the middle of the secondary-school age range (Kay & Francis, 1996, p. 42).

As this is the age group of the participants in the present study, the questionnaire will explore the extent to which this finding is also true for them, thus extending the work of Kay and Francis in a different context. Table 2.10 lists some of their findings.

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Table 2.10

*Percentage Agreement to Attitude Items in 1974 and 1994 (Kay & Francis, 1996, p. 205)*

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| Attitude item                         | 1974 | 1994 |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| I know that Jesus helps me            | 42   | 22   |
| I know that Jesus is very close to me | 36   | 18   |
| I want to love Jesus                  | 39   | 22   |
| Jesus doesn't mean anything to me     | 16   | 23   |
| I know that God helps me              | 42   | 25   |
| I believe that God listens to prayers | 47   | 31   |
| God helps me to lead a better life    | 39   | 22   |
| God means a lot to me                 | 39   | 25   |
| I find it hard to believe in God      | 36   | 41   |

---

Another finding of relevance to this study is the changed student attitude to Jesus and to God. Approximately half as many students in 1994 agreed that Jesus helped them and was close to them, compared with the number in 1974. There was also a significant decline of 17% in the number of students who agreed that God helped them, and an almost equally high number who believed that God listened to prayers and helped them to live a better life. The present study explores the participants' attitude to Jesus and to God and these will also be explored.

### *Summary*

This review of research literature concerning young people and spirituality has presented an overview of key literature in the area of the images of God. Some of the emergent issues are the extent to which the developing capacity of adolescents' abstract

thought is reflected in their images of God, and the identification of the factors that shape their images of God. The research also raised questions about the privatisation of faith and the relationship between religion and spirituality.

## Literature on Young People and Spirituality

### *Aim of This Section*

This section of the literature review will briefly explore a wider range of literature on the spirituality of young people, in particular, literature related to images of God. Some components of young people's spirituality will emerge, providing an additional framework within which the participants' images of God can be interpreted. The work of the Australian researchers Crawford and Rossiter (1991); Mackay (1999) and Engebretson (2001) will be considered in this context. A wide range of international research will be briefly noted, including that of Keary (1968); Roff (1992); Shelton (1992); Harris and Moran (1998); Brienens (1998); Schwab (2000) and Lealman (2000).

### *Australian Researchers*

#### *Crawford and Rossiter*

Crawford and Rossiter (1991) considered that adolescents may choose a spirituality that is apparently not linked with religion. However care should be taken in forming judgements about their choice:

Critical or rejecting comments about some traditional religious beliefs are not necessarily cynical or nasty rejection. It may be a part of their searching for a more meaningful faith (Crawford & Rossiter, 1991, p. 2).

This claim supports the invitation to participants in the present research, to give reasons for some of their responses, as a single word or brief answer cannot adequately convey the intention of the respondent.

Like Kay and Francis (1996), Crawford and Rossiter (1991) claimed that the spiritual search of adolescents was complex, and was affected by the growing secularisation of the western world. They also considered that significant consequences arose from the privatisation of adolescents' belief and the diminished importance of communal expressions of faith:

While not devaluing the need for a personalised faith, it may be expecting too much of individuals to construct meaning for life in isolation without reference to a community that can support and nourish personal beliefs and values (Crawford & Rossiter, 1991, p. 4).

They claimed that problems associated with an individualised search for meaning might be too much for some young people, hence the need for a supportive community of belief. The present research will indicate whether participants have such support, and examines the extent to which participants' responses demonstrate the influence of secularisation and a privatisation of religious belief.

Crawford and Rossiter's (1991) paper listed some characteristics of adolescent spirituality (Table 2.11) and the responses to the present study may reflect some of these elements. The study included questions about values in life, belonging to religious groups and involvement in social action. Links will later be made between the work of Crawford and Rossiter and the present study.

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Table 2.11

*Crawford & Rossiter: "Ten Prominent Elements in the Spirituality of Young People"*

*(Crawford & Rossiter, 1991, pp. 7-8).*

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They look for a clear statement of ideas and ideals about life and its management  
 They form beliefs and values from a variety of sources  
 They would like a personalised religion that is not too prescriptive about beliefs and morality  
 They do not see a division between the secular and the religious  
 They are less likely to join religious groups than to be involved in social action

They are conscious of the negative effects of irresponsible economic activity  
 They are increasingly questioning the economic values and principles of politics and culture  
 There is greater questioning and agitation about values  
 There is a greater tendency to directly challenge authorities  
 There is a greater consciousness of the violence in society

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### *Mackay*

Mackay (1999) considered that religious faith in Australia was generally thought of as a private matter, for even though 20% of the Catholic population attended Mass or Church once a month, they found it "rather embarrassing" to talk about it (p. 224). They also tended to be vague when they did talk about religious beliefs. These claims support the inclusion of questions in the questionnaire of the present study, associated with the privatisation of belief among Australians. Mackay (1999) claimed that Australians associated spirituality with anything except traditional religion: "Nevertheless, the idea persists that the church has something important to offer a bewildered and restless society" (p. 224). Mackay (1999) considered that a desire for moral leadership existed: "There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that many people are looking to the churches for a tougher, "straighter" line on everything from tax policies to euthanasia" (p. 225). In his view, there was no single trend about religion and spirituality in Australia:

The message inherent in all such initiatives is that traditional, 'one-product' church programs are inadequate in meeting the needs of an increasingly sceptical society that doesn't regard churchgoing as a natural, or even 'normal', thing to do (Mackay, 1999, p. 227).

While Mackay's focus was not on young people, his claims support the inclusion of questions in the questionnaire, concerning the relationship between faith, religion and the Church. The responses of the present study, may provide information to supplement his research.

*Engebretson*

Engebretson (2001) considered the religion and spirituality of young people, particularly through the work of Kay and Francis (1996). She claimed that like the UK, Australia is a secularised society characterised by what Kay and Francis called a "drift from the churches", caused by the pressures of socialisation into the adult world. Engebretson (2001) agreed with Kay and Francis that "Positive personal religious experiences are an important inhibitor of adolescent drift from the churches" (p. 4). These claims support the inclusion of questions in the present questionnaire, concerning the participants' relationship to religion and the institutional Church. Engebretson (2001) considered that young people's belief is characterised by a privatisation of belief. She referred to Crawford and Rossiter's (1991) claim that such a privatisation is linked to the trend to treat religion as a commodity: "Choosing or rejecting church-going, choosing or rejecting a spiritual system or constructing one's own, is the same as choosing any other commodity, or choosing to live without it" (p. 8). Engebretson (2001) also highlighted the role played by experience in young people's search for meaning: "They are not ideological, in that they do not choose one religious system to follow, but they search for meaningful personal experiences that speak to them of the spiritual life" (p. 9).

Engebretson (2001) considered that this search includes a search for identity achievement and a questioning of values: "During youth, reflection on spirituality can lead to a demythologising of meaning and a critical distancing from one's previous value system" (p. 15). As a consequence of such claims, the present survey included questions about the participants' values, and the experiences that shaped their spirituality, in particular, their images of God. Engebretson (2001) claimed that, paradoxically, in contrast to an individualised search, young people also long for community:

A vital element in the spirituality of young people is its connectedness, its relational and communal character, which is in contrast to a privatised and individualistic spirituality. The impulse towards connectedness places the practice of justice in a special and privileged place, with justice understood as fidelity to the demands of all our relations (Harris (1998), as cited in Engebretson, 2001, p. 109).

The present questionnaire also included questions identifying the role of community in the participants' spiritual formation. Engebretson (2001) considered that young people's sense of justice is centred on tolerance, because they have grown up in a society that rejected discrimination. She argued that this could lead them to reject institutions that seem to foster discrimination, including the Church. The present study will identify the extent to which this was a reason for participants' rejection of the Church.

Engebretson (2001) stated that identity achievement is one of the tasks of adolescence and that this search characterises their spirituality, and is characterised by a shift from accepting external authority, to taking personal responsibility for belief. She suggested that part of this shift is the examination by young people of their value system. This examination is highlighted by the range of opinions and choices that face young people. The characteristics of spirituality presented by Engebretson supported the inclusion of questions in the present study, which sought to identify the participants' spirituality, in particular, their attitude to religion and the Church.

### *International Research on Adolescent Spirituality*

#### *Keary*

Keary (1968) stated that the two most common characteristics of adolescent boys are selfishness and "an idealism which cannot be reduced to practice by" (p. 377). He claimed that they caused young men to develop defence mechanisms, which often prevent adults from seeing the real person. Other characteristics that he saw in adolescents are a striving for independence, self-recognition and security. He considered that many

adolescents believe that God and religion seem to negate this striving and this often led them to reject both: "The adolescent sees Christ, the church and even God as further weakening his freedom" (Keary, 1968, p. 381). In the face of such negativity, Keary (1968) saw the secular world as a starting point for the adolescent's encounter with God. This encounter is possible through service of others and working to create a better world: "If the notion or expression God, or religion must enter the adolescents' world at all it ought to be as a point of arrival, not one of departure. Begin with existential reality...the human condition" (p. 382). As well as exploring characteristics of adolescent spirituality and their reasons for rejection of God and religion, the present study will also examine the influence of secularisation on the participants. These findings can then be compared with Keary's claims.

### *Roff*

Roff (1992) emphasised the importance of having a positive attitude towards young people. He believed that their spirituality is evident during retreats, and this reflected Flynn's (1993) finding that retreats are important spiritual experiences in students' lives. Roff (1992) also shared Keary's view of secularisation, as he claimed that a shift has occurred from the cynicism of the post-modern age to a positive counter post-modern period. He considered that this period is marked by:

Belief in something; trust in the reflective self; recognition that everything/everyone is connected; vision beyond self; willingness to explore new pathways; respect for the journey of others; recognition of the need to effectively team; learning to live with paradox (Roff, 1992, p. 38).

Roff (1992) argued that his description of adolescents (Table 2.12) includes many Christian values, although they are not named as such. He believed that adolescents long for a society based on Christian values, however the gap they see between religious teaching, and social reality, often leads them to personal meaning making and a rejection of religion.

Table 2.12

*Descriptors of Contemporary teenagers (Roff, 1992, p. 38)*

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Are doers, despite insecurities  
 Are unshockable  
 Avoid the language of potential oppression  
 Seek immediate gratification but yearn for deeper fulfilment  
 Want simple lives and are irritated by complexity and ambiguity  
 Are very hospitable and less materialistic than previous generations  
 Have a sense of humour and fun  
 Believe formal rules were made for others  
 Are relational not one dimensional with the opposite sex  
 Mask their deep spirituality

---

As stated earlier, the present study explores the influence of secularisation on the participants, asking them about their attitude to religion and personal meaning making.

### *Shelton*

Shelton (1992) explored adolescent spirituality within the context of the developmental factors of that age group and therefore his work can be linked to that of the developmental theorists discussed earlier in this chapter. Shelton suggested ways of helping adolescents find meaningful ways of praying. He claimed that solitude was an important preparation for prayer, and that students should be helped to grow in appreciation of it, without becoming lonely or self-absorbed. Such suggestions are explored through the present study. Shelton (1992) considered that friendship is of central importance to adolescents, hence the image of Jesus Christ as a friend would be helpful to their prayer lives. This claim will be explored in the present study, which asks participants to prioritise various images of Jesus, including that of Jesus as friend. Shelton (1992) commented that:

This realisation of Jesus as a friend parallels James Fowler's observation of the deeper symbolisation that takes place in adolescents concerning God. It is during adolescence that God can now be symbolised as a personal friend who can offer the

young person a deepening relationship that is based on both openness and trust (Shelton, 1992, p. 125).

Like other researchers such as Engebretson (2001), Shelton (1992) emphasised the importance of life experience as the source of the adolescents' encounter with God. He argued that finding meaning in life is an important task of this stage of life, hence it is a critical source of religious experience. He suggested that if adolescents acquire a deep experience of the presence of Jesus in their lives, educators might be able to expand the meaning of prayer to a wider view of God's presence in life:

The adolescent is embarking on a search to determine both 'who am I' and 'what my life is about'. If prayer is above all the presence of God in life, perhaps we might attempt a confluence of this God-presence and the adolescent's quest. (Shelton, 1992, p. 137).

Like Engebretson (2001), Shelton offered reasons for the faith crisis that often occurs during adolescence. These include peer pressure, institutional alienation, separation from parents, and the search for meaning. He also offered suggestions for fostering adolescent spirituality, such as encouraging adults to share their images of God, then inviting adolescents to do the same. This suggestion is of particular relevance to the present study as it is focused on images of God. The questions he suggested will be asked in the present study, including: "What do you think when you think of God? How do you feel when you imagine God?" The reason he gave for such an approach is because "Imaging appears to have a positive effect on the adolescent's faith life" (Shelton, 1992, p. 155).

#### *Harris and Moran*

Harris and Moran (1998) claimed that adolescent spirituality emerges from the search for meaning in their changing lives:

Although each of us carries our complete selves within us ... our "way of being in the world" and our relation to Mystery is inevitably altered by the changing circumstances of our lives' (Harris & Moran, 1998, p. 110).

They considered that concern for the environment also characterises spirituality, and should be complemented by a supportive interior life:

The question for the immediate future is whether Christians can engage in a way of life - a spirituality - that manifests a care for all creation, thereby providing an alternative to a well-meaning but rootless spirituality. Without education in Christian sources and the living testimony of Christian communities, the emergence of a spirituality equal to the task is unlikely (Harris & Moran, 1998, p. 116).

Such claims support the importance of the present study in the identification of characteristics of contemporary adolescent spirituality.

### *Brienen*

Brienen (1998) described three characteristics of youth spirituality in the Western secularised world: young people are conventional, their religion is private and that they are issues-focused (p. 241). Most young people, Brienen claimed, lead their lives with family and friends: "Their spheres of interest are school, work, clubbing, shopping, sports and music" (Brienen, 1998, p. 242). In his view, they are not greatly different from their elders, are conservative on matters of law and order, and could be motivated for charity campaigns but not political causes. Brienen considered that the Church continues to lose influence over them, and has been replaced by a privatised spirituality: "Whether it is expressed in a Christian way...or in yet another way, there seems to be a tendency to 'privatise' the religious experience" (p. 242). He also noted that young people are involved in particular social justice issues and do not connect these to their sources in a global system of injustice:

They fight racism and other forms of prejudice; they protest against the rationality of the modern world and its values ... their politics are focused on particular issues rather than on a system that needs to be challenged (Brienen, 1998, p. 242).

These claims will be explored in the present survey, in particular the claim concerning the privatisation of belief.

### *Schwab*

Schwab's (2000) personal value list of 14-18 year olds (Table 2.13) provides insights into the spirituality of middle adolescents in Germany.

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Table 2.13

*Personal Values of German Young People Aged 14-18*

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| Value                      | Percent % |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Family                     | 69        |
| Freedom                    | 67        |
| Freedom of opinion         | 62        |
| Independence               | 59        |
| Leisure time               | 57        |
| Protection of environment  | 56        |
| Tolerance                  | 44        |
| Self-realisation           | 44        |
| Democracy                  | 40        |
| Equality of women's rights | 40        |

---

Here "family" was the highest-ranking value, followed by "freedom" and "independence". "Leisure time" and "protection of the environment" were also highly valued. Young Germans felt neglected by churches: "Young people of course do have an access to religious questions - but within the established structures of the congregations they often can't find places to articulate their own questions" (Schwab, 2000, p. 4). Schwab (2000) considered that personal experience was central to the formulation of young people's spirituality:

Many young people try hard to formulate their religiosity in the context of a world that is determined by their own experiences. Ready-made traditional patterns must be regarded as minor if compared to their own experience (Schwab, 2000, p. 5).

Like Rossiter (1991), Schwab (2000) referred to a 'cafeteria - religion', which he saw as an attempt to shape beliefs into a spirituality offering support in an individualistic society. Schwab's findings about adolescent spirituality will be compared with those of the present study.

### *Lealman*

Lealman (2000) listed Evans' (as cited in Lealman, 2000) eight attitude-virtues that they considered to be the roots of human spirituality (Table 2.14). This schema has parallels with Erikson's life-cycle theory. The virtues build on each other, with trust as the foundation. (Lealman, 2000, pp. 69-70).

---

Table 2.14

#### *Attitude-Values*

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#### Attitude-Value

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Basic trust: the cosmic trust that reality has meaning  
 Humility: the realistic acceptance of our own powers and freedom  
 Self-acceptance: the acceptance of oneself and rejection of self-guilt  
 Responsibility: the conscientiousness of a trustworthy person  
 Self-commitment: the integrity of personality and being true to oneself  
 Friendliness: the willingness to enter a relationship of love  
 Concern: the willingness to help others pastorally or prophetically  
 Contemplation: the appreciation of the universe including self

---

Like Schwab (2000), Lealman (2000) demonstrated a positive attitude towards the possibilities of developing a vibrant adolescent spirituality in a secular world:

Living in questions about spirituality will expand us out of the grottos and ghettos of piety and inappropriate past spiritualities into the 'tall city of glass which is the laboratory of the spirit' - where authentic and daring explorations of human inwardness can take place from fully within modern religious and secular experience (Lealman, 2000, p. 70).

### *Summary*

There are many links between the research literature represented in this review and the present study. These links suggest that this study will be important in providing new Australian data on the spirituality of adolescents. The study is original in that it is the widest survey of the images of God of the middle adolescent age group. Many of its findings support those of the literature in the field, such as its support for the claim that abstract thinking develops during adolescence. However its findings lead to the new claim that earlier images of God are retained even though new abstract images may develop. Table 2.15 presents a summary of the major characteristics of adolescent spirituality that have emerged from this review of the literature.

---

Table 2.15

*Summary of the characteristics of adolescent spirituality*

| Characterised by            | Other features of adolescent spirituality             |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Search for identity         | Acceptance of personal responsibility                 |
| Complexity                  | Feeling neglected and not listened to by the          |
| Concern for the environment | Church  |
| Confusion                   | Inability to discuss religion, faith and spirituality |
| Eclecticism                 | Indifferentism to religion                            |
| Fear                        | Irregular or non Church attendance                    |
| Freedom                     | Issues-based sense of justice                         |
| Honesty                     | Longing for community                                 |
| Hostility at times          | Non-involvement with Church                           |
| Idealism                    | Personal search for meaning                           |
| Independence                | Privatisation of belief                               |
| Individuality               | Postponing making commitments                         |
| Tolerance                   | Valuing being listened to                             |
|                             | Valuing personal and social relationships             |

*Note:* Items listed in alphabetical order.

Some of the findings from the literature on religion in Australia indicate that while most Australians believe in God, only a minority believe in a personal God. Most did not attend Church on a regular basis, however 71% had been to a special religious

service in the past twelve months or had contacted a religious social service. Many Catholics who did not attend Mass did not contribute to the life of their local parish. Under 40 year olds were under-represented in Catholic Church life. The questionnaire to be used in the present study will incorporate questions about each of these areas, hence providing additional data on middle adolescents' thinking in these areas.

The literature on young people and organised religion includes the finding from the *CCLS* (1996) that over half of the participants think of God in Trinitarian terms. Other key images of God are those of "Friend", "Father", "Master" and "Judge". Another finding is that over half the middle adolescents feel at ease in discussing faith. The three most important people who had shaped the faith of the participants were parents and religious education teachers. The major factors leading to an awareness of God were "family death" and "nature". These areas were also addressed in the present study, thus the findings of the two studies can be compared.

The literature on young people and spirituality indicated that some of the key features of their spirituality were their longing for community; their searching for identity and meaning; their concern for their environment and for the future; their belief in God; their irregular or non-Church attendance; their sense of justice and concern for relationships. The findings of the current study can also be compared with these characteristics.

### Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed literature related to the study of *The Images of God of Middle Secondary School Adolescents*. It has provided a context within which to interpret the findings of the questionnaire, and pointed to the issues and questions that should form part of this study. The survey of literature in this chapter has highlighted the particular contribution of this study, which both integrates and applies what has been reported in the

literature in a new context, that of the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents in Australia.

The literature on the developmental theorists Piaget (1969), Erikson (1968) and Fowler (1981), outlined the developmental stage of the age group of the participants, and led to the inclusion of questions in the research instrument which test these claims. Some of the questions of the wide-ranging *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) explored a similar area of spirituality, and included participants of a similar age group of those of the present study. Its findings led to the inclusion of similar questions in the present study, such as the extent to which the participants held Trinitarian images of God, thus enabling contrasts and comparisons to be made.

The research literature on young people and spirituality also influenced the questions included in this study. In particular, the factors shaping the participants' images of God such as their parents, school and nature. Other questions were concerned with the search for meaning and the participants' value system. The participants' relationship with God and Jesus Christ was also explored. The general literature on young people and spirituality led to the inclusion of questions concerning the privatisation of belief in the present study. Associated questions were related to the participants' attitude to faith and religion; their relationship to the institutional Church; and the major characteristics of adolescent spirituality.

This chapter has raised issues and questions that can be addressed by the data arising from the present study. The following chapter provides a further context for the study in its focus on Scripture and theology, which are the sources of Christian images of God.

## CHAPTER 3: IMAGES OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY WITHIN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

### Introduction

#### *Aim of the Chapter*

A study of the images of God of students in Catholic schools needs to examine the range of normative Catholic images in Scripture and Catholic theology. This chapter conducts such an examination. The images have been included in the questionnaire of the present study, so that they can be located within a spectrum of traditional Catholic images of God.

This chapter examines a sample of scriptural and theological literature as it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a very extensive review of this topic. The early section explores the biblical language used to convey images of God. The New Testament section considers Jesus Christ as an image of God and the parables as sources of images of God. The theological section then provides a brief history of Christology and outlines the meaning of Revelation today. It also examines the images of God in the *Guidelines for Religious Education of Students in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (*Guidelines*, CEOM, 1995) as this resource forms the basis of the religious education curriculum in the participants' schools, hence they are one source of their images of God.

#### *The Language of Scripture*

Significant events and beliefs shaped the Israelites' understanding of God, including their belief that God was living, spiritual and one. As their experience of life changed, new images of God became meaningful for them and they came to know other qualities of God, for instance, those associated with a shepherd, king and liberator.

Ralph (1989) described this process of change in the following terms:

In Scripture we are reading the ways in which our ancestors understood their experiences with the living God and the ways they communicated that understanding to others. However, they, like we, had a tendency to allow the image to replace the reality and so were forced to reconceptualise or reimage their relationship with God in the light of subsequent events and new encounters with (God) (Ralph, 1989, p. 11).

Religious language emerges from the human experience of God, thus the Scripture writers' human experience of God is reflected in their religious language and mediated through cultural images. The writers' world was hierarchical and patriarchal, consequently the key scriptural images of God are hierarchical and male, for example, king (Ps. 5:2), Lord (Ps. 9:1), father (Ps. 68:5) and warrior (Ps. 78:65). The readers of the Bible today have their own cultural backgrounds, which influence their interpretation of the texts. Therefore, the formation of images of God based on scriptural interpretation is a personal process. Campbell (2000) noted that:

In the exploration of our human experience God is disclosed to us. I read the Bible and experience myself attracted to an image of God or repelled by an image of God. I have to explore the totality of my experience to discover God and to discover what God is for me (Campbell, 2000, p. 22).

Hence while the language of Scripture is of fundamental importance to the formation of images of God in the Christian tradition, the person reading the text is an active participant in this process. Mills (1989) claimed that:

It is possible for a given reader to select within the diversity of language those images, which, for him or her, offer a means of communication with the sphere of transcendent order. This raises matters to do with readers' expectations of text and of the role of biblical language (Mills, 1989, p. 7).

It is not the task of this study to explore this question further, however its importance has been noted here.

## The Old Testament

As this is not a detailed study of Scripture, discussion is limited to two scholars whose work is centred on images of God, the topic that is the focus of this study. Ralph's (1989) *Plain Words About Biblical Images: Growing in our Faith Through the Scriptures* and Mills' (1998) *Images of God in the Old Testament* provide a comprehensive range of images, which can be compared with the study's findings.

### *Ralph's (1989) Analysis of the Images and Qualities of God in the Old Testament*

Ralph (1989) explored the images and qualities of God within the context of her discussion of the biblical concept of "covenant", including God's covenants with Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21), Moses (Ex. 19: 3-8) and David (2 Sam. 7:8-17). Because of the significance of these events in Judaeo/Christian history, the images and qualities of God found in these texts will be explored in this section.

#### *God of the Covenant With Abraham (Gen. 15:1-21)*

In Ralph's (1989) analysis of the covenant account of Genesis 15:1-21 she found a "deep personal relationship between Abraham and his God" (p. 18), implying a degree of intimacy between them. She also considered that God was caring and trustworthy:

(The Lord) brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:5-6).

God was also faithful and protective: "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess" (Gen. 15:7). She noted images of God such as Lord and shield: "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great' "

(Gen. 15: 1). She claimed that God was presented as a judge and liberator: "I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen. 15: 14). This range of images and qualities is presented in Table 3.1.

---

Table 3.1

*Images and Qualities of God (Gen. 15:1-21)*

---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGE OF GOD     | Judge; liberator; lord; shield            |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Caring; faithful; protective; trustworthy |

---

*God of the Covenant With Moses (Ex. 19:3-8)*

In this account, Ralph (1989) noted the images of God as an eagle and a lover: "You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Ex. 19:5). She also noted qualities of God such as protective, holy and powerful, for example "the whole earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5). These images and qualities are summarised in Table 3.2.

---

Table 3.2

*Images and Qualities of God (Ex. 19:3-8)*

---

|                  |                |
|------------------|----------------|
| IMAGE OF GOD     | Lover; eagle   |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Holy; powerful |

---

*God of the Covenant With David (2 Sam. 7:8-17)*

Here Ralph (1989) considered that the image of God to emerge was that of father: "He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam. 7:14). Some

of the qualities of God to emerge were: protective, "I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you" (2 Sam. 7:9); caring, "Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house" (2 Sam. 7:11); punishing, "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings" (2 Sam. 7: 14); loving, "But I will not take my steadfast love from him" (2 Sam. 7: 15) and faithful, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Table 3.3 summarises these findings:

---

Table 3.3

*Images and Qualities of God (2 Sam. 7:8-17)*

---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGE OF GOD     | Father  |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Caring; faithful; loving; protective; punishing |

---

*God of the Prophet Hosea (Hos. 2:10-20)*

Ralph (1989) claimed that the images of God evident here were those of a husband and Lord who was righteous, just, loving, merciful and faithful;

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord (Hos. 2:19-20).

Ralph (1989) also found references in the text to qualities of God such as powerful, punishing, saving and generous, for example: "I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hos. 2:14). Table 3.4 lists the images and qualities of God in the Book of Hosea.

Table 3.4

*Images and qualities of God (Hos.2:10-20)*


---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGES OF GOD    | Husband; lord   |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Faithful; generous; just; loving; merciful; powerful;<br>protective; punishing; righteous; saving |

---

The images and qualities of God that emerged from Ralph's (1989) exploration of the theme of "covenant" in Scripture are summarised in the following table.

Table 3.5

*Summary: Images and Qualities of God in Ralph (1989)*


---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGES OF GOD    | Father; husband; liberator; lord; lover; shield   |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Caring; faithful; generous; holy; just; loving; merciful;<br>powerful; protective; punishing; righteous; saving;<br>trustworthy |

---

*A Synopsis of the Images of God in Mills (1998)*

Like Ralph (1989), Mills (1998) also focused on the theme of images of God, in this case, through the concept of "unity in diversity". Some of these images are presented in the following discussion.

*Images of God in Genesis 1-11.*

Mills (1998) considered that the basic images of God to be found in Gen. 1-11 were creator, judge and redeemer, describing these images as three "roles" of God: "Each of the three modes of divine operation automatically involves a partnership or

relationship” with humankind (p. 135). Mills (1998) claimed that "it is human beings who form the other half of the image of the divine. The texts reveal the faces of a God known through his (sic) connection with humankind” (p. 135). It can therefore be concluded that human beings are “divine icons, mirrors of the deity”.

Mills (1998) claimed that a shift had occurred from the image of God as caring creator seeking intimacy with humanity (Gen. 1-2), to that of destructive judge flooding the earth (Gen. 3):

Responsibility for this character shift is laid not on the unpredictability of the deity but on the corruption of human behaviour. In this way God is allowed to emerge as a reasonably consistent figure while still retaining contradictory impulses (Mills, 1998, p. 19).

God is presented as the redeemer who swears an eternal covenant with Noah and his descendants (Gen. 9). Mills (1998) noted that: "the images of creator, judge and redeemer frequently offer biblical writers the means of defining human experience in a divine context” (p. 12), hence they are repeated throughout the Old Testament. Mills (1998) claimed that the image of God as creator changed and became that of a destroyer in punishing the Egyptians. God's power was also shown here, for example, in the crossing of the sea: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided" (Ex. 14:21).

### *Genesis 12-Exodus 3*

Mills (1998) stated that the Genesis account marked the beginning of the image of God as the God of Abraham, journeying with him to the promised land: "Thus God defines himself within the text by virtue of his relationships to human beings" (p. 21). She claimed that this led to God being regarded as the God of the Fathers as implied in

Gen. 28:13-15:

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen. 28:13-15).

#### *Exodus 19-Numbers*

Mills (1998) considered that God's self-revelation as "YHWH" in the encounter with Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13-18) was an invitation to intimacy: "When God reveals his name, then, he is inviting Moses and Israel into a personal relationship of trust and loyalty" (p. 31). She also saw the name "YHWH" as evoking life and being. Mills (1998) regarded YHWH as the key image of God in the Old Testament, and other images contributed to an understanding of this central image. Mills (1998) claimed that the image of God was that of a God of law and covenant (Ex. 19:16-25; 20:1-21) in the encounter of God with Moses at Mount Sinai. God was associated with power through natural phenomena such as clouds, thunder and lightning.

#### *God of Love and Jealousy in the Book of Deuteronomy*

Mills (1998) considered that the qualities of God that were evident in Deuteronomy were those of love and jealousy: "love" referred to God's care while "jealousy" reflected God's anger. God's love was expressed through the gift of the land and there was an expectation of a response from Israel;

In Deuteronomy the three themes of God, people and land are woven together with the linking ideas of election, covenant and a just social order. It is this broader context which gives meaning to the language of love and jealousy (Mills, 1998, p. 47).

Mills claimed that here, God was presented through the image of a good king rewarding

loyal subjects.

*God as First and Last in the Book of Isaiah*

Mills (1998) identified texts in the Book of Isaiah in which YHWH used several titles about himself, such as loving Redeemer, Lord of Hosts and Holy One. She described "Lord of Hosts" as a translation of "YHWH Sabaoth" which had its roots in warfare terminology, conveying a sense of God as punisher as well as of helper;

This divine warrior image of God is visible in Torah and in Psalms as well as in prophecy. It is one of the key images of God in the Old Testament. In Isaiah it serves to define a god who punishes his people, as well as, here, a god whose power is used on his people's behalf (Mills, 1998, p. 63).

In Mills' (1998) view, Second Isaiah used the theological device of drawing together images of God throughout the Old Testament and applying them to the one God. This device was emphasised by the use of the image the First and Last "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Is. 44:6). She commented that:

This title undergirds all the rest and gives them a special value. Only one deity deserves all these titles, only one deity is redeemer, holy, Lord of Hosts. The concept of monotheism is clearly in evidence in this approach to God (Mills, 1998, p. 63).

*God as Father and Husband in Prophecy*

Mills (1998) considered that God was depicted in the prophetic literature through the images of husband and father: "On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband', (Hos. 2:16)" and "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos.11:1). She noted that the feminine images of pregnant woman and nursing mother are also used: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15).

Mills (1998) claimed that the image of God as father was the “focal” Christian image of God, implying a family relationship between God and the people of God. She considered that the image of God as husband (Hos1-2) implied nurture, security and love:

Not the covenantal loyalty of *hesed* so much as the intimate bond between two human lovers (*ahab*). In the writings of the prophets, God's love is unreciprocated. In redeeming God's people, God acts as father and the people are his children: sometimes “rebellious” always cherished (Mills, 1998, p. 71).

Mills (1998) identified the image of God as mother in the Old Testament, referring to the Book of Isaiah 42:13 where the masculine image of warrior leads immediately to that of a woman in childbirth: "The Lord goes forth like a soldier, like a warrior he stirs up his fury; ... now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant" (Is. 42:13,14). Mills (1998) claimed that in the Book of Isaiah, the nation is addressed as daughters as well as sons, however the references to “daughters” are mostly negative. Mills (1998) commented that: "The image of a defiled and humiliated woman is frequently found in the texts which deal with Israel's sin and punishment from God" (p. 74).

#### *God and the Temple in Ezekiel*

Mills (1998) noted that the central image of God in the book of Ezekiel was the throne chariot or "Glory of God": "Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them" (Ez. 11:22). Mills (1998) claimed that this image was based on that of the Ark and pointed to the abiding presence, holiness and transcendence of God.

#### *God and Divine Wisdom*

Mills (1998) believed that the key image of God in the Wisdom tradition was

that of the Lord of the universe; God alone was wise, and knew the whole of creation. "Wisdom" was seen to be a female figure who accompanied God in creation. Hence Mills (1998) saw Divine Wisdom<sup>4</sup> as another image of God in the Old Testament, for example:

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;  
Because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.  
For she is a breath of the power of God,  
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty (Wisdom 7:25).

Mills (1998) considered that the attributes ascribed to God in the Wisdom books had a semi-separate identity: "God's wisdom, (his) powers of thought and reason become the Wisdom of God" (p. 5).

*The Image of God as King, and as a God of Power and Justice in the Psalms.*

Mills (1998) thought "King" to be one of the most popular images of God in the Old Testament, evoking images of God as a powerful ruler bringing order, justice and righteousness: "The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice...Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Ps. 97:1,2). She suggested that there were many examples of these images in the psalms: "Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Ps. 97:2).

*The God of Time in Daniel*

Mills (1998) considered that God was presented in the book of Daniel as a powerful God whose power was eternal and cosmic in scope. Mills (1998) called this an image of a "god of time": "The god of time stands up for the marginalised or oppressed in society; in Daniel this entails supporting the cause of Jewish national independence" (p. 130).

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<sup>4</sup> It is used 318 times in the Old Testament (Freedman, 1992, p. 920).

Mills (1998) believed that all the Old Testament images of God were related to human existence, for instance, "the stranger on the road" (Gen.18) and "the fire and storm" (Ex. 19). Table 3.6 summarises the images and qualities of God covered by Mills (1998).

---

Table 3.6

*Summary: Images and Qualities of God in Mills (1998)*

---

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| IMAGES OF GOD       | Creator; destroyer; father; fire; God of our Fathers;<br>humanity; husband; king; lord; mythological images;<br>nursing mother; order; pregnant woman; ruler; storm;<br>stranger; wisdom; YHWH |
| QUALITIES OF<br>GOD | Almighty; demanding; jealous; loving; male; patient;<br>Solitary   |

---

This brief discussion restricts itself to an outline of the main images of God mentioned by Mills (1998). The implications of these images will be considered during the analysis of the research data.

A summary of the images and qualities of God in Mills (1998) is listed in the following table.

Table 3.7

*Summary of Images and Qualities of God in the Old Testament According to Mills (1998)*


---

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| IMAGES<br>OF<br>GOD    | Creator; destroyer; El (God); engineer; father; fire; God of the apocalypse;<br>God of our fathers; God of history; husband; king; lord; lord of hosts; lord of<br>Israel; lord of the universe; God almighty; God of the fathers; God of time;<br>nursing mother; order; other; pregnant woman; punisher; redeemer; ruler;<br>storm; stranger; throne-chariot God; warrior; wisdom; YHWH-El (Lord<br>God); YHWH judge; YHWH-sabaoth |
| QUALITIES<br>OF<br>GOD | Almighty; angry; caring; compassionate; demanding; first and last; one;<br>healing; human; holy; intimate; jealous; just; loving; male; patient; powerful;<br>presence; solitary; transcendent; universal; weak.   |

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*A Summary of the Images and Qualities of God in Ralph (1989) and Mills (1998)*

This discussion has indicated the key images and qualities of God in the work of Mills (1998) and Ralph (1989). Table 3.8 lists the images and qualities that are common to both authors, and Table 3.9 is a total summary of all the images and qualities listed by each. It provides a range of images that forms the basis of the Old Testament images to be included in the questionnaire of the present study. It also provides a background against which to compare the participants' images of God within the scriptural tradition of the Catholic Church.

Table 3.8

The Images and Qualities of God in the Old Testament Found in Both Ralph (1989) and Mills (1998)

---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGES OF GOD    | Father; husband; liberator/redeemer; lord; warrior/shield |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Caring; holy; just; loving; powerful                      |

---

Table 3.9

*Summary of the Images and Qualities of God in the Old Testament Found in Either Ralph (1989) or Mills (1998)*

---

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Images using the title "God" | El (God); God of the Apocalypse; God of our Fathers; God of History; God Almighty; God of the Fathers; God of Time; Throne-chariot God  |
| Images using the term YHWH   | YHWH-El (Lord God); YHWH Judge; YHWH-Sabaoth  |
| Images using the term "Lord" | Lord; Lord of Hosts; Lord of Israel; Lord of the Universe;  |
| Feminine images of God       | Pregnant woman; nursing mother;   |
| Masculine images of God      | Father; husband; king; ruler; warrior;  |
| Abstract images of God       | Fire; order; other; shield; storm; wisdom;  |
| Other images of God          | Creator; destroyer; lover; punisher; redeemer; stranger;  |
| Qualities of God             | Almighty; angry; caring; compassionate; demanding; faithful; generous; first and last; one; healing; human; holy; intimate; jealous; just; loving; male; merciful; patient; powerful; presence; protective; punishing; righteous; saving; trustworthy; solitary; transcendent; universal; weak. |

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## The New Testament

Continuity exists between the images and qualities of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and there are also significant differences between them. The evangelists interpreted the Old Testament in the light of their faith, and wrote of it in terms of its relevance for Jesus and his followers. Although each Gospel was written by believers in Jesus Christ for communities of faith, they are different because of their different cultural settings, purposes and audiences. Moloney (1992) commented that: "Form and redaction critics have shown that the Gospels came into existence as written texts to address the pastoral problems which faced the early Church" (p. 42).

This section is centred on the synoptic Gospels of the New Testament since they provide particular understandings of the life of the historical Jesus and its meaning, as understood within early Christian communities, and consequently of the God about whom Jesus Christ taught. The claim that Jesus Christ is an image of God will be explored through the work of Haight (1999), whose book is centred on *Jesus: Symbol of God*, which is also its title.

These Gospels have also been chosen, because they contain a wide range of parables through which Jesus presented images of God. Many of these images have been included in the questionnaire of this study, and the participants' responses to them will be listed for comparison. Some of the discussion of these images by Dodd (1978) and Hendrickx (1986) is presented in this section. Dodd's work was first published in 1935, indicating that he was one of the first scholars to explore the parable as a literary genre, and his work is balanced by the more recent work of Hendrickx (1986).

### *Jesus as an Image of God*

*The meaning of the term "Symbol".*

Haight (1999) defined "symbol" in the following terms:

Because this is a Christology from below, Jesus is called "Symbol of God," for although this symbol is a sacrament and never "merely" a symbol, "symbol" is the broader and more recognised interdisciplinary category. In the Christology of this book, the symbol mediates in both directions: it draws human consciousness toward God, and it mediates God's presence to the human spirit (Haight, 1999, p. xiii).

In order to understand how Jesus can be considered to be the symbol of God, Haight (1999) claimed that it was first necessary to have some knowledge of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, hence he offered four "broad portraits" of the historical Jesus: Jesus as Prophet; Teacher; Healer and Saviour. The use of the term "portraits" corresponds with Ralph (1989) and Mills' (1998) use of the term "images".

#### *Jesus as Prophet*

Haight (1999) claimed that Jesus was a prophet who ushered the "kingdom" or rule of God into the world.

As a prophet mighty in word, Jesus spoke the oracles of judgment and promise. Like John, Jesus too spoke of imminent catastrophe: the kingdom of God was about to begin and it would involve radical change ... for those who repented and accepted the message, the kingdom of God proffered welcome and peace (Haight, 1999, pp. 64-65).

Haight saw a link between the image of Jesus as a prophet and that of Jesus as teacher, and supported the view that Jesus thought of himself as the embodiment of Wisdom.

#### *Jesus as Healer*

Haight (1999) considered that there was much evidence in the gospels that Jesus performed exorcisms and healings:

His healing power is connected with being able to mediate God's authority and power over sickness. He is an exorcist, able to drive out spirits, and this is closely connected with healing. Such a religious figure can also forgive sins (p. 73).

Haight argued that the power of Jesus to heal and perform “mighty deeds” increased his authority.

#### *Jesus as Saviour or Liberator*

Haight (1999) claimed that the image of Jesus as Saviour or Liberator existed from Jesus' death to the present day, and that this image included the confrontation of Jesus with the law and social custom, and his friendship with the poor and outcasts. In summary, Haight's four images of Jesus are those of prophet, teacher, healer, saviour or liberator.

Haight (1999) considered that the centrality of Jesus' message of the kingdom of God provided insights into his idea of God: “It joins together two stories or modes of kingship, one relating to God's being creator and sustainer of the world, the other relating to God's being active in history in behalf of Israel” (p. 98). Haight (1999) claimed that through the use of this term, Jesus challenged people to see God's present saving action in the world: “The kingdom of God, then, even though it encompasses the end-time, is not something utterly otherworldly, because it points to God acting in history” (p. 98). In summary: Haight saw the symbol of the kingdom of God as conveying the image of God as a saving God acting in history, and in Jesus' teaching, God was also present.

Haight (1999) presented a list of some of the qualities of God to emerge from Jesus' sayings, including God's transcendent power and omnipresence. Other qualities were God's goodness and holiness; God's desire for the wellbeing of humanity; God's activity in history, creating, blessing, judging, condemning and chastising. God was also presented as saving, justifying, forgiving and merciful. God was also a God of the living

and of life.

Haight (1999) claimed that through Jesus' person and actions, people encountered God:

The Gospel records contain a number of different kinds of actions performed by Jesus that are considered more or less historically authentic, and they communicate something about his conception of God (Haight, 1999, p. 105).

He discussed a range of Jesus' actions, for example, Jesus' healing and exorcisms through which he believed that God was revealed. Haight considered that the images of God that emerged from Jesus' actions were that God was personal, good, powerful, concerned for human well-being, and that through Jesus, God acted to save and liberate: "It appeared in Jesus' action as the power of God which cured and restored to human beings their full potential for life in this world" (p. 106). Through Jesus' association with the marginalised, God's love and concern for them was revealed: "The God of Jesus, in being for those who are weak and neglected, is likewise against all patterns of behaviour or structures of society that diminish or dehumanise people" (p. 107). Haight stated that such images of God were also present in Jesus' sayings on prayer, which indicated that God was personal, responsive, loving, compassionate and forgiving.

Haight (1999) summed up the role of Jesus as the symbol or parable of God in the following terms:

Because of his function in the Christian religious imagination, Jesus himself can be considered a parable of God, so that one can discern implicit teaching or a revelatory mediation of God in Jesus' activity (Haight, 1999, p. 88).

Haight considered that it was Jesus, the whole person, who was a parable of God and highlighted the distinction between Jesus and God:

One must recognise immediately that as a human being Jesus is Jesus, is not God, but points away from himself to God. Only then can the human mind begin to recognise certain contours of God within the reality of Jesus (Haight, 1999, p. 112).

This issue will emerge again in the analysis of the data gathered for this study.

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Table 3.10

Haight: Summary of images and qualities of God in the New Testament as revealed by Jesus Christ

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|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGES OF GOD    | <i>Abba</i> ; creator; father; judge; king; life; saviour; sustainer  |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Active; authority; compassionate; concerned;<br>condemning; forgiving; good; holy; just; liberating;<br>living; loving; merciful; personal; powerful; present |

---

This section has discussed Haight's (1999) "portraits" of Jesus, which revealed images and qualities of God (Table 3.10). The parables taught by Jesus will now be examined in order to identify the images of God that they contain.

*The Parables of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels*

The parables of the synoptic gospels as listed by Throckmorton (1979) have been classified according to their primary focus, primary images of God, and primary qualities of God, as indicated in Table 3.11.

Table 3.11

*Primary Focus and Image of God in the Parables*

|   | Parables   | Primary Focus   | Image<br>of God | Quality<br>of God |
|---|--|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1 | The seed growing secretly<br>Mk. 4: 26-29                            | The coming of the kingdom<br>of God.                              | Judge           | Active            |
| 2 | The mustard seed.<br>Mt. 13:31 -32;<br>Mk. 4: 30-32;<br>Lk. 13:18-21 | Hidden growth of the<br>kingdom through the<br>ministry of Jesus. |                 |                   |
| 3 | The leaven.<br>Mt. 13:33   | Hidden growth of the<br>kingdom.                                  |                 |                   |
| 4 | The weeds.<br>Mt. 13:24-30   | Response to the kingdom.  | Judge           | Active            |
| 5 | Good Samaritan.<br>Lk. 10:29- 37                                     | Love must be active.  |                 |                   |
| 6 | The rich fool.<br>Lk. 12:13-21                                       | Dependence on God not<br>riches.                                  |                 |                   |
| 7 | The great supper.<br>Lk. 14:15-24                                    | Necessity of accepting God's<br>invitation to the kingdom         | King            | Just              |
| 8 | The lost sheep and the lost<br>coin. Lk. 15:1-10                     | Importance of repentance  | Man<br>Woman    | Joyful            |

|    | Parables                                       | Primary Focus  | Image<br>of God | Quality<br>of God |
|----|--|--|-----------------|-------------------|
| 9  | The prodigal son.<br>Lk. 15:11-32              | Forgiveness of God   | Father          | Mercy             |
| 10 | The unjust steward.<br>Lk. 16:1-13             | Need for action in response<br>to the challenge of the<br>kingdom      |                 |                   |
| 11 | The rich man and<br>Lazarus.<br>Lk. 16:19-31   | Need to take responsibility<br>for the poor and oppressed              |                 |                   |
| 12 | The unjust judge.<br>Lk. 18:1-8                | Necessity of continued<br>prayer                                       | Listener        | Caring            |
| 13 | The Pharisee and the<br>Publican. Lk. 18:9-14  | Necessity for humble faith in<br>the mercy of God                      | Forgiver        | Powerful          |
| 14 | The salt and light.<br>Mt. 5: 13-16            | Necessity for Christians to<br>have a purifying effect in the<br>world |                 |                   |
| 15 | The sower. Mt. 13:1-9;<br>Mk. 4:1-9; Lk. 8:4-8 | Variety of responses to the<br>testing of faith                        |                 |                   |
| 16 | The hidden treasure.<br>Mt. 13:44-46           | The challenge of the<br>kingdom  |                 |                   |

|    | Parables  | Primary Focus   | Image<br>of God | Quality<br>of God |
|----|---|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| 17 | The net. Mt.13:47-50  | Response to the kingdom<br>involves self judgement                    |                 |                   |
| 18 | The labourers in the<br>vineyard. Mt. 20:1-16                 | The kingdom reflects divine<br>generosity exceeding strict<br>justice | Employer        | Generous          |
| 19 | The talents. Lk. 19:<br>11-27; Mt. 25:14-30                   | Warning to Christians about<br>accepting one's<br>responsibilities    | Lord            | Just              |
| 20 | The two sons.<br>Mt. 21:28-32                                 | Embracing of the kingdom<br>by the outcasts                           | Father          | Just              |
| 21 | Wicked tenants.<br>Mt. 21:3-46; Mk. 12:1-<br>12; Lk. 20: 9-19 | The kingdom will be given<br>to those who value it                    | Landlord        | Just              |
| 22 | The ten virgins.<br>Mt. 25:1-13                               | Need to prepare for Jesus'<br>second coming at an<br>unexpected time  |                 |                   |

*Note:* The analysis of parables 1-13 is based on Hendrickx (1886). The analysis of parables 14-23 is based on Dodd (1978).

Haight (1999) considered that because Jesus commonly used parables to proclaim the kingdom of God, they were therefore an important means of arriving at Jesus' view of God:

In the reversals of the parables, God's values appear as transcendent and other than human ways, disruptive of the present order of things, and always in the interests of human welfare (Haight, 1999, p.105).

The parables to be discussed here are presented in a summary table (Table 3.12). Such discussion will be based on the work of Hendrickx (1986) and Dodd (1978), with emphasis being placed on the images of God they contain.

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Table 3.12

*Summary Table of Parables Whose Primary Focus is on Images of God*

| <i>Parables</i>                                 | <i>Primary Focus</i>                                   | <i>Primary<br/>Image<br/>Of God</i> | <i>Primary<br/>Quality<br/>of God</i> |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 The seed growing secretly. Mk. 4:26-29        | The coming of the kingdom of God.                      | Judge                               | Active                                |
| 2 The weeds. Mt. 13:24-30                       | Response to the kingdom.                               | Father                              | Good                                  |
| 3 The wedding feast Lk. 14:15-24                | Necessity of accepting God's invitation to the Kingdom | King                                | Just                                  |
| 4 The lost sheep and the lost coin. Lk. 15:1-10 | Importance of repentance                               | Man<br>Woman                        | Joyful                                |
| 5 The prodigal son. Lk. 15:11-32                | Forgiveness of God                                     | Father                              | Compassionate                         |

|    | <i>Parables</i>  | <i>Primary Focus</i>  | <i>Primary Image Of God</i> | <i>Primary Quality of God</i> |
|----|--|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 6  | The unjust judge.<br>Lk. 18:1-8                                  | Necessity of continued prayer.                                  | Listener                    | Caring                        |
| 7. | The Pharisee and the Publican. Lk. 18:9-14                       | Necessity for humble faith in the mercy of God.                 | Forgiver                    | Powerful                      |
| 8  | The labourers in the vineyard. Mt. 20:1-16                       | The kingdom reflects divine generosity exceeding strict justice | Employer                    | Generous                      |
| 9  | The talents. Lk.19:11-27; Mt. 25:14-30                           | Warning to Christians about accepting one's responsibilities    | Lord                        | Just                          |
| 10 | The two sons.<br>Mt. 21:28-32                                    | Embracing of the kingdom by the outcasts; rejection             | Father                      | Just                          |
| 11 | Wicked tenants.<br>Mt. 21:33- 46;<br>Mk. 12:1-12;<br>Lk. 20:9-19 | The kingdom will be given to those who value it.                | Landlord                    | Just                          |

*Note:* The analysis of parables 1-13 is based on Hendrickx (1886). The analysis of parables 14-23 is based on Dodd (1978).

*The Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (Mk. 4: 26-29).*

The primary images of God here are those of a judge and a sower. The sower sows the seed, or, as Hendrickx (1986) pointed out, he “throws the seed on the ground”. God is then presented as the harvester who is also a judge: "The harvest of which the

parable speaks is the eschatological judgement...the eschatological judge...is God himself" (Hendrickx, 1986, p. 23). Jesus points out that God often worked in hidden ways and that God's activity may be unexpected.

*The Parable of the Weeds (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43).*

In his explanation of this parable (Mt. 36-43), Jesus identifies himself with the man who sows good seed in his own field, while an enemy sows weeds while everyone is sleeping. When both have borne grain, the weeds become evident. The image of God then changes to that of a householder, a term also applied to God in Matthew 20:1-11; 21:33. The householder is also addressed as "Master". In his explanation, too, Jesus calls the sower "the Son of Man" (Mt. 12: 37).

The Master does not agree with the slaves' proposed solution, instead, he tells them to allow both crops to grow until the harvest. He will then order the harvesters to collect the weeds and burn them, and gather the wheat into his barn. The image here is of a judge who decides the fate of good and bad. Jesus refers to God as Father whose kingdom is for the righteous: "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt. 13: 43).

*The Parable of the Great Banquet/Wedding Feast (Lk.14:15-24; Mt. 22:1-14).*

In commenting on this parable, Hendrickx (1986) stated that "for Jesus as well as for his audience, the 'great banquet' is a metaphor for the great eschatological banquet of joy" (p. 133). He also pointed out that in Jesus' life "his meals with the most diverse people, Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners, are a sign of the welcoming love characteristic of the new time of God's rule. His meals are an anticipation of the kingdom" (p. 133). The images of God used by the two evangelists are different, in that Matthew's account describes the host as a king, whereas in Luke, it is a man (Lk. 14:16)

and a householder (Lk. 14:21).

Hendrickx (1986) saw the conduct of the king as a parallel for God's way of acting, manifested throughout Jesus' ministry. Here God's love for the poor and sinners is shown, and God condemns those who reject the invitation to the kingdom. Thus the qualities of God shown in the parables range from compassion to rage.

*The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Lk. 15:1-10);*

*the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32).*

Hendrickx (1986) claimed that God was presented in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin as rejoicing over a repentant sinner. The terms "in heaven" and "in the presence of the angels" were circumlocutions for God (pp. 148-150). The joy of God is also presented through the father who greets his repentant son. God is therefore shown to be compassionate, loving and wise.

Hendrickx (1986) saw in the parable of the lost sheep Jesus' response to those who criticised him for his concern for sinners. He considered that here Jesus also challenged the Pharisees' and scribes' image of God. Hendrickx (1986) commented that "in Jesus' conduct, God's concern and liberating, saving activity can be experienced" (p. 162).

Hendrickx (1986) considered that in the parable of the lost coin, Jesus' search for people paralleled God's search, as it was God who drew people to God-self: "The parable refers to God as the one who seeks people and who experiences exuberant joy in finding them" (p. 163). He claimed that the parable of the prodigal son showed God's love and compassion, commenting that: "Jesus ... anchors his conduct in the conduct of God. ... Jesus knows himself sent to establish *God's* justice and love among people " (Hendrickx, 1986, p164).

*The Parable of the Unjust Judge/the Widow (Lk.18: 1-8).*

Hendrickx (1986) considered that the image of God highlighted here was that of a God who listened. This parable is one of the few in which Jesus mentions the word 'God'. God's willingness to bring justice to those who seek it is contrasted with the reluctance of a judge to grant justice to a widow, until her perseverance prevails on him: "And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?' " (Lk. 18:6-7).

In Hendrickx' (1986) view, the parable of the *Pharisee and the Publican/Tax Collector (Lk. 18:9-14)* centred on the necessity of humility in prayer, highlighting the need to trust in the unlimited power and mercy of God. Hendrickx (1986) commented that the Pharisee and the tax collector had two different images of God:

God functions as the keystone of an established order in which the Pharisee himself is lord and master. The attitude of the tax collector reveals a very different image of God. Sinful as he is he can only bend down before the holy and mighty God ... we underestimate his real greatness: a mercy from which nobody is excluded and to which nobody appeals in vain (Hendrickx, 1986, p. 245).

*The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16).*

Hendrickx (1986) considered that God was presented in this parable as a generous and compassionate employer who paid the same rate to his labourers, regardless of the length of time for which they worked. Jesus introduced this story by stating that it is a symbol of the kingdom of God: " For the kingdom of heaven is like..?" (Mt. 20:1). Hence Dodd (1978) saw the employer's generosity as symbolic of the generosity of God towards outcasts and sinners: "The divine generosity was specifically exhibited in the calling of publicans and sinners who had no merit before God" (p. 97). This generosity also indicated that God's judgement and that of humanity, did not always coincide. God's power was also acknowledged: "Am I not

allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" (Mt. 20:15).

*The Parable of the Talents (Mt. 25:14-30) and the Pounds (Lk. 19:11-27).*

Dodd (1978) claimed that this parable symbolised the second coming of Jesus at which he would judge humanity. The use of the term "Lord" can be seen as an image of God:

We may recall that in the Old Testament and in the Jewish usage the relation of God and Israel was so constantly represented as that of a 'lord' and his 'slaves' that a hearer of the parable would almost inevitably seek an interpretation along those lines (Dodd, 1978, p. 112).

The images of God presented here are Lord, Master, Just Judge and the one who gives in trust.

*The Parable of the Two Sons (Mt. 21:28-32).*

Dodd (1978) considered that God was presented here as a father whose two sons responded differently to his request that they work in the vineyard. One said that he would go but did not; the other said he would not go but he did. Jesus compares the sons with those who rejected the kingdom of God and those who accepted it:

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him (Mt. 21: 31, 32).

God is presented here as a father and judge who accepts or rejects people into the kingdom, according to their own responses.

*The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mt. 21:33-46; Mk. 12:1-12; Lk. 20:9-19).*

Dodd (1978) commented that in this parable, the murder of the son was symbolic of Jesus' forthcoming death (p. 98). "By implication it may be said to 'predict' the death of Jesus, and the judgement to fall upon His slayers":

Every (such) hearer would also know that by long tradition ... Israel was the Lord's vineyard. It follows that the crime of the wicked husbandmen, who refused their landlord his due, and met his appeals with defiance that stopped at nothing, is the crime of the rulers of Israel (Dodd, 1978, p. 94).

Thus God is presented as both a landowner and a just judge.

The New Testament images of God and of Jesus Christ in Haight (1999), Hendrickx (1986) and Dodd (1978) are listed in Table 3.13.

---

Table 3.13

*Images and Qualities of God in the New Testament*

---

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| IMAGES OF GOD    | <i>Abba</i> ; creator; employer; father; forgiver; judge; king; landlord; life; listener; lord; man; woman; saviour; sustainer  |
| QUALITIES OF GOD | Active; authority; caring; compassionate; concerned; condemning; forgiving; generous; good; holy; just; joyful; liberating; living; loving; merciful; personal; powerful; present |

---

The images and qualities presented here provide a point of comparison between these biblical images and those included in the participants' responses. Many of these images have also been included in the questionnaire of the present study.

### The Theology of Revelation

The introduction to this chapter claimed that human experience and the understanding of God are inextricably linked, and that images of God were formed from

reflection on the experiences of life. This claim is explored in this study, where participants were invited to reflect on their lives, and to indicate the images of God that emerged from such reflection. In theological terms, this process can be considered to be "revelatory" in nature, hence the nature of Revelation and its relationship with Christology will be explored. This section will draw on the work of O'Collins (1981), a theologian who has written extensively in the area of Revelation.

As the foundations of Christology were formulated in the first centuries after the death of Jesus Christ, the key points of this process, and the various Church councils that formulated this teaching, will be noted here. Such formulations underlie the images of God and of Jesus Christ, that form part of the religious education curriculum of the participants in this study. The *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) will therefore be examined, as these guidelines are the base documents for this curriculum.

#### *Historical Outline of the Foundations of Christological Teaching*

O'Collins (1981) demonstrates how the New Testament period was followed by that of the Patristics, or Church Fathers, and that it was during this period that the early Councils of the Church took place. He saw this period as characterised by "false interpretations of Christ, struggles for the right terminology to use about him, and differing methodologies" (O'Collins, 1981, p. 16). Some of the early "false interpretations" or heresies of this period included: Docetism (late First Century) which denied the full divinity of Christ; Adoptionism (Third Century) which taught that the one God adopted Jesus as his Son and gave him his Spirit, and Modalism (Third Century) which held that God was only one person and that the Son and Holy Spirit were modes in which God appeared.

The first of the Ecumenical Councils, at Nicaea (325) was called in response to

the heresy of Arianism which questioned the divinity of Christ. The council adopted the term “*homo-ousios*” (of one substance) to define Jesus' unity of being with the Father. The Council of Constantinople (381) was called to refute the heresy of Apollinarius of Laodicea who questioned whether Christ had a human soul. It confirmed the teaching of Nicaea and also taught that Christ did have a human soul. The Council of Ephesus (431) condemned Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople, who had denied that Mary was Theotokos (Mother of God). Eutyches, also of Constantinople, embraced the Monophysite heresy, which denied the humanity of Christ. This led to the Tome of Pope Leo I (449) and the Council of Chalcedon (451), which recognised two natures in one person in Jesus Christ. O'Collins (1981) pointed to the importance of this council, stating that “its language of 'one person in two natures' became the normative terminology down to the twentieth century”. The Council of Constantinople II (553) introduced the term “*hypostatic union*” to interpret the unity of Christ, and the Council of Constantinople III (680) added the point that Christ possessed a divine and human will, and that these two wills were not confused with each other.

In summary, the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ were formulated in the early centuries of Christianity. The process of formulation shows that both doctrines are inextricably linked. The key image of God to emerge from this process was that God is a Trinity of being: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was defined as the Son of God and the Son of Mary, therefore, divine and human. As a consequence, he had a unique role in the revelation of God. The meaning of such revelation will now be considered.

### *Revelation*

O'Collins (1981) described Christian revelation in the following terms:

Christians believe that through the history of the Old and New Testament the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are disclosed as a God who cares for us with an infinitely merciful love. Christianity is a revealed religion (O'Collins, 1981, p. 54).

As a consequence, he claimed that revelation is at the heart of Christian theology.

O'Collins (1981) considered that the models of revelation changed over time, and that a shift occurred after Vatican 11 from a propositional to a personal model, however he did not regard these models as being mutually exclusive:

Even if the personal question (“*Who* is revealed?”) is the primary one, the propositional content of revelation (the answer to the question “*What* is revealed?”) continues to enjoy its proper place. ... The communication of the truth *about* God remains an essential part of revelation, albeit always at the service of the personal encounter *with* God (O'Collins, 1981, p. 56).

O'Collins (1981) considered that the term "experiencing the divine self-communication" best described the revealing and saving activity of God:

“Experience” recalls the place where the individual subject and the community meet God. “Self-communication” reminds us that revelation always entails grace, that active *presence* of the triune God who delivers us from our evils and comes to share with us the divine life (O'Collins, 1981, p. 59).

### *Revelation in Human Experience*

O'Collins argued that every human experience is potentially revelatory:

As all human experience entails an ultimate, religious element, it bears a primordial, transcendental revelation and can become a consciously religious experience to constitute an historical self-communication of God (O'Collins, 1981, p. 62).

This implies that the life experiences of the participants in the present study are potentially revelatory of God, and that it is therefore possible for them to have formed their own images of God. This implication supports the feasibility of the aim of this

study, to identify adolescents' images of God. O'Collins (1981) described human experience in the categories of common and uncommon experiences, negative experiences, experiences of time, the mediators of revelation, the experience of history, and acts of God. These experiences, in different words, were included by the participants in the present study as among the factors that led them to think about God.

Among the "common" and "uncommon" experiences mentioned by O'Collins were experiences ranging from sadness to joy that were recounted in the Scriptures. For example, in the Old Testament, they ranged from the Exodus experience (Ex.14:21-30) to the individual experience of Joseph's dreams (Gen. 37:5-11). O'Collins referred to Jesus' reference to the everyday experience of a woman losing a coin (Lk. 15: 8-10), concluding as follows:

All in all, few would disagree with the assertion that in the Old Testament, in the New Testament and, for that matter, in our situation today God's saving revelation is communicated through an indefinitely wide range of experiences: from the most dramatic to the most ordinary and from the most unusual to the most commonplace (O'Collins, 1981, p. 64).

O'Collins (1981) also considered that negative experiences could be revelatory of God, referring to suffering, evil and sin as examples. He claimed that experiences of time could also reveal God, for example, in the past event of the Exodus, which shaped the way in which the Israelites saw, and continue to see, their relationship with God today.

O'Collins (1981) believed that revelation was conveyed by people, and the research conducted for this study, asked the participants to identify the people who led them to think about God and who most closely represented God to them. O'Collins (1981) referred to the wide range of people chosen as mediators of the divine self-revelation, distinguishing between the institutionalised, for example, priests, and the non-institutionalised, such as prophets.

O'Collins (1981) stated that Christianity is an historical religion, which claims that revelation has taken place in the past through the history of Israel and through Jesus of Nazareth, and continues today: "History is the means par excellence by which the divine self-communication has entered and continues to enter human experience" (p. 71). He claimed that the present religious experience of Christians drew upon Christ's life, death and resurrection. Thus, revelation is on going, but linked to and derived from Christ.

O'Collins (1981) considered that the Scriptures downplay nature as a means of God's self-communication. He claimed that the Old Testament was richer than the New Testament in its references to nature, referring to the book of Job and to the Psalms. He emphasised the sense of mystery conveyed by nature and its "religious claim" (p. 76). This study asked participants to indicate the extent to which nature led them to think about God and revealed images of God to them.

O'Collins (1981) also referred to the experiences of Revelation today through God's action in leading people to faith and holiness:

The divine self-communication is present and at work when those who are already Christians grow "in Christ", know more fully his power in their weakness and enter more deeply into the life of the Trinity: through the sacraments, sermons, the reading of the Scriptures, loving activity with and for others, episodes of suffering and any other concrete means ... that convey revelation and grace (O'Collins, 1981, p. 100).

This experience can be individual, or shared with a community through collective experiences such as a Church council. Some of the questions included in this research asked the participants to indicate the extent to which these factors led them to think about God. Several questions explored their relationship with communities such as the home, school and Church in terms of their spiritual growth and their formation of images of God.

This section has explored the rationale for O'Collins' (1981) claim that human experience can be revelatory of the divine self-communication. It also indicated the relationship between these claims and the present study. In summary, "the Trinity" is the image of God in foundational Revelation, as identified by O'Collins (1981); and the qualities of God he finds there are "loving", "merciful", "personal", "present", "revealing" and "saving".

#### *Revelation in the Religious Education Curriculum.*

As has been indicated, Revelation is an important theme of the present study, and the participants were asked to reflect on the images of God emerging from their own life experience. It is therefore relevant to examine the images of God presented in the religious education curriculum of the participants, as such images may have influenced the formation of the participants' images and been included in their responses. The *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) are a key source of religious education theory and are also the base documents for religious education curriculum development in the Victorian Catholic system of schools. They have formed the basis for religious education programs in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and in the other Victorian dioceses since their development in 1973, and subsequent revisions in 1984 and 1995. They have been directed for use in all the schools involved in the present study (Little, cited in the *Guidelines*, CEOM, 1995).

An additional reason for exploring the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) is that this edition gives special attention to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catholic Church, 1994); the documents of Vatican 11 and postconciliar documents<sup>5</sup>. They

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<sup>5</sup> Vatican 11 documents arise from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-1965).

therefore represent a normative view of religious education, including the area of images of God. The *Guidelines for Middle Secondary* (CEOM, 1995) will be explored here, as this is the age group of the participants in this study.

In his letter mandating the use of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995), the then Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Frank Little DD, spoke of Revelation, stating:

Religious Education that is meaningful for students in the 1990's must seek to bring the Gospel into dialogue with the concerns of our times and with the distinctive realities, issues and concerns which students experience in their daily lives (Little, as cited in the *Guidelines*, CEOM, 1995, p. iv).

Little (1995) then defined the aim of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995): "Their ultimate intention is that students will be drawn to new and deeper understandings about human life in Jesus Christ who is 'the way, the truth and the life' " (p. iv). He emphasised here the role of Jesus Christ as the Revealer of what it is to be human.

Revelation is also defined in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) themselves:

Revelation is a process whereby God's self-revelation is communicated throughout history. Revelation testifies to God working deeply within human life, the life of the Church, the wider world, the natural environment and the universe (CEOM, 1995, p. 6).

Here revelation is defined as the communication of God through human life. The research for this study asked students to reflect on their lives, and to identify the images of God that they had formed as a result of their life-experience. As pointed out earlier, their images of God may have been shaped by those of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995), hence it is appropriate to identify the images of God they contain.

The central image of God in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) is that of the Trinity. There are two sections in which the Trinity is defined. The first is during the discussion of "Revelation and Faith", where God is described in the words of the CCC (CC, 1994): "God is eternal blessedness, undying life, unfading light, God is love:

Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (CC, 1994, p. 257). The *CCC* (CC, 1994) emphasised the importance of this teaching in stating that "the mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith" (CC, 1994, p. 6). It referred to the omnipresence of God, calling and helping humanity to reach the fulfilment of relationship with Godself.

The definition offered of God the Father is also based on the *CC* (1994), and cited in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995):

By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children (CEOM, 1995, p. 6).

The definition of Jesus Christ in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) refers to the fullness of the revelation of God through Jesus: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, fully human and fully divine, unites in himself all human life and the life of God" (p. 7). It then includes various functions of the Holy Spirit, drawn from the *CC* (1994):

The Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church - and through her in the world - leads believers to the full truth and makes the Word of Christ dwell in them in all its riches (CC, 1994, p. 79).

Other functions noted here are the power to enliven, to strengthen, to express God's love and to bring people to faith.

The Trinity is also defined in "The Aims of Religious Education" (CEOM, 1995, p. 114). The images and qualities of God given there, and not mentioned earlier, are now noted and italicised in the table that follows. Some of the descriptions of God the Father are "creator", "truth" and "love". Jesus is referred to as "the Christ", "our brother" and as "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14: 6). The Holy Spirit is referred to as "guide". Table 3.14 indicates the images and qualities of God included in both sets of definitions.

Table 3.14

*Images and Qualities of God in Early Sections of the Guidelines (CEOM, 1995)*

|              | Images  | Qualities  |
|--------------|---|--|
| God          | Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit;<br>Life, Light, Love                 | Eternal, blessed, present,<br>calling to relationship        |
| Father       | Origin of all<br><i>Creator, Truth, Love</i>                            | Transcendent, good;<br>authority, loving care                |
| Jesus Christ | Son of God, Word of God<br><i>The Christ, Way, Truth, Life, Brother</i> | Human, divine  |
| Holy Spirit  | <i>Guide</i>  | Leads to truth; brings life to<br>Church; reveals God's love |

Section 4 of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) presented an "Overview of Doctrine and its Development in the Religious Education curriculum". As such, it offered a third source from which to identify the images and qualities of God that underlie the theology of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995). The three relevant sections here are "God", "Jesus Christ" and the "Holy Spirit" (pp. 52-57). God is described as "mystery", "holy", "just", "immanent", "merciful", "freeing", "saving", "personal", "giver of life and order", "loving unconditionally" and "bringer of happiness". It is a surprising fact that there is not a separate section here about God the Father. This may be why some of the images and qualities that were earlier defined in association with God the Father, for example, God as the origin of all, have been transferred to the section on God. There is no separate exploration here of the nature of God as Father, nor is this image explored in

the section on Jesus Christ.

Some of the descriptions of Jesus Christ given in this section of the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) are "the image of God", "Son of Mary", "head of the Church", "Good News", "deliverer" and "reconciler". The scriptural reference to the fruits of the Holy Spirit is then cited: " love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22). The seven gifts of the Spirit are also listed: "wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord" (1 Cor.12: 4-11). The Spirit is described as "sanctifying", "inspiring" and "renewing". The images and qualities of God given in Section 4, and not shown earlier in Table 3.14, are listed here and italicised in Table 3.15.

Table 3.15

*Images and Qualities of God Including Section 4 of the Guidelines (CEOM, 1995)*

|              | Images   | Qualities  |
|--------------|--|--|
| God          | Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit<br>Life, light, love.<br><i>Mystery, giver of life and order, bringer of happiness</i>                 | Eternal, blessed, always present, calling to relationship.<br><i>Just, holy, immanent, saving, merciful, freeing, personal, loving unconditionally</i>   |
| Father       | Origin of all, creator, truth, love.   | Transcendent, good, authority, loving care.  |
| Jesus Christ | Son of God, Word, the Christ, Way, Truth, Life, brother.<br><i>Image of God, Son of Mary, Head of the Church, deliverer, reconciler.</i> | Human, divine.   |
| Holy Spirit  | Guide  | Leads to truth; brings life to Church; expresses God's love. <i>Inspires, renews. Peace, patience, self-control, gentleness. Wisdom, understanding, knowledge, fortitude, counsel, fear of the Lord.</i> |

Table 3.15 indicates the range of images and qualities of God that are evident in the Guidelines (CEOM, 1995). They will be used later in this thesis, as a point of comparison with some of the responses of the participants in the present study.

### *Summary of Findings*

The following table presents a summary of the images of God in Revelation as presented by O'Collins (1981), and in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995). It indicates that the key image of God emerging from both sources is that of the Trinity. The qualities of God from these sources are also presented. This theological section complements the earlier scriptural sections of this chapter.

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Table 3.16

*Images and qualities of God in Revelation (O'Collins, 1981) and in the Guidelines (CEOM, 1995)*

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| Images                            | Qualities  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Trinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit | Blessed; calling to relationship; faithful;                                |
| Bringer of happiness;             | freeing; gentle; good; holy; immanent; joyful;                             |
| Giver of life and order;          | just; loving; patient; peace-loving; present;                              |
| Light, Love, Mystery              | understanding; merciful; personal; revealing;<br>sanctifying; saving; wise |

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### Conclusion

This chapter has explored the images and qualities of God in the Old and New Testaments and in the theology of Revelation. Table 3.16 presented a summary of the

images and qualities identified when the findings from each of these sources were combined: Old Testament images in Mills (1998) and Ralph (1989); New Testament portraits of Jesus Christ in Haight (1999); the parables of Jesus Christ in Dodd (1978) and Hendrickx (1986); the images from Revelation in O'Collins (1981) and in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995).

This chapter presented an outline of the scriptural and theological foundations of the questionnaire used in this study. They shaped many of the questions included there. The images and qualities of God that emerged throughout this chapter, provide a normative spectrum of images against which to compare those identified by the participants in the present study. Such a comparison, to be conducted in later chapters, will indicate the extent to which the participants' images and qualities of God are in keeping with normative Catholic doctrine in this area.

Table 3.17

*Summary: Images and Qualities of God in the Old and New Testaments and Revelation*

| Images of God  | Qualities of God  |
|--|---|
| <i>Abstract images of God</i>  | Active; Almighty; Angry;  |
| Fire; Life; Light; Love; Mystery; Order; Other;<br>Shield; Storm; Wisdom   | Authoritative; Blessed; Calling to<br>relationship; Caring; Compassionate;                              |
| <i>Feminine images of God</i>  | Demanding; Eternal; Faithful;   |
| Nursing Mother; Pregnant Woman; Woman  | Freeing; Generous; Gentle; Good;  |
| <i>The Trinitarian image of God</i>  | First and Last; One; Healing;   |
| Father, Son and Holy Spirit  | Human; Holy; Immanent; Intimate;  |
| <i>Images using the title "God"</i>  | Jealous; Just; Joyful; Kind; Leading  |
| El (God); God of the Apocalypse; God of our<br>Fathers; God of History; God Almighty; God of<br>the Fathers; God of Time; Throne-chariot God | to truth; Loving; Male; Merciful;<br>Patient; Peace-loving; Personal;<br>Powerful; Present; Protective; |
| <i>Images using the term "Lord"</i>  | Punishing; Righteous; Sanctifying;  |
| Lord; Lord of Hosts; Lord of Israel; Lord of the<br>Universe   | Saving; Trustworthy; Solitary;<br>Transcendent; Understanding;  |
| <i>Images using the term YHWH</i>  | Universal; Weak; Wise   |
| YHWH-El (Lord God); YHWH-Sabaoth   |   |
| <i>Masculine images of God</i>   |   |
| Father; Husband; Judge; King; Landlord; Man;<br>Ruler  |   |

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Images of God

Qualities of God

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*Other images of God*

Bringer of happiness; Giver of life and order;

Creator; Destroyer; Employer; Engineer;

Forgiver; Listener; Lover; Punisher; Redeemer;

Stranger

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In the following chapter, the methodology used in for the research conducted for this study will be described and justified.

## CHAPTER 4: THE RESEARCH DESIGN

### Introduction

The previous chapters have established the aims, and the literary, theological and scriptural context of this study. The literature review in Chapter Two has provided a background of research against which the findings of this study will be considered. It has also established the significance of this study within the field of adolescent spirituality. In Chapter Three, the scriptural and theological underpinnings of the study were explored. In this chapter, the methodology used to gather and analyse the data collected for the research is described and justified.

### Research Methods

The aim of the study was to identify the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents. Hence, one thousand adolescents, in the middle school classes of seven Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, were asked to respond to a written questionnaire on this area. A quantitative methodology was adopted, as it provided a suitable method of data gathering and analysis of the wide-ranging questionnaire (112 questions: 1000 participants), an instrument which was designed to gather a wide range of data in a field in which little currently exists.

Burns (1997) has pointed to the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative research:

Qualitative research places stress on the validity of multiple meaning structures and holistic analysis, as opposed to the criteria of reliability and statistical compartmentalisation of quantitative research (Burns, 1997, p. 11).

Wiersma (1991) considered that a continuum existed between the two methods, arguing that the purpose of the research was the critical difference between their use: "Qualitative research is done for the purpose of understanding social phenomena ...Quantitative research is done to determine relationships, effects and causes" (Wiersma, 1991, p. 14).

Crotty (1998) outlined additional reasons for the choice of a particular methodology, stating that such decisions arise from "the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work" and that such assumptions were linked to "our theoretical perspective" (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). He added that this theoretical perspective arises from the understanding of human knowledge underlying the research, and from epistemological questions such as "How should observers of our research...regard the outcomes we lay out before them? And why should our readers take these outcomes seriously?" (Crotty, 1998, p. 2).

Crotty (1998) referred to three possible epistemological approaches: objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism (p. 8). He considered that "objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness", that "in subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject", but that with constructionism:

There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9).

In this sense it can be argued that the present study is constructionist in approach as the variety of images of God in the participants' responses support the definition's claim that "different people may construct meaning in different ways". It can also be defined as objectivist in that it seeks objective data; nevertheless its aim is to identify students' constructed images of God. Hence the focus of the study is constructivist but its methodology is objectivist.

Quantitative methods, such as the questionnaire used in this research, are generally identified with objectivism, and qualitative research is generally associated with

constructivism. In Crotty's (1998) view, the distinction was not between qualitative and quantitative research, but between "objectivist/ positivist research, on the one hand, and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other" (p. 15). Further, he saw the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research existing at the level of methods and not at the theoretical or epistemological level. Hence he argued that just as in the past qualitative research had been carried out in a positivist manner, and quantitative in a constructionist manner, so this was equally valid today. His argument is relevant to the present study, which uses quantitative/objectivist methods within a constructivist paradigm. Crotty (1998) stated "Constructionists may indeed make use of quantitative methods but their constructionism makes a difference" adding that "quantitative research has valuable contributions to make, even to a study of the farthest reaches of human being" (p. 16). Research such as the present study, which focuses on young people's images of God, has such a reach, hence providing an additional reason for the use of quantitative methods in this study. The quantitative methodology centred on a broad, numerical survey was necessary because of the lack of existing data on this topic and age group. It could be followed up with further in depth research and longitudinal studies.

### Surveys

A variety of research techniques exist within the field of quantitative research. De Vaus (1991) claims that surveys include questionnaires, structured and in depth interviews, observation and content analysis: "The distinguishing features of surveys are the form of data collection and the method of analysis" (p. 3). Burns (1997) described two major forms of surveys: descriptive and explanatory:

- (a) The **descriptive** survey aims to estimate as precisely as possible the nature of existing conditions, or the attributes of a population.
- (b) The **explanatory** survey seeks to establish cause and effect relationships but without experimental manipulation (Burns, 1997, p. 467).

While making these distinctions, Burns (1997) added that: "Sometimes, of course, both descriptive and explanatory studies can be carried out in the same inquiry" (p. 467). According to these definitions, this can be termed a descriptive survey, as it aims to identify the nature of the middle adolescents' images of God, and not the cause and effect of holding such images.

Burns (1997) emphasised the importance of representative sampling of the population in surveys of this kind, in order to ensure the accuracy of the statistics (p. 467).

He offered the following set of characteristics of surveys (1997):

- (a) It requires a sample of respondents to reply to a number of standard questions under comparable conditions.
- (b) It may be administered by an interviewer, by mailing a respondent a form for self-completion, or by telephone.
- (c) The respondents represent a defined population. If less than 100% of the defined population is sampled then a sample survey has been conducted, a 100% survey is a census.
- (d) The results of the sample survey can be generalised to the defined population.
- (e) The use of standard questions enables comparisons of individuals to be made (Burns, 1997, p. 468)

The present study exhibits all of these characteristics. One to two hundred of the Year Nine and Ten students in each of seven Catholic secondary schools, were invited to respond to a standard set of one hundred and twelve standard questions. The total number of students involved was one thousand. It was conducted in the students' schools during school hours and was administered by the researcher in each of the schools. The survey was a "sample" survey as only some of the Year Nine and Ten classes were surveyed in each school, as there was a maximum number of two hundred students involved. It can also be considered to be a sample, as only seven of the Catholic secondary schools in Victoria were involved. The results of the survey can be cautiously generalised to all

middle adolescents in Catholic secondary schools because of the care taken to ensure a balanced sample and to involve a large number of students. The use of standard questions enables comparisons to be made between the respondents. The sample can be described as "balanced" as the questionnaire was addressed to a similar number of female and male participants, of urban and rural students, and of Year Nine and Ten students.

Using another of Burns' (1997) definitions, the survey adopted in the present study can also be described as being cross-sectional:

The method involves taking a cross-section of the population, selecting, for example, a particular age group, and measuring the value of one or more variables, such as height, reading ability, etc. These data can then be used to calculate norms for that particular age group (Burns, 1997, p. 470).

The present study was focused on the age group of middle adolescents and the variable of their images of God was identified. From this data, the "norm" for this age group, in this area, can be discerned. However, Burns (1997) offered a caution about the cross-sectional approach, which is of particular relevance to the present study:

By concentrating on averages, this approach tells us very little about individual patterns of development, and may indeed give a false picture of growth. If some children develop very quickly between the ages of four and five, and others very slowly, this will be obscured in the cross-sectional data. The impression would be that all develop at a steady rate (Burns, 1997, p. 471).

This comment is applicable to the present study as adolescence is also a time of rapid growth and not all young people develop at the same rate, hence their images of God may be different. In particular, as adolescence is the time of development of the capacity to think in an abstract manner, the development of this capacity may vary between the adolescents. This is of significance in the area of the present study as some participants may have developed the capacity to think of God in abstract terms while others may not. With this variable in mind, some of the questions were designed to test the extent to which participants' images of God may have changed as a result of adolescence. For example,

Question 10 asked participants to complete the statement, "When I was about 10 I thought of God as..." The responses to this question were then compared with the ways in which participants thought of God today (Question 1). Some of the questions were also designed to test the extent to which students thought of God in abstract terms, for example, Question 47 asked them to prioritise the extent to which they thought of God as a "Spirit".

Burns (1997) listed both the advantages and disadvantages of using a questionnaire in research. The following tables are based on his comments (1997, p. 482).

---

Table 4.1

*Advantages of a Questionnaire*

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1. *Cost. Less expensive to administer and no funds are required for training interviewers.*
  2. *Useful when the purpose of the survey can be explained clearly in print.*
  3. *Each respondent receives the identical set of questions, phrased in exactly the same way.*
  4. *Errors resulting from the recording of responses by interviewers are reduced.*
  5. *The respondent is free to answer in their own time and at their own pace.*
  6. *Fear and embarrassment, which may result from direct contact, are avoided.*
  7. *The problem of non-contact with the respondent is overcome.*
  8. *It is possible to include a larger number of subjects in more diverse locations.*
  9. *With confidentiality guaranteed, more truthful responses would be obtained.*
  10. *Unlike an interview, the interviewer who may influence an interview, is not present.*
- 

*Note:* The italics in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 are those of the author, Burns (1997).

Table 4.2

*Disadvantages of a Questionnaire*

- 
1. *Difficulty of securing an adequate response to mailed questionnaires.*
  2. *Sampling problems in mailed questionnaires.*
  3. *Complex instruments, ambiguity or vagueness will cause poor responses.*
  4. *The method is unsuitable when probing is desirable.*
  5. *Ambiguous, incomplete or inaccurate information cannot be followed up.*
  6. *Non flexibility due to questionnaire design.*
  7. *There is no opportunity to acquire supplementary observational data.*
  8. *The respondent's motivation for answering the questionnaire is unknown.*
  9. *Self administered questionnaire are inappropriate for some groups e.g. the illiterate.*
  10. *Possibility of misinterpretation of the questions by the respondents.*
- 

All survey tools have advantages and disadvantages. However in terms of the present study, the advantages of the questionnaire outweighed the disadvantages.

The purpose of the questionnaire was explained in the letters to Principals, parents and participants (Appendices 3,4,5 ). They were also explained verbally to participants as the researcher conducted the questionnaire process at each location and was able to clarify any questions. Each participant received an identical set of questions, phrased in exactly the same way.

Errors resulting from the recording of responses were reduced because of the use of the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* program and because all the data were coded where necessary, recorded and entered into the program by the researcher. The respondents were free to answer in their own time and at their own pace, within the

specified time frame allocated to the conducting of the questionnaire. Fear and embarrassment were avoided, as there was no direct contact with individual students unless they chose to stay behind and talk with the researcher. The problem of non-contact with the respondent was also overcome. The use of a questionnaire enabled the large number of one thousand middle adolescents to be surveyed in both urban and rural locations. As confidentiality was assured, it can be concluded that more truthful responses would be more likely than would otherwise be the case. The influence of the researcher, who was present during the questionnaire process, was limited, as no direct contact was made with participants on an individual basis.

Some of the disadvantages listed in Table 4.2 do apply to the present study while others do not. The responses were secured from all respondents as the survey was conducted at school by the researcher. This also eliminated any potential sampling problems. Trials of the questionnaire were conducted before the final instrument was adopted, hence eliminating any obvious complexity, ambiguity or vagueness, and adding to the quality of the responses. The trials are described in the following section.

“Probing” was not a key feature of the present study, which was wide-ranging rather than deep in scope. The aim of the questionnaire was to generate a large amount of data concerning the images of God of middle adolescents, as there was little existing data in this area. Although the questionnaire did not provide the same depth as would be possible with a series of in depth interviews, the questionnaire did probe the research topic. Participants' views on particular issues were tested through a large number of questions. The variety of questions and question styles, added depth to the overall pattern of student response. Participants were also asked to give reasons for their answers to some of the questions, and their responses gave added depth. In depth interviews and longitudinal studies could probe the findings further.

A disadvantage of the questionnaire process was that ambiguous, incomplete and inaccurate information could not be followed up. However, as outlined earlier, steps were taken in an attempt to avoid such problem information being generated. The questionnaire was inflexible in that the same set of questions was given to each participant; however, participants did have the flexibility to decide on the number of questions to answer. Some also made comments at the end of the questionnaire. Future studies might use part of this questionnaire and combine it with additional opportunities for acquiring supplementary observational data.

The respondents' motivations for answering the questionnaire were unknown. It cannot be concluded that because participants were given the option not to participate, that they therefore valued the aims of the questionnaire or that they did their best to reply truthfully. There was evidence that a small number of participants either found it too hard, lost interest, or did not have enough time, as they did not complete the survey. Some analysis of this is given in later chapters of this thesis. There is also evidence from written comments and remarks made after the questionnaire process was completed, that in general, participants enjoyed responding to the questionnaire, completed it honestly, and answered all questions. The questionnaire was not self-administered but presented by the researcher, hence students' questions could be clarified.

A series of in depth interviews would have been more appropriate if reasons for the participants' views, or the factors leading to these views had been the main purpose of the study, however this was not the case. Questions about these areas were included, but the responses did not reach the depth that would have been possible in a series of interviews, as breadth of numbers of responses rather than depth of response was the desired outcome of this study. As Wiersma (1991) stated in connection with sample size: "Generally,

increasing sample size enhances statistical precision" (p. 264). "Probing" was not considered to be essential to the central purpose of the present study.

### Open and Closed Items

This section will consider some of the literature concerning these two main types of items for questionnaires: selected-response (forced-choice or closed-form) and open-ended. Wiersma (1991) considered that:

Open-ended items allow the individual more freedom of response because certain feelings or information may be revealed that would not be forthcoming with selected-response items. A disadvantage of open-ended items is that responses tend to be inconsistent in length, and sometimes in content, across respondents. Both questions and responses are susceptible to misinterpretation...responses to open-ended items are usually more difficult to tabulate and synthesize than responses to selected-response items (Wiersma, 1991, p. 176).

Where open-ended questions were used in the present study it was because the "freedom of response" was considered to be more important than the disadvantages of the process. Procedures were put in place to eliminate or reduce as many potential disadvantages as possible. For example, the length of response was controlled by the amount of space allotted to each question; the questionnaire was delivered by the researcher, hence participants were able to ask clarifying questions, and in some cases, to amplify responses and avoid misinterpretation, participants were asked to give reasons for their responses.

Babbie (1990) commented on the popularity of closed questions because "they provide a greater uniformity of responses and are more easily processed" (p. 127). He considered that the chief shortcoming of these questions "lies in the structuring of responses" as they may exclude some important issues (p. 128). Other advantages that led to their use in the present study were that such questions might have been easier for some students than those requiring them to write responses. This was a significant factor as this study included all the students in given Year Nine and Ten classes, hence including

students with a range of literacy skills. Another advantage was related to the size of the questionnaire (112 questions), which meant that a quick method of response was desirable.

De Vaus (1991) saw the advantages and disadvantages of both styles of questioning:

The choice of open or closed questions depends on many factors such as the question content, respondent motivation, method of administration, type of respondents, access to skilled coders to code open-ended responses and the amount of time available to develop a good set of unbiased responses. There is no right or wrong approach (De Vaus, 1991, p. 87).

In order to enhance motivation, the aim of the questionnaire and its contribution to educational research were explained to the participants by the researcher and they were thanked for their participation. Some students indicated their response to the questionnaire after completing it. Sample comments were: "It was hard but better than doing Maths or Science"; "I enjoyed it, it made you think". Another student spoke about her suffering at the recent death of a school friend as the result of a road accident. One student thanked the researcher for the opportunity of completing the questionnaire, stating that there should be more opportunities to think about these things. She then discussed her image of God. In other cases, a few participants did not complete the questionnaire, which may have indicated a lack of motivation, of interest, time management skills or a lower degree of literacy.

De Vaus's comment that "there is no right or wrong approach" supports the decision in the present study to adopt both approaches in the questionnaire, depending on the area to be explored, in order to enhance the probability of authentic results. His comment is supported by Burns (1997):

Closed items have, for example, the advantage of achieving greater uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability; of making the respondents answering a manner fitting the response category; and of being more easily coded. Disadvantages include: their superficiality; the possibility of annoying respondents who find none of the alternatives suitable; of forcing responses that are inappropriate. These weaknesses can be overcome, however, if the items are written with care, mixed with open-ended ones, and used in conjunction with probes if part of an interview (Burns, 1997, p. 473).

This statement also supports the use in present study of both closed and open items of questioning.

### Sampling

Wiersma (1991) defined sampling as "a subset of the population to which the researcher intends to generalize the results" (p. 247). Sampling is important because it is impossible to involve all those eligible for inclusion in a given piece of research, hence it is necessary to involve a representative sample. Bryman and Cramer (1990) commented that such samples could be enhanced by "probability sampling" in which "each unit of a population has a specifiable probability of inclusion in a sample" (p. 99). Random samples are a form of such sampling. This form of sampling was used in the present study, where a representative sample of middle adolescents was randomly selected from Years Nine and Ten classes to complete the questionnaire.

The seven schools involved were not randomly selected but chosen according to particular criteria, hence they involved purposeful sampling according to Wiersma's (1991) definition: "Purposeful sampling is selection based on the characteristics of the units (sites or individuals) relevant to the research problem" (p. 265). In the present study, the "units" were the schools chosen for inclusion, and they are listed in the Table 4.3 and described below. These seven schools were selected because of the following factors, school population, location, and ownership; student gender, Principal gender and whether or not the Principal was a member of a religious congregation. The latter factor was included, as

it provided a means through which the influence on schools of the particular spirituality and tradition of a religious congregation, could be tested in a limited manner.

Table 4.3

## Schools Involved in the Questionnaire Process

| School | School<br>Population | School<br>Location |       | School<br>Ownership |                    | Student<br>Gender |        | Principal<br>Gender |        | Religious<br>Principal |    |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------|-------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|------------------------|----|
|        |                      | City               | Rural | Regional            | Religious<br>Order | Male              | Female | Male                | Female | Yes                    | No |
| 1      | 1000 -1500           | *                  |       | *                   |                    | *                 | *      | *                   |        |                        | *  |
| 2      | 1000 -1500           | *                  |       |                     | *                  | *                 |        | *                   |        | *                      |    |
| 3      | 500 -1000            | *                  |       |                     | *                  |                   | *      |                     | *      | *                      |    |
| 4      | 500 -1000            |                    | *     |                     | *                  | *                 | *      | *                   |        | *                      |    |
| 5      | 500 - 1000           |                    | *     | *                   |                    | *                 | *      | *                   |        | *                      |    |
| 6      | 500 - 1000           |                    | *     | *                   |                    | *                 | *      | *                   |        |                        | *  |
| 7      | < 500                |                    | *     | *                   |                    | *                 | *      | *                   |        |                        | *  |

The factors listed here, enabled the research to be carried out by a balanced and representative sample of middle secondary school adolescents. The first factor addressed the size of the schools involved and ensured that a range of schools, from small to large, was represented. Two of the schools had populations between one thousand to one thousand five hundred students; four had populations between five hundred and one thousand students and one school had fewer than five hundred students. The second factor was the location of the school. Care was taken to involve schools in the capital city, on the urban-rural fringe, and in the country. Three of the schools were located in Melbourne and four were in rural areas, including one on the urban-rural fringe. The third

factor related to schools concerned school ownership. Three of the schools were owned by religious congregations and four were regional schools owned by parishes.

The other three factors were related to the students and the Principals. The first of these concerned the gender of the students, and the second, the gender of the Principals. Five of the schools involved were co educational and one was a boys', and another a girls' school. Six of the Principals were male and one female. The final factor considered whether or not the Principals were members of a religious congregation or not. Three of them were religious and four were lay people.

The questionnaire was to have been given to two hundred middle adolescents in five Catholic secondary schools in Victoria, however an additional two rural schools were invited to participate in order to maintain the balance between the number of rural and urban students involved. This became necessary because some of the schools were not able to arrange the participation of 200 students on the pre-arranged date. Unexpected situations arose such as school rituals, community service activities, sporting functions and student illness, which prevented students being available to complete the questionnaire. The increased number of schools participating in the research, added greater validity to the findings of the questionnaire. The following table lists the number of participants surveyed in each school.

Table 4.4

*Number of Participants Surveyed in Each School*

| School number | Number of participants |
|---------------|------------------------|
| 1             | 139                    |
| 2             | 164                    |
| 3             | 189                    |
| 4             | 147                    |
| 5             | 58                     |
| 6             | 155                    |
| 7             | 148                    |

## The Questionnaire Used in the Research

The questionnaire (Appendix A) consisted of 112 questions and was presented in six sections. It was prefaced by a background information section which asked participants about their year level, gender, year of birth and number of siblings. It also asked questions to elicit participants' ethnic and religious background.

The questionnaire used the two main forms of research questioning, closed items (91 questions) and open-ended items (19 questions). Two of the questions can be considered as both closed and open, in the sense that although participants were asked open-ended questions, they could also prioritise their responses through circling a number on the Likert scale. For example, in response to Question 60: "The...at school (leads me to think about God)", a participant might complete the sentence with "the liturgies", then circle number 4 on the scale to indicate that this was "often" the case. The advantage of this technique was that it allowed the participants the freedom to state a factor that may have been overlooked in the closed questions. It also allowed the participant to indicate the degree of influence of this factor.

All the closed items used the same form of Likert scale. Wiersma (1991) defined a Likert scale in the following terms:

*A Likert scale* is a scale with a number of points that provide ordinal scale measurement. A set of related responses, one for each point, is provided. Response is made by checking a point or circling a letter representing a point on the scale. When summarizing the results, these points are assigned numerical values, 1 to 5 or 0 to 4, which can be totalled over a number of items that concern the same issue or topic (Wiersma, 1991, p. 177).

In Sections B-F a Likert scale of 1-5 (never to always) was used and students were asked to circle the number that best matched the statements they were given.

The use of both forms of questions in this research enabled the style of question to be matched to the purpose of the question, thus enhancing the validity of the results. The use of both styles of questioning also enabled the same area to be probed in a variety of ways, and the similarities and differences in the responses to be compared. Thus the weight of replies, which led to clear conclusions, also brought credibility to the findings. The following table (Table 4.5) indicates the sections in which open or closed questions were used. The questions in each section sought through a variety of approaches, to discover the images of God of the participants, which was the general aim of the study. Some of the sections have similar headings, for example, Sections A and B, however the emphasis and the style of questioning were different. The decision regarding which questioning style to adopt, whether open or closed, was dependent on the purpose of each section.

Table 4.5

*Research Questions in Present Study*

| Section    | Closed Items | Open-ended   | Closed & Open |
|------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Section A  | 0            | 17           | 0             |
| Section B  | 15           | 0            | 0             |
| Section C  | 17           | 0            | 0             |
| Section D  | 39           | 0            | 2             |
| Section E  | 15           | 1            | 0             |
| Section F  | 5            | 1            | 0             |
| Total: 112 | 91 Questions | 19 Questions | 2 Questions   |

Some of the questions also asked the participants to indicate reasons for their responses. This technique was adopted as an additional means of ensuring that the responses were interpreted correctly and that conclusions were valid. It also added depth to the participants' responses. The frequency with which reasons were sought in each section is recorded in the following table (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

*Questions seeking Reasons for Response*

| Section              | Number of Questions |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Section A            | 4                   |
| Section B            | 8                   |
| Section C            | 0                   |
| Section D            | 0                   |
| Section E            | 0                   |
| Section F            | 0                   |
| Total: 112 Questions | Total: 12 Questions |

The headings of each section were similar in style for ease of comprehension by the participants. The language use was as simple and brief as possible, so that the focus of each section would be clear. This is shown in Table 4.7. Section B is similar to Section

A, in that they are both focused on "thoughts about God", however Section B emphasises the invitation for participants to give their own personal responses. Sections C, E and F use the same structure as Section A: "Some ... about God".

---

Table 4.7

Section Headings

---

| Section   | Headings                            |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| Section A | Some thoughts about God.            |
| Section B | The way <i>you</i> think about God. |
| Section C | Some words about God.               |
| Section D | Reminders of God.                   |
| Section E | Some statements about Jesus Christ. |
| Section F | Some statements about God.          |

---

Twelve of the questions asked participants to give reasons for their responses. Such questions enabled some of the factors shaping the participants' images of God to be identified.

Section A of the questionnaire was entitled "Some Thoughts About God" and asked participants seventeen questions about God, four of which also asked them to give reasons for their answers. The open-ended questions were framed with sentence starters to be completed by the participants. Section B: "Some Words about God", focused on the way in which participants thought about God. It sought to identify the participants' images of God by the use of a different survey technique. In so doing, the findings of Section A were reinforced and amplified. Closed item questions were used and a Likert scale of 1-5 (never to always) was used and students were asked to circle the number that best matched the statements they were given. Participants were also asked to give reasons for eight of their answers, which was more than for any other section. This was done in

order to avoid misinterpretation, to provide depth to participants' responses, and to allow any differences to emerge as to the reasons why individuals responded in the same way, to a given statement.

Closed item questions were also used in Section C: "The Way *You* Think of God". Here, however, instead of statements, participants were given single words or brief descriptors of God and were asked to circle the number that best matched descriptions of God. The same Likert scale was used as in Section B. The same techniques were used in Section D: "Reminders of God", where single words, or brief descriptors of factors that led them to think about God were given, and participants were asked them to circle the number that best matched the description. An open-ended question was "fill-in-the-gap" in style and asked students to state the factor that led them to think about God.

Section E was entitled "Some Statements about Jesus Christ" and gave participants fifteen statements about Jesus Christ, asking them to circle the number that best matched the description. Once again the same Likert scale was used as in the previous sections. An open-ended question was asked, inviting participants to state their two favourite images of Jesus. The final section, Section F was entitled "Some Statements about God" and gave participants five statements about God, asking them to circle the number that best matched the description given. The same Likert scale was used. Once more an open-ended question was fill-in-the-gap in style, and asked students to state the image of God that they mostly had when they prayed.

The questions in each section emerged from the scriptural and theological background presented in Chapter Two. The scriptural section explored the literature about God's relationship with Israel in the Old Testament and the way in which the Hebrews' life experiences led to the formation of their images of God. In the New Testament, the images of God revealed by Jesus Christ in his life, ministry, death and resurrection were

explored, particularly those presented in the parables of the Synoptic Gospels. The theological section of Chapter Two explored the Revelation of God through Jesus Christ, through nature and through everyday life. It also examined the images of God presented in the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995).

Some of the closed questions (Sections B-F) were designed to identify whether or not a correlation existed between scriptural and theological images of God and those of the participants. For example, the first seven questions of Section B asked participants the frequency with which they thought of God using some of images from the Old Testament such as "protector", "creator", "powerful one", "judge", "rewarder" and "punisher". Descriptors of Jesus Christ in the New Testament were also used to identify the frequency with which the participants thought of him in scriptural terms: "Son of God", "Good Shepherd", "Lord", "the Way, the Truth and the Life" and "Light of the World."

The theological range of images noted in Chapter Two influenced the content of the questions as they emphasised that it is possible to experience God in the everyday experiences of life. This led to the inclusion in the questionnaire of questions asking participants to state their "thoughts about God" (Section A) in general, and their own personal ideas about God "the way *you* think of God" (Section B). Hence certain questions throughout the questionnaire sought responses from the participants' life experiences.

Some of the questions sought to identify the extent to which participants' supported the two foundational teachings of Christian theology, namely, the Trinitarian nature of God and the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Section F was focused solely on the former asking questions about the Trinity (Q107), as well as single questions about God as Father (Q108), God the Son (Q109) and God the Holy Spirit (Q110). Section E was focused solely on statements about Jesus Christ, two of which were related to the

incarnation: "I think of Jesus as the Son of God" (Q99); "I think of Jesus as the Son of Mary" (Q100).

### Trials

Trials of the questionnaire were conducted in three schools in order to test the kinds of questions to be used, the clarity of the questions and the method of administration of the questionnaire. Such trials of questionnaires are endorsed by researchers such as Wiersma (1991) who stated that "a *pilot run* of the items provides the opportunity to identify confusing and ambiguous language, and to obtain information about possible results" (p. 177). He added:

The group used for the pilot run need not be a random sample of prospective respondents, but the members of the group should be familiar with the variables under study *and* should be in a position to make valid judgements about the items (Wiersma, 1991, p. 177).

In the present study, the groups used for the trials were not "a random sample of prospective respondents" but they were "familiar with the variables under study" and were able "to make valid judgements about them" (Wiersma, 1991, p. 177). This is because the questionnaire was given to a group of middle adolescents in two schools, large and small, urban and rural. On completion of the questionnaire, the questions were discussed with the participants and points were made about factors such as question style, clarity, length and degree of difficulty. Such discussions led to changes in some of the questions and the addition of new ones. This process supports Wiersma's (1991) comment:

On the basis of the pilot run results, necessary revisions should be made for the final form of the questionnaire. Besides eliminating ambiguities and clarifying directions, a pilot run can avoid results that provide little or no information (Wiersma, 1991, p. 178)

In general, the students' positive approach to the survey, and the ease with which most were able to give responses, indicated that there were no significant problems as regards the suitability of the questions. Their comments and those of the staff who were present during the trial process, were consistent with there being no major problems with either format. Typical comments of the participants were: "It was hard but it made you think"; "It was enjoyable and interesting"; "I'm really glad to have done it"; "It raised questions you don't often think about"; "It was harder than the science test we did this morning but it was good to do".

The relationship of the participants with their class teacher emerged as an unexpected influence on the participants' approach to the questionnaire. In this connection, Wiersma (1991) commented that: "Essentially, individuals will respond to questionnaires if the perceived cost of responding (in terms of time and effort) is low relative to the perceived reward" (p. 171). Where the class teacher was positively disposed towards the survey, it created interest among the participants and helped to foster a positive attitude and lessened any "perceived cost".

#### The Pre Administration Period

Ethical clearance for the survey was gained from Australian Catholic University (Appendix B). Written permission was given by the Directors of Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the Diocese of Sale, to conduct the survey in the schools in their dioceses (Appendix C). It was also given by the Principals of the participating schools, and by the parents of the participants (Appendix D).

These steps are consistent with recognised ethical codes for research as outlined by Burns (1997) who stated that in the ethics of research informed consent is "the most fundamental ethical principle that is involved. Participants must understand the nature

and purpose of the research and must consent to participate without coercion" (p. 18). To ensure that the participants gave informed consent, the questionnaire was administered in person by the researcher in each of the schools, with a teacher present. A written statement as to the nature, purposes and duration of the research was given to each participant (Appendix E), and the researcher also briefly described them. Before beginning the survey, each participant was invited to complete a consent form (Appendix F), and to ask any related questions.

Babbie (1990) distinguished between anonymity and confidentiality: "A respondent can be considered *anonymous* when you yourself cannot identify a given response with a given respondent.... In a *confidential* survey, you are able to identify a given person's responses but essentially promise that you will not" (p. 342). According to this distinction, the information gained from the participants was anonymous, for although the questionnaires were numbered, the identity of the participants was not indicated. They were numbered to ensure that the projected number of students from each school had completed the questionnaire, so that the factors presented in Table 4.3 would be included. Numbering also meant that quotations and references to the data could be made during the process of analysis. Burns (1997) highlighted the importance of privacy and confidentiality (1997):

Confidentiality involves a clear understanding between researcher and participant concerning the use to be made of the data provided. It is extremely important to ensure that responses to personal questions ... are confidential and anonymous so that the reader of the research would be unable to deduce the identity of the individual (Burns, 1997, pp. 20-21).

The researcher debriefed participants by inviting comments about the questionnaire. Informal comments were made, and questions were asked by individuals and small groups at the conclusion of these processes.

## Analysis of Results

Babbie (1990) defined validity as "the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the *real meaning* of the concept under consideration" (p. 31). De Vaus (1991) gives the simpler definition of "a valid measure is one which measures what it is intended to measure" (p. 55). The *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)* program was used because of its ability to process the large quantity of information generated by the 112 questions responded to by 1000 participants. The program not only enabled the findings of the questionnaire to be measured, but also for the "real meaning" behind the findings to be analysed. Wiersma (1991) saw a distinction between internal and external validity:

Validity involves two concepts simultaneously: the extent to which the results can be accurately interpreted and the extent to which the results can be generalized to populations and conditions. The former concept is called *internal validity*, and the latter is called *external validity* (Wiersma, 1991, p. 4)

Wiersma (1991) considered that "internal validity is a prerequisite for external validity. However, internal validity does not ensure external validity" (p. 5). In the present study, "internal validity" exists, because the results of the questionnaire can be "accurately interpreted". The size of the questionnaire sample also means that there is a high probability that the results can be generalised to other schools and students, particularly other Australian Catholic secondary schools. Further research with other groups of adolescents would verify this claim.

The *SPSS* program is a software package which can be used to analyse qualitative and quantitative data, and as a database and spreadsheet. Its capacity to process large quantities of data suited the needs of the present study, with its large volume of data generated by the questionnaire. The program enabled the data findings to be presented in a variety of ways, and correlations between various factors to be presented.

The responses to the questionnaire given in numerical form were directly entered into the data bank, and the written responses were coded then given a numerical form. The codes were arrived at by the researcher, in consultation with colleagues, who also worked on particular collections of data to determine codes.

Variable labels were given to written responses and reasons for responses. For example, the value labels given to responses to Question 6 are given in Table 4.8: *Question 6: The person that best represents an image I have of God is...? This is because...?*

---

Table 4.8

*Value Labels: Question 6*

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| Value labels qa6a# |                |
|--------------------|----------------|
| 1.                 | "Priest"       |
| 2.                 | "Jesus"        |
| 3.                 | "Parents"      |
| 4.                 | "Famous"       |
| 5.                 | "Family"       |
| 6.                 | "Pope"         |
| 7.                 | "Sport Heroes" |
| 8.                 | "Good People"  |
| 9.                 | "Teachers"     |
| 10.                | "Other"        |
| 11.                | "Nothing"      |
| 12.                | "Missing"      |

---

The second part of this question, "This is because" asked the reason for this choice. These reasons were grouped under various headings according to similarity of reason given. Table 4.9 is an example of this method. It lists the reasons given for the responses to Question 6. The headings were decided upon according to frequency of response, and the reasons were listed under headings to which there was a link.

Table 4.9

*Reasons for Responses to Question 6*

| God-Like    | God's Son | Loving    | Powerful   | Religious | Good      | Forgiving   | Helps   | Unique   | Other    |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|---------|----------|----------|
| God-like    | God's Son | Loving    | Powerful   | Bible     | Good      | Forgiving   | Helps   | Unique   | Sky      |
| God's Place |           | Friendly  | Admire     | Catholic  | Dedicated | Honest      | Listens | Precious | Old-man  |
| God's Work  |           | Generous  | Hero       | Faith     | Excellent | Trust       | Tries   |          | Punisher |
|             |           | Kind      | Leader     | Mass      | Best      | Understands | Wise    |          | Children |
|             |           | Caring    | Mysterious | Nun       | Holy      |             |         |          | Father   |
|             |           | Nice      | Respect    | Priest    | Perfect   |             |         |          | No-God   |
|             |           | Sacrifice | Tall       | Prays     |           |             |         |          | Within   |
|             |           |           |            | Spirit    |           |             |         |          | Human    |

Some of the responses could have been placed under several headings, so their categorisation was dependent on the context of the response as a whole. This included consideration being given to the response to the first part of the question, as well as the reason given for the choice. For example, reasons such as "generous", "kind" and "caring" were categorised under the heading of "loving".

### Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology for the research reported in this thesis. It is a quantitative study, which uses both open and closed questions, in order to provide a wide sample of the thinking of middle secondary school adolescents. It enabled a large number of questions to be asked in a variety of ways, in order to enhance the validity of the findings.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the questionnaire in regard to the participants' images of God, including reference to the key formative factors shaping their images of

God. In this, it responds directly to the first and second and fourth aims of the study. These aims were to identify the need for additional data on the images of God of Australian Catholic youth, to identify where the images of God of the middle adolescents are located within a comprehensive spectrum of images of God in Catholic theology and to report on some of the formative factors that may have influenced middle adolescents' images of God.

Chapter Six provides an analysis of the data that was gathered in the research. In doing so, it also responds to a further aim of the study, which was to explore the extent to which the data on middle adolescents' images of God harmonise or question findings from existing research on images of God. Chapter Seven addresses the final aim of the study, which was to consider implications of the findings for youth spirituality and religious education. Additional implications and recommendations emerging from the data analysis are also presented.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings of the research, and these are discussed and analysed in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven summarises all finding and draws recommendations from them. The structure of Chapter Five follows that of the questionnaire (Table 5.1).

---

Table 5.1

*Questionnaire: Section Headings*

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| Chapter 5 | Section Headings of Questionnaire              |
|-----------|--|
| 5.2       | Background Information                         |
| 5.3       | Section A: Some thoughts about God.            |
| 5.4       | Section B: The way <i>you</i> think about God. |
| 5.5       | Section C: Some words about God.               |
| 5.6       | Section D Reminders of God.                    |
| 5.7       | Section E: Some statements about Jesus Christ. |
| 5.8       | Section F: Some statements about God.          |

---

### Background Information

Information concerning the participants' background is given in this section, providing a context for the interpretation of the data findings, and opportunities for the correlation of background factors with the findings. The questionnaire was delivered to five percent more Year Ten than Year Nine participants (Q1) and there were ten percent

more girls than boys involved (Q2). Eighty-two percent of participants were 15 years old or more at the time of the survey (1998) (Q3).

---

Table 5.2

*Student Class Level and Gender*

---

| Class Level | Frequency | Percent of total participants |
|-------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Year 9      | 526       | 52.6                          |
| Year 10     | 474       | 47.4                          |

---

| Gender | Frequency | Percent of total Participants |
|--------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| Female | 547       | 54.7                          |
| Male   | 452       | 45.2                          |

---



---

Table 5.3

*Student Age*

---

| Year Born | Frequency | Percent of Total Participants |
|-----------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| 81        | 10        | 1.0                           |
| 82        | 296       | 29.6                          |
| 83        | 511       | 51.1                          |
| 84        | 181       | 18.1                          |
| Missing   | 2         | 0.2                           |

---

The participants described their homes as "usually" being happy, and 21% thought of them as "always" being happy (Q18). Approximately one third of the participants had no sibling, although most had at least one, and almost one third had two or more (Q4).

---

Table 5.4

*Students' Siblings*

---

| Number of Siblings | Number with Sisters | Percent of Sisters | Number with Brothers | Percent of Brothers |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 0                  | 333                 | 33.3               | 313                  | 31.3                |
| 1                  | 419                 | 41.9               | 408                  | 40.8                |
| 2                  | 177                 | 17.7               | 193                  | 19.3                |
| 3                  | 49                  | 4.9                | 48                   | 4.8                 |
| 4                  | 16                  | 1.6                | 27                   | 2.7                 |
| 5                  | 5                   | 0.5                | 9                    | 0.9                 |
| 6                  | 1                   | 0.1                | 1                    | 0.1                 |
| 7                  | 0                   | 0.0                | 1                    | 0.1                 |

---

A majority of participants and their parents were born in Australia (Q5, Q6, Q7), had lived there most of their lives (Q8) and English (83%) was the main language used in the home (Q9). Most described themselves as city-dwellers (Q10) who had never lived in the country (Q11). This reflects the fact that there were more participants from city schools than country schools.

Table 5.5

*Parents' Countries of Origin*

|              | Percent born in Australia | Other countries of origin |
|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Participants | 81.7                      | 36                        |
| Mothers      | 54.6                      | 52                        |
| Fathers      | 53.5                      | 54                        |

The main differences in the parents' occupations were in the unemployed and skilled areas (Q15, Q16).

Table 5.6

*Parents' Occupation*

| Occupation   | Percent of fathers | Percent of mothers |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Unemployed   | 6.1                | 20.0               |
| Unskilled    | 15.0               | 19.3               |
| Skilled      | 43.6               | 24.8               |
| Clerical     | 14.3               | 10.9               |
| Technical    | 5.4                | 1.1                |
| Professional | 9.0                | 16.4               |
| Missing      | 6.6                | 7.5                |

The participants and their parents were predominantly Catholic or other Christian (Q12, Q13, Q14). Homes reflected this religious culture as sixty percent of them displayed religious objects (Q17).

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Table 5.7

*Religious Affiliation*

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|              | Catholic | Orthodox | Other<br>Christian | Non-<br>Christian | No<br>Religion | Missing |
|--------------|----------|----------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------|
| Participants | 74.5     | 1.7      | 9.6                | 3.6               | 9.6            | 1.0     |
| Mothers      | 68.5     | 2.2      | 14.7               | 6.1               | 6.9            | 1.6     |
| Fathers      | 59.1     | 2.0      | 15.0               | 6.6               | 14.9           | 2.4     |

---

*Note:* Figures in percentages

Indicators of the participants' religious practice were the frequency with which they reported praying and attending Mass/Church. The group was evenly divided between those who reported that they prayed and those who did not (Q19). A large majority rarely attended Mass/Church (Q20). These findings are consistent with a secularised group (Keary, 1968) and may suggest that their responses to the questionnaire may reflect the influence of secularisation and a privatisation of faith. The findings are also consistent with the findings of the *ACS*, which found that for most Australians, particularly young people, belief in God did not lead to church attendance:

Those under 40 years are under-represented in Catholic Church life. Further, younger Catholic Mass attenders are less likely to attend as regularly as those who are older (Kaldor et al., 1999, p. 37).

Table 5.8

*Participants' Religious Practice*

|              | Percentage frequency of<br>prayer |             | Percentage<br>frequency of church<br>attendance |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Never        | 16.7                              | Rarely      | 58.9  |
| Hardly Ever  | 34.3                              | Monthly     | 8.8   |
| Weekly       | 14.3                              | Twice Month | 9.1   |
| Several Days | 13.9                              | Weekly      | 21.2  |
| Every Day    | 20.5                              | Twice Week  | 1.6   |
| Missing      | 0.3                               | Missing     | 0.4   |

This background information section has created a context for the presentation of the findings of the questionnaire which now follows.

## Section A: Participants' Thoughts About God

*Participants' Thoughts and Feelings About God (Questions 1, 2)*

Table 5.9

*Question 1: Participants' Thoughts About God*

| Thoughts about God | Percent of total participants |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Religion           | 18.5                          |
| Powerful           | 16.2                          |
| Loving             | 14.8                          |
| Human              | 8.7                           |
| Creator            | 8.2                           |
| Abstract           | 7.4                           |
| Above              | 6.5                           |
| Father             | 5.4                           |
| Missing            | 5.1                           |
| Jesus              | 4.6                           |
| Other              | 3.5                           |
| Nothing            | 1.1                           |

Most participants equated "God" with "religion" (19%), "powerful" (16%) and "loving" (15%). Seven percent of them thought of God in specifically non-anthropomorphic or "abstract" terms such as "spirit" and "light". The category of "powerful" included images of God as a ruler, watcher, king and leader. There were references to God's presence, kindness, goodness, happiness and peace, and these were

categorised as "love". It is unclear whether the references to a "man" described as good, loving and kind, were intended to be applied to God or to Jesus. However, as the question was about God, the responses have been categorised as such.

---

Table 5.10

*Question 2: Feelings about God*

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| Feelings about God | Percent of total participants |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Happy              | 22.5                          |
| Nothing            | 18.2                          |
| Safe               | 16.4                          |
| Confused           | 8.2                           |
| Good               | 7.8                           |
| Missing            | 7.0                           |
| Loved              | 6.5                           |
| Peaceful           | 4.7                           |
| Negative           | 3.6                           |
| Wonder             | 3.3                           |
| Close              | 1.5                           |
| Other              | 0.3                           |

---

Most participants stated that they felt "happy" (23%) when they thought about God. This finding was supported by similar responses such as "good", "peaceful" and "safe". A large number reported feeling "nothing" about God (18%) and a third had negative, confused or indifferent feelings when they thought about God.

One third of the participants had negative, confused or indifferent feelings about God. For example, one participant commented that she felt "emotions mixed in a bumbling ocean of waves" (N79). Another commented that: "If you're wondering why I'm feeling this way it's because life's (-)! Or else why would my parents split up!" (N75).

Sounds and Actions Associated With God (Questions 3,4);  
Times when God is Close (Question 5)

Table 5.11

*Questions 3, 4: Sounds and Actions Associated With God*

| Sounds Associated<br>With God | Percent of<br>Total Participants | Actions Associated<br>With God | Percent of Total<br>Participants |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Music                         | 25.5                             | Praying                        | 28.7                             |
| Missing                       | 15.5                             | Missing                        | 17.0                             |
| Silence                       | 11.9                             | Ritual Action                  | 12.0                             |
| Storm                         | 8.1                              | Loving                         | 10.6                             |
| Birds                         | 7.8                              | Sign of the Cross              | 9.6                              |
| Water                         | 6.4                              | Helping                        | 6.0                              |
| Wind                          | 6.3                              | Power                          | 4.4                              |
| Religious                     | 6.2                              | Human Action                   | 3.7                              |
| Noise                         | 4.6                              | Nature                         | 3.7                              |
| Nature                        | 3.9                              | Nothing                        | 2.2                              |
| Nothing                       | 3.5                              | Peace                          | 1.8                              |
| Other                         | 0.3                              | Other                          | 0.3                              |

Most participants indicated that they associated God with "music" (26%). The next most frequent response was "silence" (12%). There were also many references to nature and religion.

Religious actions (50%) were most frequently reported in association with God (Question 4), and these included praying, ritual action and making the sign of the cross. References to positive actions and experiences were also made, but only half as frequently (22%). They included actions such as loving (11%) and helping (6%). These positive actions could also be categorised under other headings such as "loving" and "religious".

Participants reported that they felt close to God (Question 5) during experiences associated with religion such as praying (38%) and being in Church (24%). There were many references to the abstract images of "light" including fire, candles and sunrise and "life", including creation, new life and growing.

Table 5.12

*Question 5: Times God is Close*

---

| Times God is close | Percent of total participants |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Praying            | 37.8                          |
| Church             | 23.5                          |
| Missing            | 7.5                           |
| Need               | 6.0                           |
| Sad                | 5.9                           |
| Alone              | 5.7                           |
| Happy              | 4.2                           |
| Nothing            | 3.3                           |
| Good               | 2.8                           |
| Other              | 1.4                           |
| Nature             | 1.3                           |
| School             | 0.6                           |

---

*Symbols Associated With God (Questions 6-9)*

Questions 6-9 can be considered under the heading of "symbols associated with God". These questions asked participants to indicate the person, plant or tree, animal, and building that best represented images of God for them.

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Table 5.13

*Question 6: Persons Like God*

---

| Persons like God | Percent of total participants |
|------------------|-------------------------------|
| Missing          | 21.8                          |
| Priest           | 16.0                          |
| Parent           | 14.3                          |
| Good People      | 10.1                          |
| Family           | 9.4                           |
| Jesus            | 8.3                           |
| Nothing          | 8.1                           |
| Pope             | 4.4                           |
| Sport Heroes     | 2.7                           |
| Teachers         | 1.9                           |
| Famous           | 1.7                           |
| Other            | 1.3                           |

---

Participants referred to religious figures as the people who best represented God for them. They included priests (16%) and the Pope (4%). There were also references

to Jesus by eight percent of the respondents. Other religious figures such as Mary, Mary Mackillop and Mother Teresa were included in the category of "good people", and references to Zeus, Athena, Buddha and Krishna in the category of "other". The category of "teachers" included the Principal and the religious education teacher. Almost one quarter of the participants reported that parents and family members represented God to them. They often associated qualities of parents with qualities of God, or interpreted qualities of God in terms of their expectations of parents/family.

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Table 5.14

*Question 7: Plant or Tree as an Image of God*

---

| Plants/trees as images of God | Percent of total participants |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Missing                       | 27.6                          |
| Beautiful                     | 16.0                          |
| Large                         | 13.9                          |
| Native                        | 12.6                          |
| Biblical                      | 10.4                          |
| Other                         | 5.3                           |
| Christmas                     | 4.7                           |
| Nothing                       | 3.2                           |
| Small                         | 2.4                           |
| Fruit                         | 1.8                           |
| Young                         | 1.4                           |
| Rare                          | 0.7                           |

---

There was a uniform distribution of answers to the question inviting participants to give a symbol of a plant or tree that they considered best represented their image of God. The most frequently occurring responses were "beautiful" and "large". Juxtaposition of opposites occurred in the responses, for example "large and small", "young and old". Some of the reasons given for the choice of symbol were that it was "powerful" or "religious". Other reasons are listed in Table 5.15.

---

Table 5.15

*Plants as Images of God: Participants' Comments*

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| Plant      | Reason for Choice   |
|------------|---|
| Any flower | The majority are small and simple and most of the time not noticed but they are beautiful (N315).   |
| Apple      | Apple trees are so juicy with life (N465).  |
| Fern       | It's plain, elegant and simple (N116).  |
| Gum        | It is strong. It's a home for some animals and provides them with food (N456).  |
| Rose       | Sometimes I can be afraid of him like thorns, but when I think about him and life and death, I feel loved like the feeling I get when I smell a rose's fragrance and look at it (N79) |
| Weed       | It is free and goes where it wants to (N177).   |
| Willow     | It seems to have no other purpose in life than making us feel peaceful (N149)   |

---

The significance of the large number of "missing" responses will be discussed in the following chapter. It may indicate that the participants had never have thought of God in such symbolic terms. It may also indicate that some of the participants who did respond, did so through a sense of autosuggestion, that is, they responded with whatever word was triggered in them by the question. If this is true, it means that the results must be treated cautiously, as these responses may not reflect the ways in which the participants usually thought about God.

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Table 5.16

***Question 8: An Animal as an Image of God***

---

| Animals as Images of God | Percent of Total Participants |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Birds                    | 28.7                          |
| Missing                  | 23.1                          |
| Powerful                 | 17.3                          |
| Domestic                 | 9.3                           |
| Gentle                   | 7.5                           |
| Biblical                 | 4.5                           |
| Other                    | 3.2                           |
| Nothing                  | 2.4                           |
| Small                    | 1.9                           |
| Speedy                   | 1.3                           |
| Slow                     | 0.5                           |
| Rare                     | 0.3                           |

---

Most participants mentioned "birds" as the animal that best represented an image of God to them (29%), followed by animals that were "powerful" (17%). Opposites such as "powerful and gentle", "large and small", "speedy and slow" were also included. The following table indicates some of the reasons for the participants' choice of symbol.

---

Table 5.17

*Animals as Images of God: Participants' Comments*

---

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Ants       | They are everywhere like God (N314); no one really cares about it (N315).   |
| Birds      | They fly above the world; can see everything; are symbols of freedom (N37). |
| Dove       | Plain and white and holy (N489).  |
| Eagle      | They are high fliers who have a powerful majesty about them (N495).         |
| Mole       | You hardly ever see them (N365).  |
| Polar bear | He may be silent you know he is there with a powerful presence (N63).       |
| Snake      | It's dangerous like God. (N280).  |
| Wild boar  | He's on the rampage! (N99).   |

---

"Religious" buildings such as churches and chapels (63%) were most frequently reported as the buildings that best represented an image of God to the participants. Non-Christian places of worship were also included. Powerful size (11%) was often associated with these images, for example, a variety of skyscrapers and large monuments were included (Table 5.18).

Table 5.18

*Question 9: A Building as an Image of God*

| Buildings as Images of God | Percent of Total Participants |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Religious                  | 63.1                          |
| Missing                    | 16.3                          |
| Big                        | 10.7                          |
| Home                       | 2.4                           |
| Nothing                    | 2.2                           |
| Empire State Building      | 1.4                           |
| Other                      | 1.2                           |
| School                     | 1.0                           |
| Eiffel Tower               | 0.8                           |
| Leaning Tower of Pisa      | 0.4                           |
| Hospital                   | 0.3                           |
| Statue of Liberty          | 0.2                           |

The main reason for the participants' choice of a religious building was that they considered it to be "God's place" where "God was present". Some of their comments are included in the following table.

Table 5.19

*Churches as Images of God: Participants' Comments*


---

I feel his presence when I'm there (N496).

I feel that God is there listening to me (N206).

A time when we can be alone with God without interruption (N373).

Holy and everyone likes it (N475).

Although it is old it is still respected and everyone still comes (N193).

---

Such responses reinforced the positive attitude to God evident in earlier responses, and indicated that participants also had a positive attitude to the Church as a place in which to encounter God. Many comments indicated that they had experienced a sense of the sacred in Church. There were also many references to powerful, large buildings including both ancient buildings and modern skyscrapers. The reasons given for these references were that the Church building stood out, held large crowds, and was respected and important. Other reasons are given in Table 5.20.

Table 5.20

*Large Buildings as Images of God: Participants' Comments*


---

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| A spire                  | It's pretty, big and different every way you look at it (N303) |
| Melbourne Cricket Ground | There's room for everyone (N104)                               |
| The Rialto skyscraper    | It's tall, commanding yet everyone can reach the top (N101)    |

---

The findings here support earlier findings that these adolescents thought of God as "powerful" and associated God with "religion".

Images of God Reportedly Learnt From Parents (Questions 10, 11)

Table 5.21

*Questions 10, 11: Images of God Reportedly Learnt from Parents*

| Key image of God reportedly learnt from mothers (Question 10) | Percent of total mothers | Key image of God reportedly learnt from Fathers (Question 11) | Percent of total fathers |
|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Loving  | 25.5                     | Missing   | 35.3                     |
| Missing   | 24.7                     | Nothing   | 14.3                     |
| Powerful  | 11.5                     | Loving  | 11.6                     |
| Nothing   | 6.8                      | Good  | 10.5                     |
| Good  | 6.4                      | Powerful  | 8.3                      |
| Creator   | 5.9                      | Helpful   | 4.2                      |
| Morality  | 5.5                      | Creator   | 4.0                      |
| Jesus   | 4.3                      | Presence  | 3.0                      |
| Forgiving   | 3.1                      | Jesus   | 2.9                      |
| Religion  | 3.0                      | Forgiving   | 2.4                      |
| Spirit  | 2.4                      | Spirit  | 1.9                      |
| Other   | 0.9                      | Other   | 1.6                      |

The three key images of God that participants believed they had learnt from their parents were the same for both; they were "loving", "powerful" and "good". However the priority order was different. For example, both reported "loving" but in different numbers (mothers: 26%; fathers: 12%).

Participants' Favourite Images of God (Question 12)  
and Words about God (Question 13)

Table 5.22

*Questions 12, 13: Participants' Favourite Images; Words about God*

| Q 12 Images of<br>God | Percent of Total<br>Participants | Q13 Words About<br>God | Percent of Total<br>Participants |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Jesus                 | 19.1                             | Loving                 | 33.1                             |
| Nature                | 18.9                             | Good                   | 16.4                             |
| Loving                | 16.3                             | Peace                  | 13.8                             |
| Religious             | 15.5                             | Powerful               | 10.1                             |
| Dove                  | 7.2                              | Jesus                  | 8.3                              |
| Abstract              | 6.7                              | Forgiving              | 7.9                              |
| Powerful              | 6.3                              | Creator                | 4.3                              |
| Human                 | 3.6                              | Heaven                 | 2.6                              |
| Old Man               | 2.4                              | Spirit                 | 1.7                              |
| Other                 | 2.3                              | Other                  | 1.0                              |
| Nothing               | 1.7                              | Nothing                | 0.8                              |

Table 5.22 shows that the participants' favourite images of God were "Jesus", and images drawn from "nature", "loving" and "religious" (Question 12). Participants made forty-three references to different aspects of nature. The main image was a religious one when the responses of "Jesus" (19%), "dove" (7%) and "old-man" (2%) are added to the "religious" category. The participants' favourite words about God were "loving", "good", "powerful" and associated with "peace" (Question 13). The general attitude towards God was a positive one with "loving" being the most frequently reported descriptor. Some of the participants' comments include the following: "God is always watching over us in love" (N213); "Even if I desert him he will not desert me" (N79); "He is a forgiver and never leaves us. He is always with us through good times and bad" (N361).

In general, these findings support those recording the participants' favourite images of God. However "Jesus" was much more frequently reported as a favourite image than as a favourite word. This may be due to the structure of the question, which asked for a word "about" God. The inclusion of "about" may have been interpreted as requiring a descriptive, adjectival answer.

*The Most Important Thing to Know About God (Question 14)*

Table 5.23

*Question 14: The Most Important Thing to Know About God*

| The most important thing to know<br>about God | Percent of<br>total participants |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Loving  | 32.8                             |
| Existence                                     | 16.4                             |
| Missing                                       | 12.2                             |
| Forgiving                                     | 9.9                              |
| Creator                                       | 8.2                              |
| Helping                                       | 6.4                              |
| Jesus   | 5.6                              |
| Powerful                                      | 4.1                              |
| Good  | 2.9                              |
| Father  | 1.0                              |
| Other   | 0.4                              |
| Nothing                                       | 0.1                              |

Participants responded that in their view, the most important thing to know about God was that God was "loving" (33%). This response was supported by the associated categories of "helping" (6%) and forgiving (10%). The category termed "existence" (16%), included questions about God's existence as well as affirmations that

God was present everywhere. Thus, some of the key things considered to be important to know about God, were that God "existed" and was "forgiving".

*Participants' Images of God at the Age of Ten (Question 15)*

Table 5.24

*Question 15: Participants' Images of God at the Age of Ten*

| Images of God at Age of 10 | Percent of Total Participants |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Powerful                   | 18.6                          |
| Missing                    | 15.9                          |
| Above                      | 13.1                          |
| Loving                     | 8.8                           |
| Father                     | 7.1                           |
| Abstract                   | 6.3                           |
| Human                      | 6.1                           |
| Nothing                    | 5.5                           |
| Good                       | 5.0                           |
| Other                      | 4.9                           |
| Jesus                      | 4.7                           |
| Creator                    | 4.0                           |

The most frequently occurring responses to the question concerning the participants' images of God at the age of ten, were "powerful", "missing", "above" and "loving". The high number of "missing" responses may have been because the students could not remember how they had thought about God at the age of ten.

*Things To Ask God or Say to God (Question 16)*

Table 5.25

*Question 16: Things to Ask God or Say to God*

| Things to say to God | Percent of total participants |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Future               | 21.0                          |
| Love                 | 20.3                          |
| Morality             | 16.5                          |
| God's nature         | 14.6                          |
| Creation             | 10.1                          |
| Thanks               | 8.7                           |
| Purpose              | 3.8                           |
| Good                 | 2.8                           |
| Forgive              | 2.2                           |
| Other                | 1.8                           |
| Jesus                | 0.6                           |
| Nothing              | 0.4                           |

The most frequently occurring responses here, have been grouped under the headings of "love" and "meaning of life". "Love" was linked with "thanks" and "forgiveness". It included expressions of love for God and requests for God's help and protection. The category of "morality" was linked to that of love, and indicated the participants' concern for social justice issues, including the poverty and suffering in the world.

The category of "meaning of life" was related to the "future", including life, death, health and success. The categories of "creation", "purpose" and "God's nature" supported this emphasis as they included questions about God and the meaning of life.

*God's Home (Question 17)*

Table 5.26

*Question 17: God's Home*

| God's Home | Percent of total participants |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| Heaven     | 44.4                          |
| Everyone   | 11.8                          |
| Everywhere | 8.3                           |
| Beyond     | 6.8                           |
| Missing    | 8.0                           |
| Clouds     | 6.3                           |
| Minds      | 6.2                           |
| Building   | 3.9                           |
| Good Place | 1.8                           |
| Other      | 1.0                           |
| Nothing    | 0.8                           |
| Nature     | 0.7                           |

Almost half the participants claimed that God lived in heaven. Some responses such as "clouds" and "beyond", evoked the image of a distant God, while others

emphasised the nearness of God. The latter responses indicated participants' belief that God lived in "everyone", "everywhere", and in our "minds" and "hearts".

#### *Conclusion to Section A*

The responses in this section indicated that most participants thought of God in religious terms, and as being powerful and loving. Most had positive feelings towards God and almost one quarter of them stated that they felt happy when they thought of God. The sounds that they associated with God were "music", "silence" and sounds drawn from "nature". The actions associated with God were religious in nature, and "religious" experiences such as praying and being in church were the times when the participants felt close to God. Participants chose religious figures as people who were images of God for them, and religious buildings were the most frequently reported representations of images of God. Beautiful and large plants were those that the participants considered to best represent plant/tree images of God. Birds were most frequently reported as the animal symbol that best represented God to them. Powerful animals were also frequently reported.

The three main images of God that participants believed that they had learnt from their parents were the same. They were "loving", "powerful" and "good". The participants' favourite images of God were "Jesus", images drawn from "nature", "loving" and "religious". Their favourite words about God were "loving", "good", "powerful" and "peaceful". These responses can be compared with the images of God that the participants' claimed that they had when they were ten. At that age they thought of God as "powerful" and "above".

The participants reported that the most important things to know about God, were that God existed and was loving. Many wanted to express love and thanks to God. The questions that most would like to ask God concerned the future, creation, morality and social justice. Other questions were related to the nature of God and to creation. Almost half the participants stated their belief that God lived in heaven. The findings presented here will be discussed and analysed in the following chapters.

## Section B: "The Way *You* Think of God"

### *Introduction*

In this section, participants were asked to prioritise the extent to which they agreed with given statements.

### *Participants' Responses to Some Images of God (Questions 18-23)*

Table 5.27 indicates the frequency with which participants thought of God as a protector (Q18), a creator (Q19) and as powerful (Q20). The most frequently occurring responses were the images of "creator" and "protector".

---

Table 5.27

*God as a Protector, Creator and as Powerful*

---

|           | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-----------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Protector | 7.4   | 9.8            | 27.5           | 23.5  | 30.8   | 1.0     |
| Creator   | 11.5  | 10.3           | 20.9           | 23.0  | 33.7   | 0.6     |
| Powerful  | 14.7  | 15.6           | 24.3           | 20.1  | 24.3   | 1.0     |

---

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

Questions 21-23 considered the images of God as a judge (Q21), a rewarder (Q22) and a punisher (Q23).

---

Table 5.28

*God as Judge, Rewarder and Punisher*

---

|          | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|----------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Judge    | 19.4  | 20.7           | 27.0           | 16.4  | 15.3   | 1.2     |
| Rewarder | 14.3  | 10.9           | 22.8           | 22.9  | 28.1   | 1.0     |
| Punisher | 37.2  | 19.7           | 24.1           | 8.3   | 9.6    | 1.1     |

---

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

Participants' responses indicated that they not only thought of God as a rewarder (always 28%; often 23%), but they rejected the opposite image of God as a punisher (never 37%; hardly ever 20%).

*Faith and Religious Worship (Questions 24-30)*

This group of questions examined whether participants saw a difference between faith and religious worship. The exploration began by asking participants to indicate the extent to which most people they knew believed in God (Q24).

Table 5.29

*Faith Distribution*

|                                     | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-------------------------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Percent of<br>Total<br>Participants | 3.2   | 12.0           | 33.3          | 31.3  | 18.8   | 1.4     |

The participants considered that most people, at least sometimes, believed in God (83%). This high number supports the findings of the following questions, which explored the extent to which participants saw faith as a value.

Table 5.30

*Faith as a Value*

| Percentage of<br>Responses | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missi<br>ng |
|----------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|-------------|
| Makes Sense                | 13.0  | 12.9           | 27.1           | 23.6  | 22.5   | 0.9         |
| Happy Unbelief             | 4.9   | 6.2            | 17.3           | 19.9  | 49.7   | 2.0         |

A large number of participants agreed that while faith can help a person to make sense out of life (always 23%) it is not necessary for a happy life (always 50%).

Table 5.31

*Interior Faith and Exterior Observance*

| Percentage of<br>Participants' Responses | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|--|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q26 Don't speak of faith                 | 10.8  | 7.3            | 25.4           | 27.6  | 27.4   | 1.5     |
| Q27 Faith not Religion                   | 8.6   | 7.2            | 20.8           | 22.3  | 38.7   | 2.4     |
| Q28 Faith not Mass                       | 5.7   | 2.7            | 13.6           | 24.0  | 53.0   | 1.0     |
| Q29 Faith not Action                     | 8.8   | 11.4           | 28.4           | 23.4  | 24.5   | 3.5     |

Table 5.31 indicates that participants saw a difference between having faith and expressing it, whether through speaking about it (Q26), formally belonging to a religion (Q27), going to Church/Mass (Q28), or allowing faith to inform everyday life (Q29).

*Participants and the Church (Questions 31, 32)*

Table 5.32

*Participants and the Church*

| Percentage of<br>Responses | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some-<br>Times | Often | Always | Missi<br>ng |
|----------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|-------------|
| Images From Church         | 9.4   | 7.1            | 24.2           | 30.5  | 26.5   | 2.3         |
| Church Same As God         | 21.6  | 18.9           | 25.8           | 13.9  | 15.9   | 3.9         |

The table demonstrates that most of the participants' images of God came from the Church (Q31). Despite this figure, 22% of participants did not equate the Church

with God, 19% "hardly ever" did so, and 16% "always" or 14% "often" thought in this way.

### Section C: Some Words About God

#### *Descriptors of God (Questions 33-43)*

The following table presents the participants' responses to single word descriptors of God.

Table 5.33

#### *Descriptors of God*

|                | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|----------------|-------|----------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Loving         | 4.3   | 3.6            | 14.5          | 20.8  | 55.8   | 1.0     |
| Holy           | 4.2   | 2.0            | 9.3           | 13.2  | 70.6   | 0.7     |
| Wise           | 4.6   | 2.6            | 11.7          | 18.8  | 61.5   | 0.8     |
| Beautiful      | 17.2  | 14.7           | 23.2          | 16.8  | 26.8   | 1.3     |
| Powerful       | 5.1   | 3.8            | 11.4          | 16.7  | 62.3   | 0.7     |
| Mysterious     | 6.6   | 4.8            | 17.8          | 18.4  | 51.0   | 1.4     |
| Truthful       | 5.3   | 4.4            | 11.5          | 19.6  | 58.2   | 1.0     |
| Living Forever | 7.3   | 3.7            | 10.3          | 11.6  | 66.0   | 1.1     |
| Peaceful       | 4.7   | 3.6            | 14.0          | 17.3  | 58.9   | 1.5     |
| Masculine      | 22.5  | 12.4           | 22.5          | 15.1  | 24.4   | 3.1     |
| Feminine       | 43.7  | 14.9           | 20.1          | 8.3   | 9.5    | 3.5     |

The most common ways in which participants "always" thought of God were in terms of "holiness" (71%), "living forever", "powerful" (62%) and "wise" (62%). When the category of "often" is added, "holiness" (84%) remains the most frequently occurring descriptor, and the order of the other three descriptors changes to "wise" (80%), "powerful" (79%), and "living forever" (78%). Other qualities ascribed to God such as "truthful" (78%), "loving" (77%) and "peaceful" (76%) were also frequently reported ("always"/ "often").

"Feminine" (44%) was the least common response with almost half the participants never thinking of God in that way. "Masculine" (23%) and "beautiful" (17%) were also rarely reported.

#### *Thoughts About God (Questions 44-49)*

These questions asked participants to rank some phrases describing God. The questions were formatted in personal terms as they were introduced with the phrase: "I think of God as someone..."

Table 5.34

*Thoughts About God*

| Percentage of Responses | Never | Hardly ever | Some-times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-------------------------|-------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q44 Get to Know         | 12.5  | 13.6        | 25.1       | 21.8  | 25.8   | 1.2     |
| Q45 Eternal Life        | 9.4   | 7.8         | 16.3       | 17.2  | 48.0   | 1.3     |
| Q46 Loves Me            | 8.0   | 6.9         | 15.0       | 15.6  | 53.1   | 1.4     |
| Q47 Spirit              | 7.9   | 6.7         | 18.0       | 21.6  | 44.7   | 1.1     |
| Q48 Confused            | 22.0  | 19.4        | 26.8       | 10.3  | 20.7   | 0.8     |
| Q49 Uncertain           | 31.9  | 14.5        | 21.4       | 11.3  | 20.3   | 0.6     |

Most participants "always" thought of God as "someone who loves me" (53%) and someone they wanted "to live with after death" (48%). The image of "Spirit" was also frequently recorded (45%).

## Section D: Reminders of God

*Introduction*

The questions in this section explored the factors that led participants to think about God. It did so by listing some of the possible factors for participants to rank. The findings have been grouped into related areas.

*Good and Evil (Questions 50, 51, 52,62, 73,74,75,76,77,84)*

In this group, factors related to "good" or "evil" have been gathered together for comment. The first eight have been categorised as "good" and the last two as "evil". The participants' responses as listed in Table 5.31, indicated the frequency with which they were led to think about God by each of the following items.

Table 5.35

*Good and Evil*

| Percentage of Responses | Never | Hardly Ever | Some-times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-------------------------|-------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q50 Good People         | 9.1   | 10.5        | 28.2       | 27.3  | 23.8   | 1.1     |
| Q51 My Family           | 12.4  | 14.1        | 28.9       | 21.6  | 21.7   | 1.3     |
| Q52 Friends             | 17.6  | 22.5        | 30.5       | 15.5  | 12.8   | 1.1     |
| Q73 Good Happening      | 13.2  | 13.4        | 24.1       | 22.3  | 24.4   | 2.6     |
| Q74 Success             | 14.0  | 12.6        | 24.6       | 22.2  | 23.5   | 3.1     |
| Q75 Helping             | 10.9  | 13.1        | 25.0       | 23.3  | 25.2   | 2.5     |
| Q76 Doing Good          | 12.7  | 10.6        | 25.7       | 23.7  | 24.8   | 2.5     |
| Q84 Enjoying Sport      | 42.1  | 22.6        | 18.8       | 6.9   | 7.0    | 2.6     |
| Q62 Evil in World       | 21.8  | 15.5        | 26.5       | 15.6  | 18.0   | 2.6     |
| Q77 Doing Wrong         | 26.5  | 21.2        | 23.7       | 13.5  | 12.1   | 3.0     |

There were several frequently occurring factors that "always" led participants to think about God. These included "helping" (25%), "doing good" (25%), "good

happening" (24%), "good people" (24%) and "success" (24%). The combined frequency of the categories of "always", "often" and "sometimes" amounted to the high number of seventy-nine percent. The table also indicates that "family" ("always" 22%) was more likely to lead participants to think about God than "friends" ("always" 13%). This finding is emphasised when the negative frequencies are considered: "family" ("never" or "hardly ever" 27%) and "friends" ("never" or "hardly ever" 40%). "Sport" was not reported as a prominent factor that led participants to think about God ("never" 42%; "hardly ever" 23%) and it also had the least number of responses in the "always" category (7%). The responses to the two categories related to evil, "doing wrong" and "evil in the world", indicated that these categories led a significant number of participants to think about God. This may indicate that dealing with these issues led many participants to think about God, and that such thoughts could be negative or confused.

*Joy and Sorrow (Questions 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71)*

The first seven items in this group refer to experiences of suffering and are categorised as "sorrow", and the last two are times of happiness, categorised as "joy".

Table 5.36

*Joy and Sorrow*

|                     | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q63 Pain            | 13.5  | 14.6           | 30.5          | 18.0  | 21.5   | 1.9     |
| Q64 Own Illness     | 21.4  | 20.5           | 26.4          | 16.8  | 13.2   | 1.7     |
| Q65 Others' Illness | 9.7   | 12.2           | 29.1          | 22.7  | 24.2   | 2.1     |
| Q66 Death           | 6.5   | 6.7            | 14.9          | 22.4  | 47.3   | 2.2     |
| Q67 Own Death       | 11.7  | 8.2            | 18.9          | 21.5  | 37.4   | 2.3     |
| Q70 Fear            | 19.9  | 20.8           | 26.6          | 15.3  | 15.3   | 2.1     |
| Q71 Worry           | 20.1  | 19.7           | 27.0          | 16.2  | 14.6   | 2.4     |
| Q68 Birth           | 12.3  | 14.0           | 25.1          | 22.2  | 24.1   | 2.3     |
| Q69 Own Birth       | 19.8  | 17.7           | 28.0          | 16.5  | 15.9   | 2.1     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

In this group of items, the death of a loved one most often led participants to think about God, ("always" 47%), followed by reflection on one's own death ("always" 37%). Almost 40% of participants "never" or "hardly ever" thought of God as a result of fear or worry.

*The World of Nature (Questions 78,79,80,81,82,83)*

Table 5.37

*The World of Nature*

|                       | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-----------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q78 My Pet            | 33.0  | 19.8           | 21.1           | 11.8  | 10.3   | 4.0     |
| Q79 Nature            | 14.4  | 13.5           | 24.8           | 20.0  | 24.8   | 2.5     |
| Q80 Origins/ Universe | 13.6  | 8.3            | 21.4           | 19.4  | 34.8   | 2.5     |
| Q81 Alien Life        | 23.1  | 14.6           | 24.7           | 16.3  | 18.3   | 3.0     |
| Q82 Wonders/Nature    | 14.7  | 11.3           | 25.4           | 20.2  | 25.8   | 2.6     |
| Q83 Scientific World  | 28.3  | 22.9           | 25.3           | 11.4  | 9.4    | 2.7     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

"The origins of the universe" was the factor that led most participants to think about God ("almost" 35%), followed by the "wonders of the natural world" ("almost" 26%) and "nature" ("always" 25%). This indicates that nature was a key sign of God's presence for the participants.

*Religion and Church (Questions 61, 85, 86)*

Table 5.38

*Religion and Church*

|                 | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-----------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q61 Parish      | 16.0  | 14.6           | 23.6           | 24.2  | 18.7   | 2.9     |
| Q85 Bible       | 11.5  | 8.1            | 17.7           | 21.3  | 37.9   | 3.5     |
| Q86 Mass/Church | 11.7  | 07.4           | 15.1           | 20.0  | 42.1   | 3.7     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

Sixty-two percent of participants "always" or "often" thought of God when attending Mass/Church. Other frequently reported factors that "always" or "often" led participants to think about God were "reading the Bible" (59%) and "belonging to a parish community" (43%). However, 31% of participants "never" or "hardly ever" thought of God as the result of belonging to a parish community.

*The Arts and Media (Questions 53, 54, 55, 56, 72)*

Table 5.39

*The Arts and Media*

|                  | Never | Hardly<br>Ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q53 Music        | 11.1  | 16.7           | 32.5           | 20.2  | 18.0   | 1.5     |
| Q54 Arts         | 12.5  | 16.7           | 31.6           | 23.4  | 14.6   | 1.2     |
| Q55 Film         | 16.1  | 24.1           | 31.9           | 15.2  | 11.6   | 1.1     |
| Q56 Favourite TV | 43.6  | 30.7           | 17.6           | 4.4   | 2.4    | 1.3     |
| Q72 TV News      | 16.1  | 16.6           | 26.3           | 21.2  | 17.3   | 2.5     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

Music and the arts, which included "art", "poetry", "stories" and "plays", were the most frequently reported factors in the category of "the arts and media", which led participants to think about God.

*Reflection and Peace (Questions 87, 88, 89)*

Table 5.40

*Reflection and Peace*

|                     | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q87 Favourite Place | 22.0  | 15.5           | 26.5          | 16.8  | 16.2   | 3.0     |
| Q88 Doing Nothing   | 40.5  | 19.3           | 22.0          | 8.6   | 6.5    | 3.1     |
| Q89 Peace           | 17.8  | 9.1            | 23.2          | 19.4  | 27.4   | 3.1     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

"Peace" was the most frequently reported factor ("always" or "often" 47%) of the three factors of "favourite place", "doing nothing" and "peace" that led participants to think about God. The least reported factor was "doing nothing" ("never" or "hardly ever" 60%).

5.6.8 *School (Questions 57, 58, 59, 60)*

Table 5.41

*School*

|                            | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|----------------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q57 Religious<br>Education | 7.9   | 9.8            | 23.6          | 26.2  | 31.1   | 1.4     |
| Q58 Liturgy                | 8.8   | 9.8            | 22.2          | 28.5  | 29.3   | 1.4     |
| Q59 School<br>Celebrations | 16.4  | 22.0           | 32.8          | 17.9  | 8.9    | 2.0     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

Question 60 asked the participants to name the factor at school that led them to think about God. This question was framed in a different way from the other questions in Section D, with the exception of Question 90, which was also a fill-in-the-gap question. Participants indicated that "Religious Education" classes ("always" 31%) and "liturgies" ("always" 29%) were the factors at school that most frequently led them to think about God.

Table 5.42

*Factors About School*

---

| Factors about school | Percent of total participants |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Missing              | 49.9                          |
| Chapel               | 14.3                          |
| Liturgy              | 9.9                           |
| Teachers             | 7.7                           |
| Classes              | 5.1                           |
| Recreation           | 3.8                           |
| People               | 3.1                           |
| Artwork              | 2.1                           |
| Other                | 1.7                           |
| Prayers              | 1.3                           |
| Atmosphere           | 1.0                           |
| Nothing              | 0.1                           |

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*Factors That Lead Me To Think About God (Question 90)*

The scope of this question was different from Question 60 as it asked participants to name any factor that led them to think about God.

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Table 5.43

*Factors Leading to Thoughts About God*

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| Factors    | Percent of total participants |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| Missing    | 34.5                          |
| Good       | 10.5                          |
| Creation   | 8.7                           |
| People     | 7.5                           |
| Reflection | 7.4                           |
| Church     | 7.3                           |
| Death      | 5.6                           |
| Prayer     | 5.5                           |
| School     | 5.4                           |
| Pain       | 5.4                           |
| Nothing    | 1.7                           |
| Other      | 0.5                           |

---

The high number of "missing" responses to question 60 and 90 indicates that participants may have found this type of question harder to answer than those requiring a circled response to a Likert scale. It may also imply that they were becoming tired.

## Section E: Some Statements About Jesus Christ

Table 5.44

*Descriptors of Jesus Christ*

| Responses in Percentages | Never | Hardly ever | Some-times | Often | Always | Missing |
|--------------------------|-------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q91 Friend               | 12.0  | 14.3        | 23.6       | 19.7  | 26.7   | 3.7     |
| Q92 Healer               | 8.3   | 8.3         | 21.8       | 22.8  | 35.3   | 3.5     |
| Q93 Helper               | 8.0   | 6.4         | 18.4       | 23.8  | 39.4   | 4.0     |
| Q94 Miracle Worker       | 8.9   | 6.2         | 15.8       | 22.0  | 43.6   | 3.5     |
| Q95 Forgiver             | 7.4   | 7.1         | 14.3       | 20.5  | 46.9   | 3.8     |
| Q96 Teacher              | 11.9  | 9.2         | 20.6       | 21.2  | 33.1   | 4.0     |
| Q97 Friend/outcasts      | 12.7  | 9.5         | 23.3       | 20.1  | 30.3   | 4.1     |
| Q98 Concerned/Women      | 19.3  | 13.8        | 26.8       | 17.4  | 18.8   | 3.9     |
| Q99 Son of God           | 5.4   | 4.7         | 10.3       | 13.4  | 62.3   | 3.9     |
| Q100 Son of Mary         | 6.1   | 3.7         | 12.9       | 15.3  | 58.1   | 3.9     |
| Q101 Saves Us            | 11.4  | 9.9         | 18.4       | 18.9  | 37.4   | 4.0     |
| Q102 Good Shepherd       | 15.0  | 11.1        | 22.1       | 17.6  | 30.3   | 3.9     |
| Q103 Lord                | 11.0  | 7.6         | 16.6       | 16.4  | 44.2   | 4.2     |
| Q104 Way, Truth, Life    | 13.9  | 11.0        | 22.3       | 15.4  | 32.9   | 4.5     |
| Q105 Light of World      | 15.5  | 10.6        | 18.9       | 17.9  | 32.2   | 4.9     |

The most frequently reported responses in the "always" category were "Son of God" (62%) and "Son of Mary" (58%). The least frequent response was to the image

of Jesus as someone who was "concerned about the place of women in society" (19%). This factor also had the highest number of participants who "never" thought of Jesus in that way. A later question (Q106) asked participants to list their favourite images of Jesus (Table 5.45).

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Table 5.45

*Favourite Images of Jesus Christ (Q106)*

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| Images of Jesus Christ | Percent of total participants |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Love                   | 16.3                          |
| Cross                  | 14.2                          |
| Young Man              | 13.8                          |
| Saviour                | 13.2                          |
| Miracles               | 12.4                          |
| Infant                 | 10.0                          |
| Helpful                | 6.9                           |
| Other                  | 5.2                           |
| Artwork                | 3.6                           |
| Forgiving              | 2.6                           |
| Nothing                | 1.8                           |

---

There is an emphasis on "love" in these responses. The many references to the "cross" (14%) and "Saviour" (13%) made the latter image, the participants' most

frequently occurring image of Jesus. Images in the category of "young man" included references to Jesus' ministry as well as to his physical appearance.

#### Section F: Some Statements About God

Table 5.46 indicates the frequency with which participants' thought of the images of God listed in the statements.

Table 5.46

*Some Statements About God*

|                                     | Never | Hardly<br>ever | Some-<br>times | Often | Always | Missing |
|-------------------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Q107 Father, Son,<br>Holy Spirit    | 11.3  | 9.6            | 20.6           | 19.9  | 34.1   | 4.5     |
| Q108 God as Father                  | 14.9  | 13.2           | 17.7           | 19.1  | 30.4   | 4.7     |
| Q109 God the<br>Son                 | 12.3  | 12.2           | 20.5           | 18.4  | 31.9   | 4.7     |
| Q110 God the<br>Holy Spirit         | 12.5  | 11.3           | 20.0           | 18.6  | 32.5   | 5.1     |
| Q112 No image of<br>God when I pray | 36.1  | 17.8           | 18.7           | 6.7   | 11.5   | 9.2     |

*Note:* All figures are in percentages

One third of the participants reported that they "always" thought of God in Trinitarian terms (Questions 107-110). The image of God as Father was the least frequently reported Trinitarian image with 15% ("never") and 13% percent ("hardly ever") thinking of God in that way. Question 112 was framed in negative terms, and the responses indicated that most participants had an image of God when they prayed. Question 111 asked the participants to fill-in-the-gap with the image of God that they "mostly" had when they prayed. Table 5.47 lists these images and the frequency with which the participants reported them.

---

Table 5.47

*Prayer Images of God*

---

| Prayer images of God | Percent of total participants |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Helper               | 16.6                          |
| Abstract             | 15.7                          |
| Listener             | 13.3                          |
| Father               | 10.3                          |
| Human                | 9.7                           |
| Spirit               | 7.4                           |
| Jesus                | 7.4                           |
| Nature               | 5.5                           |
| Nothing              | 5.1                           |
| Other                | 4.6                           |
| Powerful             | 4.5                           |

---

The table indicates that the image of God as a "helper" was the most frequently reported image (17%). The image of a "listener" (13%) is linked to it, hence almost one third of the participants thought of God as wanting to assist them. The "helper" was referred to as being watchful, smiling and protective. "Abstract" images were also frequently reported (16%) and "spirit" (7%) is related to this category. However, most of the images were anthropomorphic and referred to images such as "a man in the clouds". Sometimes deceased family members and friends were described as being with this man. Other human images were "father" and "Jesus". The father was usually described as having a beard and a long white robe. In some cases, the image was simply a face or a voice.

### Conclusion

This chapter has presented a summary of the findings of each section of the questionnaire. It has also reported the key features of the background information provided by the participants. It has described the students' thoughts about God and their responses to various words about God. It has indicated some of the factors that participants believed to have shaped their images of God and led them to think about God. It has also described the participants' responses to some statements about Jesus Christ and about God.

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Table 5.48

*The Qualities of God Most Frequently Reported by the Participants*

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Active; Caring; Eternal; Freeing; Good; Healing; Holy; Just; Joyful; Kind; Loving;  
Masculine; Merciful; Peace-loving; Personal; Powerful; Present; Protective; Saving;  
Trustworthy; Transcendent; Understanding; Universal; Wise.

---

This table indicates that the participants believed in an active, holy, loving God who was both present and transcendent. Their religious language used both abstract imagery for God such as "spirit", and anthropomorphic imagery such as "father".

The findings presented here will be discussed and analysed in the following chapter, and the conclusions and recommendations arising from this analysis will be presented in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter will analyse and interpret the data presented in the previous chapter through the exploration of the key themes that have emerged there. It will consider the meaning and significance of these findings against the background of the literature review in Chapter Two and against the scriptural and theological themes contained in Chapter Three. In particular, it will examine participants' reported images of God and the influences that have shaped their spirituality.

### The Influence of Secularisation on the Participants

The participants' responses reflected the influence of secular Western society on young people's spirituality. This is a key theme in the literature of adolescent spirituality. For instance, Kay and Francis (1996) found that over a twenty year period, a decline in Church involvement had increased in the United Kingdom "among pupils aged fourteen to sixteen years. This is where the drift from the churches is most apparent" (p. 43). Australian researchers in this area include Crawford and Rossiter (1991), who claimed that secularisation affected the spiritual search of adolescents. They also considered that significant consequences arose from the privatisation of adolescents' belief and the diminished importance of communal expressions of faith.

There were indicators of the influence of secularisation in the participants' responses to questions about faith and life (Table 5.27, p. 151). However, while participants were divided about the impact of faith on life, overall, sixty percent of participants stated that faith in God did affect everyday life. They thought of God as "good", "mysterious", "powerful", "protective", "worthy of personal commitment" and

"offering meaning in life". One participant commented that "to believe in God is to change a piece of you. Even if it is small the change will grow" (N79). The findings that faith does affect personal life and commitment to others, supports the findings of researchers such as Leavey (1992), who found that middle adolescents were concerned about social justice issues and thought of God as being involved in the world (p. 221).

One third of the participants reported that faith was not needed for happiness in life (Table 5.26, p. 149). They emphasised the importance of personal choice. Some of the reasons they offered for a lack of belief included confusion about God and the many religions in the world. Participants also pointed out that some people did not have faith and others did not know anything about God, Church or religion. Other participants wrote of the need for God, and stated that God offered love, help and a sense of purpose in life. A wide range of opinion was reflected in the participants' comments such as:

God is happiness (N105).

God fills up the empty spaces (N270).

People make their own happiness but God makes it even better (N398).

God is the source of every good (N468).

Different people are amused or made happy by different things (N495).

The responses to the question asking participants if they believed that people could believe in God but not go to Mass or Church (Table 5.27, p. 151) also reflected the influence of secularisation, as 84% of participants agreed with the statement. The responses to this question paralleled those of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that for most Australians, belief in God did not lead to church attendance (p. 27).

Some of the reasons for the participants' views were that they thought Mass was boring, that they had no time to go, or that they were unable to attend. Many wrote that there was no need to go, because God is everywhere and people can pray to God in their

hearts, and in places apart from churches. A typical response was: "As long as you believe and have God in your heart you don't always have to go to Church. Everywhere you go God is with you" (N227). Such responses reflected the findings of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that despite a shift towards more contemporary forms of worship, infrequent attenders or non-attenders perceived worship services to be boring or unfulfilling (p. 57).

However, nine percent of the participants disagreed with the statement, and a further six percent stated that it was undesirable to fail to attend Mass/Church. They considered that there was a need to express faith in daily life and that the Church helped people to do this. Many described the church as "God's place" where God's Word was heard, Communion was given and growth in faith was possible. They also said that people would go to Mass if they were really committed. One participant wrote, "going to Mass is celebrating God's love for us" (N235).

The privatisation of faith is linked to the secularisation of western society. Table 5.27 (p. 151) indicates the importance of individual choice to the participants, as one quarter of them believed that people chose whether or not faith affected their lives. Sixteen percent of respondents considered that faith was a private matter and considered that it was "uncool" to express personal faith in action. A typical comment was that "you connect your life to God in the way you want to" (N359). The responses to questions about whether having faith necessitated belonging to a religion and going to Mass/Church (Table 5.27, p. 151) also emphasised the value participants placed on privacy in the areas of faith and religion. However, twenty-seven percent stated that people needed God and religion, that religion was important and good, and that faith required commitment expressed through religion.

Fourteen percent of respondents thought that there was no need to discuss one's faith, and eleven percent thought that it was undesirable to do so (Table 5.27, p. 151). One reason for this was due to fear of others' reactions. For instance, one participant wrote that people "don't want to admit that they believe in someone and something" (N252). Seventeen percent of respondents considered that people could believe in God but not talk about it, and nine percent stated that it was a matter of personal choice. One participant said that people didn't discuss their faith because it was "private and sacred". More than one quarter of the participants thought that people might not be able to speak about God even if they wanted to. One student wrote: "It's a gut feeling with God. You can't explain a gut feeling" (N487). Thirteen percent of the participants disagreed with the statement and wrote that believers should talk about their faith. These responses reflected Nowotny's (1978) finding that the students in her survey wanted to express their beliefs despite the difficulty involved (p. 41).

The influence of secularisation on the participants indicates the need for religious educators to critique with their students, the influence of society and its values. It also indicates the need for a well-founded ecclesiology to be presented to the students. Teachers need to have opportunities for ongoing formation in ecclesiology. Students also need opportunities to gain confidence in discussing their faith and defending their values. It is difficult for religious educators to know what to do in the face of the almost total absence of young people at regular Sunday Mass. However, they could discuss with their students the need to nurture their faith through communal rituals, even if these are not always Eucharistic. It is important that as well as teaching about the value of ritual expressions of faith, religious educators offer young people relevant liturgical experiences so that they may come to appreciate them and seek to participate

in them in their own time and after they have left school. The finding that in the participants' view, liturgies were one of the two main factors at school that led them to think about God seems to indicate that Catholic schools are achieving some success with the liturgies they offer their students.

#### The Influence of the Church and Religion on the Participants

Participants had mixed views concerning the influence of the Church and religion on their attitudes and lives. These two influences are fundamental to religious literature. Therefore the participants' views here can contribute to the on-going discussion in this area.

The influence of the Church on the participants was indicated by the finding that almost 60% of them believed that the Church had shaped many of their images of God (Table 5.29, p.153). Positive comments were made about the Church such as: "Church is where God and us come together in peace" (N414) and "listening to readings and the gospels I have learned what God stands for and what he is like" (N490). Fourteen percent of the participants stated that their images of God had come from the artwork in churches, including crosses, statues, pictures and symbols. They commented that Church rituals also helped to shape their images of God, including sermons, Scripture readings, celebrations of the Mass and times of prayer. Another finding was that belonging to a parish led 43% of the participants to think about God "always" or "often". Nineteen percent of this number were "always" led to think about God because of belonging to a parish, and this figure was exactly the same as in Flynn's (1993) study.

However, many participants had a less positive attitude towards the Church. For instance, 31% of participants were not influenced by the parish to think about God, and the Church had not shaped the images of God of 19% of them. Negative comments were made about the Church, such as that it was boring or focused on rules: "The Church locks it in. God is meant to be outside" (N62) and "only my bad images of God have come from the Church" (N140).

The influence of religion on participants was evident throughout the study. An indicator of the influence of religion was the consistent manner in which the participants gave religious references when asked questions about God. For example, the sounds that many of them associated with God were linked to religious services, including bells, organs, chimes and gongs (Table 5.11, p.133). Sounds with biblical associations included "storms", "lightning" and "wind" which are associated with theophanies such as Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. However, the extent to which these associations were made by the participants was not always clear. Half of the actions that participants associated with God were also "religious" in nature, including "praying", "ritual action" and making "the sign of the cross" (Table 5.11, p. 133). They also reported that they felt close to God during religious experiences such as praying and being in church (Table 5.12, p. 135). It is not surprising that the participants associated God with religion, as the purpose of religion is to draw people closer to God, thus the two are closely related. However, two thirds of the participants reported that, overall, they did not think about the Church in the same way as they thought about God (Table 5.28, p. 152). This indicates the participants' ability to distinguish between God and institutional religion. It also indicates the participants' ability to distinguish between belonging to an institutional religion and having faith in God.

Some responses emphasised their rejection of the Church (25%) while others emphasised their positive attitude to God (22%). The participants offered many descriptions of God and of the Church, including that God was a "spirit", "everywhere", "free", "loving" and "powerful"; while Church was described as "hypocritical", "boring", "strict", "wrong", "unpopular", as well as "God's place" and "good". Overall, there were more negative comments about Church and more positive comments about God:

Sometimes the Church is hypocritical but God is always there - peaceful, forgiving (N71).

I pray to God. I pray at the church (N103).

God is more free and forgiving than the Church (N253).

Church can be a real boring thing but God teaches us something new each day (N499).

The findings indicate that participants chose what they saw to be valuable about religion and rejected the rest. Most participants saw religion as optional and not a necessary consequence of belief in God. They made a clear distinction between God and the Church. It can be argued that the participants' responses reflected their parents' views, as they had indicated that parents were the greatest influence on their spirituality.

Participants' responses also reflected the influence of the secularisation of the post-modern world, which is experiencing change in all fields of life, including religion. One such change has been brought about through scientific advances in the field of embryonic research. The possibilities in this area pose challenges in the legal, ethical and religious fields. Such challenges indicate the inter-connectedness of life and that choices have universal consequences. They also indicate that religion is being challenged to enter into a dialogue with the secular world, and provide a spirituality that brings a sense of meaning in life as well as a sense of moral values. Religion need not

be restricted to a ritual practice on one day of the week, or be regarded as an out of date irrelevancy. Prokopf and Ziebertz (2002) comment that:

The challenge for religious education as a whole is to develop the processes of religious communication for young people so that the biblical Christian image of God in its various forms may come to light "through and by" the modern pluralistic society (Prokopf & Ziebertz, 2002, p. 156).

Within the Church, a formal, public doctrinal stance is at odds with the questioning unrest of those who believe that the promise of the Second Vatican Council has yet to be fulfilled. Tension between the two positions is exacerbated by the crisis of confidence in the Church as a moral authority that many western secularised countries have seen over recent years. This lack of confidence is accompanied by the need to bring about new forms of parish organisation due to the decline in the number of active priests and those seeking priesthood. This has hastened the necessity to rethink the meaning of priesthood and the pre-requisites required for it to be an effective form of ministry and a healthy, enriching lifestyle for the priest. Theological tensions form part of the background to the participants' responses, which indicate a shifting between acceptance of the "official" Church position on some matters and rejection of it in others. They accept the sacramental life of the Church, but reject its stance on issues such as homosexuality. They indicate a belief in the Trinity, in a loving God and in Jesus Christ whom they thought of as their Saviour and loving friend. At the same time they reject many aspects of the Church's teaching, particularly in the area of sexual morality. This attitude may also reflect that of their parents whom they regarded as the key influences on their spirituality.

The lack of commitment to the Church and parish life reflects the widespread lack of commitment by young people in other areas of life. There are fewer marriages and more people living together without being married than in previous decades. There

is also a high rate of divorce. These trends reflect a changed attitude to religious views in Australian society. The breakdown in commitment to traditional religions has also contributed to the widespread search for a spirituality that is nurturing, non-judgemental and offers meaning in life. There is also an awareness of the needs of the world and a subsequent willingness to work towards social justice. The participants' many questions in the category of "morality" reflect their concern for the suffering and evil in the world. Such concern was consistent with Brienen's (1998) claim that "young people oppose racism and other particular issues" (p. 242).

Finally, even though participants stated that their images of God had been mainly derived from the culture of the Church, they also implied that this did not make communication with God dependent on the Church. They also believed that they could get by in life without much, if any, contact with organised religion. There are challenges here for religious educators to critique both secular society and the Church. It may be helpful to invite students to reflect on their beliefs about God and to grow in the ability to talk about them. The findings here indicate the need for future teachers to be well trained in a well-founded ecclesiology. There is a similar need for the on-going ecclesiological education of teachers. Collaboration between school and parish personnel is also required in order to bridge the gap between school and parish. It may be valuable to encourage parents to deepen their understanding of ecclesiology, as this may influence their children's understanding of Church since, as this research shows, parents have a significant influence on their children's religious development.

The Correspondence between the Participants' Images of God  
and those of Scripture and Theology.

Although participants responded to questions in religious terms and in a largely conventional manner, they also believed that religion was an option, as they claimed that faith in God did not require adherence to a religion. Their conventional approach was evident in the finding that participants expressed belief in the central Christian image of God, that of the Trinity, as well as the central Christian belief about Jesus Christ, namely, that he is human and divine. The disjuncture here between belief and religious practice suggests the need for education in the challenge of Jesus Christ's life, ministry and message. It also reflects the need for Christians in every age to be challenged away from a "cosy" Christianity to what Bonhoeffer (1972) called "the cost of discipleship". The finding also implies the need for a well-founded ecclesiology to be presented to the students and for them to have good experiences of the life of the Church.

The importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian teaching is indicated by the following statement in the *CCC* (1994): "The mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith" (CC, 1994, p. 6). There were many indicators of the participants' belief in this. Many of the participants' thoughts about God (Question 1) included references to all three persons of the Trinity and some participants used the word "Trinity" in their responses. This finding reflects that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) which found that half of the middle adolescent participants indicated that they had a Trinitarian image of God.

The respondents' thoughts about God (Q1) included direct references to "Father" and to terms such as "old man", "man in the sky" and "man in heaven". Such

terminology may represent the participants' attempts to denote the transcendence of God: that the divinity of God is as "distant" or distinct from humanity as the sky is from the earth. As such, it is consistent with the definition of "Father" provided by the CCC (1994) and quoted in the *Guidelines* (1995):

By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children (CCC, as cited in the *Guidelines*, CEOM, 1995, p. 6).

There were also direct references to Jesus Christ, many of which referred to salvation and included words such as "Saviour", "Messiah" and "cross". The largest number of references to a person of the Trinity was to "Spirit". The responses about the Trinity here were similar to those given to later questions about the Trinity (Table 5.42, p. 166). In this table almost one third of the participants "always" thought of God either as the "Trinity", or as one of the three persons: God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit. With the addition of those who "often" thought in such terms, almost half of the participants thought of God as Trinity. It can therefore be concluded that the image of God as Trinity is one of the participants' key images of God.

The participants' understanding of Jesus Christ was also conventional and indicated support for the Church's teaching of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Evidence for this is that their two most frequently reported descriptors of Jesus were Son of God (62%) and Son of Mary (58%) (Table 5.41, p. 165). The importance of Jesus Christ to the participants is evident from the finding that their favourite image of God was that of "Jesus". References to him were consistent with biblical images, and included references to Jesus' ministry, suffering, death and resurrection. The frequent image of Jesus as Saviour was consistent with Haight's (1999) claims about the enduring nature of this image. The image of Jesus as a forgiver of sins can be linked to

the image of Saviour, which is one of the participants' key images of Jesus Christ. The participants' images of Jesus and God are doctrinally orthodox and conventional. This is a surprising finding that is underscored by the participants' equally surprising knowledge of religious terms and their ability to use religious language. This implies that while the participants rejected the Church to a large extent, they knew Church language and images and used them as part of their own spirituality.

The respondents' belief that Jesus Christ is a friend (27%) might have enriched their prayer lives, as Shelton (1992) claimed that this image would assist adolescents' prayer lives (p. 125). This finding was also consistent with Flynn's (1993), that young people had a positive attitude to Jesus Christ, and thought of him as a personal friend, helper and shepherd (p. 309). The most infrequent response was that Jesus is concerned about the place of women in society. This response also had the highest number of participants who "never" thought of Jesus in that way. There may be a link here with the few positive responses recorded for feminine descriptors of God. This finding will be discussed later in this chapter (pp. 170-174).

Some of the images that Jesus applied to himself in the gospel accounts, such as "the way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6) and the "Good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11) were less frequently reported, which may indicate that the students were not as familiar with these titles as with others. This may imply that Scripture teaching in religious education classes is limited in the range of texts that are studied. Other studies such as Stead's (1996) have shown that this is the case. In addition, the abstract nature of these images could have made them less appealing than the more descriptive images such as "someone who helps us". Some of the responses indicated students' views about aspects of Jesus' physical appearance such as his face, hair and clothing. Such responses were

among those indicating that participants' preferred concrete rather than abstract imagery. This preference may reflect the developmental stage of the respondents, as developmental theorists would suggest that adolescence marks the beginning of the capacity for abstract thought (Fowler, 1981).

A comparison between the favourite images of Jesus nominated by the participants (Table 5.45, p. 169) and the descriptors listed for them to prioritise (Table 5.44, p. 168) shows the images they have in common. These images common to both are listed in the following table. Table 6.1 indicates that "Son of God" and "Son of Mary" were the two most frequent replies when participants were presented with descriptors to be circled, but they were not listed by participants when they were asked to fill-in-the-gaps with their favourite images of Jesus.

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Table 6.1

*Favourite descriptors and images of Jesus*

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| Favourite descriptors<br>And images of Jesus | Favourite descriptors<br>only | Favourite images<br>only |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Forgiver                                     | Light of the World            | Artwork                  |
| Helper                                       | Lord                          | Baby                     |
| Saviour                                      | Son of God                    | Nothing                  |
| Miracle worker                               | Son of Mary                   | Other                    |
| Friend                                       | Teacher                       | Young man                |
|  | Way, Truth, Life              |                          |

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The finding that only eight percent of participants thought of Jesus Christ as the person who best represented God, may indicate that confusion existed amongst the students as to the nature and identity of Jesus. Many seemed unclear as to whether

Jesus is separate from God or identical with God. Those who equated Jesus with God would not have thought of him as simply leading them to think about God, and they would not have referred to Jesus in the context of this question. This tendency to equate Jesus with God could indicate that such confusion also existed among the parents of the students, as participants had indicated that their parents were the greatest influence on their spirituality.

Overall, the participants' responses indicated that their images of God and their understanding of Jesus Christ were consistent with biblical and theological teaching. Table 6.2 enables a comparison to be made between the qualities of God that emerged from this research and those that emerged from the exploration of Scripture and theology in Chapter Three (Table 5.18, p. 141).

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Table 6.2

*Qualities of God*

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| The qualities of God that emerged from this research and the exploration of Scripture and theology.   | The qualities of God found in Scripture and theology but which did not emerge from this research. |
|---|---|
| Active; Almighty; Authoritative; Blessed; Calling to relationship; Caring; Compassionate; Eternal; Faithful; Freeing; Generous; Gentle; Good; One; Healing; Human; Holy; Immanent; Intimate; Just; Joyful; Kind; Leading to truth; Loving; Masculine; Merciful; Peace-loving; Personal; Powerful; Present; Protective; Righteous; Sanctifying; Saving; Trustworthy; Transcendent; Understanding; Universal; Wise. | Angry; Demanding; First and Last; Jealous; Patient; Punishing; Solitary; Weak.                    |

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Table 6.2 indicates the wide range of qualities of God found in the three sources. The scriptural and theological qualities that the participants rejected were those that could be categorised as negative, such as "weak". In fact, one of the strong themes to emerge from this study was the students' belief that God was "powerful". They also rejected qualities such as "patient" and the term "first and last" as they did not usually associate such them with God.

The finding that so many biblical and theological images of God are reflected in the participants' responses may indicate the positive nature of such teaching. If this were not the case, the participants would have rejected the images. This finding also suggests that young people may have a greater understanding of religious concepts than is generally believed. Their competent use of religious language may also be regarded as a surprising finding. This may imply that religious education is more successful in achieving its aims than is often believed to be the case.

#### The Immanence and Transcendence of God

This is a recurring theme in religious literature, expressing belief in the nearness of God and in the transcendence of God. These beliefs are not mutually exclusive and both reflect needs of the human spirit. They represent the attempt to convey the belief that "God" is "other" and divine, while humanity is created and dependent. In Christian teaching, such transcendence is not "distance from" humanity, as God is considered to be everywhere, including within humanity. It further claims that this God is a God of love, whom Jesus invited all to regard as a parent.

The participants' responses reflect these beliefs, particularly those in reply to Question 17, which asked them where they thought God lived (Table 5.22, p. 144).

Almost half of the participants stated that God lived in "heaven". The respondents did not always define "heaven", however some stated that it was "above" and used images such as "clouds" and "sky" to convey this sense. Others considered that heaven was "everywhere", "in our minds" and "in our hearts". Future research could explore the use and meaning of this term in greater detail.

It is likely that the students' ideas that God was in some way "above" would have been shaped by biblical references to God as being "above". For example, one of the key scriptural passages of the Old Testament, which would be known by the participants, is the encounter of Moses with God on Mount Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments. In this encounter, the mountain acts as a physical symbol of the sacredness of God and of the distance between God and humanity. God is presented as deciding who may bridge this distance, as the people can see God but not approach God:

The Lord said to Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow ... on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ... The Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain; and Moses went up'" (Ex. 19:10-12; 20).

Films and paintings based on this encounter have been created and widely circulated, and they may have helped to shape the participants' belief that God is "above". Some of the biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ also indicate that "heaven" is above. For instance, Mark's gospel ends the account of Jesus' life and ministry with the statement that Jesus "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mk. 16:19). Another example is the biblical description of the baptism of Jesus, where "heaven" is referred to twice, the Spirit of God is described as "descending" and "alighting on" Jesus, and God's voice speaks from heaven (Mt. 3:16). Such imagery

forms the basis of paintings and films based on Jesus' life that may have helped to shape the participants' views that "heaven" is a place that is above the earth where God lives. Such a belief is more likely to be true of those who identified Jesus Christ with God.

Some of the participants in this study had more immanent ideas about God and thought of God as being present everywhere and in everyone: "in our minds" and "in our hearts". In their view, "heaven" was an abstract concept that did not indicate a place, but a state of being. There were fewer students who thought in this way about heaven, and this corresponded with the finding that fewer participants thought of God in abstract terms. For instance, their responses to the question which asked them to state the way they thought about God (Q1) indicated that over 80% of students thought of God in concrete rather than abstract images. However, another question found that half of the participants thought of God as "Spirit" (Q111). Overall, however, the majority of the participants' images of God and views about heaven were anthropomorphic in nature. The findings here are consistent with Piaget's (1979) claim that from 11 to 15 years of age, young people begin to acquire the capacity to solve abstract problems in a logical fashion, and it can be concluded that their capacity to hold abstract images of God would also be developing. However, as young people do not develop at a uniform rate, it could be expected that responses would include both abstract and concrete images. The finding that there were more concrete than abstract images, may reflect the young age of the participants, as 51% of them were 15 years old and 30% were 14 at the time of the survey, and their capacity for abstract thought may have been in the early stages of development.

Question 15 sought to test the developmental theorists' claim that it was during adolescence that young people developed the capacity for abstract thought.

Participants were asked to recall how they had thought about God when they were ten years of age, so that their responses could then be compared with their current images (Table 5.20, p. 142). An interesting finding here was that the same students held both abstract images of God and their childhood anthropomorphic images together. It can therefore be concluded that even though the capacity to think of God in abstract images had developed, anthropomorphic images of God had remained. In some cases, a shift had occurred in the importance placed on the earlier images.

In the Old Testament, God's divinity, transcendence and holiness are often identified with separation from humanity, however it also includes images that emphasise the nearness of God. For instance, in one of the encounters of Moses with God on Mount Sinai, God reminds Moses of God's closeness to humanity:

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Ex. 19:3-4).

The scriptural images of God as both distant and intimate have influenced the theology of the Church and the literature of Christian spirituality. Nowotny (1978) found that the participants' ideas about God could be placed along a five-point continuum which included belief in God as a Supreme being or force and belief in a personal God who is helper, guide and loving friend. In the present research, participants' responses also indicated belief that God was distant but near. This "distance" of God pointed to the divinity and holiness of God. It did not imply that they thought of God as cold and uncaring, rather, their key image of God is that of a loving God. The sense of distance also carried the sense that God was watching over them, not to intimidate or judge them, but to protect and help them.

Participants' responses indicated their belief in the holiness and goodness of God (Table 5.29, p. 153). "Helping others" and acts of goodness led approximately half of the participants to think about God. Good people revealed to them the image of a God of goodness. O'Collins (1981) claimed that such revelation "is tied to and derived from Christ" (pp. 101-102). Participants also associated goodness with peacefulness. For instance, "peaceful" was one of the participants' favourite words and key qualities associated with God. Participants also stated that they felt "peaceful" when they thought about God. The responses to this question paralleled the finding of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) where 11% of middle adolescent respondents named "quiet reflection" as an ordinary event that led to an awareness of God. It also supported Shelton's (1992) claim that solitude was an important preparation for adolescent prayer.

The reverse side of goodness also influenced some of the participants to think about God. Responses to Question 16 listed poverty, pain and war among the topics that participants would like to discuss with God. Such responses parallel the finding of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) that being "unable to cope with evil" affected the awareness of God of ten percent of the middle secondary school participants (1996). "Death" was a key influence on the participants' thinking. Reflecting on "the death of a loved one" led almost half of them to think about God, and a large number thought of God when reflecting on their own death. This finding also parallels that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that family death was the event that most frequently led middle adolescents to an awareness of God. Personal illness and the illness of others were also among the negative factors that led participants to think about God. The importance of the experiences of pain and death in shaping the participants' spirituality supports

O'Collins' (1981) claim that suffering is a means of revelation and of bringing people to faith and holiness:

The divine self-communication is present and at work when those who are already Christians grow "in Christ", know more fully his power in their weakness and enter more deeply into the life of the Trinity: through the sacraments, sermons, the reading of the Scriptures, loving activity with and for others, episodes of suffering and any other concrete means ... that convey revelation and grace (O'Collins, 1981, p. 100).

The findings of this research are consistent with biblical and theological imagery of God that seeks to convey the distinction between the divinity of God and the dependence of humanity. In doing so it establishes the connection between the immanence and transcendence of God.

#### The Positive Nature of the Participants' Images of God

The finding that most of the participants thought of God in terms of "love" (Table 5.9, p.130), indicates their positive attitude towards God. Over half of the participants always thought of God "as someone who loves me" and approximately half of them stated that they always wanted "to live with God after death" (Table 5.30, p. 153). One third of the participants stated that the most important thing to know about God is that God is loving (Table 5.19, p. 142). Some of the comments about God in this research paralleled those concepts from the *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995): "God is with us at all times and in all places, calling us and helping us seek, experience and know the ultimate fulfillment of communion" (p. 6). The emphasis on God's love is consistent with Christian teaching and reflects the biblical revelation that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). This emphasis is found throughout the literature about and research into Christian spirituality. For example, Flynn (1998) found that:

About three-quarters of students see God as a *Loving Father* who loves them very much, who always forgives them and is ready to assist them in need. Students generally hold a *very positive, warm image of God as a loving Father*. For about 60% of students, God is close to them, means a lot to them and assists them in their daily lives (Flynn, 1993, p.308)

Some typical descriptors of God that participants stated they had learnt, were that God is a "friend", "protector", "trustworthy" and "understanding". Further, almost one quarter of the participants stated that they felt happy when they thought about God. The *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) also found that half of the participants thought of God as a friend. Leavey (1992), too, found that adolescents in the developmental stage of the participants, saw God in positive terms as a friend and supporter. The positive nature of the participants' images is underscored by the finding that "punisher" (Table 5.24, p. 147) was the least mentioned image of God, even though it is a biblical image of God (Gen. 6:11-13).

It can be concluded that this positive attitude towards God arises from their religious experience. Their responses indicated that such religious experience was not necessarily "religious" in the sense of pertaining to a traditional religion, but included other life experiences that led them to think about God and to feel close to God. The participants made clear that many did not think about the Church in the same way as they thought about God. This finding will be discussed at a later point. Some of the key life experiences that led them to think about God and to feel close to God were experiences of nature, of goodness and of the loss of a loved one through death. It is probable that through such experiences the students gained a positive attitude towards God.

As parents were the key factors shaping the participants' images of God, the conclusion can be drawn that the parents' images of God must have been positive, in

order for their children to have developed positive images of God. Participants also indicated that they were influenced by people who did good for others, such as priests, and it is likely that such people also presented positive images of God. Prayer experiences and religious education classes at school were the major factors about school that led them to think about God. The participants may have found opportunities for prayer and prayer rituals to be positive experiences, as they reportedly helped to shape a positive image of God. Such experiences may have also reflected the positive attitudes towards God of the teachers who prepared the rituals and led the prayer sessions. This may also have been true of the images of God conveyed in the participants' religious education classes. There is evidence that the teachers' own images of God and their ability to communicate such images, helped to shape the students' positive images of God. Images drawn from nature were another frequently reported source of their images of God. These experiences of nature must have been positive as they led to participants forming positive images of God, which is an argument for retaining outdoor experiences, such as camps and religious retreats, in the curriculum.

With the impetus of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) a theological shift took place from an emphasis on the image of God as a distant being to be feared, to that of a compassionate God drawing humanity to a relationship of love. The Catholic Church has always taught that God is a God of love, however such teaching did not appear to be at the forefront of Catholic teaching in the pre-conciliar years. The Council had a greater biblical foundation than other councils of the Church and this may have influenced the images and qualities of God that it emphasised. For instance,

Dulles (1966) makes the following comment about the Council's approach to its deliberations on the Church:

When the Council Fathers came together, they immediately saw the need of setting forth a radically different vision of the Church, more biblical, more historical, more vital and dynamic (Dulles cited in Abbott, 1966, pp. 10-11).

The Council itself turned to a statement from St John Chrysostom, one of the Fathers of the early church, to convey one of their images of God. They spoke of "the gentle kindness of God" and acknowledged the influence of Scripture in shaping this image.

In Sacred Scripture, therefore, while the truth and holiness of God always remain intact, the marvelous "condescension" of eternal wisdom is clearly shown, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express (Abbott, 1966, p. 121).

Thus the advances in biblical interpretation prior to the Council had a deep effect on its deliberations and findings. In particular, these advances influenced the theology that emerged, and on the subsequent form of religious education that followed. The parents and religious educators of the participants belong to the postconciliar age group and their theology would have been shaped by its findings. This is not to say, however, that all pre-conciliar theology was swept aside and disappeared. The reality is that both theologies remain and are the roots of the seemingly paradoxical beliefs of Catholics in the post-conciliar Church. Some would argue that the new theology has barely taken root in the forty years since the Second Vatican Council. However, although it may have not yet reached full maturity, its influence has been profound. The finding that the participants' responses reflect this changed theology provides evidence that theological change can be passed on from one generation to the next.

As stated, prior to the Council, the prevailing image of God was that of a God who watched humanity in order to judge, punish and reward. This often led to an over-

emphasis on sin, guilt and fear. By contrast, the participants in this research thought of God as watching over them in order to help and protect them. They did not emphasise sin, and there were only three references to a sense of fear of God in the entire responses. There was also no evidence of a sense of guilt and they stated their rejection of the image of God as a punisher. The students' main image of God was that of a God of love, and Jesus Christ was the person with whom they identified this image of God. Their main image of Jesus was that of a Saviour. This implies that they were aware of the need for redemption, but it did not create a sense of fear or guilt in them, but confidence.

The changed theological understanding of God has developed from advances in biblical scholarship. As has been indicated, central to these changes has been the development of a Christology that emphasised the humanity of Jesus Christ as well as his divinity. Jesus' relationship with people as a friend and brother has been emphasised, while continuing to acknowledge the uniqueness of his relationship with God his Father. This has led to a greater sense of closeness to Jesus, and to God for whom he used the intimate term of "Abba", which when translated from the Aramaic is the diminutive form of "father" or "Daddy". Such revelation may be one of the sources of the sense of the nearness of God that is reflected in the participants' responses. It may also be the source of the sense of happiness and peace that the participants reportedly felt when they thought about God.

The participants' experiences of the Catholic Church may have also led to the formation of positive images of God, as sixty percent of them stated that their images of God had been shaped by the Church. This is despite the finding that many stated that they did not feel the same way towards the Church as they did towards God: they felt

close to God and were often critical of the Church. The students may have also been influenced by the attitude towards God of Australian society. Although Australia is a secularised society and the participants' responses reflected this secularisation, Australian research has shown that the majority of Australians believe in God. For instance, the *ACS* (1998) found that:

Most Australians believe in God. A large number accept conventional Christian beliefs such as ... the divinity of Jesus. ... While most Australians believe in God, only a minority believe in a personal God (Kaldor et al., 1999, p. 15).

It would seem that participants have a positive view of God, as their responses generally reflected rather than challenged the views of the prevailing culture, and their images of God were positive. Further research would be necessary to provide evidence of Australians' general attitude towards God. It would also be valuable to explore the meaning of the term "a personal God".

In conclusion, the positive attitude of the participants towards God forms the background against which other responses should be interpreted.

#### The Influence of Parents on Their Children's Images of God

The finding in this research that parents are the most important influence on their children's images of God supports a key finding of the literature in the field of adolescent spirituality. The *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) is one of the studies that points to the influence of parents on their children's spirituality. It found that parents were "the most significant persons" in terms of their children's faith. The finding in this study is also consistent with Flynn's (1993) that: "The influence of the example and lives of parents remained the single most significant influence on students' religious development" (p. 412). In the present study, mothers were the most significant person

for over three quarters of the participants, and fathers for fifty-eight percent of the participants (Table 5.19, p. 142).

Therefore, despite the literature indicating that young people tend to "pick and choose" their beliefs, the participants in this research stated that their images of God had predominantly been shaped by their parents. They also indicated that friends played only a very small part in shaping their images of God.

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Table 6.3

*Factors leading me to think about God*

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| Factor      | Never | Hardly Ever | Sometimes | Often | Always | Missing |
|-------------|-------|-------------|-----------|-------|--------|---------|
|             | %     | %           | %         | %     | %      | %       |
| Q52 Friends | 17.6  | 22.5        | 30.5      | 15.5  | 12.8   | 1.1     |

---

Thus although developmental theorists such as Fowler (1981) have claimed that peers had greater influence than the family during adolescence, this was not the perception of the participants in this aspect of their lives. This perception may be based on the fact that they did not talk about God with their friends. However, their friends and peers' attitude to God may have had an unconscious influence on them that they had not recognised.

The finding that parents are the most important influence on their children's images of God also supports traditional Catholic teaching concerning the role of the Catholic school. Such teaching emphasises the primary role of parents in the education of their children. For instance the most recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (1998), states that:

Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1998, p. 23).

This research supports this statement as it has found that it is the parents, not the teachers, who are the predominant influence on the spiritual lives of young people. It is important to again note that the age-group of the participants' parents has a different form of religious practice than the students' grandparents and that while they believe in God, they do not regularly attend a Church and neither do their children. This finding is supported by other research such as that of Kaldor et al. (1999) who commented that "(despite) latent Christian belief and goodwill towards the churches...Australians are not turning to the churches to understand or develop their spirituality" (p. 27). Two of the participants' most frequently recorded images of God, "Jesus" and those associated with God as "loving", were among the images reportedly learnt from parents. Table 6.4 shows the correlation between the participants' favourite images and those they regarded as having been learnt from parents.

Table 6.4

*Correlation between Participants' Favourite Images of God and Those  
Reportedly learnt From Parents*

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Images shared by participants      Jesus; loving; powerful

And both parents

---

Images shared by participants      Religious

And mothers only

---

Images shared by participants

And fathers only

---

Participants' images not      Abstract; dove; heaven; human; nature; old man;  
Shared by parents      peace

---

Parents' images not shared by      Creator; forgiving; good; Spirit

Participants

---

Mothers' images not shared      Morality

By fathers and participants

---

Fathers' images not shared by      Helpful; presence

Mothers and participants

---

*Note:* The categories of "other", "missing" and "nothing" are not included as they are common to every table.

Table 6.4 supports the earlier finding that the participants' positive images of God as "loving" were shaped by their parents. It is significant that the participants reported that parents had shaped their image of God in the person of Jesus Christ. It is also significant that mothers shaped their "religious" images of God. These are important findings as the two central relationships in Christianity, the relationship with God and the relationship with Jesus Christ have both been shaped by their parents. The images listed in Table 6.4 are also significant as they indicate both the images of God that the participants believe that they have learnt from their parents, and that many of them are also their favourite images. No participants indicated that parents had shaped their images of God and that they had rejected such images, rather, they approved of the majority of their parents' images and had adopted them. Their parents' influence in this connection was regarded favourably by their children. It would be a valuable future study to ask parents the extent to which they would have predicted their children's responses. They could also be asked to list the images of God that they believed that they had passed on. Such responses could then be compared with their children's responses. Would the parents of the participants be surprised that their children had accepted their images and the underlying values they represented? There may have been other images that they had tried to inculcate but were not reported by the participants.

Table 6.5 enables a comparison to be made between the participants' favourite words about God and those they believed that they had learnt from their parents.

Table 6.5

*Participants' favourite words about God and the images of God reportedly learnt from Parents*

| Mothers' Key Images (Q10) | Percent of Total Participants % | Fathers' Key Images (Q11) | Percent of Total Participants % | Favourite Words About God (Q13) | Percent of Total Participants % |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Loving                    | 25.5                            | Missing                   | 35.3                            | Loving                          | 33.1                            |
| Missing                   | 24.7                            | Nothing                   | 14.3                            | Good                            | 16.4                            |
| Powerful                  | 11.5                            | Loving                    | 11.6                            | Peace                           | 13.8                            |
| Nothing                   | 6.8                             | Good                      | 10.5                            | Powerful                        | 10.1                            |
| Good                      | 6.4                             | Powerful                  | 8.3                             | Jesus                           | 8.3                             |
| Creator                   | 5.9                             | Helpful                   | 4.2                             | Forgiving                       | 7.9                             |
| Morality                  | 5.5                             | Creator                   | 4.0                             | Creator                         | 4.3                             |
| Jesus                     | 4.3                             | Presence                  | 3.0                             | Heaven                          | 2.6                             |
| Forgiving                 | 3.1                             | Jesus                     | 2.9                             | Spirit                          | 1.7                             |
| Religion                  | 3.0                             | Forgiving                 | 2.4                             | Other                           | 1.0                             |
| Spirit                    | 2.4                             | Spirit                    | 1.9                             | Nothing                         | 0.8                             |
| Other                     | 0.9                             | Other                     | 1.6                             | Missing                         | 0.0                             |

This table supports the comments made earlier concerning the participants' favourite images of God, as their favourite words about God were "loving", "good", "powerful" and "peace-loving". With the exception of the latter, these words were also among the images of God reportedly learnt from both parents. Twice as many favourite words than favourite images were reportedly learnt from parents. This may have been because the participants found it easier to recall their parents' words, than to move beyond them to the images represented by the words.

The positive nature of the participants' favourite words and images of God reflects their parents' positive attitude towards God. It also points to the importance of well-grounded adult faith formation so that parents can grow in understanding of Scripture and theology and pass on this understanding to their children.

#### Persons as Images of God

The literature in the area of adolescent spirituality indicates the people, including parents, who are the formative influences on the spirituality of the young people. Such people included heroes and role models. These findings are supported by this research. Participants most frequently referred to religious figures as the persons who best represented images of God for them (Table 5.13, p. 136). Most of the references were to "priests" and they were seen to be doing "God's work" or being "God-like". One participant wrote that: "He sounds holy when he speaks and he loves all the people who come into the church and cares about their lives" (N487).

This finding reflects that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that priests were the fourth most significant person in terms of the participants' faith (22%). It is significant that participants had such positive attitudes towards priests, given the

widespread criticism of them in society today. This suggests that such criticism has not influenced the thinking of this group of young people, perhaps because of their personal experiences with priests. Other religious figures, who represented God to the participants, were the Pope and bishops, and biblical figures such as Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Moses, angels and saints. These references may reflect the biblical base of the participants' religious education. School principals, nuns and teachers were also noted in the responses. However, overall, only two percent listed teachers. This finding was at odds with the findings of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) which asked a similar question, concerning the most significant people for the respondents' faith: (religious education teachers 25%; other teachers 21%). The difference between the two findings may be because the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) surveyed churchgoers who were more likely to record a higher score in this area. The different emphasis in the questions asked may also help to explain the different results. The present question referred to a person representing "an image of God", not merely a person of influence on the participant's faith. The finding about teachers in this research is more in keeping with that of Flynn (1993) who found that the influence of teachers in students' lives had halved over the past two decades, and that only 14% now saw them as sponsors of students' religious development (p. 412).

The finding that more priests than teachers were reported by participants as representing God for them is significant. It could be assumed that the imbalance in the amount of time that teachers spend with students compared with the relatively few times that students met priests, would mean that teachers had a greater impact. The finding that this is not so, implies that the relationships are different in style. For instance, priests may be perceived to be working solely in the field of the spiritual whereas

teachers may or may not be seen as valuing the spiritual. Priests may only come to schools to perform religious rituals and may be identified with religion only, whereas even those teachers engaged in religious education usually teach other subjects and so may not be identified solely with religion. This perception differs from the way in which the religious Sisters and Brothers, who formerly staffed Catholic schools, were perceived by their students. Whether they were good teachers or not, they were nevertheless viewed as being associated with religion and dedicated to the service of God. The fact that teachers are not considered by participants to be representations of God, may imply the need for students to grow in an understanding of the spirituality of the laity and the ways in which religious commitment is expressed in everyday life. They may still be tending to see the "religious" experience as outside of normal life. The finding may also point to the need to ensure that the staffs of Catholic schools include teachers with rich spiritual lives and evident religious commitment. It also points to the need for ongoing professional development of staff in the area of Christian spirituality.

Participants indicated that religious education was the factor about school that led most of them to think about God. This suggests that the images of God presented in these classes may have helped to shape the participants' images of God. The findings here support those of Flynn (1993), who found that students saw school as an important influence on their religious development through factors such as religious education, retreats and liturgies (p. 412). These findings imply that religious education can still be an important influence on participants even though religious education teachers may not have a powerful influence on them. Flynn (1993) also found that only 14% of respondents saw teachers as sponsors of their religious development, and that this number

was declining, nevertheless: "Students saw the school as an important influence on their religious development through such things as retreats, religious education, liturgies and Masses" (Flynn, 1993, p. 413).

The findings also show that in raising the profile of religious education to an academic subject equal to other curriculum areas, the affective, spiritual and mystical dimensions of religious education - at least in the middle school - have not been lost. This may be due to the finding that a more academic approach to religious education is not taken until senior secondary, where students can undertake religious education courses that are the equivalent of other VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) subjects. The possible outcomes of this approach are currently being debated in religious education literature, for example, Dwyer (2002) asks, *Has Religious Education become a derivative subject?* (p. 50).

Most people listed by the participants were either religious figures or contemporary people well known for doing good, such as Princess Diana, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. People who were not well known, such as volunteers, midwives, friends and carers were also included. Some of their valued characteristics were that they were "loving", "forgiving" and "understanding" - the same qualities that they associated with God. Participants' comments included one about a midwife and another about a best friend: "She helps to bring new life into the world" (N314). "I can trust her. We tell each other everything. She forgives me, respects me, helps me and loves me" (N484).

The adolescent search for role models was reflected in the references to leaders and others who could be categorised as powerful such as the Queen and the President of the USA. Powerful images of God were frequently reported by the participants. It

was one of the key qualities that they associated with God. Sporting heroes were also noted. One reason given for this was that: "He's mysterious, good at what he does and he's got style" (N119). There were also some references to musicians, singers and actors. The significance of role models here, is consistent with the findings of the developmental theorists. For example, Erikson (1968) claimed that adolescents looked for people and ideas in whom and in which to have faith.

### Feminine Images of God

The research sought to identify whether or not the participants used feminine images of God. It found that none of the participants used either feminine imagery or language for God. In fact, respondents ranked the word "feminine" less frequently than any other descriptor of God. Only eighteen percent of the participants associated that quality with God and almost half the participants never thought of God in that way. This finding extends that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that the feminine image of "mother" was the least frequently chosen image of God.

One of the reasons for the lack of support for feminine images of God may well be the participants' unfamiliarity with the term. There was evidence of this during the questionnaire process, where the word "feminine" had to be explained more often than any other. The participants who did understand the term may have associated it with weakness or softness and rejected it, as most participants thought of God as being powerful. Participants' non-use of feminine images may also be due to their lack of knowledge of such images. This may result from the lack of feminine images of God in Catholic teaching and liturgy, despite the existence of feminine images of God in Scripture. If this is the case, then participants' lack of knowledge of such images has

implications for parents, religious educators and for the religious education curriculum. It may imply that parents, religious educators and other teachers do not use feminine images of God. If they did, such images may have been evident in the participants' responses, as parents, in particular, were identified by participants as the most important influence on their children's images of God.

Participants also indicated that religious education and liturgies were the factors at school that were most influential in leading them to think about God. Perhaps such experiences did not include feminine images of God as it is likely that they would have been communicated to and used by their students. The conclusion can therefore be drawn that the participants' responses in this area raise important challenges for parents, religious educators and the religious education curriculum.

This conclusion is supported by the finding that the comments made about the participants' non-use of feminine images of God, also apply to their non-use of feminine language for God. All of the participants' anthropomorphic references to God were expressed in masculine images and used masculine language. This is not a surprising finding, as the Catholic Church not only fails to encourage the use of feminine imagery and language for God, but uses only masculine imagery and language. Recently, the first English translation of the *CCC* (CC, 1994) used inclusive language, however a new translation, using only masculine language for God and humanity, was ordered by the magisterium (the teaching authority of the Church). It is surprising that the *CCC* (CC, 1994) itself acknowledges the inability of human images to fully describe God, and encourages the use of the feminine image of "mother", however it does not practise this advice in its own use of language about God and humanity:

By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasises God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. ... Human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought, therefore, to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. (CC, 1994, p. 63)

Although the Catholic Church uses masculine images and language about humanity, as well as about God, this would not be true of most parents and religious educators. Equal opportunity and gender equity are enshrined in law in Australia and have helped to promote an awareness of the need to extend such equity to the use of inclusive language. However it would seem that such awareness in society is counter-balanced by the culture of the Church, and that it may be that inclusive language is used in all subject areas except religious education and in school liturgies. This assumption is based on anecdotal evidence only; it would be a valuable future study to investigate and quantify the extent to which this statement is correct. There is a challenge here for the school community to ensure that inclusive language is used as far as possible in all classes, including religious education and school liturgies. There is a further challenge to designers of school curriculum and creators of religious education resources, to ensure that gender inclusive language, and feminine images and language about God are used.

Many biblical scholars such as Johnson (1992) and McFague (1987) have written about the discriminatory culture of the Church. They have focused on the scarcity of feminine images of God in Scripture, as well as on the nature of those images. Mills (1998) considered that Old Testament used feminine images for sinfulness and unfaithfulness, and masculine images for goodness and faithfulness. She claimed that this reflected the patriarchal culture of the biblical writers. Mills (1998)

argued that such images had negative consequences and maintained the subordination of women (p. 75). This may be the reason why some religious educators do not use these feminine images in their teaching. However, there are many positive feminine images of God that could be used, such as those of a pregnant woman and nursing mother: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you " (Is. 49:15). It would be a valuable experience to explore with students the historical, cultural and theological factors leading to the inclusion of negative feminine images in the Bible, in order to help them to contextualise such images.

There are challenges in this discussion for the home, the school, the parish, pre-service teacher education and the wider Church. There is a need for on-going biblical and theological education opportunities for parents, religious educators and the school staff so that they may become more aware of the scriptural and theological foundations of feminine images and language for God and to be encouraged to use them. Such opportunities also need to be given to future religious education teachers in pre-service education. Parishes could also be encouraged to use such language and imagery in their prayers and liturgies. It is important that the findings and challenges here be taken seriously if the power of feminine spirituality is to be experienced in the Church and due respect is to be paid to the particular giftedness of women's religious expression.

Finally, the insistence on the use of masculine images of God shifts the emphasis from belief in the spiritual nature of God, to insistence on "correct" images of God, which are centred on one expression of what it is to be human. Such an emphasis does not aid the development of a rich range of abstract images of God, and tends to reinforce the control of the Church over people's images of God. This is of particular

relevance for adolescents who are beginning to experience the early stages of the capacity to think of God in an abstract manner. For some Christians, the incarnation of Jesus as man is taken as proof that God is male, and Jesus' use of the image of "father" for God is taken as a reference to a physical reality, rather than to an image of a creator spirit. This is the commonly held view of those Christians who identify Jesus with God. Such a view has been underscored by patriarchal cultures in the family, the Church and the world. An underlying challenge then, is to teach a Christology that is authentically Trinitarian in nature and that emphasises the spiritual nature of God.

### Images of God From Nature

Images of God drawn from nature, together with the image of God in the person of Jesus Christ, were the participants' favourite images of God. Such images were evident in the sounds that participants associated with God (Table 5.3, p. 125). For example, their numerous references to water, which included both powerful and gentle images: "waterfall", "sea", "plop" and "trickle". Some words, such as "river and waves", exemplified the difficulty of correctly interpreting symbols, as they could symbolise either power or gentleness. Other sounds included by respondents were: "wind", "storm" and "birds". Some of the sentences included were: "A sunny morning with birds singing" (N199), "The sounds of a mother giving birth" (N395) and "The sound bing! Like when a fairy sprinkles fairy dust with its wand - bing!" (N371).

"Doves" were often mentioned by participants and have been categorised here as "religious" because of the widespread use of this bird in Christian iconography as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Such usage has its origins in the New Testament, for example, in the account of the Baptism of Jesus Christ in all four Gospels (Mt. 3:13-17;

Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22; Jn. 1:32). The participants who had received the Sacrament of Confirmation, would have seen this symbol during preparation classes for this Sacrament, however it cannot be assumed that every participant who referred to "dove" did so with the image of the Holy Spirit in mind.

The power of nature as a source of images of God was explored in Questions 7 and 8 (Tables 5.14; 5.15, pp. 137-138), which asked participants to indicate the plant/tree (Q7) or animal (Q8) that best represented their images of God. The responses here reinforce the key role of nature as a source of images of God, hence O'Collins' (1981) claim that Scripture downplays the role of nature in Revelation is significant (p. 76). He considered that the Old Testament is richer than the New in its references to nature, however it can be argued that the New Testament is rich in images of rural life and of nature. The parables, in particular, convey images and qualities of God, and of the kingdom. For example:

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you - you of little faith! (Lk. 12:27-31):

Such parables indicate Jesus' awareness of the workings of nature. The New Testament also records that Jesus often prayed in natural settings such as on mountains and in gardens (Lk. 22:39-46).

The category of "birds" was the participants' most frequently noted animal and supported an earlier finding that birdsong was one of the sounds most frequently associated with God. Opposite qualities of animals such as "powerful and gentle", "large and small", "speedy and slow" emerged in the responses, in some cases, within the same reference. For instance, in reference to a lion: "It is gentle with others but is also the king of the animal world" (N477).

Many "powerful" animals were referred to as "leaders", "rulers" and "kings". The frequent association of God with power supports earlier findings of this study. It does not support Leavey's finding (1992) that young children (years 6-8) saw God in terms of size and power, and it was adolescents who saw God as a friend and helper. That participants have continued to think of God as "powerful" indicates that images of God are not necessarily abandoned through various life-stages, but are reinterpreted, and new images are acquired.

A sense of God's presence was also conveyed in the students' choice of images, for example, in reference to the ability of birds to be "everywhere" and to have an "overview of the world". This reinforces Mills' (1998) claim that in the Psalms, God's power and abiding presence are shown through the wonders of creation. God is depicted as being both "in here" (present) and "out there" (distant) (p. 106).

Reflecting on nature also led participants to think about God. For instance, reflecting on "the origins of the universe" was the factor that most frequently led the participants to think about God. This was followed by reflecting on "the wonders of the natural world" and on "nature" itself. Responses to Question 16 also supported this finding, as there were many questions about the nature and existence of God, and about God's role in creation. The questions included the following: "Did you create the world?" "How did you create the world?" and "Who created you?" Such questions underlined the relevance of Mills' (1998) claim that a key biblical image of God was that of the Lord of the universe (p. 19). Such responses also reinforced the finding of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996) that nature most frequently influenced participants to become aware of God (30%). Shelton (1992), too, claimed that the "discovery of

nature's marvels" was one way in which adolescents could "come into contact with the transcendent mystery of God through Jesus Christ" (p. 130).

This consideration of the importance of nature as a source of Revelation for the participants, accords with Scripture, for example:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made (Rom. 1:19-20).

The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of the Second Vatican Council (Abbott, 1966), cites this text, emphasising that while God can be known from "created reality" through reason, Revelation has a unique role to play in revealing religious truths:

God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason (cf. Rom.1:20); but the Synod teaches that it is through His revelation 'that those religious truths which are by their nature accessible to human reason can be known by all men with ease, with solid certitude, and with no trace of error, even in the present state of the human race (Abbott, 1966, p. 114).

The *Guidelines* (CEOM, 1995) also point to the role of nature as a means of Revelation:

Revelation is a process whereby God's self-revelation is communicated throughout history. Revelation testifies to God working deeply within human life, the life of the Church, the wider world, the natural environment and the universe (CEOM, 1995, p. 6).

These findings indicate the need for the school curriculum to include outdoor opportunities for experiences of nature such as retreats and camps in country or seaside settings. It would also be valuable if it included areas that promote a sense of the wonder of the origins of the universe and of nature.

The findings reflect a continuous theme of Christian literature found in the Scriptures themselves, in particular, the Psalms and the parables of Jesus, to that of saints and scholars such as Hildegard of Bingen (1089-1179), Francis of Assisi (1182-

1226) and Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Such writing underlines the centrality of a relationship with the natural world as a powerful force in Christian spirituality. This relationship has been re-energised today and takes many forms including new forms of pantheism. Contemporary Christian theology encompasses literature in this general area of "creation spirituality". Theologians such as Edwards (1992) and Kelly (c1993) are engaged in exploring the understanding of God that arises from the new discoveries about the workings of the universe and the inter-connectedness of all forms of life. Participants in this study reflected an intuitive and experiential understanding of the importance of the mutually nurturing relationship that can exist between humanity and the natural world. This is evident in their statements that images of God drawn from nature are among their key images of God. The importance to them of such images is underscored by the fact that such images were reported as frequently as the image of God in Jesus Christ. Such images, in turn, were often created by Jesus in his references to nature.

#### The "Missing" Category of Response

The high number of "missing" responses calls for comment here. To aid this discussion, Table 6.6 lists the questions with missing responses of more than ten percent. The high number of missing responses to Questions 60 and 90 may have been because they were framed in a different style from other questions in the set and some students might have been unsure as to how to respond. These two questions asked the students to fill in a gap rather than to circle a response and some may have found it hard to express their thoughts in words. They may also have found it hard to associate God with school (Q60) and to identify a factor that led them to think about God (Q90).

In addition to being a different style of question from the others, Question 90 was also towards the end of a long sequence of questions and the participants may have begun to feel tired and not made the effort to respond. They may have also been unable to answer the question. The high number of missing responses to the question about the images of God the participants believed they had learnt from their parents, might indicate a lack of communication between them on this topic, or that they were simply not aware of having learnt any images of God from their parents.

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Table 6.6

*"Missing" responses*

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|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Question 3  | A sound I associate with God                                | 16% |
| Question 60 | Things about school that lead me to think about God         | 50% |
| Question 90 | Leads me to think about God                                 | 35% |
| Question 11 | The main image of God that I have learned from my Father is | 35% |
| Question 7  | The plant/tree that best represents an image I have of God  | 28% |
| Question 10 | The main image of God that I have learned from my Mother is | 25% |
| Question 8  | The animal that best represents an image I have of God      | 23% |
| Question 6  | The person that best represents an image I have of God      | 22% |
| Question 4  | An action associated with God                               | 17% |
| Question 9  | A building as an image of God                               | 16% |
| Question 15 | When I was about 10 I thought of God as                     | 16% |
| Question 14 | The most important thing to know about God is               | 12% |

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The high number of missing responses for Questions 3-4 and 6-9, may indicate that the respondents found it difficult to associate God with these images, as they were not the conventional or familiar ways of thinking about God. If the question included a view of God that they had never thought of before, they may have found it hard to respond and could therefore have found it easier not to answer. Some participants stated that they did not answer these questions because they thought of God as unique,

thus nothing could be compared with God. Some had written "all" in response to these questions because they believed that God was everywhere, thus no one person or thing could represent God. Thus no person, no animal or plant could represent an "image of God " for them. Some students reported that they considered Questions 7-9 to be insulting to God and were angry that they were asked. This reaction supports the idea that some participants were shocked at the unusual views of God that were presented. The responses to these questions should also be treated with caution as they may be based on autosuggestion and do not represent the ways in which the participants usually thought about God.

Some students may have found it hard to remember the images of God that they had when they were about ten years old, thus leading to the high rate of missing responses to this question. The high rate of missing responses to Question 14 may have been because the students found it hard to decide between their views about God. Another reason for the high rate of non-response to these questions may have simply been because the students found the questions too hard to answer.

### Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the findings presented in Chapter Five, exploring the meaning and significance of the major themes that emerged there. It has done so against the background of literature in the area of adolescent spirituality, and the exploration of Scripture and theology in Chapter Three. In the following chapter, conclusions and recommendations arising from this analysis will be explored.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

This chapter summarises the main conclusions of the study and considers implications for education in spirituality and religious education. Firstly, the aims of the study, and where they have been met, are described; the conclusions drawn as a result of the research are then presented, followed by the recommendations arising from these conclusions. Finally, the significance of the study, and its limitations, are described. In summary, in this chapter, the major question of the research is addressed, namely, "What are the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents and what influences help to shape these images?" The conclusions that are presented offer answers to this question, and the recommendations propose ways in which they may be implemented.

### *Aims of the Study*

The research reported in this study aimed to:

1. identify the need for additional data on the images of God of Australian Catholic youth;
2. identify where the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents are located within a comprehensive spectrum of images of God in Catholic theology and Scripture;
3. explore the extent to which the data on middle adolescents' images of God harmonise or question findings from existing research on images of God;
4. report on some of the formative factors that may have influenced middle adolescents' images of God;
5. consider implications for education in spirituality and religious education.

The first aim was addressed in Chapter Two, where the review of key literature in the field identified a particular need for further Australian data, and in Chapter Five where the findings of the research were presented. The second aim was addressed in Chapters Five and Six, which presented, discussed and analysed the findings of the research. In Chapter Six, the images of God of the middle adolescents in secondary schools were located within a comprehensive spectrum of images of God in Catholic theology and Scripture. This comprehensive spectrum of images of God was presented in Chapter Three, which described the images of God in Catholic theology, and Scripture. The third aim was also addressed in Chapter Six where the participants' images of God were compared with existing research on middle adolescents' images of God. The fourth aim was addressed in both Chapters Five and Six. In Chapter Five the formative factors on middle adolescents' images of God were reported, and in Chapter Six these factors were analysed. The final aim will be addressed in this chapter, which considers the implications and recommendations for education in youth spirituality and religious education. The other three chapters of the study are the present chapter, the introductory chapter, and Chapter Four in which the research methods adopted in the study were described.

#### *Synthesis of Findings Concerning the Images of God of Middle Secondary School*

##### *Adolescents*

*Finding 1: The Participants' Key Images of God were those of "Jesus Christ " and images drawn from nature.*

This finding addressed the principal aim of the study, as well as the related aim of exploring the extent to which participants' images of God supported or challenged those of a range of literature in the field. The images of God most frequently reported by

participants, were "Jesus Christ" and images drawn from "nature" such as "the sun". The latter images indicate the participants' awareness of their environment, as well as the influence of nature on their spirituality. This finding supports that of Leavey et al. (1992) who associated adolescence as the life-stage in which God was identified with nature.

The finding that Jesus Christ was the participants' favourite image of God implies the strong association that they saw between Jesus Christ and God, in fact, some students consistently identified Jesus with God and used the terms "Jesus Christ" and "God" interchangeably. Their understanding of Jesus Christ indicated support for the Church's teaching of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, as their two most frequently reported descriptors of Jesus were Son of God (62%) and Son of Mary (58%). Their responses also emphasised the role of Jesus as "Saviour". Hence in reporting that Jesus was their favourite image of God, the participants indicated support for the image of Jesus presented in Scripture and theology, in particular, the unique relationship between Jesus Christ and God. It is significant that they not only saw the importance of Jesus Christ in terms of his relationship with God, but were attracted by the image that they had of him, and by the image of God he revealed to them, since the image of God presented by Jesus Christ was nominated as their favourite image of God.

*Finding 2: There was widespread belief in the Trinity as an image of God*

The orthodox nature of the participants' responses to questions about Jesus Christ was also evident in their responses to questions about the Trinity. Such responses indicated their belief in the Trinity as an image of God. This is an important finding as the Trinity is the key image of God in Catholic theology. This finding

supported that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that over half of its participants thought of God in Trinitarian terms.

The second aim of the study was to identify where the images of God of the middle secondary school adolescents were located within a comprehensive spectrum of images of God in Catholic theology and Scripture. The findings concerning the participants' beliefs about Jesus Christ and the Trinity indicate that these beliefs are consistent with the images of God in Catholic theology and Scripture. However some scriptural and theological images were rarely reported by the participants, including those of an exacting, challenging God (Mills, 1998, p. 63). Further, they rarely used titles of God such as "Lord" and "YHWH", indicating that such terms did not commonly form part of their experience, that they did not understand them or that they did not represent their usual or favourite images of God.

*Finding 3: The participants' images of God and the qualities they associated with God were positive in nature.*

The positive nature of the images was evident in the frequent references to images such as "creator", "lover", "forgiver", "redeemer" and "listener", as well as in the finding that they did not refer to God as "demanding", "judging", or "punishing". The positive attitude towards God was also reflected in the qualities participants associated with God, such as "loving", "powerful", "good", "religious" and "active". Respondents also rejected qualities that could be thought of as negative such as "weak", and those not commonly associated with God such as "patient". These images and qualities support many of those found in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two of this thesis. One example is that of Flynn (1993), who found that the participants in his study thought of God as a loving, personal friend.

*Finding 4: God was thought of as both present and transcendent*

The fact that participants thought of God as both present and transcendent was evident particularly in their responses to the question about where God lived (Question 17). Almost half of the participants stated that God lived in "heaven". The respondents did not always define "heaven", however some stated that it was "above" and used images such as "clouds" and "sky" to convey this sense. Others considered that heaven was "everywhere", "in our minds" and "in our hearts". This belief that God was in some sense different from and greater than humanity, while remaining near and in some sense attainable, is another example of the way in which the participants' views reflected those of Catholic theology and Scripture.

*Finding 5: There were fewer abstract than anthropomorphic images of God*

Both abstract and anthropomorphic images of God were reported by the participants, and this finding is related to another important conclusion, that participants retained anthropomorphic images of God even after they had developed the capacity to think of God in abstract terms. This finding differs from Bradbury's (as cited in Hyde, 1990) who found that adolescents no longer had material images of God after the age of fourteen.

*Finding 6: The anthropomorphic images of God were male, and participants exclusively used masculine language about God.*

Participants in the present study used a variety of male anthropomorphic images of God, such as "father" and "old man". Masculine language for God was also evident in the results, and no feminine images of God were used by the participants, in fact, they indicated their rejection of such images.

*Finding 7: There were more "missing" responses to questions suggesting unfamiliar images of God.*

The high number of missing responses to questions using unusual images for God such as comparing God with a "plant", a "building" and an "animal", may indicate that some participants found it difficult to think about God using unconventional imagery. They may have confused the symbol with the reality and considered that some of these symbols were unworthy of God. There was evidence of such thinking in some of the participants' comments, for instance, those stating that responses were not given because participants thought of God as unique, hence no image could do justice to God. Others wrote "all" in response to these questions because they believed that God was everywhere, thus no one person or thing could represent God. The responses to these questions should also be treated with caution as they may be based on autosuggestion and do not represent the ways in which the participants usually thought about God.

*Finding 8: There was an overall correspondence between participants' spirituality and that of the literature in the field.*

This finding addresses the second aim of the study, which was to explore the extent to which the data on middle adolescents' images of God harmonises with or questions the findings from existing research on images of God. The responses provide evidence that the features of adolescent spirituality emerging from this study, correspond with those of key literature about adolescent spirituality. A comparison between them shows that "fear" was the only characteristic in the literature of adolescent spirituality not found in the results of this research. The characteristics shared by this study and the literature, include the importance placed on individuality

and freedom; a concern for social justice and tolerance; a privatised belief system; a personal search for meaning and an appreciation of relationships. Participants also indicated their appreciation of people who listened to them. Both the study and the literature indicate that many young people are irregular Church attenders, and that most do not attend at all.

*Synthesis of Findings Concerning the Factors Leading Participants To Think About  
God and Shaping Their Images of God*

This synthesis addresses one of the aims of the study, which was to report on some of the formative factors shaping middle adolescents' images of God.

*Finding 9: Parents were the most important influence on participants' images of God.*

This study indicated that parents were the most important influence on the formation of their children's images of God. For instance, participants reported that in their opinion, most of their images of God were learnt from both parents. These images and qualities were positive in nature and included images associated with God as "loving", "powerful" and "good".

*Finding 10: Reflection on death was the key factor leading participants to think about God.*

"Death" was a key influence on the participants' thinking, as reflecting on "the death of a loved one" led almost half of them to think about God, while a large number thought of God when reflecting on their own death. This finding also parallels that of the *CCLS* (ACBPRP, 1996), which found that family death was the event that most frequently led middle adolescents to an awareness of God.

*Finding 11: Religious people and good people led participants to think about God.*

An area in which the findings of this research support that of the literature of adolescent spirituality, is the claim that heroes and role models are formative influences on the spirituality of young people. Most people listed by the participants were either religious figures or contemporary people well known for doing good, such as Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. People who were not well known, but who cared for others, such as volunteers, midwives, friends and carers were also included. Some of their valued characteristics were that they were "loving", "forgiving" and "understanding" - the same qualities that they associated with God.

*Finding 12: Religious education classes and liturgies were key school experiences*

Thirty percent of participants most frequently reported religious education classes and liturgies as the factors at school that most often led them to think about God. With this question, participants were asked to supply the factor themselves, they were not given a range from which to choose, hence adding weight to their responses, as their choice was not limited. Further, as well as indicating the influence of religious education on them, the participants also seemed to have a reasonably wide ranging and theologically sound set of images of God, hence it is reasonable to conclude that the religious teaching they had received has been successful in this regard. Hence this finding underlines the importance of the religious educators in shaping their students' spirituality, including their images of God.

*Finding 13: There was evidence of the influence of privatisation and secularisation on the participants.*

A major conclusion of the study was that the privatisation of belief and the secularisation of western society had influenced the spirituality of the participants. Many believed that it was possible to have faith in God but not belong to any religion, or to attend Mass or Church, or to talk about religious belief. They claimed that it was possible to believe in God without such belief having much effect on their lives, and that faith was not essential for a happy life. Participants also stressed the importance of individual choice and freedom in religious matters. On the other hand, the influence of the Church was indicated by participants' claims that their images of God had been formed by the Church. They also reported that belonging to a parish community, and attendance at Mass or Church services and reading the Bible, also led them to think about God.

The participants' often contradictory views raised questions concerning the form of their spirituality and its relationship with Church and religion. Their responses indicated that they were as secularised as the young people referred to in other writings in the literature such as those of Crawford and Rossiter (1993). However the participants in this study indicated that such secularisation was not incompatible with having an extensive range of images and beliefs about God. There was evidence that they knew the language about God but they claimed that it had little or no impact on their lives. However a proportion of the participants claimed that they did see a link between religion and life, and for those students, their spirituality was informed by religion.

For those who thought that the Church was irrelevant to their lives, there was a contradiction that might well apply not only to individuals but to different groups. Those who said that religion did influence their lives, did have a spirituality, and such a

spirituality might draw on their experience of the Church and their education in the Catholic faith tradition. However, at the same time, they might not think that the Church was such a compelling presence that they would want to be a part of it, or of its regular practice. Hence they could be drawing on religion for some parts of their spirituality while not wanting to be practising members. This certainly underlines a division between religiosity (as measured by Church attendance and involvement) and an active spirituality.

Young people may well be religious but they do not want to exhibit it. The participants in this study indicated that they might have assimilated much of what was offered in religious education, and in their experience of the Church, but they were hesitant to discuss their beliefs. The age group of the young people could exacerbate such a privatisation as they were at a developmental stage in which developmental theorists such as Piaget indicate that the influence of the peer group is strongest. For example, Fowler (1981) claimed that adolescents developed a new and deeper awareness of self and others, that interpersonal relationships were central to their lives, and that conformity with the group was critical to their lives.

### *Summary of Conclusions*

The major conclusions of the study are listed in the following table.

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Table 7.1      *Summary of Conclusions*

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#### Images and Qualities of God

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1. The participants' key images of God were those of "Jesus Christ" and images drawn from "nature".
  2. There was widespread belief in the Trinity as an image of God.
  3. The participants' images of God and the qualities they associated with God were positive in nature.
  4. God was thought of as both present and transcendent.
  5. There were fewer abstract than anthropomorphic images of God.
  6. The anthropomorphic images of God were male, and participants exclusively used masculine language about God.
  7. There were more "missing" responses to questions suggesting unfamiliar images of God.
  8. There was an overall correspondence between participants' spirituality and that of the literature in the field.
- 

#### Factors Leading Participants to Think About God and Shaping Their Images of God

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1. Parents were the most important influence on participants' images of God.
  2. Reflection on death was the key factor leading participants to think about God.
  3. Religious people and good people led participants to think about God.
  4. Religious education classes and liturgies were the key school experiences leading participants to think about God.
  5. There was evidence of the influence of privatisation and secularisation on the participants.
-

### *Recommendations and Conclusions*

The major conclusions of the study listed above, have led to the recommendations that follow. Before presenting these recommendations, it is important to declare that the researcher, who is an experienced Catholic religious educator, brings a particular value position and certain assumptions to the formation of these recommendations. This position, which assumes that education for spirituality and for religious understanding is potentially a positive part of a whole education for the young person, means that the recommendations are designed to help to improve and develop the quality of this education.

This thesis in particular, and other research studies, report young people's views that a range of experiences affects their images of God. The ways in which such experiences affect the development of their images of God are complex. While teachers within religious education in Catholic schools might wish to give their students access to a wide range of traditional Catholic images of God, including feminine images, it is difficult to propose simple strategies that might be effective in providing such access. Even if access to a range of images is provided within religious education, this does not mean that students will appropriate such images and incorporate them into their personal spirituality.

Nevertheless, educators can develop some curriculum planning and strategies that will provide what they hope might be the most favourable educational environment within which young people's education in the images of God might be fostered.

#### *Recommendation 1: Range of Images of God*

One of the first steps in the planning process would be to alert teachers to the possibility that the scope they give to this topic within their own teaching can be an

important spiritual resource for students in religious education. Curriculum planning could take into account the range of images that it was thought desirable to include as part of the students' religious education

*Recommendation 2: Feminine Images of God*

If those responsible for the curriculum of the school accept that there appears to be little reference to feminine images of God, then a starting point might be to ensure that feminine images and a language of spirituality about God that does not exclude the feminine, might appear in the curriculum documentation that underpins Catholic school religious education. This might also be true of the prayer and liturgy of their schools. In this way, staff and students may grow in awareness of feminine language about God and of feminine images of God. This may enrich the young people's imagery about God and help females, in particular, to feel a closer connection to God when comparisons can be made between the divinity and the female experience of humanity.

*Recommendation 3: Analysis of the Religious Education Curriculum*

The range of scriptural and theological images of God as considered in the early chapters of this thesis may be of use in the development of a template of images of God that could be used for reviewing the images of God represented in curriculum and student resource material in religious education. As yet, there has not been an analysis of Catholic religious education curricula resource materials which might indicate whether or not the treatment of images of God in current materials is appropriate. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate this question, however such a research task may be undertaken if it were considered that the range of images of God represented in religious education curriculum materials needed appraisal.

*Recommendation 4: Scriptural and Theological Images of God*

The influence of religious educators on students has been acknowledged in this study and in other literature in the field, hence, in terms of this study, it is important that such educators have an understanding of images and qualities of God that are based on scriptural and theological foundations. This may mean that those providing pre-service teacher education courses in religious education may need to examine the scriptural and theological courses they offer. This will help to ensure that the teaching offered to future students will be well founded. Current religious education teachers may also need to be provided with on going professional development opportunities in these areas. This may have financial and programming implications for Catholic Education Offices and school leaders.

*Recommendation 5: Abstract and Anthropomorphic Images of God*

It may be possible to provide guidelines for the writers of religious education curricula, which ensure that abstract as well as anthropomorphic images of God are included in new curriculum documents and textbooks. In keeping with the findings of developmental theorists such as Fowler (1981), this study has found that adolescents develop the capacity for abstract imagery. It also found that at the same time, adolescents retain their childhood images of God. Hence both forms of images should be included in student curriculum materials.

*Recommendation 6: Images of God drawn from Nature*

Literature such as Flynn's (1993) concerning the place of religious retreats in Catholic schools in Australia emphasises the value of that activity in helping young people think through and talk about questions of spirituality in a more personal way than is usually the case in the more formal classroom. Retreats would therefore offer

opportunities for young people to personalise their theology i.e. while they may learn the language and concepts related to images of God in formal classroom religious education, retreats might provide an opportunity for them to personalise these ideas. The success of retreats as a vehicle for spiritual development supports their inclusion in the school curriculum. It is one of the ways in which the school provides students with an opportunity to experience the power and beauty of nature. This study found that images of God drawn from nature were one of the key sources of the participants' images of God, and an important influence on their spirituality.

The findings also support those areas of the curriculum which promote a sense of the wonder of the origins of the universe and of nature, as these were also significant factors leading participants to think about God. The efforts of school communities to provide a school environment creating a sense of peace and beauty, were also endorsed by this study, which found that these were key factors leading participants to think about God.

#### *Recommendation 7: Reflection on Death and Loss*

Today there are many Australian schools providing teachers with short courses in grief education such as "Seasons for Growth". Many secondary schools have their own school counsellor and provide access to grief counseling of some kind. These factors indicate awareness within school communities of the need to support students and staff during times of grief. The importance of this awareness is supported by the finding that reflection on death was the most significant factor leading participants to think about God.

*Recommendation 8: Prayer and Liturgy*

There is evidence in the study that the ways in which prayer/liturgies are conducted in secondary schools are having a positive impact on students. This implies that they are also relevant to the needs and life experience of the students. These conclusions arise from the finding that prayer/liturgies were significant factors leading young people to think about God. It would therefore be important to continue to maintain the current work in school in these areas. This would include an emphasis on music and moments of quiet reflection in prayer/liturgies as this study indicates that both lead participants to think about God. The settings for prayer/liturgies are also important, as they can create an environment that is conducive to prayer and reflection, and students indicated that they valued times of peaceful reflection. It would also be valuable to promote opportunities for liturgical training and education for teachers so that they may be able to develop in their students an appreciation of good liturgy, and the confidence to lead prayer services and liturgical celebrations.

*Recommendation 9: The Role of Parents in the Development of Young People's Images of God*

The participants' responses confirmed that in their opinion, parents were the greatest formative influence on their images of God. This finding leads to the question as to what might be done to educate parents in relation to their own images of God and how, in turn, this might have an impact on young people, is a very extensive and complicated process. It could be expected that any theological or religious education that enhances people's grasp of images of God, would in turn be likely to enhance the potential influence that parents would have on the development of young people's images of God.

It would also seem likely that where adults were involved in the life of a local faith community, this might be expected to affect the theological background within which young people's spirituality is nurtured. This study found that those participants who belonged to a parish community found that this experience led them to think about God.

*Recommendation 10: Spirituality Resources for Young People*

There are a number of ways in which treatment of images of God in the curriculum and in the classroom teaching and learning process could provide spirituality resources for young people, such as the following examples:

- Religious education teachers may provide opportunities for students to talk about their beliefs, in order to encourage them to grow in confidence in speaking about their spirituality. This would be one way of addressing the finding that many participants chose not to talk about their religious beliefs, for a variety of reasons, including inability to do so, and that they were afraid of others' reactions.
- Good religious artwork that is both good art, and represents well-founded theology, could be provided in schools as it has the potential to shape the religious imagination of young people. For instance, many of the participants indicated that their images of God had been shaped by those they had seen in Church. Their responses also indicated a familiarity with well known religious iconography.
- As religious education classes were considered by participants to be one of the key influences at school that led them to think about God, religious educators

could be encouraged to continue to use teaching approaches that support adolescent learning.

- As participants indicated that religious figures, compassionate people, carers and listeners shaped their images of God and led them to think about God, young people could be introduced to such people through books and other media, as well as through involvement in community service programs. Such people could also be invited to be guest speakers in the school so that they may be able to influence and inspire young people and help to development their spirituality.

#### *Summary of Recommendations*

The areas of major recommendations arising from the study are listed in the following table.

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Table 7.2     *Areas of Major Recommendations*

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1. Images and Qualities of God
  2. Feminine Images of God
  3. Analysis of the Religious Education Curriculum
  4. Scriptural and Theological Images of God
  5. Abstract and Anthropomorphic Images of God
  6. Images of God drawn from Nature
  7. Reflection on Death and Loss
  8. Prayer and Liturgy
  9. Spirituality Resources for Young People
-

*Significance and Limitations of the Research*

This research has built upon earlier research in the field of adolescent spirituality. It has led to several conclusions about the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents and to recommendations based upon these conclusions. This research is the largest Australian quantitative study in the field of spirituality, in the particular area of the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents. Therefore it provides insights into Australian adolescents' thinking about the nature of God, which is an area that is at the heart of Christian belief. Since this was such a wide-ranging study involving 1000 students in seven Catholic Secondary schools in Victoria, responding to 112 questions, the findings are able to be generalised for middle adolescents in similar schools throughout Australia. This sizeable Australian study can therefore be compared with similar studies overseas. Hence it makes a significant contribution to research in the field of adolescent spirituality. This study may influence the design of future religious education curricula regarding the spirituality of young people and the factors shaping it.

A limitation of the study is that it set out to provide a broad overview rather than an in depth analysis. Future studies could explore some of the findings through in depth interviews or case studies. The findings could also be probed through longitudinal studies, in order to test the extent to which images of God changed over time. The conclusions of the study could also be tested with other age-groups, through the use of questionnaires based on the present survey. In this way the present study provides a basis for future research. Such research could include identifying the factors shaping the students' images of God. For example, it could examine whether a correlation existed between particular images of God and the religious, cultural and educational

background of families. It could also explore the extent to which abstract images of God developed in later adolescence; the extent to which students with a developed capacity for abstract thought, applied that ability to their thinking about God; the extent to which a balance existed between adolescents' childhood and abstract images of God. Future research could also examine the reasons for the reluctance of adolescents to speak about their faith, the implications of such reluctance and the recommendations that ensue.

### *Conclusion*

The research reported in this thesis sought to identify the images of God of middle secondary school adolescents. It found that the participants had positive images of God that were consistent with the central images of Christianity, such as belief in the image of God as Trinity, and in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. There was evidence of the influence of privatisation and secularisation on the thinking and religious practice of these adolescents, and in the separation they saw between belief in God and the necessity to belong to a religion. The influence of nature as a source of adolescent spirituality was also evident, as experiences of the natural world were among the greatest influences leading participants to think about God.

The findings resulting from the wide-ranging survey, which forms the basis of this study, have provided insights into the thinking of young people at a significant stage of their development. Such development includes the growth in the capacity to think in an abstract way about God. In seeking to identify the images of God of middle adolescents, this study has indicated the extent to which this capacity is evident in their responses. The findings of the study have therefore added to the body of knowledge concerning the spirituality of adolescents. It has also presented new possibilities for

religious teaching and learning during a developmental stage, which offers unique challenges to religious educators. The findings provide points of comparison and contrast with the developmental stages of students who are younger and older than the middle adolescents.

As well as providing insights into young people's images of God, the findings also provide insights into related areas of spirituality such as the people and the factors that influence the development of their spirituality. It provides evidence of their attitude to Church and to the central teachings of Christianity. The study also supports the findings of other research in the area, particularly the Australian *Catholic Church Life Survey*. In turn, the findings of this much larger survey add weight to those of the present survey.

Although this study has focused on an aspect of the spirituality of middle adolescents in Victorian Catholic Secondary schools, its findings can be applied to other Australian States and other countries. The study therefore makes a significant contribution to present and future research in the area of adolescent spirituality through its provision of new Australian data on the images of God of adolescents in the age group of middle adolescence (14-17 years).

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## QUESTIONNAIRE

### SECTION A      SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD

*Please complete the following sentences:*

- 1      When I think of God I **think** of a .....
- 2      When I think of God I **feel** .....
- 3      A **sound** I associate with God is .....
- 4      An **action** I associate with God is .....
- 5      I **feel close** to God when .....
- 6      The **person** that best represents an image I have of God is .....
- This is because .....
- 7      The **plant** or **tree** that best represents an image I have of God is .....
- This is because .....
- 8      The **animal** that best represents an image I have of God is.....
- This is because .....
- 9      The **building** that best represents an image I have of God is .....
- This is because .....
- 10     The main image of God that I have learned from my **Mother** is .....
- .....
- 11     The main image of God that I have learned from my **Father** is .....
- .....
- 12     My two **favourite images** of God are .....
- 13     My two **favourite words** about God are .....

14 The **most important** thing to know about God is.....

.....

15 When I was **about 10** I thought of God as .....

.....

16 Two things I would like **to say** to God, or **ask** God are .....

.....

.....

17 I think God **lives in** .....

**\*\*\*\*\* END OF SECTION A \*\*\*\*\***

**SECTION B**

In this section, please place a **circle** around the number that matches the way **YOU think of**

God.

- 1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
**1** This is **never** true for me  
**2** This is **hardly ever** true for me  
**3** This is **sometimes** true for me  
**4** This is **often** true for me  
**5** This is **always** true for me

*never; hardly ever; sometimes; often; always*  
 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 18 I think of God as always **looking after** me 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 19 I think of God as the **one who made everything** in the universe 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 20 I think of God as the **force or power** behind everything in the universe 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 21 I think of God as **judging** what I do 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 22 I think of God as **rewarding** people who die after living good lives 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 23 I think of God as **punishing** people who die after not living good lives 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 24 Most people I know **believe in God** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 25 I think that believing in God helps you to **make sense of life** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

- 26 I think that people can believe in God but **not talk about it.** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

- 27 I think that people can believe in God but **not belong to any religion.** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

28 I think that people can believe in God  
but **not go to Mass / Church** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

29 I think that people can believe in God  
but it **does not affect very much**  
**the way they live** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

30 I think that people can be **happy**  
and not believe in God. 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

31 Some of my images of God  
have come from the **Church** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

32 I feel the **same way** about the Church  
as I do about God. 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

This is because .....

.....

**\*\*\*\*\* END OF SECTION B \*\*\*\*\***

## SECTION C      SOME WORDS ABOUT GOD

These sentences refer to different **words** people use about God. Please place a **circle** around the number that matches the way **YOU** think.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 1      This is **never** true for me  
 2      This is **hardly ever** true for me  
 3      This is **sometimes** true for me  
 4      This is **often** true for me  
 5      This is **always** true for me

*never; hardly ever; sometimes; often; always*  
 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

***I THINK OF GOD AS .....***

- |    |                |                           |
|----|----------------|---------------------------|
| 33 | loving         | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 34 | holy           | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 35 | wise           | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 36 | beautiful      | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 37 | powerful       | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 38 | mysterious     | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 39 | truthful       | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 40 | living forever | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 41 | peaceful       | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 42 | masculine      | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |
| 43 | feminine       | 1-----2-----3-----4-----5 |

***I THINK OF GOD AS SOMEONE .....***

- 44 I hope to **get to know** better 1-----2-----3-----4-----  
5
- 45 I hope to **live with** after I die 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 46 **who loves me** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 47 I think of God as a **Spirit** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 48 I'm not sure what I **think**  
**about God** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 49 I'm not sure whether God  
**exists or not** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

**\*\*\*\*\* END OF SECTION C \*\*\*\*\***

## SECTION D REMINDERS OF GOD

These sentences refer to things that can **lead you to think** about God. Please place a **circle** around the number that matches the way **YOU** think.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 1** This is **never** true for me  
**2** This is **hardly ever** true for me  
**3** This is **sometimes** true for me  
**4** This is **often** true for me  
**5** This is **always** true for me

*never; hardly ever; sometimes; often; always*

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

### THE FOLLOWING LEAD ME TO THINK ABOUT GOD:

- 50 The example of **good people** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 51 My **family** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 52 My **friends** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 53 Some **songs** and **music** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 54 Some **art, poetry, stories**  
and **plays** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 55 Some **videos** or **films** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 56 What I **most watch** on TV 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 57 **Religion classes** at school 1-----2-----3-----4-----  
----5
- 58 **Liturgies** or **reflection days**  
at school 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 59 **School celebrations** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 60 The.....  
at school 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 61 Belonging to a **parish**  
**community** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 62 The existence of **evil in the**  
**world** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 63 **Being hurt** or **experiencing**

- 5 **suffering** 1-----2-----3-----4-----
- 64 **Being really sick** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 65 **Being with, or hearing about people I love who are sick** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 66 The **death** of someone I love 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 67 Thinking about **my own death** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 68 The **birth of someone I love** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 69 Thinking about **my birth** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 70 Being **really frightened** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 71 Being **worried or anxious** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 72 **Watching disasters in the news on TV** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 73 **Something good** happening to me 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 74 Being **successful in something** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 75 **Helping** to make someone else's life better 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 76 Doing something **good** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 77 Doing something **bad** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 78 Having a **pet** in my life 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 79 Things in **Nature** like flowers, sun, mountains and sea 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 80 Thinking about **how the universe** began 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 81 Thinking about **possible life on other planets** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 82 Thinking about **the wonders of human, animal and plant life** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 83 Learning through Science about **the way things work** . 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 84 Playing or watching **sport** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 85 Reading the **Bible** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 86 Going to **Mass or Church** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 87 Being in **my favourite place** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 88 '**Doing nothing**' 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 89 **Feeling at peace** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 90 *(Please complete)*.....
- leads me to think about God. 1-----2-----3-----4-----5

**\*\*\*\*\* END OF SECTION D \*\*\*\*\***

**SECTION E: SOME STATEMENTS ABOUT JESUS CHRIST**

Please place a **circle** around the number that matches the way **YOU** think.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

- 1 This is **never** true for me  
 2 This is **hardly ever** true for me  
 3 This is **sometimes** true for me  
 4 This is **often** true for me  
 5 This is **always** true for me

*never; hardly ever; sometimes; often; always*

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

**I THINK OF JESUS AS .....**

- 91 a **friend** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 92 someone who **can heal sickness** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 93 someone who **wants to help** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 94 someone who can work **miracles** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 95 wanting to **forgive our sins** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 96 a **teacher** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 97 a **friend** of outsiders and outcasts 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 98 being **concerned** about the place of **women in society** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 99 the **Son of God** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 100 the **Son of Mary** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 101 the one who **saves us** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 102 the **Good Shepherd** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 103 **Lord** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 104 'the **Way**, the **Truth** and the **Life**' 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 105 'the **Light** of the **World**' 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 106 Two of my **favourite images** of Jesus are: .....

**SECTION F: SOME STATEMENTS ABOUT GOD :**

- 107 When I think of God, I think of  
the **Father**, the **Son** and the  
**Holy Spirit** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 108 I have an image of **God**  
as **Father** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 109 I have an image of Jesus Christ,  
as **God** the **Son** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 110 I have an image of God the  
**Holy Spirit** 1-----2-----3-----4-----5
- 111 When I pray the image of God I **mostly** have is .....
- .....
- 112 I **do not have** an image of God 1-----2-----3-----4-----5  
when I pray

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE**

***PLEASE PLACE IT IN THE ENVELOPE***

**Appendix B:**  
**Australian Catholic University: Ethical Clearance**

Please sign, date and return this form (with any additional information or material, if requested by the Committee) to the local Administrative Officer (Research) to whom you submitted your application for approval to be confirmed.

Signed: Gay Fitzh  
URPEC Administrative Officer (Research)

Date: 26/5/98

(To be completed by the Principal Investigator or Supervisor and Student, as appropriate)

The date when I/we expect to commence contact with human participants or access their records is: September 1998

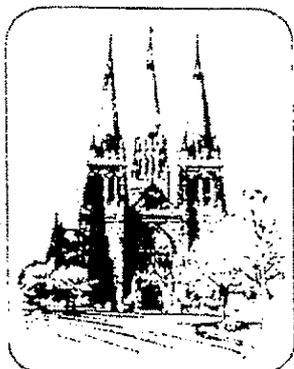
I/We hereby declare that I/We am/are aware of the conditions governing research involving human participants as set out in the Research Projects Ethics Committee's *Guidelines and Instructions for Researchers/Students* and agree to the conditions stated above.

Signed: R. Engelstrow Date: 1/6/98 ✓  
[Principal Investigator (if staff) or Supervisor, as appropriate]

Signed: V. A. Duffy Date: 1/6/98 X  
(Researcher (if student) )

(Our ref: ethapr  
vl.doc/982)

**Appendix C:**  
**Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Melbourne: Ethical Clearance**



**CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE**

JAMES SCOLD HOUSE  
 228 VICTORIA PARADE  
 EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Telephone: (03) 9267 0228  
 Facsimile: (03) 9415 9325

CORRESPONDENCE TO:  
 ETHICAL ADDRESS

PO BOX 3, EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002  
 jfrs@ceos.melb.catholic.edu.au

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE: G98/20

10 June 1998

Sr Rose Duffy CSB  
 Sion House  
 6 Witton Street  
 (PO Box 322)  
 WARRAGUL VIC 3820

Dear Sister Rose,

I am writing with regard to your fax of 10 June 1998 in which you referred to your Ph D research entitled *Images of God of Middle Adolescents*. You have asked approval to survey 600 students in Years 9 or 10 at

I am pleased to advise that your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the following standard conditions.

1. The decision as to whether or not research can proceed in a school rests with the School Principal. So, as you have acknowledged, you will need to obtain formal approval from the Principals of the schools you have chosen.
2. You should provide each Principal with an outline of your research proposal, and indicate what will be asked of the school. A copy of this letter of approval, and a copy of the notification of approval from the Ethics Committee, should also be included.
3. No student is to participate in research study unless s/he is willing to do so and informed consent is given by a parent/guardian.
4. Any substantive modifications to the research proposal, or additional research involving use of the data collected, will require a further research approval submission to this Office.

5. Data relating to individuals or schools are to remain confidential.
6. Since participating schools will have an interest in the research findings, you should discuss with each Principal ways in which the results of the study could be made available for the benefit of the school community.
7. At the conclusion of the study, a copy or summary of the research findings should be forwarded to the Information Services Unit of the Catholic Education Office.

I wish you well with your research study. If you have any queries concerning this matter, please contact Mr Mark McCarthy of this Office.

With every best wish,

Yours sincerely,



(Rev. T. M. Doyle)

DIRECTOR OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

# CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE

**DIOCESE OF  
SALE**



**SION HOUSE  
6 Witton Street  
PO Box 322  
Warragul 3820  
Tel: (03) 5623 5644  
Fax: (03) 5623 4258**

17 November 1998

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am writing to seek your permission for your child to participate in a survey I am conducting on **THE IMAGES OF GOD OF MIDDLE ADOLESCENTS**. Your child would be asked to complete an anonymous written questionnaire. The survey has the approval of the University Research Projects Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

If you are willing to allow your child to participate in the questionnaire, please sign the form below and return to the College.

With thanks,

Rose Duffy CSB  
CHAIRPERSON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION STAFF GROUP  
DIOCESE OF SALE

.....  
I hereby give my consent for my child to participate in the anonymous questionnaire conducted by Sr Rose Duffy on

***The Images of God of Middle Adolescents***

**PARENT/GUARDIAN:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**(please print)**

**SIGNED:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

**TITLE OF PROJECT: THE IMAGES OF GOD OF MIDDLE ADOLESCENTS**

**NAME OF RESEARCHER: Sr Rose Duffy CSB**

The purpose of this study is to find out more about the images of God of young people of your age. These images could be pictures or ideas in your mind or heart. There has not been much study like this done in Australia before. This is not an exam or test as there are no right or wrong answers; just your own thoughts, feelings and responses.

The questionnaire will take around 30 minutes to complete.

This questionnaire will be given to 1000 Years 9 and 10 students in 5 Catholic Secondary schools in Victoria. Your answers, and theirs, will help teachers know more about how young people of your age think about God. this may help to make our teaching more interesting and relevant to you.

Please remember that you are free to withdraw your consent and not continue to participate in this study at any time without giving a reason to anyone.

If you have any questions about the questionnaire please let me know:

Sr Rose Duffy CSB  
Telephone: 5623 5644

This study has been approved by the University Research Projects Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

In the event that you have any complaint about the way you have been treated during the study, or a query that the Researcher has not been able to satisfy, you may write care of the nearest branch of the Office of Research

Chair  
University Research Projects Ethics Committee  
C/- Office of Research  
Australian Catholic University  
412 Mt Alexander Road  
ASCOT VALE VIC 3032  
Telephone: (03) 9241 4513  
Fax: (03) 9241 4529

Any complaint will be treated in confidence, investigated fully and the participant informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Informed Consent form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Researcher.

**STUDENT COPY**



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:** *IMAGES OF GOD OF MIDDLE ADOLESCENTS*

**NAME OF RESEARCHER:** *Sr Rose Duffy CSB*

I *(the participant)* have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to the Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I can withdraw at any time.

I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

**NAME OF PARTICIPANT** .....  
(block letters)

**SIGNATURE:** ..... **DATE:** .....

**NAME OF RESEARCHER:** *Sr Rose Duffy CSB* .....

**SIGNATURE:** ..... **DATE:** .....

